

The Psychological Phenomenon at Play in Every Elon Musk Move

BY DENISE CANA

Last Friday, tens of thousands of public servants were fired.

The nation lost the dedication and service of these individuals, their communities have lost the security of a reliably employed core of families needing services, and the federal workers and their families have been catapulted into uncertainty, many into serious financial turmoil.

The mass terminations, led by the Department of Government Efficiency, were likely illegal. They were certainly cruel. And they clearly had nothing to do with the “performance” of the individuals let go.

Meanwhile, the daily assault on federal workers’ credibility, professionalism, and patriotism continues. We’re “crooks” who have “forgotten” our oaths to the country and the Constitution. We’re told we cannot share research results, investigate public health threats, start new projects, conclude old projects, continue to work on projects initiated under the previous administration (or even projects initiated during the administration before the previous one). We’re directed to work more efficiently with little direction as to what is allowed and what will be deemed insubordination by paranoid agency leadership teams.

Those with the misfortune of having seen cycles of abuse recognize the administration’s framework for governance by its acronym from psychology, DARVO: Deny, attack, reverse victim and offender.

First: Deny. Any and all claims of wrongdoing are derided as false. They’re baseless lies, slander, misinformation.

Next: Attack. The accuser is cast as the enemy. The people pointing out missteps and misconduct? They're not trustworthy, they aren't properly virtuous, they're too stupid to understand the situation, or they're so gullible they'll believe anything.

Finally: Reverse the positions of victim and offender.

DARVO is the pathology of a narcissistic abuser. It's a small-minded and petty ploy, but it's a dangerous one. And it is the go-to move at every level of this administration.

Presented with mounting evidence of and growing public concern for institutionalized racism, the administration says, No, you're the racist! And then it sets about dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion programs with a doth-protest-too-much fury.

Called out by reporters for demonstrably spreading misinformation and baseless conspiracy theories, the administration insists, No, you're spreading misinformation. Or, an oldie but a goodie: No, you're selling fake news.

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Department! or No, your motives are partisan and political!

And it's not just the headline-grabbing efforts. Across the executive branch, workplaces are seeing the rollout of senselessly inefficient return-to-office

protocols that will likely force people to work while sick, that will punish families with children, that will pressure employees to take leave even when they would otherwise be willing and able to work, and that even fail to recognize that some offices might need to collaborate across time zones. And when we point out incongruities or inefficiencies in these policies, we're told: No, you're inefficient and lazy.

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These are the adult tantrums of "I know you are, but what am I?" bullies, vacuous but vicious. And they have the desired effect of confusing the story, forcing onlookers to choose a side based on whom they trust rather than the evidence. Is the whiny deep state complaining about losing a cushy work-from-home gig, or is the mustachioed villain of a Musk–Miller–Trump appointee twisting the screws on well-meaning civil servants just because he can?

Usually, it's neither extreme. At every agency, the leadership teams arrived understaffed and uninformed, carrying a vague political mandate that had not been thoughtfully crafted to work with the organization's actual operations. Those appointees themselves are plainly living in fear of stepping out of line, beholden to the mercurial whims of unnamed others. Delegated lines of authority are muddied, overwritten by social contracts among agency leaders, and operations suffer huge bottlenecks because no one—often not even the political appointees—knows if they have the authority to make decisions. And those appointees have been directed to distrust the career staffers who actually know how to get things done, or even tune agency operations to Trump's own political goals.

So, at every level, the administration implements a reactionary DARVO protocol, the modus operandi of abusers looking to control a situation that has spiraled out of hand or spilled into public view.