SERVICE WITH AN ANGRY SMILE: PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN SRE

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About Zalando

- 21+ mill active customers
- 15 markets
- ~3.6 billion € net sales
- ~200 mill visits/month
- 13K+ employees

SRE @:

- Started in 2016
  - SLOs
  - On-call in teams (2 levels)
  - Blameless post-mortems, sharing info
About Me: @lauritaapplez

- Agile producer for search team (does 24x7)
- Open Source Evangelist for ~1800 techs
- Open Org Ambassador, Red Hat
- SRECon Program Committee (since 2016)

Projects:
- LappleApple/awesome-leading-and-managing
- LappleApple/Feedmereadmes
Why an SRECon talk

Things I’ve heard/witnessed:

● “Someone else should create alerts”
● “I don’t want to fix the incident”
● “It’s their fault the service is slow”
● “I’ll hope nobody will notice”
● “I don’t have time for SRE/SLO whatever”

There are costs
Agenda

- What passive-aggressive is
  - Definition
  - What it’s not
  - SRE examples
- Where it comes from
- What to do about it

I'M NOT PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE

..UNLIKE SOME PEOPLE I KNOW
Essential feature:
“pervasive pattern of negativistic attitudes and passive resistance to demands for adequate performance in social and occupational situations ...”
Criteria

- Passively resists fulfilling routine ... occupational tasks
- Complains of being misunderstood, unappreciated
- Sullen and argumentative
- Unreasonably criticizes/scorns authority
- Expresses envy and resentment toward ... more fortunate
- Exaggerated/persistent complaints of personal misfortune
- Alternates between hostile defiance and contrition
Workplace manifestations

- Deliberately mask anger, then transfer it
- "Powerlessness"
- Intersects with narcissism
- "Forgetting" duties
- Procrastinating
- Avoidance
- Stubbornness
- Blaming
- Sabotaging success

blog.visme.co/passive-aggressive-behaviors-in-the-workplace-infographic
It’s not being quiet

- Not introversion
- Not social awkwardness
- Not about being hero/rockstar: antipattern
It’s also not these

**Aggressive:** ALL-CAPS, brutally direct, blaming, yells (anti-SRE)

**Passive:** apologizes for existing, doormat, gives up, is apathetic, takes orders (anti-SRE)

**Assertive:** direct, clear, honest, engaged, empathetic, owning it (good for SRE)
It’s more about “my gut is God”

True story:
- Assertive Alice: "Service A has an alert; Service B has an outage"
- Service owner: “there’s no way it could be related, my gut tells me”
- He ignores Alice

The gut was wrong.
I can’t/I don’t

True stories:

- Product Owner: “I’m neither fit nor meant to define SLOs”

- Lead asks same questions 3x in same month, doesn't act on the info

- Eng lead: “customer impact doesn't exist in my domain”
You all suck, I’m going to Florida

A friend’s story:

- Hoarding passwords to network devices, SSL vendors
- “I don’t trust anybody else with these systems”
- Goes on vacation, things break
- Team: low morale, can’t engineer processes to be safer
It’s the customer’s fault

True story:
- SLO review meeting, service owner insists customers created his service errors
- “They shouldn't hurt *my* SLO”
- *My* SLO?
The Ketchup “Sorry”

- Could mean lack of trust
- Fear / psychological safety
- Omission: whodunit?

Please throw your food out in the hallway trash. I think we would all appreciate the newsroom not smelling like day old ketchup all the time.

Sincerely,
Your passive aggressive co-worker.
● What passive-aggressive is
● Where it comes from
  ○ Origin of term
  ○ History/DSM
  ○ Autonomy connection
● What to do about it
Quick History: “Passive-aggressive”

- US War Dept. doc
- WWII soldiers who didn’t follow orders = “immature”
- Openly defiant
- Pouted
- Stubborn
- “Inefficient”
- Procrastinated
1950-1990s: expansion

- **DSM-I**: conceptualized, 3 types*
- **DSM-II**: Passive-Aggressive *Personality Disorder* (merging)
- **DSM-III**: already controversial
- “Diagnostic bracket creep”**
- Pathologizing: pouting, disliking job, boss
- Enters pop culture

Hopwood + Wright *, Peter Kramer via Christopher Lane **
1990s-present

- Negativistic (Passive-Aggressive) Personality Disorder
- => Appendix B “for further study”

Refresh:
- “Pervasive pattern”
- Chronic attitude/behavior
- “Passive resistance to demands for adequate performance”

What “adequate” means to us
Expectation misalignment as cause

**Autonomy connection:**
- Efforts to establish autonomy => “heightened power sensitivity”*
- “Being vulnerable to control”**
- “Flat hierarchy so we’re equal, right?”
- The team/company no longer #1
- But: maybe purpose is off

Autonomy != “I do whatever”

- Dysfunctional resistance
- Chaos
- “Whoops, no alert”
- Unaccountable: “Not my SLOs”

Others pay:
- “The stress isn't in being paged, it's in the expectation of being paged.”—Narayan Desai
SRE-related costs

Product/company
- Low availability/customer impact
- Trust/reputation cost
- Lost time, money, ppl, opps

Team:
- Motivation
- Risks, delays
- Meaningless SLOs

External:
- Family/relationships
- Sleep

Dickerson's Hierarchy of Reliability
- What passive-aggressive is
- Where it comes from
- **What to do about it**
  - Empathy
  - Honesty
  - Agile
  - Teams
  - Leads/managers
  - Companies
What if ...

... we could have an emotional monitoring system tuned to alert us of these human failures?

We do: it’s us and our

• Feelings
• Observations
• Values (it’s OK, or not OK)
• “Moral authority”—Google SRE book
• Learnings
Troubleshooting emotions

“... being an expert is more than understanding how a system is supposed to work. Expertise is gained by investigating why a system doesn't work.” —Brian Redman/Google SRE book
Setting example/leading

- Communicating, esp. about change
- Customer-centric
- Proactive, big-picture
- Dependable
- Honest/fact-based
- Realistic
- Investigating, questioning
- Self-aware: biases, boundaries, burnout
- Mitigating and mediating
Empathy as a skill

- Actionable/actions
- Rooted in values
- Listening
- Understanding
- Interpreting
- Investigating: 5 Whys

EMPATHY IS A SKILL – SOMETHING YOU CAN ACQUIRE DEVELOPED BY LISTENING & UNDERSTANDING APPLIED BY PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Andrea Goulet, Corgibytes
For SREs: Looks like patience

- **Persuade:** Remind them of CUSTOMERS
- **Explain:** impact, why
- **Guide:** Provide an accountability structure
  - SLOs, post-mortems
- **Lead:** help them structure it
- **Get creative:** PagerDuty example
- **Simplify:** fact-focus
Try Socratic method

- Low-risk way to reduce potential shame-damage
- Present scenario and questions pointing toward clarity
- Asking, no telling
- Active listening
- Mind-map, mirror
- Myth-puncturing
- Not a silver bullet
Honesty as your shield

- Deflect passive-aggressive transference of blame, hostility
- Assertive: direct, clear, firm, fact-based
- Helps you avoid burnout
- Don’t enable it
Admitting failure = strength

- Setting an example
- Can defuse passive-aggressive tendencies
- Makes it safe to be accountable
- Projects “life goes on” vibe
- Enables continuous improvement
Agile as autonomy framework

- Reinforcing autonomy *with* accountability
- Ensuring Definition of Done met
- Retrospectives to solicit input, build team culture/values

Addons:
- Diagnostics: Team Autonomy Health Checks, culture surveys
- Events: PagerDuty’s Failure Friday, fun
- Trainings: Communication, tech, analysis
Focus on the team

- Reverse passive-aggressive’ing:
  - Transferring assertiveness mindset to teams
  - No “special” members
  - Teams enforce own SLOs/contracts
  - Shared knowledge:
    - Tips
    - Post-mortem docs
    - 24x7 w/playbooks
Role of leads and managers

- Leader = leading culture
- Address behaviors early
- Protecting team autonomy
- Be voice for accountability
- Respond to complaints by pointing to actions
- Set an example, do grunt work
- Guide team to proactivity
- Champion teamwork, no favoritism

NASA
Role of companies: values

Reinforce empathy:
- Transparency
- Inclusivity
- Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Community

Make honesty possible

Build psych safety

The Open Organization Maturity Model

About this document

The Open Organization Maturity Model is a framework for helping your organization to become more transparent, inclusive, adaptable, collaborative, and communal. It outlines steps that individuals, teams, and organizations can take to critically examine their organizational practices and chart their progress toward becoming a more open organization (as outlined in the Open Organization Definition).
Passive-aggressive behavior:
- Often deeply rooted
- More often situational
- Almost never malicious
- Still costs us, so address it
- Don’t succumb to it yourself
- Don’t enable it — deflect
- Remember: people evolve

Takeaways
Thanks!

- https://github.com/open-organization-ambassadors/open-org-definition/blob/master/open_org_maturity_model.md
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