

# The Real You: Pick One

Grouchy? Happy? Dopey? **David Weinberger** takes on our multiple personalities.



**C**ARL WAS THE WORST boss I never had. He would have been my boss but the CEO of the company included me in the round of interviews. “Well, what did you think?” the CEO asked me afterward. “He’s evil,” I replied.

My overstated, under-supported personnel evaluation of course didn’t affect the outcome of the process. We’d been intending to hire him from the beginning. But it did have one happy result: I didn’t have to report to him. This marginalized me in the company, but it was worth it. Carl swaggered through the organization, undercutting my friends and colleagues while I stood by, helpless except in the “Here, you can use my handkerchief” and “I think they can sew that sort of thing back on” sort of way.

What were his sins? Carl employed the classic motivational techniques that you first encountered in the schoolyard bully’s “Give me your change” program. Not only would he criticize your work, he would do it in terms of your character and he would do it in front of your colleagues. Plus, he seemed to like doing it. Even if you deserved the criticism, the idea that Carl was getting off on it went past humiliating all the way to creepy.

Oddly, this led most of us to do to Carl exactly what he was doing to us: attack his work weakness by pointing to his character flaws. But at least we had the decency to do it behind his back.

About six months into his tenure – long enough for us to conclude that this wasn’t a show to impress us but was in fact

a genuine expression of who Carl was – he didn’t show up for a few days. I asked the CEO about it. “One of his kids has the flu,” he said, “so he’s staying home with him.” Impressive. The CEO continued: “I’ve never seen a guy so totally committed to his kids. I went home with him one day and this whole passel of kids came running out of the house, hugged his legs...”

“We’re talking about Carl, right?”

“Oh yeah. They love him, and you should see his face light up. He rolls around on the floor with them. Great home life.”

Now, I roll around on the floor with my kids too, although the 22-year-old claims to be “too big” for it. But I don’t go into work and turn into another person.

Or do I?

Of course I do. And so do you. At home, I’m a goofy guy who dresses two degrees below the house minimum and flits from activity to activity like a housefly at the gingerbread man’s picnic. OK, so that’s pretty much how I am at

that we may be misunderstanding what it means to be a self. We think of ourselves as being like an M&M (that’s not even close to how Rorty puts it): We have an inner core that’s our real self and a public self that may or may not accurately reflect our inner core. But suppose, says Rorty, that we really are who we are not when we’re alone but when we’re with others. Suppose the self is social, relational and inconsistent. Who we are depends on whom we’re with.

But what do you do if one of your social selves – especially the one you’re getting paid to be – is a jerk? The notion of the relational self reminds us that our jerkitude is not simply an inner quality bursting to the surface. Rather, you have to look at the entire constellation of social forces and relationships to understand why you’re being a person you don’t like.

That doesn’t pass the buck. Quite the contrary. You need to stop being a jerk, and you need to stop right now. Change the situation, change your response, or

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work, too. But the point is that if I treated my colleagues the way I treat my kids, or vice versa, I’d be sent for counseling.


But there is, for most of us, a level underneath that is constant in our lives. For example, if you’re an easy-going person at home with a great sense of humor, you are probably also easy-going with a great sense of humor at work. It manifests itself differently – presumably at work you’re not talking baby-talk to your co-workers – but your underlying character is the same.

But if it’s not – if you’re Carl – what’s going on?

The philosopher Richard Rorty suggests

both. Then you should probably buy everyone lunch, offer to wax their cars and change your office nameplate to “I.M.A. Butt” for two weeks.

But at least you aren’t faced with the daunting task of changing your self, of becoming a different sort of person. You just have to change one of your selves, the one that isn’t working out too well.

In other words, To thine own selves be true. 

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