



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



LAURI APPLE, ZALANDO

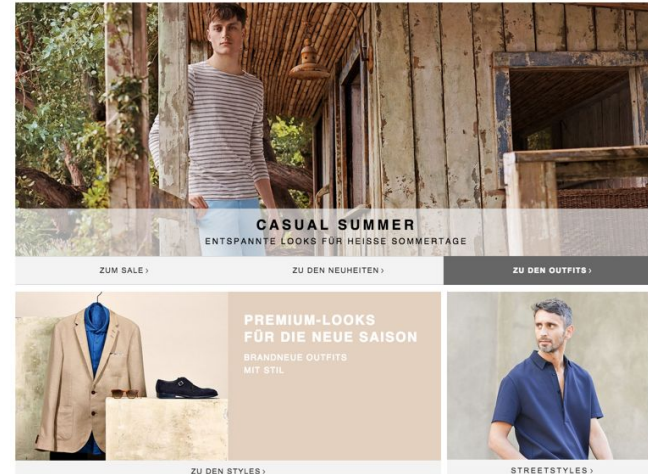


# About Zalando

- 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 ~1 800 techs
- Open Org Ambassador, Red Hat
- SRECon Program Committee (since 2016)

## Projects:

- *LappleApple/awesome-leading-and-managing*
- *LappleApple/Feedmereadmes*



(not a psychologist)

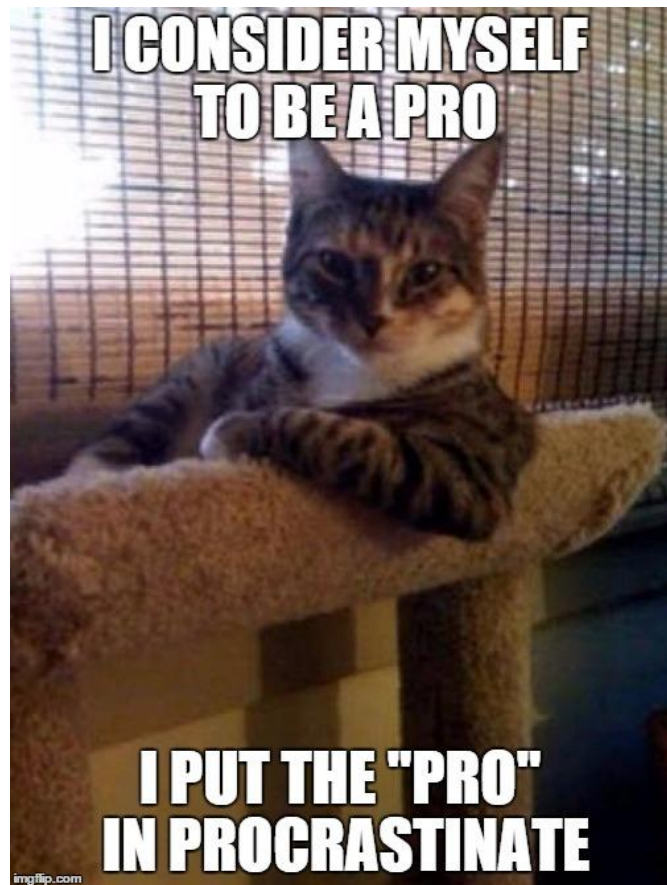


# Why an SRECon talk

## 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

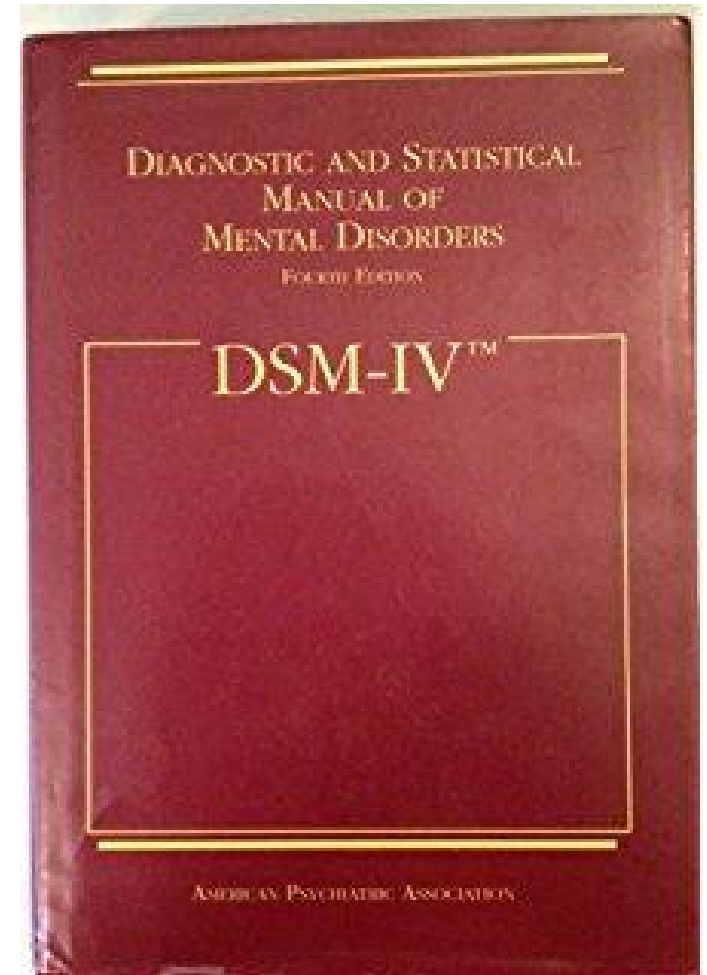
- **What passive-aggressive is**
  - Definition
  - What it's not
  - SRE examples
- Where it comes from
- What to do about it



# DSM description

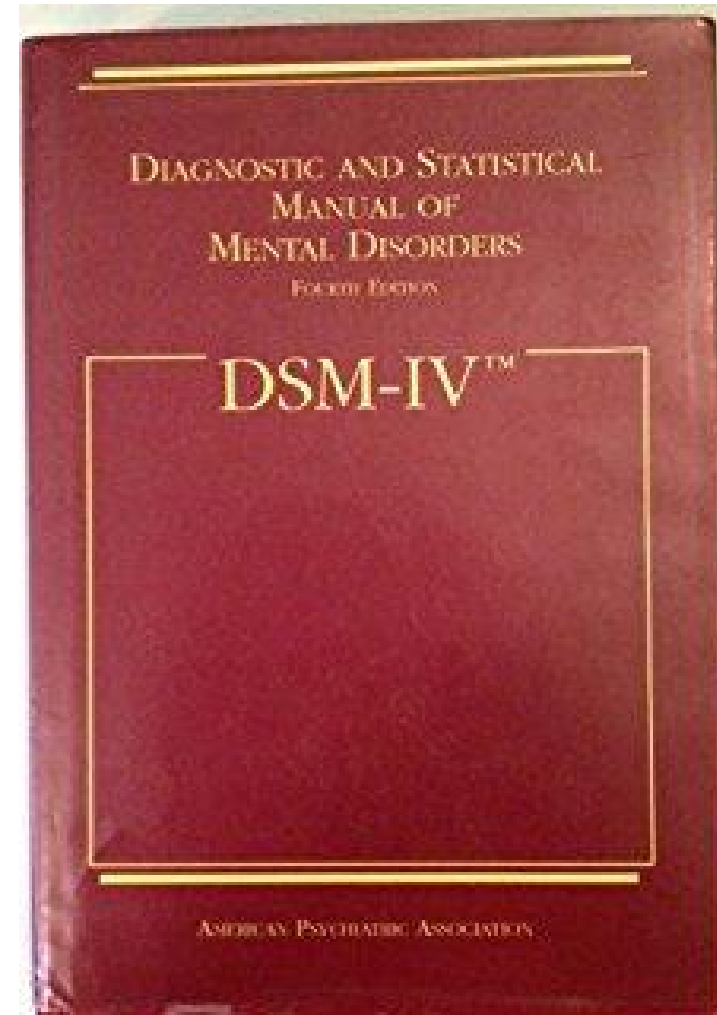
## Essential feature:

“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

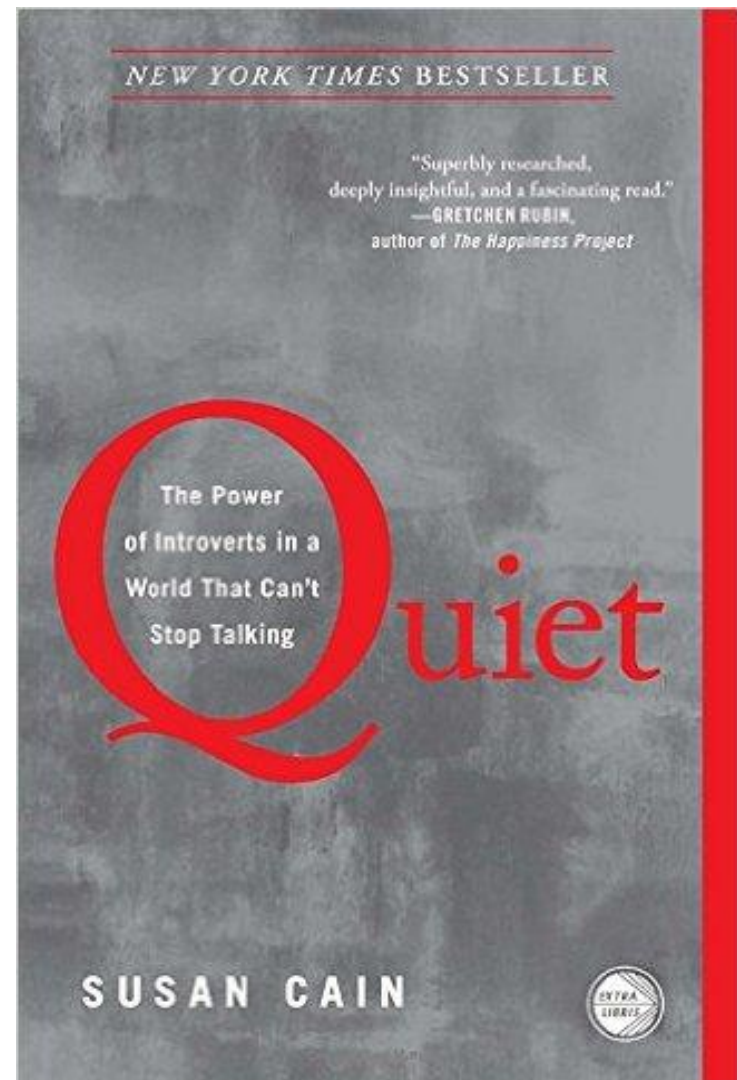
[blog.visme.co/passive-aggressive-behaviors-in-the-workplace-infographic](http://blog.visme.co/passive-aggressive-behaviors-in-the-workplace-infographic)





# 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

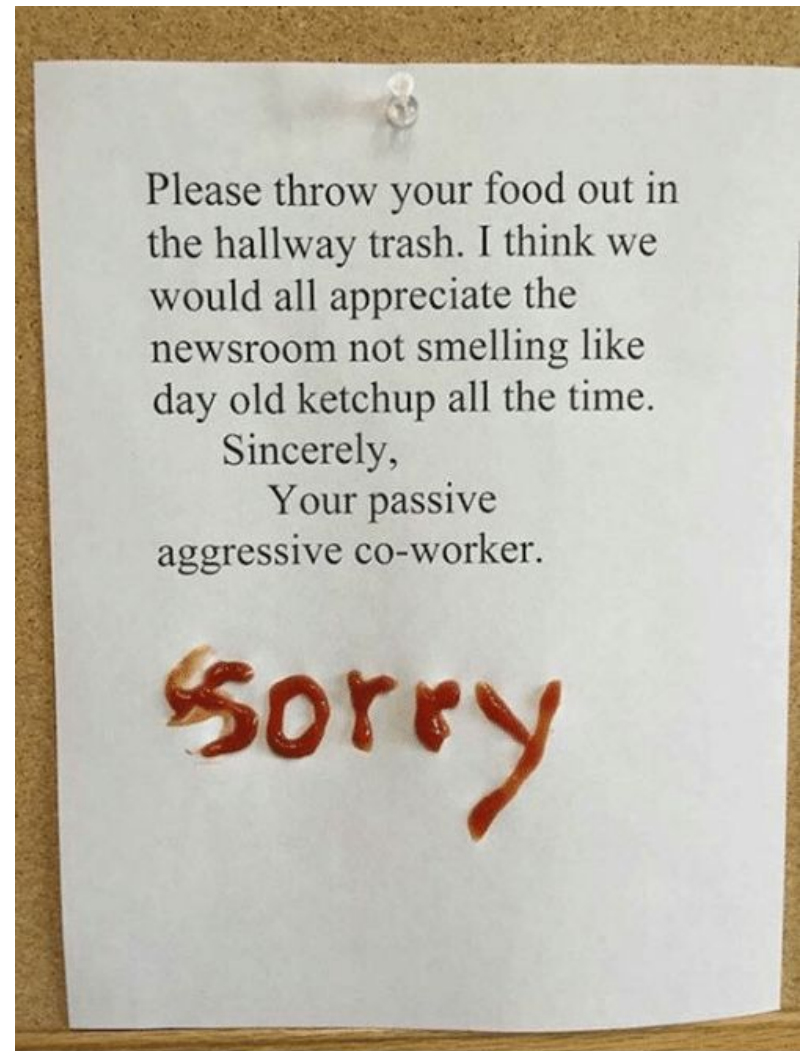
## True story:

- 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?



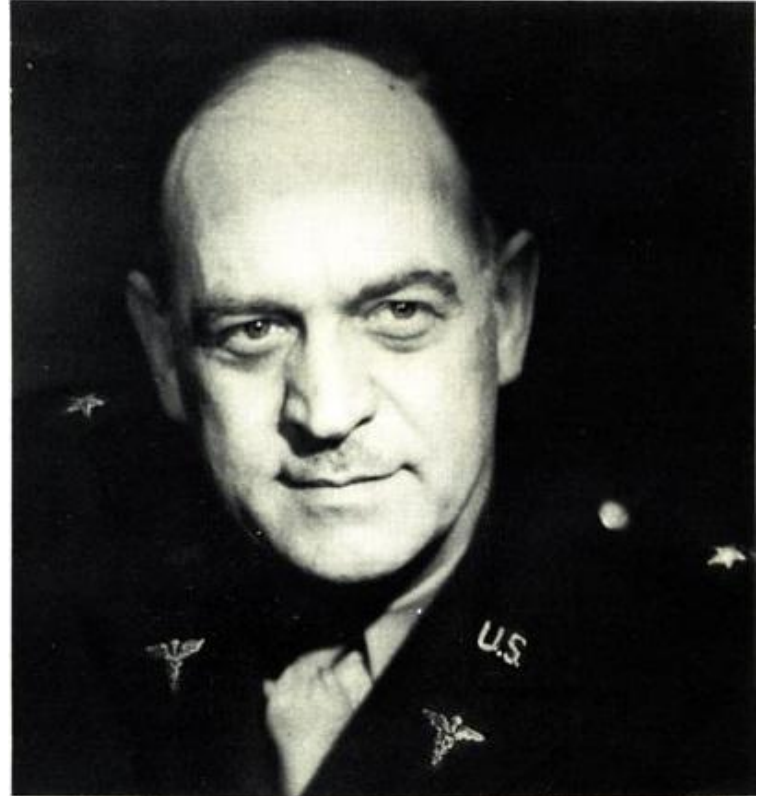
- What passive-aggressive is
- **Where it comes from**
  - Origin of term
  - History/DSM
  - Autonomy connection
- What to do about it





# Quick History: “Passive-aggressive”

- US War Dept. doc
- WWII soldiers who didn't follow orders = “immature”
- Openly defiant
- Pouted
- Stubborn
- “Inefficient”
- Procrastinated

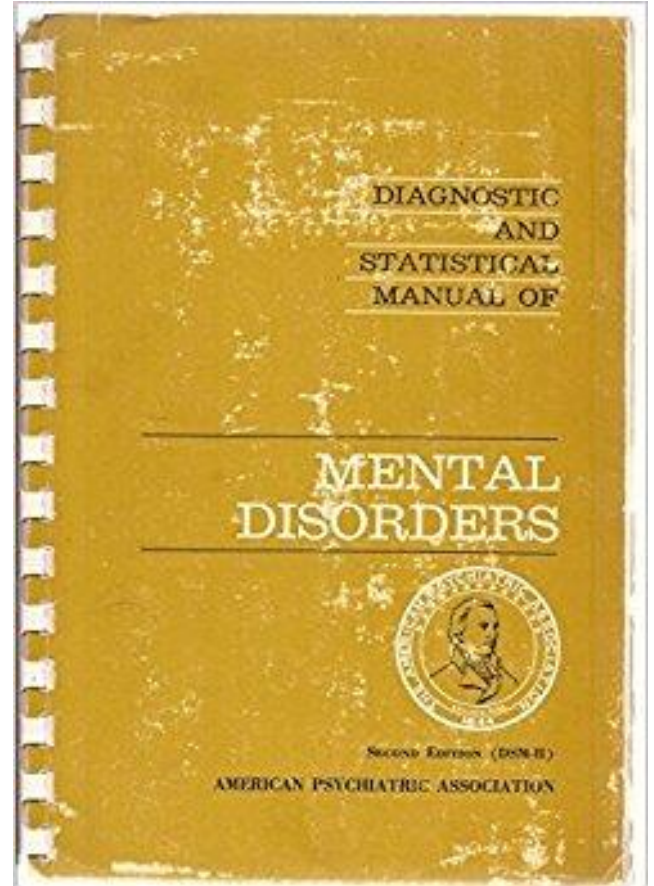


Cnl. Will Menninger  
Public Domain, US Army

# 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 \*\*



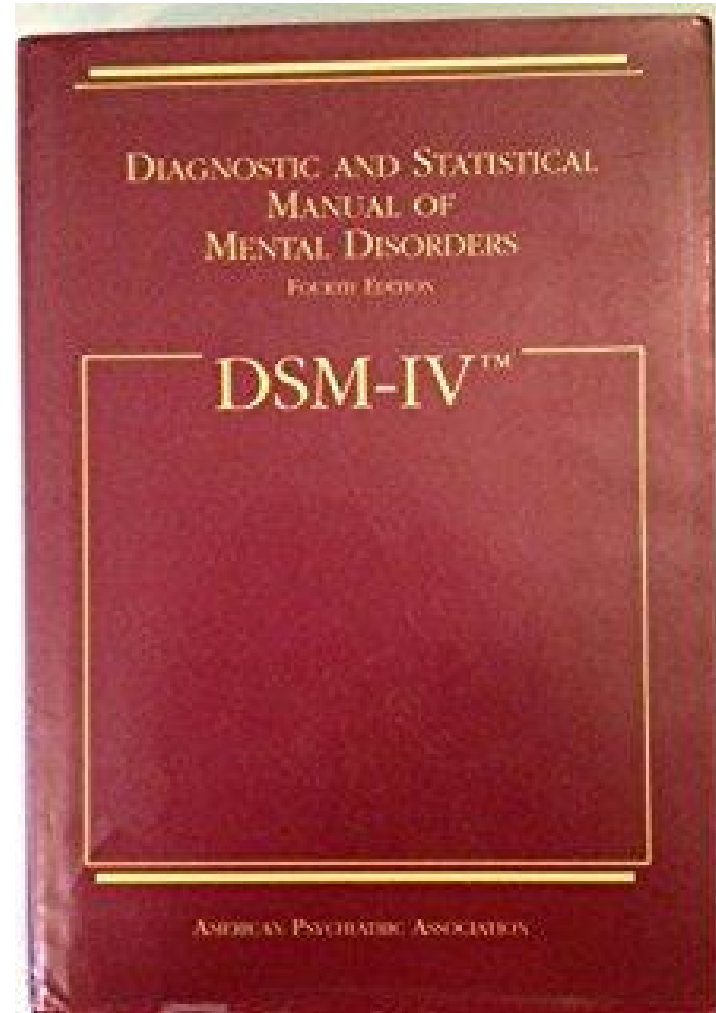
# 1990s-present

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

## Refresh:

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

<https://justines2010blog.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/dsm-iv.pdf>



# What “adequate” means to us



The “War Room” – NOW  
Facebook – December 2012

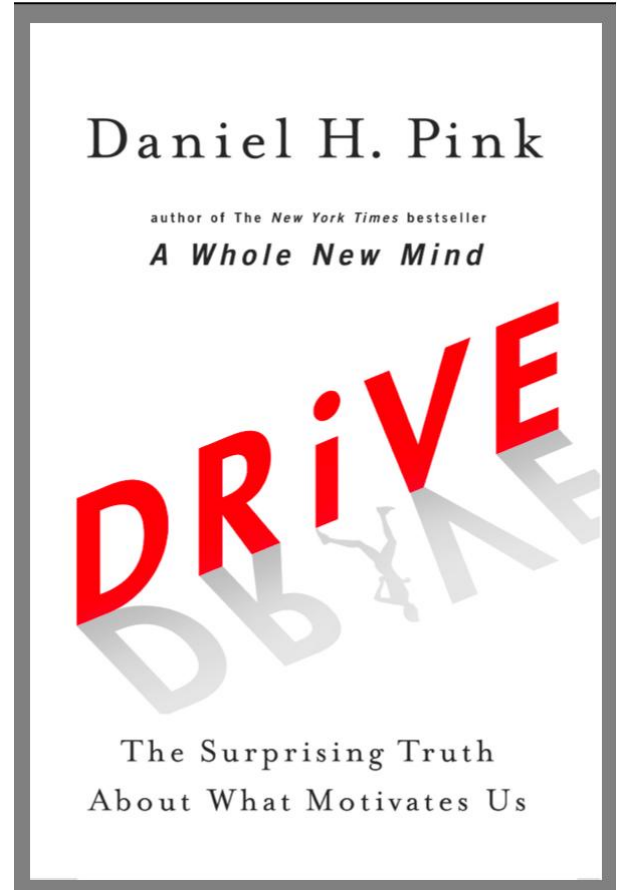


# Expectation misalignment as cause

## 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

Benjamin (1993)\*, Pretzer & Beck (1996)\*\*



# 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

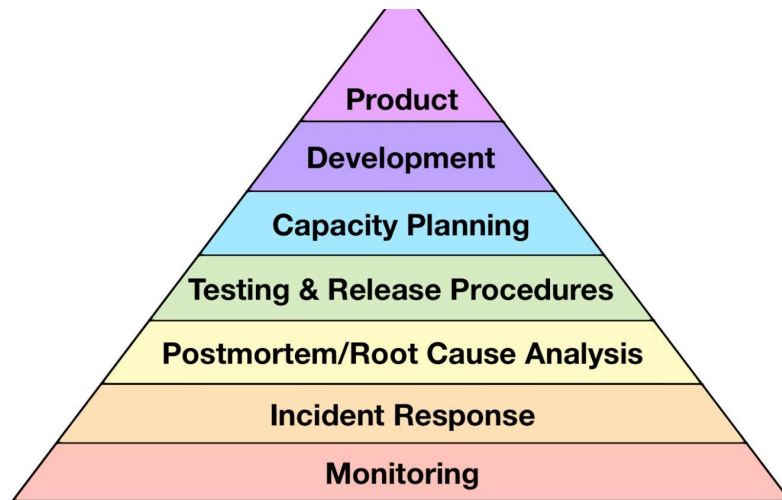
- Low availability/customer impact
- Trust/reputation cost
- Lost time, money, ppl, opps

## Team:

- Motivation
- Risks, delays
- Meaningless SLOs

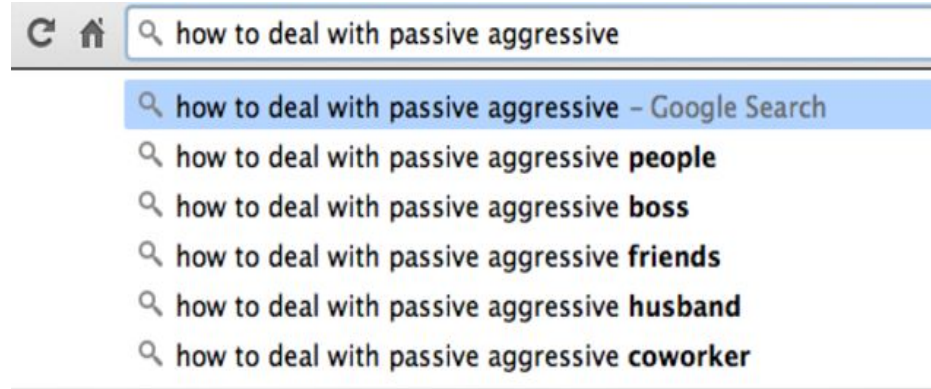
## External:

- 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



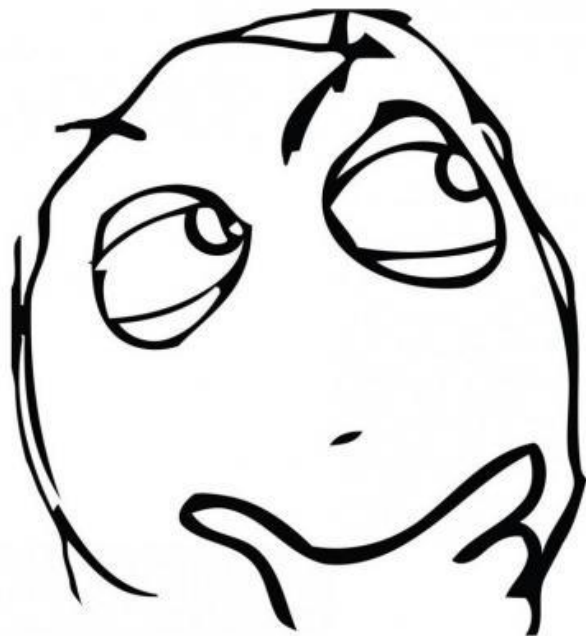


# What if ...

... 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



Luis Mineiro, SRECon PC

# 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

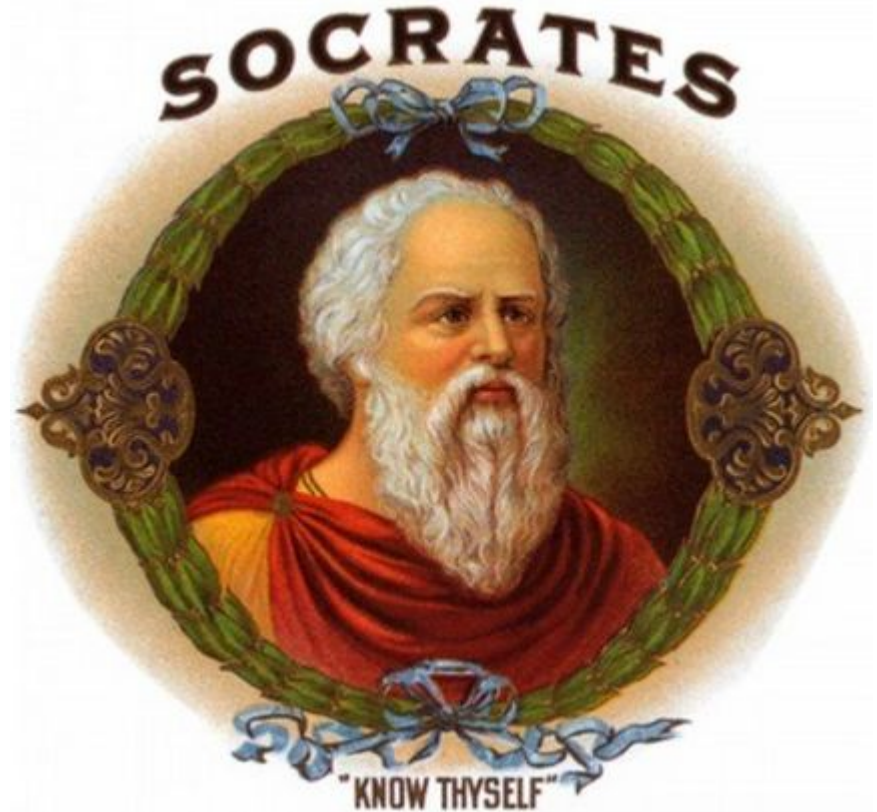
- **Persuade:** Remind them of CUSTOMERS
- **Explain:** impact, why
- **Guide:** Provide an accountability structure
  - SLOs, post-mortems
- **Lead:** help them structure it
- **Get creative:** PagerDuty example
- **Simplify:** fact-focus





# 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



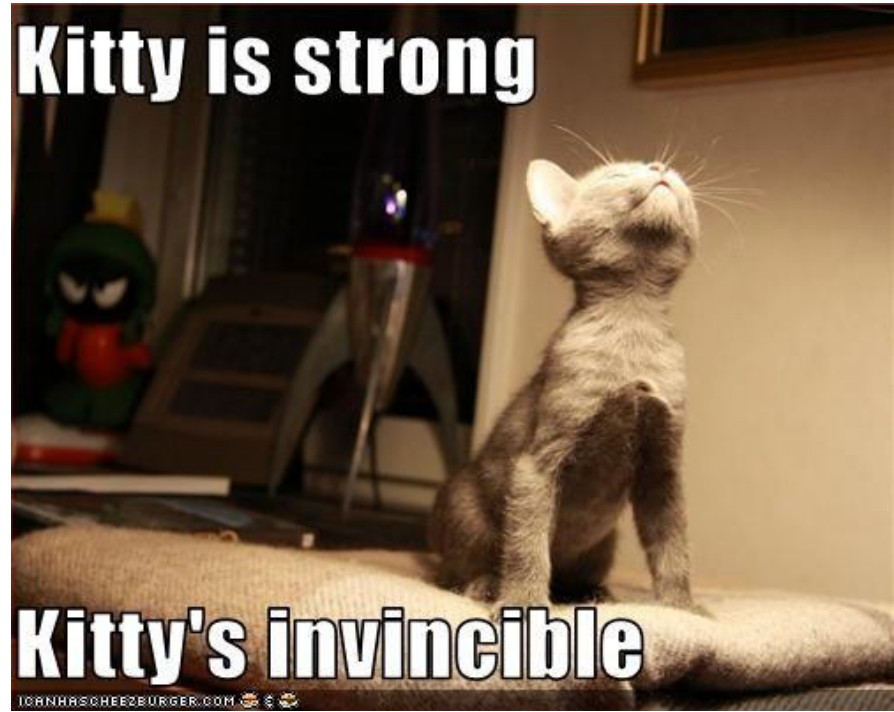
# Honesty as your shield

- 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

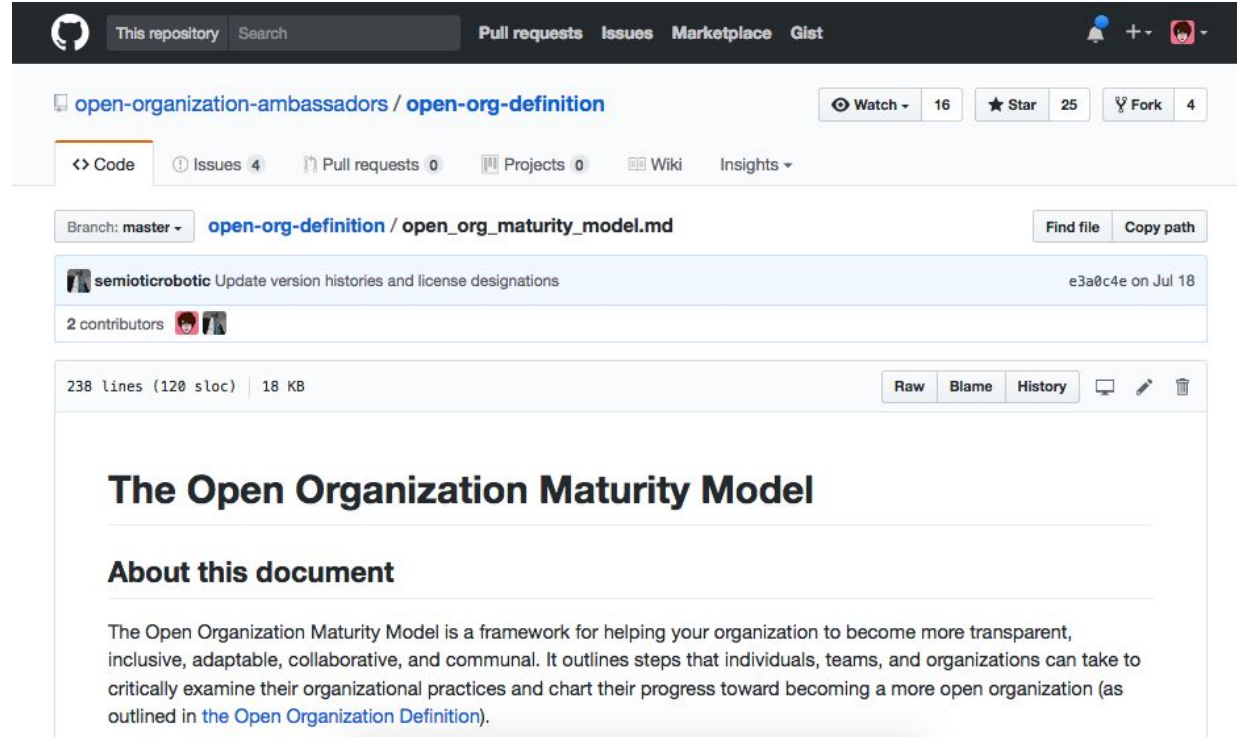
# Role of companies: values

## Reinforce empathy:

- Transparency
- Inclusivity
- Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Community

## Make honesty possible

## Build psych safety

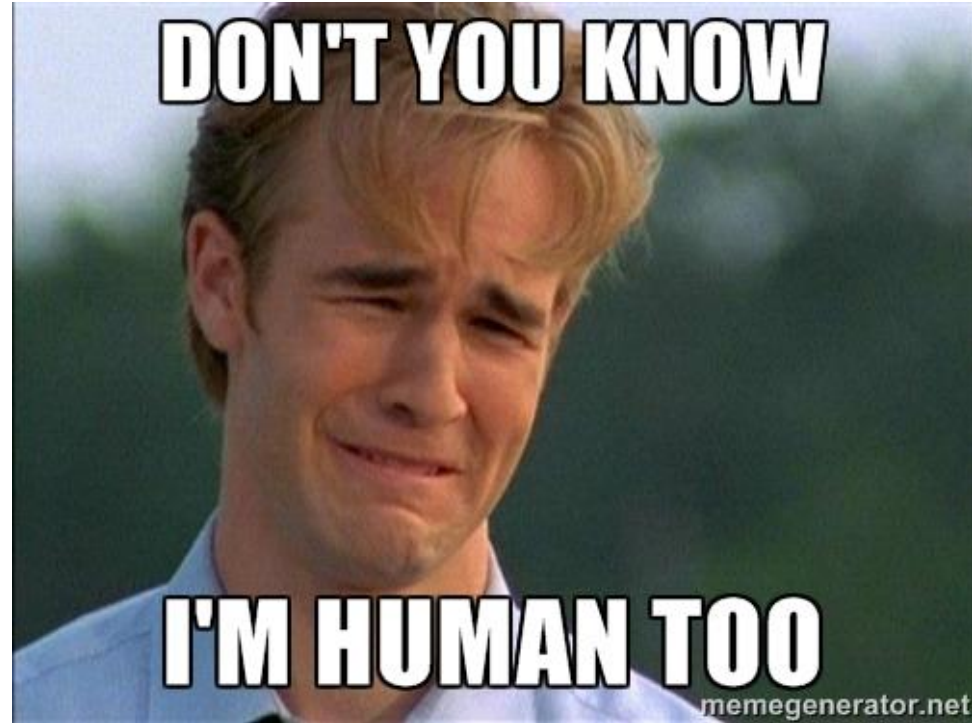


The screenshot shows a GitHub repository page for 'open-organization-ambassadors / open-org-definition'. The repository has 16 watches, 25 stars, and 4 forks. The current branch is 'master', and the file being viewed is 'open\_org\_maturity\_model.md'. A commit by 'semioticrobotic' is shown, titled 'Update version histories and license designations', dated July 18. The commit message is 'Update version histories and license designations'. The file size is 18 KB and it contains 238 lines of code (120 sloc). The commit is attributed to 2 contributors. The file content is displayed below, starting with the title 'The Open Organization Maturity Model' and a section 'About this document'. The text under 'About this document' reads: '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](#)).'.

# Takeaways

## 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



# Thanks!

- [https://github.com/open-organization-ambassadors/open-org-definition/blob/master/open\\_org\\_maturity\\_model.md](https://github.com/open-organization-ambassadors/open-org-definition/blob/master/open_org_maturity_model.md)
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