An unexamined fear is not worth having

e-O &P

amed
developing people
developing organisations

Edition Editors: Maria Arpa and Robin Shohet

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Cover illustration: Outburst of Fear by Paul Klee (1939), currently in the Museum of Fine arts, Berne.

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Maria Arpa and Robin Shohet

Introduction

Compiling this special edition of this journal on fear, shame and trauma has been an exploration of ideas and theories that, as guest editors, we have developed both individually and together over the many years we have known each other. These might seem quite heavy topics, and even perhaps to be avoided, until we see that this very avoidance gives them more power. Our belief is that by acknowledging them - not easy by any means, as there is both a personal and societal collusion to keep them hidden - we can use this acknowledgment as a source of connecting people rather than alienating them from each other.

What has led us to want to do a special edition of e-O&P is a wish for freedom for ourselves, for those we love, for our client group, for organisations and for society as a whole. And we both, from our different backgrounds, have come to the conclusion that unacknowledged fear can distort the intimacy in relationships that most of us both crave and avoid simultaneously, leading to the dysfunctional behaviour we see so often in organisations and at all levels of society. In trying to protect ourselves individually and collectively in different ways, we make people "other", which increases our fear of them. And we can see this being acted out around the whole Brexit vote, which was fuelled by a campaign of fear.

Robin's background is one of psychotherapy and supervision; Maria's is of social change through mediation, dialogue and nonviolence. Both of us are interested in fostering clear and honest communication at all levels, starting with oneself and working outwards. Soon after the publication of this special edition, we will be convening a Gathering to explore this topic in more depth. We hope you will join us. Watch this space!

The articles

Maria Arpa's article immediately throws down the gauntlet and notes that this might induce discomfort. She describes a domination culture that is so deeply ingrained into our way of thinking, that we will hurt ourselves to conform to it, not recognising how much we have allowed ourselves to be controlled. The mechanism through which this control is exercised is fear. She suggests that even attempting to change the structures of an organisation will not solve the problem as it is rooted in our thinking and conditioning. Many years ago Robin, wrote an article *How Green is Your Mind*, which suggested that faulty thinking was really the source of pollution, and that concentrating on ecological measures to combat pollution did not tackle their source in the mind.

Ben Fuchs sees fear as a virus that is transmitted so easily in organisations. He distinguishes between authentic fear and anxious fear, the latter dominating in the health system which is his focus. The domination culture transmits fear and anxiety, and he makes the point that no one counts the cost in both human and financial terms of the resulting burnout, absences, and inefficiency. He describes his work in helping people to slow down and recognise the defensive routines people find themselves in, and to move from being trapped inside the box to moving out of it.

Zoe Cohen looks at the prevalence of shame. Shame is perhaps why we are so prone to catching the anxiety virus, because it will not allow us to share what is really going on with us. Shame is embedded in our education system through fear of failure, but perhaps is even inherent in learning itself, as the very requirement to learn in retrospect implies that we were somehow deficient in the first place. She implies that this is the dark side of an improvement culture, which allows little tolerance for failure, and increases a sense of shame because we are not able to acknowledge our very human vulnerabilities. However, if such an acknowledgement is enabled, there are opportunities for growth.

Glen Williamson builds on the idea of different types of fear. He uses hang gliding as an example of how what might feel dangerous in a situation is actually safe (throwing oneself off) and what feels safe is actually dangerous (holding back). Our instincts and feelings can be deceptive and he points out that there is a big difference between 'being' and 'feeling' safe. (This theme is taken up in Robin's book reviews of *Wilful Blindness* and *The Untethered Soul* later in this edition.) Glen then goes on to describe the acronym F.E.A.R – False Evidence appearing Real. He then gives a personal example of working in a sales team with two different managers. One deliberately used fear, and the other helped people to manage their fear, thus creating a culture of support with success at all levels, evidenced in significant increases in employee, organisational and customer satisfaction. This begs a question of why we tolerate cultures of fear when they patently don't work, and this is an issue that we could well address fruitfully during our gathering later this year.
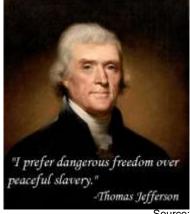
Jeff Putthoff describes his work with disenfranchised youngsters in the USA. At first sight this does not so obviously connect with OD culture. But in showing how the survival culture of his client group impacts on the workers, we realise how easily, as workers, our own survival patterns are triggered. Even with the best of intentions, it is easy for us professionals to become alienated from our client group, which happened in NHS trusts like Mid Staffs (see the book review on *Wilful Blindness*). The way forward, he found, was a rigorous self-examination by workers, built on a greater understanding of survival patterns. This can lead to radical empathy rather than burnout.

Finally, **Robin Shohet** is interviewed by a colleague, **Ben Fuchs**. Robin has been facilitating groups on fear and love in supervision for twenty years and describes some of his work in helping people to recognise fear when they might not have been aware of it. He is particularly interested in how it affects the cases that are brought or not brought to supervision, and how the mind invents excuses to keep a fear that is not useful (Ben calls this 'anxious fear') to justify not risking vulnerability. Robin invites workshop participants to look at the belief systems that can lock unhelpful behaviour in place, and invites a form of inquiry into what we find most difficult to face.

Our invitation

We invite you to explore the topic of fear, shame and trauma through reading and discussing these articles. Notice if they challenge or excite you, check whether this perspective in any way alters the lens through which you see the world of work, and ask yourself, 'What could I do differently as a result of this information and these diverse perspectives?' And watch this space for details of our **f2f post-publication Gathering in London**, probably in early December.

"I prefer dangerous freedom over peaceful slavery."
-Thomas Jefferson

Source:
PictureQuotes.com

Acknowledgements

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Domination Culture and its connection to trauma and conflict

Maria Arpa

In this article, you will find commentary on what I have learned and some conclusions I have formulated - particularly about the misuse of authority - while observing, experiencing and hearing about workplaces over the last 40 years. During these 40 years I have been the person everyone shouts at and a person who shouts at everyone. When neither of those contributed to my wellbeing I became a mediator. In the last 15 years I have become a consultant, trainer, facilitator, author and coach. My intention is to open awareness to what I consider to be mainstream thinking, so some of these reflections are intended to be disruptive. What I'm asking of you is to allow the possibility of my opinions, even if you feel resistant.

Keywords

domination culture, trauma, conflict, power over, compliance, self-determination

Some personal history

Employee as slave

I got my first part time job at the age of 14 in 1974. The work, opening envelopes and sorting the contents into piles, was mindless, and we were shouted at a lot by some women in overalls. By my mid-twenties, it began to dawn on me that I was unemployable. This was not because I couldn't perform tasks, meet performance indicators or deliver quality work, but because I wasn't willing to do anything meaningless just because someone told me to do it. So, at 28 years of age, I started running my own business and have been responsible for generating my own income ever since. For the last ten years I have been Chief Executive of a charity, the Centre for Peaceful Solutions (CPS), that I founded specifically for ethical reasons to be a non-profit making organisation.

It took many years to realise and articulate that what I was objecting to was the misuse of authority, where instructions and directives could be based on the mood and triggers of my seniors, in a system where I mostly recognised enslavement thinly disguised as employment; I was especially amazed (in a bad way) at middle and senior management systems where pleasing a boss who is also pleasing a boss could come at a great cost to other aspects of life, such as parenting, family relationships and even personal well-being. In my opinion, even having a job that requires you to get less sleep than is good for you could be considered to be enslavement in a competitive society where we are programmed to fear losing everything, while carrying a burden of debt that leaves many people two pay cheques away from financial ruin.

Employer as slave driver

All of this really hit home when I became the owner of a profit making business and I found myself managing my own handpicked team. I was shocked to realise that I was managing people in exactly the same unhappy way that I had been managed. Everything depended on my mood and on the team's ability to 'please' me.

I became aware that all I had done was to put myself in a position of power so that I no longer felt powerless. It meant that I was just following the same system from the other side of the coin. Yet what I really wanted to do was disrupt it. I saw that I needed a completely new approach, or a paradigm shift to be able to see workplaces through a different lens - one which is not taught in the education system or shared anywhere in mainstream teaching. I sold my business and went on a journey of discovery which provided answers I never knew the questions to.

At this point, I would like to define what I mean by 'domination culture', 'trauma' and 'conflict', to further contextualise my 'disruptive' comments.

What is Domination Culture?

Walter Wink

The phrase 'domination culture' was adopted by the theologian and proponent of non-violence, Walter Wink (1992) who talked about domination systems where a few people control many others to their own advantage. In domination systems people are trained to think in ways that support the system, even at a cost to themselves. So they are conditioned to fit in with the system.

The suppression of the self

A key part of fitting in with a domination system is the suppression of the self. This means that we are required to deny our feelings and needs in order to be compliant and obey the rules. The process of denying our feelings and needs begins in school (if our parents didn't start it) because as well as being required to learn information to pass tests and get graded, we also discovered the power of enforcement when we didn't do as were told.

Fear disguised as competition

For this reason many people find it hard to articulate how they feel. We were educated by society to ignore our feelings in order to be an interchangeable part in a moneymaking machine, where every individual is replaceable. In a domination system, obedience, compliance and pecking order are important. The inherent threat of replacement with a more compliant and obedient actor is implicit because we are trained to believe that there are always plenty of people who can step in and that we are competing for work, as if this is a

natural way of being in the world. The driving energy in this system is fear disguised as competition. Consequently, we put our energy into actions that are really driven by survival instinct instead of creativity.

A language of judgement and blame

Domination culture generates a language of judgement, blame and labels. It motivates people to act out of fear, guilt or shame through the use of threat. These phrases are not used explicitly, but you will find them hidden in the discourse in most mainstream workplaces. 'Do your work or I'll fire you', 'Do your work or we'll label you as incapable', 'Do your work or you'll be humiliated'. I call it 'or else' language. It can be very polite and can even include the words 'please' and 'thank you'. But hidden in the content is the 'or else …'

Unintended consequences of misguided reward systems

Sometimes, domination culture uses rewards to elicit the behaviour it desires. This may seem a better way of operating, but is really another way of manipulating people into desirable behaviour. And, while it might generate short-term compliance, if the work is meaningless or if there is still threat of punishment, the incentives become less interesting. Worse still is when the promise of rewards creates a 'winner takes all' competitive mentality. This creates winners and losers; it increases and widens the gap between those who 'succeed' and those who can't keep up, instead of putting effort into collaborating in order to make something which is greater than the sum of its parts. In one Call Centre where I was delivering some training, I was introduced to the top performing sales person. I listened in to her calls, hoping to discover the magic ingredient that set her above the others. What she was doing was only entertaining calls from people ready to place an order. If a person asked questions about the product or wanted some other information, she terminated the call without warning and moved on to the next call. She had calculated that, with the amount of incoming calls exceeding capacity, she could play a numbers game to achieve higher sales. She had no interest at all in the terrible PR she was creating in cutting people off. This is an excellent example of how a focus on competition can actually have hidden unintended consequences. She was determined to keep up her continuous sales person of the month status.

The suppression of self-determination

Both the threat of punishment and the promise of rewards are ways of controlling people, yet one human need that I hear named over and over again is self-determination. For workplaces to be healthy and functional, managers need to move beyond carrots and sticks. Underlying the carrot and stick approach is an inherent belief that people need to be controlled because they are untrustworthy. Controlling people in these ways creates fear, resentment and suspicion. When people feel fear, they do not perform at their best. When they feel resentful they actively find ways not to cooperate. When they are suspicious, they gossip in order to find others with whom they can make sense of the situation.

Add to this the suppression of feelings and needs and, while workers might not be able to articulate their fear or resentment, the feelings often manifest as undesirable behaviour, leading to enhanced punishment systems or more rules. This presents the irony of a domination culture that manufactures its own culprits.

The bottom line is that the key principle of Domination Culture is 'Power Over', i.e. retaining power over other people so that they have less or no power in a situation. Where such a power imbalance exists, honest negotiation is almost impossible to achieve, because the person with the least power cannot negotiate from a place of equality. This disparity will show up in seemingly unconnected ways, even if the negotiation in the moment appears to be successful.

What is trauma?

Experiences or situations that trigger emotional distress and human suffering can be described as 'trauma'. The level of distress and suffering overwhelms our capacity to cope, and induces feelings of powerlessness.

We usually associate trauma with terrifying events which include violence. However, there are more subtle forms of trauma, where the experiences or incidents are less visible, such as discrimination, oppression, and poverty which have a cumulative effect that can lead to dysfunction. I believe that repeatedly exerting 'power over' another person creates trauma, but we have become so used to and indoctrinated by this system in society that we accept it, and override our true feelings.

What is conflict?

The traditional definition of conflict that most people identify with is a disagreement of some sort. What I have come to understand is that conflict is a natural tension. It exists within people and shows itself when we come into contact with others. What most people identify as a conflict is actually a dispute that has arisen because we don't know how to handle conflict.

If you accept that conflict is naturally within all of us, and now put hundreds, if not thousands, of people in a building for hours at a time, then add enforcement and competition into the equation, why wouldn't you expect that you have created a pressure cooker and possibly a time bomb where disputes of one sort or another are the norm?

Trying to fix all this with Disciplinary and Grievance procedures is like trying to play a game of chess with knitting needles.

How does all this knit together?

Domination cultures traumatise and re-traumatise

On the strength of this analysis, I am proposing that domination culture workplaces traumatise and re-traumatise people, leaving them in a constant state of shock that they are not allowed to articulate or heal from. And fear of losing the job, being seen as weak, or as coming across as a trouble-maker leads to suppression of emotions which find their way out in other areas of our lives, or manifest as mental and physical illness and always show up in seemingly unconnected ways in the workplace.

'Acting out' trauma

I further propose that some people come to work and unconsciously 'act out' their unrecognised trauma by using 'power over' in sadistic ways to try and pass on the pain.

Domination cultures are unstable and unsustainable in the long run
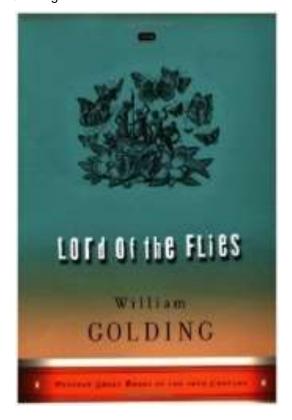
And finally, I also assert that a competitive, target driven, high pressure workplace which promotes rivalry, where domination culture, trauma and conflict are perpetuated, is actually a sick and unsustainable workplace because it is at the root of phenomena like absenteeism, industrial action, high staff turnover, workplace stress, fraud and theft, bad conduct and poor performance.

The Enron scandal is an example where maximising profit for a few shareholders drives the agenda without integrity for how that profit is made. When there is integrity but a complete lack of understanding about domination culture as a system and no knowledge of the (in my opinion) much better alternatives, that is a different and often unseen problem.

BBC Radio 4's programme 'The Joy of 9 to 5' suggested that people need structure and that hierarchy is a natural form of social order. The important part of this hypothesis is whether that structure is decided by the group or imposed.

Many companies have recognised that they don't want top-down structures. So there is a trend toward self-managed workplaces, where people are given the power to work it out and are supported when they need it. It sounds good in theory, but an unintended consequence of this structure - as quoted on the 'The Joy of 9 to 5' programme - is that people form cliques, and some people are excluded from the clique. This leads to a tribal effect. The issue here is that just getting rid of a top down structure does not change domination culture thinking.

A good example of this is in William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies', where a group of boys are stranded on a desert island and, when discussion fails, they become tribal and warring. The implication is that this is what people will naturally do when left to their own devices. I am proposing that this is what we are programmed to do by domination culture conditioning which begins at school.

One model I have come across which seems to work well is the family run firm called Timpson. I spoke to John Timpson and he told me, "No one is allowed to give orders. We pick people with the right personality, give them the freedom to do their job and support them with what they need".

I heard John Timpson speaking about the company, and I was delighted to hear him say that they don't have a 'Head Office'. There is just Timpson House. This certainly comes very close to my vision for effective and healthy workplaces.

So what am I saying?

> *Imagine ... dialoguing instead of debating, dancing instead of wrestling and cooperating instead of competing …*

There needs to be a shift from domination culture and its 'or else' language to a culture of trust if we want to create productive and effective workplaces. Here, in exchange for helping someone make a profit, we get our needs for respect, meaning, purpose and sustainability met. In my opinion, this requires a completely new language which promotes collaboration and cooperation, whilst empowering people to transform their emotional fear, thereby reducing toxic stress and removing humiliation as a tool for motivation. The Dialogue Road Map, a communications tool that I created and developed over the last 15 years, provides a bridge to finding that language.

The Dialogue Road Map creates the conditions in which all parties can have an enhanced communication experience, as transactions are clearer, more detailed, rooted in accuracy and aimed at finding effective strategies and reducing inefficiencies. For example, most disturbances to workplaces lie in the gap between

Message Sent and Message Received. Even though we believe we are speaking the same language, how we communicate and what we understand differs greatly from person to person. Failing to realise that we are acting out of assumptions can result in time-consuming and costly errors or omissions. Because of a fear of repercussions, these errors and omissions are covered up or blamed on others. This might not manifest as a visible dispute but can give rise to hidden inefficient and ineffective strategies which are costly and time consuming and difficult to uncover.

Figure: The conflict resolution model we use at CPS

I am not saying that I support anything fluffy or 'tree-hugging'. I'm not interested in so-called 'softer' skills where people learn to use language in a way that still avoids the real conversation and suppresses the conflict. I'm interested in every human being taking responsibility for everything they say and everything they do. I'm saying that for people to take responsibility in a group they need to learn how to do this. And for people to learn, they need to feel relaxed. Giving people orders under threat does not relax people to learn, it puts people into survival mode, where we are more likely to act in a defensive way, repeat old patterns or do nothing.

If we accept that all businesses will encounter predictable and unpredictable disturbances, then I am advocating sustainable processes for correcting those disturbances. These cannot be found in mainstream systems, because these processes require a paradigm shift in thinking. To make this paradigm shift, we need to be open to the unlearning required of us. So while we can't undo what has been done, we do have the power observe it, review it and change it.

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Working with fear and anxiety in health organisations

Ben Fuchs

Keywords:

authentic fear, anxious fear, anxiety, rule-based goals, real-world goals, defensive routines, system 1 and 2 thinking, self-authoring

Introduction

In the course of working as an organisational development consultant for over twenty years, I have come to recognise that fear is endemic in many organisations, although it is often not recognised as such. In Part 1 of this article I consider the impact of fear and anxiety on the UK's largest employer, the NHS; in Part 2, I offer an approach of pan-organisational self-authorship to working with it.

PART 1: A CULTURE OF FEAR AND ANXIETY IS ENDEMIC IN THE NHS

Authentic fear and anxious fear

There is a difference between authentic fear and anxious fear. Authentic fear is a natural response to a real and present danger. It propels us into action and serves to protect us from danger. Authentic fear will always be part of dealing with life and death situations. Anxious fear is a chronic underlying tension or worry that hampers effective action and drives dysfunctional behavior.

Alongside the dedication of NHS staff to providing high quality health care, health organisations are often driven by anxious fear in ways that can undermine their noble intentions. Health professionals often have higher levels of commitment and a greater sense of vocational purpose than many other professions. They can also have higher levels of work related stress. According to the Boorman Report (2009), the NHS has higher levels of illness, absenteeism and early retirement than other public and private sector employers. I think chronic anxiety in the culture is one of the root causes of stress, which adversely impacts both the wellbeing of staff and the quality of patient care.

Anxiety is understandable. Failures in health care systems can result in fatalities. When failures are exposed, the public and press demand accountability. Senior leaders come under fire. This raises anxiety levels among leaders, which in turn affects the level of anxiety experienced by frontline staff.

Anxiety is like a virus. The phenomenon of emotional contagion and its contribution to clinician stress and burnout has been well evidenced over the last 50 years. Our mirror neurons cause us to mirror the emotional state of the people around us. When we are around people who are anxious we tend to experience more anxiety. Much of the contagion happens unconsciously. In hierarchical systems, anxiety is often transmitted downward through the chain of command, where it has a detrimental impact on wellbeing.

In hospitals, patients and their visitors are anxious about their health, and ultimately their mortality. Clinicians are anxious that they could, by commission or omission, cause harm to a patient. Senior leaders are anxious about liability risks and about inspection reports from regulators. Arguably, everyone in the system is anxious, much of the time.

Defensive routines inhibit innovation

This anxiety underpins many defensive routines that emerge when faced with potential threats or embarrassment to the organisation or its leaders. Defensive routines create the illusion of control through an over reliance on rules and hierarchy. Following the rules and minimising the risk of being blamed become primary drivers. Decisions are escalated up the hierarchy to mitigate personal risk. This inhibits innovation. Creative ideas may be viewed as threats or distractions, rather than as positive contributions. The implicit assumption is that people cannot be trusted to do their best, cooperate with each other, figure things out, and make sensible decisions. Intrinsic motivation is devalued in favour of extrinsic carrots and sticks. Staff think in terms of what they are allowed and not allowed to do, rather than focus on what is best to do. Pleasing or displeasing the boss can become a bigger concern than serving the needs of patients.

People's energy is directed towards defending their actions and presenting their bosses with what they want to hear, often at the expense of more honest communication. As one senior manager said, 'part of my job is presenting the illusion of progress.' When people are fearful of displeasing the boss, they tend to avoid sharing concerns they know won't be appreciated, so the system may remain blind to problems that individuals can see. Eventually staff members cease to notice problems. Enthusiasm and motivation give way to cynicism and complacency. Organisations that provide a poor quality service are usually operating with deeply embedded defensive routines.

Some consequences of defensive routines

The cost of defensive routines can be seen in a number of ways. A culture of blame, defensiveness and negative perceptions of the leadership may develop among staff. Complaining and cynicism become a kind of social currency in daily conversation. The symptoms of these are often most visible to the organisation through the volume of formal complaints, employment tribunals, stress related absenteeism and staff survey results. The quality of care is also impacted, as patient satisfaction correlates closely with staff satisfaction. Fearful staff members are not able to deliver their best, and ultimately provide poorer care. Fear reduces learning by preventing genuine reflection or dialogue about underlying concerns and assumptions. Paradoxically, anxiety-driven behaviour increases the risk of things going wrong, making the things we fear more likely to happen.

A pervasive rule-based culture

Organisations are founded on real-world goals, their purpose and the tangible benefits they seek to provide. To scale activities, they create structures, procedures, policies and rules. These structures develop a life of their own and rule-based goals emerge. Over time, the real-world goals become subordinated to rule-based goals. The pursuit of targets takes precedence over focusing on real-world outcomes. Managers are evaluated against how they have hit or missed their targets. A rule-based culture tends to inhibit initiative and creativity and drains the staff of motivation over time.

Rule-based goals require activities to be documented. While aspects of this can be important data in the service of real world goals, much of the time spent doing this is for the purpose of self-protection and limiting exposure to risk. One A&E Matron was reported as saying: "Whenever something goes wrong, my first thought is whether my paperwork is up to date". When something goes wrong, additional rules are put in place. I was once presented with a contract that explicitly prohibited me from charging for services delivered by a deceased person. I can only imagine the origins of that rule.

The challenge of change

The risk of not addressing defensive routines, with its associated financial costs and risks to quality are much greater than the cost and risk of embracing culture change. Much effort has been put into mitigating the culture of fear and the impact of defensive routines, through leadership development and initiatives aimed at improving staff survey results. Although well intended, there is a danger that management training can become another defensive routine in itself. Learning and development departments are subject to the same mind-set as the rest of the organisation and experience pressure to show results.

While the costs of learning and development programmes are carefully budgeted, I have yet to see a budget that has a line for the cost of defensive routines. Staff turnover, absenteeism, formal complaints, wasted

Figure 1: The flow of systemic anxiety

resources, disengagement and poor performance are generally treated as individual performance problems rather than as a complex matrix of symptoms. The challenge of change is to address the underlying anxieties, rather than treat cultural symptoms as a series of unrelated phenomena. Training individual managers, without addressing the underlying cultural dynamics is like taking the individual fish out of the aquarium, cleaning them, putting them back in the same tank of murky water and expecting the eco-system of the aquarium to be different.

Shifting a culture of fear

It takes more than training to shift the culture of fear. Focusing only on individuals ignores the complexity of social systems. It is not uncommon for individuals who develop themselves to leave their organisation if the wider system is not developing along with them. This is an unintended consequence of leadership development that is familiar to coaches and consultants. The people most needed for culture change are the ones who leave if the environment is too toxic or they are not sufficiently supported systemically. It is

especially difficult to introduce culture change initiatives through top-down mechanisms that rely on a culture of compliance to achieve their aims, when the culture of control and compliance is what needs to change.

In spite of all the challenges outlined here, people working in health organisations have enormous dedication and sense of vocation. They often work unpaid overtime rather than let a patient down or leave important tasks unfinished. Their intrinsic motivation drives them to keep going under difficult conditions. This dedication can also be exploited, contributing to overall staff dissatisfaction. Talented people may leave, finding posts elsewhere, as is currently happening among junior doctors and young GP's.

The Carter Review (2016) points out that:

> "Our staff are by far our biggest resource; however the workforce is often regarded as a cost to be controlled rather than a creative and productive asset to be harnessed. The term workforce only serves to reinforce this. We have arguably the greatest concentration of intellect and talent of any UK business, but there is little evidence it has been fully engaged to solve the efficiency and productivity issues Trusts are facing.

The lack of full engagement to solve these issues is a byproduct of a fear-based culture. The term 'workforce' is an example of the language of fear. People choose careers in health care because it is a vocation, not a job. When we scratch below the surface of the apparent cynicism of many staff, there is an idealist at heart who has become hardened by disappointment and frustration with the gap between how things are, and how they could be.

PART 2: ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE CHANGE THROUGH PAN-ORGANISATIONAL SELF-AUTHORSHIP

How can organisational culture change?

Culture is notoriously difficult to shift. Changes in rules or structures seldom create the hoped for changes in mindsets and behaviours. New rules and structures are often manifestations of an existing culture, not interventions that change it. Culture is a macro-level emergent property of a complex system. It emerges from micro-level interactions. The micro-level can be seen in how we talk to each other, and how we talk to ourselves, in our internal thoughts and assumptions. By addressing the changing the micro-level mind-sets and the patterns of interactions, we can influence the macro-level of culture.

In attempting to change culture, there are two key issues that need to be addressed. One is to face into the anxiety rather than try to avoid or defend against it. The second is to put the real-world goals at the forefront of decision-making and learning at every level of the organisation. Both of these require a shift in mind-sets.

Facing into anxiety

To address systemic anxiety and the defensive routines, I think there are three interwoven areas of reflection and development that are helpful to focus on. These are intrapersonal development, relational or inter-personal development and systemic or organisational development. These areas are sometimes referred to as 'I, We and It'. All three areas need to be engaged to change culture.

While focusing only on individuals doesn't change a culture, self-development is essential to being able to engage effectively in team and organisational development. Self-development is an area often ignored by

health care professionals. There are exceptions to this, such as psychotherapy where it is a professional requirement. However, ongoing reflective practice and self-development are not generally seen as essential for quality clinical work or personal resilience. Clinicians can be tough with themselves when it comes to addressing their own anxiety and vulnerability. Personal development is often seen as remedial, to address a defect or deficit, rather than as a supportive and integral part of professional praxis.

Robert Kegan's (1982; 1994) insights about stages of adult development, characterised by increasing levels of self-awareness, cognitive complexity and emotional maturity, are helpful in understanding how important personal development is for organisations to change. A growth mindset may well be the most important indicator of leadership potential. To lessen the grip of anxious fear, we need to be able to slow down the automatic habitual responses and be able to reflect, question assumptions and ultimately make different choices about how we act and react.

In- and out- of- the- box: the value of storytelling

An activity I do with groups is to ask people to share stories in pairs about a time when they were really at their best in the context of their work - a time when they felt good about themselves. I then ask what they are feeling when they are 'at their best.' Typically, they say things like, 'calm, confident, energised, focused, happy, excited, content', etc. I also ask about the thoughts – that voice in the head giving us constant commentary (positive or negative) – when at their best. Typical thoughts are 'I can manage this, it's going well, I'm know what I'm doing, this is really interesting,' etc. I write these on a flipchart as they speak. With all these affirming thoughts and positive feelings written in front of them, I ask them to consider how often they are in this state. "Not as much as I'd like to be" is the usual answer.

I then ask the group to call out the feelings and thoughts when not 'at my best.' Typically, the words are 'frustrated, tired, anxious, angry, stressed, depressed', etc. The thoughts are typically, "I can't, it's too much, it's not fair, it's my fault, it's their fault, I'm rubbish at this", etc. These words are scribed on a different flipchart. I draw a box around the 'not at my best' words and offer the metaphor of being 'in the box' to name the corresponding state.

We discuss the things that trigger us into 'the box' and how we get ourselves out. A key question is 'who gets me into and out of this box?' Some people respond that they get themselves into the box. Others say that it is because of others' actions. The answers reveal something about the person's mindset and therefore their ability to lead themselves. Those who believe their responses are outside their control and are determined by others, often find professional life difficult. This is especially so when the job requires close cooperation with others in a hierarchical system, as in health care. They tend to make assumptions about others' intentions, take things personally and find it difficult to keep emotional equilibrium. They feel powerless over their own internal state, and attempt to control or avoid the triggers that upset them, rather than focus on their reactions to those triggers. In short, they find it hard to get out of 'the box'.

It takes a kind of maturity – what Robert Kegan calls the *self-authoring mindset* – to recognise that we have choices about our reactions. Victor Frankl (1946) wrote: '*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom'.* Those who are self-reflective and understand they have choices in how to respond can more easily recognise when they are triggered and can get themselves out of 'the box'.

Groups agree that - regardless of where they place the locus of control - when we are in the box, we are not very effective. We're much more likely to say or write things we later regret. Our behaviour is more likely to be a negative trigger to others. One manager commented: "In my organisation, a lot of people seem to spend a lot of their time in 'the box' and aren't even aware of it." This organisation had high levels of stress related health issues and conflict among staff.

System 1 and system 2 thinking

In *Thinking Fast Thinking Slow*, Daniel Kahneman (2011) talks about system 1 and system 2 thinking, which relates to two characteristics of the brain. System 1 is fast and automatic, jumping quickly to conclusions. System 2 is slow and reasoning, solving problems through considering the data. While system 1 is effortless, system 2 takes time and effort. When something triggers us, it is system 1 that quickly fills the information gaps, often making negative assumptions and jumping to conclusions. It takes the countercultural approach of system 2 thinking to get out of 'the box' by challenging those assumptions and conclusions. I recommend people listen carefully to their thoughts when they are triggered. What is this mind-talk telling us? What is actually true in the situation? On what evidence are we basing our conclusions? Often what is true is that our information is limited and we are making assumptions about what others think or intend.

The ability to separate stimulus from response and to reflect on our own habitual thoughts is a developmental task. It helps to practice noticing which stimuli triggers us negatively. Then notice our assumptions and reactions to these triggers. This enables us to consider our choices and be more self-reflective. It is a practice that can help shift the mindset towards greater self-authorship. It sounds simple, but it is not easy.

Inoculating against fear and anxiety: developing systemic self-authoring mindsets

Developing a self-authoring mindset is a foundation for being able to work effectively in team and organisational development. Most health organisations have strategies for quality improvement, staff engagement, innovation and service transformation, etc. Yet without a mindset of self-reflection and self-authorship, the cultural change required to make these improvements often remains elusive. This is because facing into the underlying anxieties that drive current behaviours requires system 2 thinking. In the same way that getting out of 'the box' requires us to slow down and inquire into our thinking, reducing fear systemically requires this reflective mindset to be shared across a system and to become habitual in the ways staff interact with colleagues and address issues. Here are two examples of growing such fear-resistant cultures.

Case 1: When seniors don't take the medicine they prescribe for their juniors

I worked with many of the middle managers in a community health organisation, who were enthusiastic about the potential to shift the culture. They were practicing new behaviours with their clinical teams and staying out of 'the box' more of the time. However, they felt unsupported by their seniors in trying to sustain culture change. The senior leaders who commissioned the development programme had not engaged in the same learning activities for themselves. While they welcomed the teams becoming more effective, and their middle managers becoming more resilient, they didn't encourage a community of practice focused on culture change. When the seniors felt under pressure, the reactive 'in the box' behaviours had a negative emotional impact on the middle managers. In this example, the individuals gained some development but the organisation as a whole was not able to shift the culture of fear. Consequently, some of the middle managers left to take up posts in other organisations.

Case 2: When *all* staff are immunised

In another organisation, managers at every level of hierarchy are now using the shorthand metaphor of 'the box' to describe their state of being. This enables them to slow down (system 2 thinking) and discuss their triggers and behaviours from a more reflective, observational perspective. They have been sharing the concept with their teams, as a way to talk about their unintended impact on each other.

The managers and team leaders have created a community of practice, to share their learning and to support one another in applying these concepts with their teams. Through regular practice, they are beginning to change the culture of anxiety by changing their habitual reactions, moment by moment.

As a group, the managers are gaining awareness of their own role in the emotional contagion among staff, and they are taking steps to reduce the spread of anxiety to people who report to them. This has been a collective shift for them. As they slow down and reflect more, they have become better able to engage their staff. They have introduced team reflections about what is going well and have engaged staff to be more solution focused towards problems.

One manager reflected *"I had a difficult email today from a difficult colleague. I took a moment to breathe and pause… look at the assumptions in play… I took a moment before responding."* This represents a reflexive shift from previous reactive behaviour that would have likely escalated a conflict unnecessarily. Managers have become more comfortable with reflection, instead of the habitual rush to anxiety-driven action. As a result, staff satisfaction is improving as they see their leaders model a different way of being and interacting.

Conclusion

Leading change – and addressing associated fear - is as much about mindsets as about skills. As long as unexamined anxiety drives defensive routines and rule-based goals, organisations keep replicating the very dynamics they seek to change. It is essential to shift the mindset of rushing into action, in order to face into the endemic anxiety and to reduce its grip.

Focusing on developing the mindsets of self-authorship, bringing out the best in ourselves and each other, continuous learning, focusing on what works, mutual accountability, inquiry, self-reflection, intelligent compassion can help shift the culture of fear. The benefits far outweigh any costs. However, it takes sustained practice at a micro-level, role modeling by those in leadership positions and organisational commitment to reduce fear and create healthier health services.

We have nothing to fear, but fear itself.
Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933)

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Shining a light on shame to enhance learning and improvement

Zoe Cohen

> *In a sense, shame is the "elephant in the room": something so big and disturbing that we don't even see it, despite the fact that we keep bumping into it.*
>
> *[Davidoff, 2002]*

Keywords

shame, fear, supervision interventions, professional shame cascade, working with shame, learning, improvement

Introduction

I believe that shame has wide-ranging harmful effects for individuals and organisations and at the same time significant transformative potential. Shame has an in-built double whammy. It lives in the shadows and makes us hide. We don't talk about it and so it can thrive and grow. I want to share with you the reader a quick tour through some of the literature, together with a little of my own passion for this topic. My wish is to encourage all of us to think more deeply about how we work with shame in our own practice, and how we can all help turn its darkness into light.

It is also important to highlight early on the integral connectedness between shame and its close cousin, fear. Shame can often be so strongly experienced by people that the *fear* of shame is equally as strong as the feeling of the shame itself.

As a woman, a mother, an atheist "half caste" Jew, a 'northerner', a scholarship kid as well as myriad other aspects of my identity, shame is part of my daily life, my lived experience. Well of course it is… Shame is a universally experienced human emotion, and therefore by definition must be present in all of our lives and in the field of our organisational practice, whatever form that takes.

My fascination with this topic began to emerge and grow five years ago with the collated experiences of seeing my child going through a shame-based education system, whilst at the same time deepening my experience as both a coach and learning to supervise other coaches, and learning about and understanding myself more deeply. My specific research interest at the time was shame in coach supervision, about which little or nothing had been written. My strong desire to want to investigate this topic and its inherent connection to learning led me to search the wider psychotherapy and counselling literature, and to conduct some research of my own with coach supervisors. Shame in general, or rather normalising, minimising, mitigating, and working effectively with shame in all aspects of my life, continues to hold much passion for me. I believe that much of what I found has wider applicability to practice in personal, business and organizational development.

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What is shame?

Shame is a '*feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour*' (Soanes & Stevenson Eds, 2008). As adults we might experience shame in a number of ways, including mortification, ridicule, contempt, humiliation, helplessness, powerlessness, inadequacy, and incompetence.

Shame is everywhere, and often originates from early family and school experiences

Shame is described as far back as biblical times: in the Genesis story it included negative self-evaluation, excessive self-focus, hiding, and blaming. (Once Adam and Eve had sinned against God, shame began: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." Genesis 3:7. For more on nakedness and shame see Robinson (2012))

The fall, expelled from Eden. Engraving by Scotin, c. 1765. Wellcome Images, (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Shame has evolutionary and neurological roots in negative parental reactions to young children's risky adventuring. Cozolino (2013) writes 'what began as a survival strategy to protect our young has unfortunately become part of the biological infrastructure of later evolving psychological processes related to attachment, safety and self-worth'… And so the question of 'Am I safe?' has become interwoven with the question 'Am I loveable?'

Brene Brown (2012) describes shame as 'the fear of disconnection'. She describes 12 'shame categories' emerging from her research. These are:

- appearance and body image
- money and work
- motherhood/fatherhood
- family
- parenting
- mental and physical health

- addiction
- sex
- aging
- religion
- surviving trauma, and
- being stereotyped or labeled.

So there's potential for experiencing shame on a regular basis in all our adult lives - and therefore in our practice.

Most psychological research has focused on the early parent-child relationship as the primary source of shame, with each person's experience of shame reflecting their 'differing developmental pathways, unique to each individual' (Hahn, 2001). School settings are considered the second most common source of shame for children. For example, Shelton (2002) explored how the perceptions and beliefs that children form as a result of school failures carry into adulthood and impact adult learning.

Noreen Giffney in her Preface of Sally Munt's book on the cultural politics of shame describes shame as an embodied emotion, "one in which the body functions as an 'archive of feelings'" (Munt, 2007). In my own words, we each develop our unique *'shame script',* our own set of associations, meanings and stories that connect shame to our self, our life and our identity.

Shame is integral to learning and improvement, yet can be a key blocker

As globalisation and the pace of change continue, businesses survive when they out-compete others. Therefore, successful modern organisations, whether corporate businesses or public services, are preoccupied with improvement. And at the heart of improvement must be learning. Yet both learning and improvement are integrally related to shame.

Learning inherently jeopardises self-esteem. To learn, we must admit, even if only retrospectively, that we don't know everything already. For some, admitting this vulnerability is too risky, painful, or both. So shame or the fear of shame may prevent us from being open to learning.

Educational processes are often shame-based and involve a right/wrong dynamic. The presence of shame can itself be a blocker to deep learning. Indeed, neurologically, the stress created by shame inhibits the neuroplasticity that underlies new learning (Cozolino, 2013).

And the connection to shame is no less strong when one considers organisational improvement. Davidoff (2002), in talking about healthcare and medical practice, describes how the experience of shame helps to explain why improvement is generally such a slow and difficult process. After all, improvement means that, however good your performance has been, it is not as good as it could be. Davidoff sees shame as "the universal 'dark side' of improvement".

So I believe one could argue that understanding and working with shame (and fear) effectively are key to organisational and business success right down to the bottom line.

Any leader: follower, manager: employee or expert: customer relationship has the potential to generate shame.

I found a general consensus in the therapy literature that supervisees typically experience shame in supervision. In my own research using a questionnaire distributed at the 2014 International Coaching Supervision Conference, all 15 respondents reported having experienced moments of shame in supervision as supervisees. (Most also said they were aware of moments when their own shame or embarrassment got in the way of their supervision practice with a supervisee). These moments were influenced by a range of factors, all coalescing around three core themes:

- the fear or experience of **judgement** by self or others;
- **exposure;** and
- **loss of contact.**

> *'Things I did that should not be done'*
> *'Not wanting my supervisor to see that part of me'*

Having reflected on my practice as a leader, coach and supervisor, I believe that the triumvirate of judgement, exposure and loss of contact are present in many professional relationships – from boardrooms and executive meetings to 1:1 management meetings and water cooler conversations.

Why might this matter for organisations, teams and their customers?

At a 1:1 relationship level, for example, there is evidence that practitioner and client shame has negative impact on therapy outcomes (Ladany & Kulp, 2011; Hahn, 2004). The following quotes from the coaches in my own research tell their own story:

> *'It stops me learning because I hide'*
>
> *'When I feel shame I go young, and disappear and don't learn'*
>
> *'Where I haven't been able to discuss it I believe it hampers me as I bring only my own lens to attempting to resolve it.'*

Shame can influence what people bring into the open or are prepared to share. This is so whether that is in therapy, coaching or counselling supervision (Webb, 2000), or more widely in admitting mistakes (Bancroft, 2007) to colleagues or customers, or in changing practice (Davidoff, 2002).

As supervisors, all respondents to my research agreed there were implications of supervisees not bringing shame-prone issues to supervision. Here are some typical responses:

> *'They will make themselves small and hide behind themselves so that neither they nor their clients will thrive'*
>
> *'Stress, shallow learning; they could carry the shame into other coaching situations as it's unresolved'*
>
> *'Opportunities for learning are lost. Opportunities for more effective work on their part with their coachees are lost. Opportunities for a deeper relationship (and thus deeper insight) are lost.'*
>
> *'Diminished performance; increased stress and potential health issues; inhibiting their openness with others and their ability to be empathetic'*

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Benefits of surfacing shameful feelings

The literature is almost wholly negative about shame and its impact. And yet when shame is discovered and explored effectively, it can enhance both relationship and outcome (Talbot, 1995). My own first-person inquiry supports the transformative potential of consciously, purposefully taking shame-prone material to supervision. As supervisees, several of my respondents described a positive impact on learning of being open about their shame:

> *'Where I have been able to discuss the shame it has moved me forward, improved my empathy and capacity to 'hold' others.'*
>
> *'It enhanced learning, because it made me very aware of the situation, the content, my reactions and the reactions of the supervisor.'*
>
> *'When I own it (the shame), it can be transformative'*

Recent literature is littered with books about large-scale corporate failures, from Enron to North Staffs and more. I believe that shame is a contributor to a number of these dysfunctional systems. Looking at team and organisational derailment, De Haan and Kasozi (2014) identify three types of vicious cycles: fighting, fear and fatigue. These are all related to how competition and conflict are dealt with – with 'fear' being where the aggression becomes internalised and unconscious, and when there is a propensity to be shamed. Conversely, virtuous cycles mean that the organization doesn't have to "constantly pay attention to a frightened, vulnerable or needy unconscious" and can focus its energy on achieving its clear, shared task. They describe a fourth 'f' (besides fighting, fear and fatigue) that relates to the 'virtuous tendencies' in teams: *frustration*. As many team coaches know, the "extent of frustration that a team can sit with can be a good indicator of its health."

De Haan and Kasozi also note how in their consulting work in organisations where fear is the norm, how quickly they picked up feelings of people "being inadequate, small or rude and abrasive", and having to learn to live with fear and shame relating to their interventions.

And yet shame isn't necessarily voiced or effectively worked with

So shame is human and universal and commonly experienced. It can make a difference to the end users of the intervention as well as to the interveners. Yet writers indicate that shame is seldom addressed (Hahn, 2001; Anderson-Nathe, 2008). Clients don't tend to disclose it, and practitioners don't often confront it.

From my own research, respondents described a spectrum in their supervisors' awareness and ability to work with shame sensitively and effectively, as Figure 1 (below) illustrates.

As supervisors, respondents themselves notice that shame is in the field, often through voice and non-verbal changes. Such changes include body language: colouring up, tone of voice, avoidance of eye contact; hesitance in bringing issues; staying at the content level. Many supervisors agreed that their supervisees could take more risks with what they brought to supervision. However not all felt fully comfortable about working with shame with their supervisee, and some felt that their supervisor training had not equipped them very well to do this.

Figure 1: A spectrum of supervisors' competence in working with shame

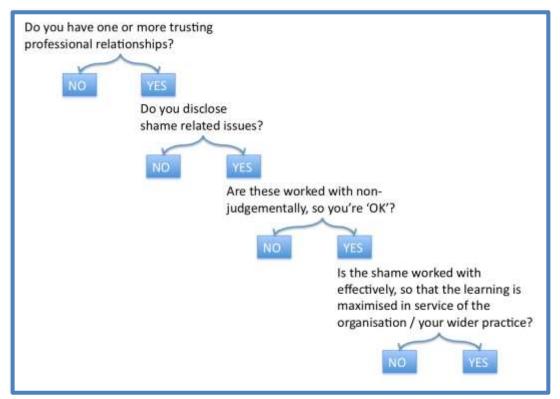|		
He did not consider shame as a paint point for supervisees because he was not careful with the sensitivity and sensibility of the people	*Not at all. She didn't spot it.*	*She noticed my feelings and helped me explore them. Her choice to also make me look from the perspective of the societal, cultural context was very effective. It made my problem a more general one. It helped me notice it in others as well.*

Supervisors' increasing awareness of, sensitivity to and effectiveness with shame

(Original diagram by Zoe Cohen)

Just as there is this human variation amongst coach supervisors in their awareness of and comfort in working with shame, so of course there is amongst leaders and followers in all types of organisation. In my view, this has been improving in recent years, as leadership development has become more psychologically informed and work on vulnerability and shame such as that of Brene Brown (2012) has become more widely known. Beginning to get shame into the supervision lexicon is a really important step. However, it is some way off addressing what I suggest can be a large quantum of unvoiced and potentially unaddressed shame within organisations. In Figure 2 below, I represent this at an individual level in what I call the 'Professional Shame Cascade'.

Figure 2: The Professional Shame Cascade

(Original diagram by Zoe Cohen)

Many factors influence the potential for shame in professional relationships

We experience shame both in relationship with others, as well as on our own – it can be pre-existing, or created in the moment. Therefore, there can be many sources of and influences on shame in organisational life. Some of these are explored in the literature, and still more are not: I summarise six potential sources of shame here:

Six potential sources of shame

- *Within each individual themselves* – their degree of 'shame-proneness', perhaps relating to their own 'shame script'; their experience; what they learnt and had been modelled in their training; whether they are in training or not; how much they have explored the shame in their own lives.

- *1:1 professional relationships* – including the degree of safety and trust, the power dynamic, and mismatches in vulnerability.

- *The wider team dynamic* – the predominant culture of the team, usually traced to one or a small number of dominant leaders

- *The group setting and characteristics* – group settings are often perceived as risky, and either people are less likely to disclose, or shame-related issues are less likely to be effectively explored in these settings.

- *Relationships with customers or clients* - for example, counter-transference is a ready source of shame in supervision, which may manifest as parallel process. For example, Talbot (1995) describes 'the therapist who feels degraded and dismissed by a patient may, by his (or her) behaviour in supervision, engender similar feelings in the supervisor'. (My insertion).

- *The wider system* - the wider organisation and/or system readily provides sources of shame. Strikingly, 14 out of 15 respondents in my research were aware of shame being in the organisational field when working with supervisees. The following quotes give a flavour of how shame may become manifest in the wider system:

> *'It comes up quite a bit as the environment is pressurising people to be at their best and there are high expectations of the coach too'*
>
> *'I'm aware of shame in the organisational field in issues of not being competent, making mistakes, not handling clients well, not speaking up about issues of integrity, not being able to help clients, not being able to work well together'*
>
> *'Very strong, I work in the NHS and it (shame) is a very real concept to deal with'*

What are the opportunities to acknowledge and work positively with shame?

In my own inquiry and learning, I have shifted away from a sense of shame (in supervision) being a 'bad' thing, with an almost inevitable negative impact on learning. I now think that, if we take a lighter, more normalised approach (shame is universal after all), it opens up the potential for a different conversation. When we can see shame as useful data and through a relational systemic perspective, this transforms it from a blocker of learning to a rich reservoir of insight and exploration. I would say that my awareness of and sensitivity to shame has transformed over recent years as a result of doing this inquiry and research. So has my comfort and courage in working with it, whether we name it specifically or not. In turn I believe that this has enabled me to be of better service to my clients, whether they are individual leaders or whole teams or boards.

Whatever our professional practice, we all have the opportunity to increase our awareness of shame and move towards an active sensitivity and sense of opportunity to bring things out of the shadows for both mutual and system benefit. Combining a review of the literature with my own experience and reflections has brought me to the view that what makes a positive difference is when leaders, followers, and those of us who intervene from outside engage in the following practices:

Opportunities in general

We can all:

- *Raise our reflective and self-reflexive abilities*

- *Become increasingly aware of our own 'shame script' and how this may hinder us but also can actually help us to develop our awareness and compassion of self and others*

- *Raise our awareness of shame in our practice, its potential sources and its transformative opportunities*

- *Be open and stay open to what is or might be going on in us and around us in the moment*

- *Grow and use the courage to name the particular shame or the tricky issue*

- *Normalise the feelings for ourselves and others – after all shame IS normal!*

Opportunities for external practitioners

Specifically, for consultants, coaches and other external practitioners we can also:

- *Contract for how we're going to work together with our clients, including the tricky bits (even if we don't use the word shame!). These are where the richest work is to be done*

- *Be brave enough to name the shame in supervision and explicitly inquire about it to keep it front of mind, keeping it out in the open*

- *Take more risks with what we take to our own supervision (if we have it), and co-inquire into the experience*

- *Ensure that work on shame is actively incorporated into all practitioner training programmes in which we're involved*

- *Share specific approaches or tools that we've found helpful e.g., using metaphor, normalising, self-disclosure.*

Conclusion

In me - and I believe in all of us in the sphere of developing people and organisations - this journey towards naming and addressing shame helps us to overcome unhelpful fear. However, it requires a continuing and growing reflection, awareness and courage.

> *"Don't turn away.*
> *Keep your gaze on the bandaged place.*
> *That's where the light enters you."*
>
> *[Rumi]*

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Image

Scotin, Engraving, (1765). This picture comes from Wellcome Images, a website operated by Wellcome Trust, a global charitable foundation based in the United Kingdom. Refer to Wellcome blog post (archive).

About the author

Zoe Cohen is a former board director of a £1billion organisation. Zoë believes in aspiring to be our best adult selves – in the moment, every moment - and that leading and managing others is a privilege. She is passionate about the power of coaching, and supervision, to change conversations for the better. Zoe coaches individuals, groups, teams and boards across the public and private sectors, and supervises coaches 1:1 and in groups.

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e-Organisations & People

Survival of the fearful

'Fear' in the workplace and how to harness it positively

Glen Williamson

The use of the 'fear factor' in the workplace is commonplace, but thankfully there is a way to harness it - and survive it. In 'The Short Reign of Pippin IV', John Steinbeck wrote, "Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts... perhaps the fear of a loss of power." With this paradox in mind, in this article I discuss, in ways that are by no means exhaustive, how I've come to see that fear can be used to control, yet ultimately how we - in order to thrive - can use it

Keywords:

fear tactics, failure, power, fearless work

Fight, flight or freeze?

A dear friend of mine recently shared some of his experiences as a hang gliding instructor with me. He told me that if you take off over the edge of a cliff ruled or guided by fear, it would lead to one or two outcomes. You either decide not to do it and miss out on an amazing experience or you try it in a cautious, hesitant manner. If you do the latter you are in danger of stalling. The fear that you feel leads you to create an extremely dangerous situation for yourself.

Fig 1: Hang-gliding: Fight, Flight or Freeze? (source: Shutterstock)

If you use the energy of fear to run through those negative drivers, pushing your personal boundaries, you will literally soar. Fear becomes a friend if you understand it, and it helps you know and understand yourself more deeply

I thought it interesting that what *feels* dangerous in that situation is actually safe and what feels safe is often actually dangerous. At first glance your instincts or feelings can often be deceptive. There is a big difference between 'being' and 'feeling' safe.

Fear initially triggers the 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze' response. For example, if a venomous snake or a hungry lion confronted me I need the right response in me to ensure my survival. Along with the fear I need enough clear thinking, so that if I choose to run I do so in the right direction and don't freeze, faint or collapse in a ball of fretful terror.

So fear is a necessary emotion that has to be understood if it is going to keep us safe and help us to develop. Many people are taught to react to the emotion of fear in an unhelpful way. Either way, it is a very *human* emotion and is there for a reason, but it has to be harnessed, appropriately directed and balanced. True, 'fearlessness' can be foolhardy or worse. Yet, fear - or the idea of fear - has the power to arouse our awareness, but depending on our relationship with it, can also kill it.

And so, the concept of fear is hotly debated. It's that favourite water cooler topic with endless quotations from the sages. It was Franklin D Roosevelt (1933) who quoted Francis Bacon in his inaugural address that stated an old favourite, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Again, Paulo Coelho (2006) famously wrote, "There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve: the fear of failure." 'Fear', as I understand it, is an energy to be harnessed in a positive manner because if we don't it will control us in a negative manner.

F.E.A.R.

As a result of some 30 years of study in the examination of Ancient Cultural Systems and Kingdoms (both matriarchal and patriarchal) as well as of Theology, an interesting concept that my sister lives by is encapsulated in a handy acrostic:

> F.E.A.R = False Evidence Appearing Real.

She argues that it is an emotion that doesn't exist in the form that we first perceive it and understand it. Historically, it has been used by some to control and by others to enhance and liberate.

Fear, and the two types of manager

The Hang Gliding conversation and the F.E.A.R. acronym remind me of a situation that occurred in my workplace at the beginning of my sales career, some 28 years ago, when I found myself at the bottom of a sales performance leaderboard. I sat in the National Sales meeting with sixteen of my peers, dreading every moment of what seemed like the longest meeting I had ever experienced.

The two at the top sat very pleased with themselves, being the only ones who had hit their annual revenue targets. The rest of the team appeared indifferent, disengaged or embarrassed.

I remember sitting engulfed in a mixture of embarrassment and fear. Until then I had never thought of myself as a loser, yet my manager made it clear that those toward the bottom were just that. Losers. He even levelled the term directly at us, albeit dressed with faux humour. Veiled threats were discharged: heads would roll, as the company did not tolerate that level of performance. The two at the top, of course, were well rewarded.

Fear tactics

This manager's tactic was to lead with fear. He was all about fear, and it resulted in him leading a team of seventeen that only had two of its sales professionals delivering anywhere near the required targets.

Another of his 'fear tactics' was to hire and fire, resulting in an inordinately high turnover of staff, yet performance did not improve across the national sales team, so unsurprisingly; his 'fear initiative' did not work.

There was no sense of team, precious little collaboration and no encouragement for anyone who didn't hit their target. Nor was there an opportunity for the people at the bottom to explain why performance may have been affected, or to get support in progressing.

The 'fear factor' was taken even further in that we were trained to make the customer fearful in the hope that they would buy more. We were actively encouraged to work out how much 'pain' we could make them feel so that they would change their mental states towards our products and services.

Simply stated, I feared my manager. He was unpredictable and inconsistent as well as always appearing busy and under pressure. He took pleasure in playing one off against each other and created negative internal competition at every opportunity. A volatile, explosive man and, as a young man in my mid-twenties, I did not know how to handle him.

Looking back, I believe that his intention was to weed out the weaklings and breed a 'survival of the fittest' initiative, where the poor performers were let go so that only the strong ones remained.

For him, utilising 'fear' was his only means of achieving results.

Personally, I find it hard to conceive a less effective method of gaining results than the creation of a 'fear environment', as it is a flawed, unreal and pyramidal approach where those at the bottom could not possibly operate from their innate genius to sell well let alone develop it.

The reaction to this end of year meeting was varied:

- Some became more determined, resolving to improve their performance (*fight*)

- A couple of them left the company, citing an aggressive, bullying culture that they were not comfortable with (*flight*)

- Some, like me, continued to perform (in fear) at unacceptable levels (*freeze*).

Fig 2: Fear in the workforce (source: Shutterstock)

My performance for the next eight months continued to be ordinary; I struggled to gain appointments, I found it difficult to close business, I negotiated poorly and operated way below my capability. The sense of embarrassment and shame that I felt constricted my voice, stripped me of my confidence to experiment and behave authentically - I just couldn't think straight, operating as I was out of my state of emotional confusion that my manager continued to reinforce.

I was ready to leave. I knew I was a good sales person, but simply couldn't function properly.

A positive change of regime

Fortunately, before I did, just over halfway into that next year my manager left for what was described as a 'bigger opportunity'. In came the replacement manager - with a brand new ethos and a completely different take on leadership and sales performance management. He began by *managing* our fear, concentrating on capitalizing the team's individual skill-sets and ensuring that everyone felt valued and integral to contributing to the company's goals. He crafted his targets largely based around each person's individual expertise and strengths.

The difference was remarkable. This manager engaged with me, striving to understand me and worked with me to understand my strengths and opportunities. He wasn't interested in making people afraid, but proud. Proud to work for the company and proud of the work they produced. The fear subsided and my motivation increased. I sprang out of bed invigorated with a new energy. I started collaborating with my colleagues and was happy to invite my manager out to meetings, confident that any criticism would be constructive and supportive. Very quickly, my sales figures (and the amount I earned) rocketed and I became a consistent top performer.

Everybody won: the company, our customers and of course, my 'self', financially and emotionally

Ultimately, all facets of the team became stronger and as a result, 18 months into the new manager's tenure, it flourished to a national sales team of 21. Instead of having two top performers, 14 of us exceeded our targets, and the remainder were given encouragement, support and a secure scaffold of objectives to enable them to develop and thrive.

Fig 3: F.E.A.R. source: Learning.Tree

It is worth noting that absenteeism reduced significantly and turnover of staff reduced to zero, positively impacting other areas of the organisational system, such as HR. As there was virtually no internal conflict to manage it all resulted in better results and a happier workforce, all happy to give discretionary effort.

Working with fear, for good or ill

Thus, it is clear that fear can be recognised and used in two ways in the workforce as demonstrated through the two managers. The first manager was all about fear. This is by far the most common sales management approach I have experienced in my career. He used fear to control, but was inept and in my view, it was fear that drove him. I bumped into him some years later and without placing too fine a point on it, it was clear that he had not been successful, and it was not unlike meeting your school bully and former tormentor as an adult. Without the fear factor as his major tool, he lacked any personal impact.

In contrast, the second manager helped us to manage our fear. He recognised it as an energy, but used it to create positive results. It proves Aristotle's statement true, "He who has overcome his fears will truly be free."

Mastering the sales conversation

At my consultancy GWC, my mission is to transform sales so that in every transaction there are three winners. My particular focus is how to 'Master The Sales Conversation' so that:

1. **You** get the best possible result every time
2. **Your customer** gets the best possible result for them
3. The benefits are felt in the **wider context** (department, organisation, community, society etc.).

My experience again and again is that this can only be done from a place of love, where the intention is to help selflessly (Williamson 2015). Fear environments do nothing to bring this about.

Fearless work

Every role we undertake in our given professions need to be performed without creating fear. We must avoid putting people into a state where their creativity closes down and instead create environments where they are comfortable to completely and authentically give of themselves. Both in and beyond sales, that means more open, intelligently structured conversations to create a greater understanding of the buyer (and our colleagues), which will produce immediate and sustainable all-round benefits.

The sales team of the future will not compete internally, nor will it compete externally. Instead, it will *collaborate* both internally and externally. The negative use of fear becomes redundant in a collaborative environment and any fear that shows up gets used to create an increase in awareness and a positive transformative energy.'

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Illustrations

Fig 1: Flight, Fight or Freeze using an image from Shutterstock

Fig 2: *Fear In The Workforce.* Sourced from Shutterstock, June 21st 2016

Fig 3: *F.E.A.R.* With permission from Learning.Tree, personal archive, June 20th 2016

About the author

As a Speaker, Sales Consultant and certified Master Coach (CSA), Glen Williamson is passionate about helping SME business owners and sales professionals of all levels reach new height of sales performance delivery. Taking his 30 years of experience in sales and business development, Glen founded GWC Sales Training in 2011 to deliver consultancy and training for clients across a wide range of sectors including logistics, financial services and oil and gas.

Meeting the needs of our increasingly complex and competitive business environment, Glen's "Master The Sales Conversation", and "Brand It. Tell It. Sell It" Masterclasses create interactive opportunities to embed new ideas and techniques for consistent, predictable sales success. Glen believes that sales is a collaborative process, part of who we are and how we survive, and at its core, should be a desire to 'help', not 'sell'. You can contact Glen @ glen@gwcsalestraining.com.

Hope works
Beyond fear and survival to better futures

Jeff Putthoff

"Hey, you have been late a number of times this week. Go home and come back in a month when you're serious about taking advantage of what we have to offer!"

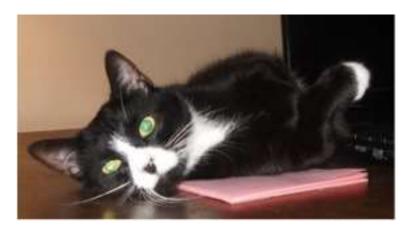[Hopeworks Training Director to a 17 year old Hopeworks trainee]

Keywords

brain health, impact of one's personal past, parallel process, radical empathy, vicarious trauma

In the beginning …

In 2000, I founded a non-profit organisation to work with youth (our clients) ages 14-23 who had dropped out of school. The idea was simple at the time -a group of local congregations wanted to provide much-needed resources for youth who had dropped out to enable them to get back into school and move forward with their dreams. To accomplish this goal, I (a Jesuit priest) and two Lutheran ministers created three technology-based social enterprises--real companies that provided paying clients with website design, GIS, and sales force administration services. Our intention was to offer the youth we served marketable skills, a structured environment, and paying jobs, so that they could look forward to a great future. We named our organisation Hopeworks.

Before we knew it, we were a success --employing youth, helping them earn credits at the local community college, and rejoicing when they went on to complete their GEDs and college degrees. However, something else happened to us as well. After beginning our work with the best of intentions, we eventually stopped liking our youth - that is our customers – who are the very people we had set out to serve. It was strange.

Hopeworks aspiration (1): a relaxed, warm environment

We had worked hard to create a space that was welcoming, warm, and caring. We had converted an old row house into our office, adopted a cat, installed a soothing indoor waterfall, and started baking bread onsite every morning (because it smelled so good!) -- all in an effort to distinguish the space from the harsh streets outside. We were trying so hard to be a caring alternative.

Hopeworks aspiration (2): a caring environment

But then, somehow, we became different from the image we had envisioned; we had not only started disliking our customers, but we had also become quite punitive towards them. One particular incident caught my attention. Our youth trainer confronted a youth who had repeatedly come late and had "let him have it," informing the young man that he could come back in a month when he "was ready to take the programme seriously."

We gathered the staff together, and I asked what was happening. The response from our team was emphatic and strong: "We are stressed and tired!" In fact, I was told that I needed to hire more people, and that the current staff needed to offload some of their work to new employees.

I can chuckle about this story today. At the time, however, my staff and I were perplexed and bordering on discouraged. We were only running at about 70% of capacity, but there was no doubt that we were overwhelmed as individuals and as an organisation. The experience was real and tangible, but also it seemed contradictory to what we believed we were doing. We had become a workplace that didn't like the people we were founded to help.

What had happened to us? The importance of brain health

For close to 20 years, Camden NJ has been known as one of America's poorest and most violent cities. Close to 50% of its population is 25 or younger and the childhood poverty level is close to 60%. It is a city that between Jan 2002 and 2010 was taken over by the state of NJ, disenfranchising the residents, has had three mayors jailed for corruption, and in 2012 broke its own murder record. It is a very tough and demanding place. It is a place where the goal of its youth has shrunk to just being able to survive.

Hopeworks was originally created to provide job skills, financial literacy, mentoring, and real focus on grit to help these youth thrive. However, after many years, we still had a number of young people who continued to just survive rather than succeed.

What we came to realise was that we were missing a key component of our work, a need we had yet to address. To escape a challenging environment and the impact of toxic-stress, yes, you need a mentor, and, yes, you need resources, but first you need something much more fundamental — you need brain health.

Over the last two decades, beginning with the seminal Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES), it has become increasingly clear that the allostatic load of toxic-stress impacts both the "hardwiring" and "softwiring" of the brain, and that this impact begins even before birth, in utero. (Bloom 2013, p.20).

Beginning in the third trimester and continuing through the first two years of childhood, the brain is susceptible to a variety of adversity vectors. The original 2014 ACES eventually included 10 such categories of adversity and lately those have been augmented by additional vectors as outlined by the Philadelphia ACES study (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Categories of adversity in childhood

The ten reference categories experienced during childhood or adolescence are as below, with their prevalence in parentheses:

Abuse

1. emotional – recurrent threats, humiliation (11%)

2. physical - beating, not spanking (28%)

3. contact sexual abuse (28% women, 16% men; 22% overall)

Household dysfunction

4. mother treated violently (13%)

5. household member was alcoholic or drug user (27%)

6. household member was imprisoned (6%)

7. household member was chronically depressed, suicidal, mentally ill, or in psychiatric hospital (17%)

8. not raised by both biological parents (23%)

Neglect

9. physical (10%)

10. emotional (15%)

Additional vectors included by the Philadelphia Urban ACES

Neighbourhood safety and trust

- Felt safe in your neighbourhood

- People in your neighbourhood looked out for each other, stood up for each other and could be trusted

Bullying

- Bullied by a peer or classmate

- Witness violence

- Saw or heard someone being beaten up, stabbed, or shot in real life

Racism

Treated badly or unfairly because of your race or ethnicity

Foster care

- Ever in foster care

When faced with an onslaught of these threats early on, the parts of our brain that care for our survival are heavily used and can therefore be overdeveloped (Quin et al, n.d.). Thus, children experiencing adversity in early childhood tend to over develop the survival components of their brains, a condition which actually predisposes them to health and behavioural struggles later in life.

The implications of this process involve not only brain architecture and neurological programming for fear, but also behaviours that one adopts in response to adversity. When exposed to a chronic lack of safety, individuals develop coping mechanisms to protect themselves. This survival behaviour in the face of fear is necessary because it enables the individual to survive a toxic environment. I have come to appreciate the great valour and strength that the youth I have worked with muster each day to survive.

Smoking to survive!

For instance, smoking is often used as a survival mechanism. Smoking is one of the quickest ways to ingest a drug—about six seconds from inhalation to impact. Two primary effects of nicotine are reduction of anxiety and appetite suppressant. In a community where childhood poverty is over 50%, smoking actually "makes sense" when you are unsure of where you will sleep, who will be in your home, and are unsure of if you will eat your next meal. It is easy to preach the long-term detrimental impact of smoking for those who have the secure perspective of a home and adequate food supplies. For others who are living with a lack of safety, smoking presents a short-term strategy for dealing with an environment of toxic-stress. Learning to endure these challenges are often misunderstood and are in conflict with building a thriving future. In these toxic spaces, the concept of future is shrunk to the timeline of today. Planning for dreams and hopes often take on elements of fantasy because of the dissociation with the injury that the person has received.

What is needed for those who work with these customers is a shift in perspective from "Why are they doing what they are doing?" - a framework filled with judgement and shame - to a framework that asks "What happened that what they are doing makes sense to them?" This shift allows understanding how their behaviour is fundamentally connected to their own internal system of seeking safety. Making this move begins to unlock the power of future in a young person's life.

Vicarious trauma in adult life

This perspective is also very important for those who work at helping make futures possible for others. The difference between "Why?" and "What happened?" impacts on the way that employees show up to work and on the way they actually do their work. At one organisation I recently visited, it was not uncommon to find youth workers yelling at a two-year-old for tantrums or getting upset about youth/clients not showing up on time. One youth worker talked about how "certain youth really set me off. I don't feel supported by my colleagues. I'm not sleeping well. I'm isolated. I find myself coming to work, sitting in the parking lot, and not wanting to get out of the car. Angry all the time, I bristle at the client I work with. I am basically mad at them for their behaviour and it impacts my life."

These responses are all too familiar in environments of toxic-stress. But here is the question: "Why am I being so impacted by the two-year-old or by a client who is repeatedly absent?" After all, the two-year-old is being a two-year-old and the client is simply late.

The importance of safety

During our childhood, we have the need to "practice our brain" in order to grow it. For most of us, this practice primarily involves the interactions we have with our caregivers, a sort of serve-and-return between parents and children that literally exercises the brain into its development. As Dr Sandy Bloom (2013) writes:

> 'Newborns as young as forty-one minutes are already imitating the people around them because our "mirror neuron system" is innate – hardwired into the core of our being. Recent work on early child development shows that the infant and its mother comprise a complex caregiver system. The main currency of exchange at this stage of development is emotional information. The infant comes into the world as a broadcaster of emotional information and the infant's primary caregivers are the receivers of this information through a process known as affective resonance or emotional contagion.' (p. 51)

The imitation game: image by Jeff Putthoff

The brain needs this interaction in order to grow and develop properly. As stated in one recent research report:

> 'Early experiences determine whether a child's brain architecture will provide a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health. The interaction of genes and experience shapes the architecture of the developing brain, and the active agent is the "serve and return" nature of children's relationships with the important adults in their lives' (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007).

If the brain doesn't receive this nurturing from caring adults, it doesn't get the requisite safety and security that is required to develop a strong foundation. When not attended to, the child feels fearful and its brain automatically goes into survival mode, learning other ways to stay safe. If this state is chronic, then the impact can be quite severe on brain development and on the health of future relationships.

Imagine now, what happens when a baby who has learned to exist in survival mode grows a little bit older, and eventually becomes a teenager? Imagine, too, that s/he comes to work for you? Things begin well, s/he settles in and the work begins.

Working, s/he is now presented the opportunity to get something s/he hasn't received before, namely the security of a job and caring work relationships. However, this presents a dilemma. S/he is now faced with one of two ways of responding. If s/he can acknowledge and talk about what has happened in past, the

"there and then" that makes it difficult to trust another person and accept a sense of safety, the person has a chance to heal and move forward. This response, however, requires a high level of personal awareness about the impact of one's past.

If, however, the employee is not aware of what has happened to them, this caring relationship can trigger a re-enactment, when a person's "there and then" (their history) is now experienced as the "here and now." In a re-enactment, because the person is not aware of how s/he has been impacted by past traumas and deprivations, they are still subject to what has happened to them and are apt to respond using familiar coping mechanisms that come from a place of self-preservation and distrust of others. At this moment, the youth moves away from the situation of safety. They will get angry, withdraw, and disappear, all to move away from that which has triggered this feeling of insecurity-- perceived by them, as being you, the youth worker. This response is a disruptive attachment, as the offer to connect is rebuffed because of the feelings of fear and insecurity that have been triggered. It is not uncommon in learning new skills at Hopeworks, that a youth will experience "not knowing" as shameful. Their "there and then" of learning is filled with failing, being left behind, and not being attended to. Thus, the very space of "learning," of encountering a new area of exploration can often trigger flight, fight, or freeze. They literally "should know" that which they are there to learn. When this happens, the shame of the past is triggered. We have learned to work with this moment as an opportunity for healing!

Parallel process at work

This concept was the big insight for us at Hopeworks, and we began to consider how we as caregivers might also default to creating disruptive attachments ourselves, even when trying to connect with a traumatised youth. If we as caregivers are unaware of our own history of attachment, hurt and trauma, then we can meet any disruption from a youth with our own defensive mechanisms. We may punish, shame, or flee the situation. The youth worker and their client are then in a parallel process at that moment, with both people literally worried about their own safety due to past injury.

The exciting work for healing then must begin with us, the careworker, adult or indeed manager. In order to help our clients move from surviving to thriving, an organisation needs to help its workers understand how their own histories are at work in a given situation so that they can make a choice for their client that isn't about protecting its workers. The worst thing we can do as an institution is say, "Oh, we can't have anyone who blows up. Get out of here." The person who blows up is the one most in need of our healing care.

A change of vision: embracing radical empathy in organisational relationships

This change of thinking is challenging. How do organisations manage the care of both their workers and those they serve? The answer is a shift to a stance of radical empathy, meaning that organisations must teach their employees how to understand and use their personal histories as sources of empathy and tools of change. Workers must embrace their histories as sacred and also recognise how their past is still very much present in all their relationships and interactions, including those with the clients they serve. By deepening our understanding of who we are and where we come from, we can better help those in our care to change the trajectory of their lives from surviving to thriving. This process of cultivating radical empathy is akin to a professional development opportunity, through which we can learn how to support rather than punish those we serve. Failing to do so leaves an organisation vulnerable to vicarious trauma.

Working with vicarious trauma

Recognising vicarious trauma and its impact on the organisation is hard to do! When we began Hopeworks, the goal seemed clear to us -- get 14-23-year-olds back into school. However, despite the many resources provided, many youth/clients didn't succeed. The reason? We didn't understand brain health. In the beginning, this problem was frustrating, as we were left puzzling over what had gone wrong. We were providing great training, job opportunities, pathways back into school, and even housing. However, our programme wasn't the answer for all of our youth/clients, and some were stuck. At this point, vicariously traumatised organisations simply move on from that youth -- "We gave her all the resources we had. She doesn't want to take advantage of them." I had to learn that providing resources and mentoring wasn't enough, and that punishing behaviour without understanding its root cause was actually quite disastrous.

The young people that we work with have much to overcome; facing the stresses, demands, and uncertainties of their daily lives requires amazing courage and strength. These young people are amazingly adaptable, strong and resilient in the face of huge obstacles. However, many of the coping mechanisms that these young people have had to develop to survive the harsh realities of their day-to-day lives do not translate well into succeeding in safe, professional environments. As a result, their incredible resourcefulness and raw strength are often underestimated. An 18-year-old youth who shows up to learn computer programming each day at 9 AM may come with an attitude or leave too early, but we would be remiss if we failed to realise the incredible strength and determination this youth demonstrated to come in the first place. It is this strength that we have to learn to leverage, for these youth are quite capable of meeting the expectations we set if we teach them how.

The key to helping traumatised youth learn new, healthy coping mechanisms is to first understand the role toxic stress plays in the development of the negative coping mechanisms. We see absenteeism, aggression, withdrawal, drug usage, etc. as things to be 'fixed" instead of as learned behaviours of survival. The crucial paradigm shift required is to move from asking "Why?" to "What happened?" that led to the current behaviours. These survival mechanisms have served the youth well in other capacities, even if they are objectively negative behaviours. Literally, we need to ask "How does this behaviour make sense to the client in front of us?", and let the trauma itself teach us what the client needs. As with the crying, temper-tantrum- throwing toddler, a radical stance of deep empathy is required to do this.

> *Stress-addicted children are often those children in the classroom who cannot tolerate a calm atmosphere but must keep antagonizing everyone else until the stress level is high enough for them to achieve some degree of internal equilibrium again. Violence is exciting and stressful, and repeated violent acting-out, gang behaviour, fighting, bullying, and many forms of criminal activity have the additional side effect of producing high levels of stress in people who have grown addicted to such risk-taking behaviour. People who self-mutilate, who literally cut and burn their arms, legs, and torso have always puzzled psychiatrists because this self-mutilation does not seem to be aimed at suicide (Bloom 2013, p.64)*

This insight, the undeniable need for trauma-informed care in our work, was a huge turning point for our organisation. It fundamentally shifted the conversation away from asking the question "Why did you do this?" to a new system of inquiry framed by "What happened to you that this behaviour is helpful?" When we think about stress as externally located rather than as a response to inner trauma, we intensify the problem. We are hesitant to interact with those under great duress, and think "If you don't come near me, then I won't

have any stress." In the work environment, that approach will not be effective because we will distance ourselves from those most in need of our help.

For us at Hopeworks, this change was captured in a change of vision. Originally, we had seen ourselves as "Providing a safe place for youth to achieve their dreams." With our new emphasis on brain health, we pivoted to a vision that was more in line with healing. This new focus emphasises the importance of understanding how our past environment shapes our future. Our new mission has become "Providing a safe place where we can understand what has happened to us and, through healing, gain options for the future."

A community of healing

To create a community of healing, an organisation, that is responsive to the injuries that toxic-stress causes, requires a fundamental shift, and we have made that shift at Hopeworks. The change was a difficult one. It required each us first to address our own personal histories. What we discovered was that we each actually had concerns about our own safety and emotional management of some of the loss and change that had occurred throughout the history of our organisation. In other words, we had some "there and then" that continued to inform our "here and now." Not surprisingly, the organisation had developed ways of protecting itself when these past traumas were triggered. In beginning to address our own organisational history of loss and change, we were able to focus more on our future - a future that is realistic and possible rather than one based in fantasy and good intentions. Literally, by beginning an inquiry around our thoughts and behaviours, we have created the safety needed to allow us to move from being subject of our organisational dynamic, to object of it. The energy going into surviving the present has been freed up concentrate on moving towards our future and the futures of the youth in our community.

Conclusion

This transformation was some of the most exciting work that I have encountered in working with our youth and organisation. The shift from fear to possibilities allows us to be realistic about the future because we were realistic about the present, about the environment of stress we were working in, and about how our own personal and collective histories contribute to it. Too often, not recognising the impact of our previous experiences results in simply re-enacting the past.

Today, without an emphasis on brain health, we continue to create organisations to manage negative behaviour without addressing or even understanding the underlying causes of the behaviour. By disregarding the root causes, we are ultimately creating structures to eliminate/contain behaviour that our clients are relying on to be safe. Such an approach only makes our clients feel even less secure, more fearful, and deepens their resistance to change.

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An unexamined fear is not worth having

Robin Shohet, with Ben Fuchs

In this article Robin Shohet was interviewed by Ben Fuchs on his work on examining fear and how it impacts both our work and daily lives. Both Robin and Ben are OD c consultants, supervisors and coaches who work with fear in group settings.

Keywords:

Inquiry, groups, core beliefs, vulnerability, avoidance, projective identification, resistance, challenge.

Why should we be interested in fear?

BF   I understand you recently ran a workshop on the topic of fear for thirty executive coaches. Can you talk about why you chose fear as the topic and how you approached this topic with the group?

RS   You might think that focusing on fear might feed it. In fact fairly near the beginning one participant said, "I have spent a lot of my life focusing on fear. I don't want to do more of this. It will just make me feel worse."

Why I run workshops on fear is just the opposite. I believe that we do not fully allow ourselves to know how frightened we are and how much fear dictates our behaviour, and so feel bad because we have NOT focused on fear, but have spent so much energy avoiding feeling it. So we do not really get curious, feel it in our bodies, but use strategies which do not work and then blame the fear, as opposed to our responses to it.

For example, I think much, if not all judgment comes from fear, as do such behaviours as blame, jealousy, revenge, and gossip which do not obviously look fearful. I will expand on this later. So, the first step is to help people to realise how much fear there might be in any behaviour that takes us out of relationship. The second thing is that we do not trace these behaviours to fear because we do not like to feel the feeling, so we avoid it. And the third thing is that we create beliefs or rules that we think will help us to avoid the situations that triggered the fear. And much of my work is helping people to question these beliefs which usually do not serve them.

People often say that fear is good, and give an example of the tiger rushing towards you. I reply that fear has a survival mechanism in the moment. So we run from the tiger. Well and good. But then we create a story. We might say, "It is dangerous to go to India as there are tigers there and so on." And it is the stories that emerge from the fearful experience that I try and challenge. Of course I am not saying all fear is bad. Words like good and bad are not useful. I don't believe fear can be eliminated. That is not the point. It is to examine what we do around it that is the purpose of this article. How basically we avoid it, repress it, and deny it and how it comes out in ways that are dysfunctional BECAUSE it is not recognized

Fear of flying

An example may help. A participant shared that he was flying in a small plane and had to make an emergency escape down a slide. He was terrified. He asked, "Should I not be frightened next time, because I certainly am". I said. "Of course." I added that if he told a story about himself or others - you should never fly a small plane etc. - I would want to interrupt that. Over time he might or might not lose the fear. But a story that ensured he never flew again might not be useful if he loved

Fierce Tiger, by Kishi Ganku (1749)

flying. Gradually we build our stories up and as we get older our worlds shrink. I think the title 'Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway' sums up a lot of what I am trying to say. But I am not so interested in just the doing. I am wanting to go to another level where we begin to challenge our beliefs, and we often find that every belief we have can be traced back to fear. The belief came into being, and was attached to, to avoid being in the present when it might have been too difficult (as for example when we were very young). And these beliefs shape our behaviour, our thinking, and our attitudes. This can make us feel very uncomfortable as our beliefs feel as if they are part of us.

Surfacing hidden assumptions

Separating content from process

BF   So if I understand you, you are saying two interrelated things - fear underpins many of our behaviours which we may attribute to other motives or feelings - sort of a core sponsoring feeling that is driving the other feelings.

And our sense-making and rules for living are born out of our need to remove or attempt to control the things which scare us, rather than confront our own feelings of fear.

So I'm wondering two things:

- How do you go about this with a group - what methods do you use?

- How do groups respond to this directness - given that you're essentially asking them to dismantle a psychological defense mechanism?

RS   My starting point is an exercise which really goes to the heart of how we avoid because of fear. I ask them to write down the continuation of this sentence. I ask them to write it down, because the mind will not be pinned down otherwise and subtle changes can occur. I stress, really stress that I will not ask them to share their answers. No tricks. This is just for them:

> *What I would least like my supervisor (if they are in supervision) or colleagues to know about my work is……...*

So for example someone might write I don't want my supervisor to know that I overrun my sessions quite often (this would not be shared).

And then the next sentence:

> *I would not want them to know because………*

So typically a person might write 'they would judge me, or think less of me'.

I ask people to share their second sentences starting with 'Because. ..' I tell them the first one sentence is *content* - that does not interest me and I promised not to ask. It is personal - particular to them. But the second sentence is *process* and as such universal. "I would not want them to think less of me" is an answer that is often given. I ask if it would be OK to look at that together. Before I go any further I check and see if any of the group identify with them. There are always a few nods. I go further. "Is there anyone who has not withheld something because they were worried about what people might think of them?" Not a hand goes up. So I stress that what is being shared is universal, and rather than just watching the person I am working with, I ask the other participants to empathise with the person who is working. This makes sure that the person who is working is not carrying something for the group which the rest of them can disown, and stresses the normality of worry about others' opinions.

So here's how it goes. Sometimes I might inquire of the person sharing whether they could really know that the other person will think less of them. They usually say they cannot know for sure. So are they withholding because of an unchallenged assumption?   Perhaps they are projecting their own disapproval on to the other? This usually resonates. There is an occasional, "But you don't know my boss." Or an equivalent. "True", I say. "But if there is such a gap between you, THAT needs to be acknowledged (process) without telling them what you have just written (content). What would stop your saying something like, "Can we review how this relationship is working for both of us?"

So you see I am not asking them to share sentence number one either with me or with their supervisor or boss, but to examine the process of what stops them. And there is invariably a fear of some kind.

Shaming (for more on this, see Zoe Cohen's article in this edition)

Take another common answer. "I would feel ashamed." I venture, "Well perhaps you already feel ashamed?" And again I ask the group if there is anyone who has not felt ashamed? I tell the person they are doing this for the group. It is all our work. Is it possible in order to avoid the shame involved in telling, they are not in touch with the shame of hiding as well? Again, they are also not giving the relationship a

chance. And if they are sure that the supervisor would shame them (as opposed to feeling the shame they already feel) then again there is an invitation to explore the relationship. And if they don't feel able to do that even, what exactly is going on?

Judging

A final common one. "The supervisor would judge me." I ask, "Can you really know that?" "No". "Perhaps you have judged *you*?" "Yes." I point out the projection and add, "If you judge that your supervisor will judge you, and you cannot know for sure, who is doing the judging? You have judged your supervisor. No wonder you are frightened of their judging you."

Obviously this has to be done carefully and this account does not do justice to the process, as I have to see how far I can go with each person. But there is a general understanding of how fear creates justifications, and so is not brought to the surface, thereby stopping any exploration and possible change in the relationship. I stress we are watching the mind. This is about awareness, not changing behaviour. And I have shown them a little of what is going on a lot of the time in their lives, namely avoiding difficult conversations with very good rationalisations. And the excitement of discovering this usually overrides the need to hold on to the defense. They might think, "Perhaps I CAN say this to my supervisor. Or even to this group. It is not such a big deal. I did not even realise I was withholding - the defense was happening below my level of awareness."

Anxiety, challenge and resistance in personal development

BF   It sounds like you are trying to get to the hidden assumptions and beliefs that keep people fearful, exposing both their commonality and irrationality. While this may be a relief to people, I can imagine that in the context of professional development, this could also feel very exposing for some. Can you say more about how you hold the group and work with the anxiety this provokes?

RS   Yes I am trying to do that, i.e. get to the hidden assumptions. What happens is that there is often an immediate relief in seeing how their minds have been sabotaging them, through these beliefs, assumptions, rules which they may not have been conscious of. It also does not feel like a personal exposé as this way of being applies to all of us. In the context of professional development with people who are used to some form of looking at themselves, who may have had their own therapy, this work is not so much of a challenge. But for people not used to doing this, you are right, it is a challenge. And this is what happened with some people on this particular conference

Vulnerability

Working in this way is bound to create some resistance. I have a belief that resistance can happen when there is the potential for growth (of course not always - sometimes the growth is in being resistant). My job as a group leader is to hold the group there. At the conference of coaches mentioned above, someone said, "The energy is so low, you said you had another exercise. Could we try that?" I was tempted, but held in there. And the turning point came soon after when a man shared his vulnerability. He had been worrying about a piece of work for the last month and the work was still a month away. I asked him what his worst fear was. He said he might freeze. And then? He might fall to pieces. I said that was a big leap from freezing to falling to pieces. What did falling to pieces mean? He would not be able to function, and be a gibbering wreck. He was beginning tosee how his mind was creating nightmare scenarios. I said his idea

of falling to pieces was scaring him, not the event, and what options did he have if he froze - always a possibility. He said he would call time out, and have a break and regroup. He relaxed visibly.

He was jumping on the tightrope, Matt Scott (2007)

Now in terms of answering your question, the group, hitherto for the most part resistant, clapped. And the person who was the first to honour the man, who had been vulnerable, was one of the resisters. He was the one who suggested the group clapped. It was very moving. What I did was not lose my nerve, and totally trusted the process. I resisted the temptation to try to change the energy.

Fear of assessment and holding one's nerve

At some stage I tell them about my own experience of holding in there. It was on a ten day meditation course, meditating for up to 12 hours a day. Three of those hours we were not supposed to move. Not consecutive hours, but three separate hours. No chairs, sitting on the floor on a cushion. After about thirty minutes I was in agony, my knees and my back. I could not believe I could stand such pain, but I wanted to keep my commitment. And then a miracle. The tension completely dissolved and waves of energy surged through me. And nothing external had changed.

The extra point about the story is that the dominant culture is about customer satisfaction and we in this business should not be selling a product. We are here to help raise awareness (at least I am), and that can sometimes be quite a painful process initially. (Actually the pain is already there and they are just beginning to let themselves feel it.) If we are trying to keep the client/customer happy we won't go for risking alienating them, holding them in an uncomfortable space. In consultancy it starts with the beauty parade when, to get the work we have to second guess what the client wants.). I see this fear of being assessed happening in the coaching/consultancy/training world with scores. How did I do, or how did we do? It does not take into account that sometimes what appears to be a terrible session can be transformative.

I remember doing a group supervision session with a coach as my co-leader in the training. I left the supervisee in a stuck situation. The coach/co-leader rounded on me. You should always finish with a plan for what next, a commitment to try something new. I said it was much more powerful to leave the stuckness as it was. The next day the supervisee said he had had a revelation. He felt full of shame that he couldn't resolve the issue with his client in front of the whole group the day before. And he realised that his client was full of shame. It changed his whole perception of his work with that client.

I think, in terms of the zeitgeist, something very important is happening. In the bad old days, professionals were untouchable. Doctor knows best. Masters and serfs and servants. Now the pendulum has swung the other way. I know my rights and I can sue if necessary so better be on your toes, give me what I want. The rageful victim wounded inner child archetype is now taking revenge on the parental archetype which has dominated. This is catastrophic as the child cannot see the bigger picture archetypally. And insurance and lawyers feed this dynamic. We are in a classic either/or pendulum swing - too authoritarian to no authority. Over simplified I know, but you may get my gist. So holding my nerve is a group interrupts that 'Give me what I want/expect' dynamic.

A helper's assumptions about working with fear

BF   I am struck by how you frame the issue of fear and have extended the insights from the personal level to the group dynamics to the wider culture of fear. It seems to me that in a world where the implicit demand often is to 'make us more comfortable and better able to cope', you are saying that any real change comes from facing into the fears, feeling the discomfort, challenging the core beliefs and assumptions and recognising that we can make different choices. So my next question comes back to the context of fear in 'the helping professions'. What are the beliefs and assumptions you are making about what 'helping' really means? Where do your beliefs come from and how might these differ from other peoples' beliefs?

Challenging the rule of fear

RS   Let me answer that first by sharing an experience from last night I was with a group of 12 people from all walks of life. A non-executive director of a trust, an opera singer, a management consultant, a tax inspector, a musician and so on. All brought together because we care about the way the world is. And all twelve of us mentioned how fear is endemic. And how we are being manipulated into a pseudo safety - Big Brother is protecting us. We'll use the deterrent; press the button. We'll protect our country. And in the end many of us came to the conclusion that we need to keep working on ourselves and trust that it will ripple out. So the work on fear, I believe, is really important on many levels and perhaps facing it in ourselves is our best contribution to society as we won't be unconsciously colluding with a fear culture.
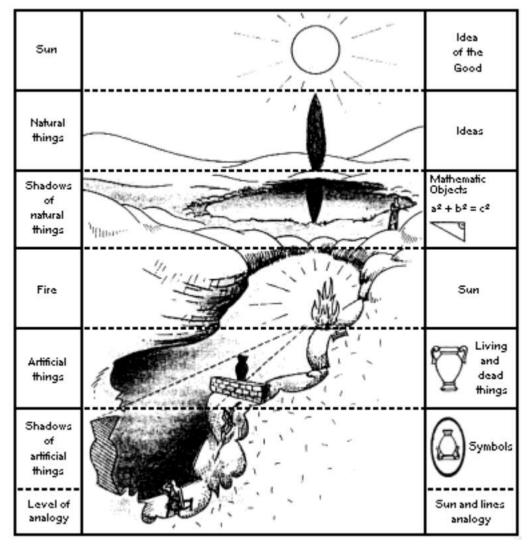
Now to the question about beliefs. The first thing I want to say is that so many of the beliefs are unconscious. It was you who said to me, "If you have an argument with someone it means they have broken one of your rules." I thought that was a brilliant reframing. Rather than look at what the other person did, or even what you might be projecting which can be useful, we go even deeper and look at the rules. Because these rules will be operating all the time. And the beauty of looking at rules and beliefs is that you can do deep work very quickly even in a large group, because we are all full of the same or similar rules/beliefs (I lump them together - a rule usually comes from a belief). A good way to elicit a rule is to ask people to finish

the sentence, "People should never…." Answers come like: judge, lie, kill. For judge, I might ask, "What do you do with people who judge? If you have the rule people must never judge, you judge them." Usually there is laughter here as we begin to see how our minds are working. People should never lie. "Well, I say "is there anyone in this room who has never lied?" Of course not a hand goes up. "So, if we all do it, what is the rule doing? It is making us all wrong. The rule does not work." How much more interesting and potentially useful to say if someone is lying they might be scared as virtually all of us would prefer to be honest. We are just happier when we can be truthful. As for killing I say we have all killed in our minds, so let's not get self-righteous and literal about physical killing and investigate the thinking behind wanting to kill. The group begins to see how mind is not at all logical even though it appears to be.

Exposing the tyrant in us all

Behind all these rules, I am beginning to believe, is a non- acceptance of self, other, how the world is and a demand that the world should be how I/we want it to be. If everyone behaved as I did (even though I lie, judge, want to kill) the world would be a better place. And there is a tyrant in all of us, which I am inviting people to bring to light. It is not personal which is why I get away with being so challenging. And of course I have found all these things in me.

The Allegory of Plato's Cave (source: http://www.holybooks.com/complete-works-of-plato/)

What supports me in all this is that I am interested in other people's freedom and my own, It is like the story of [Plato's Cave](), where the person who left the cave went back and told people about a free world outside but was not believed. I know there is something more. At some level we all know there is something more - in one way or another most of us have had an experience of something bigger than us, and I want to examine the rules and beliefs that keep us imprisoned.

Freedom from fear through insight and co-inquiry: a personal manifesto

BF   I'd like to ask if you can say more about what and how you work with these insights, once the deeper issues are uncovered. How do you use these insights as catalysts for change? How do you move from recognising the 'rules and beliefs that keep us imprisoned' to freeing ourselves from their grip on us?

RS   I don't know what difference it makes in people's lives directly. I know that in the session several people feel a release but I don't ask them to apply it, except to ask if they would be more willing to say whatever they wrote for sentence number 1 to their supervisor (but not requiring them to). I think I do the inquiry for the love of it, and I think that gives me freedom. I am not bound to produce results and that freedom to play releases people in the moment and perhaps afterwards. .

BF   You mention afterwards. How has the way you and others see the world (outside the workshops), and how you respond to it, been altered by living with this awareness? In other words does it translate into behaviour?

RS   I know for me personally, I have felt much freer by this form of questioning my beliefs. In my work, it is not the questioning of beliefs per se, but the combination of the inquiry and me as a group worker and creating safety. So writing like this, it is hard to describe the flavour that comes from how safe it becomes by making the issues universal, or archetypal rather than just personal. I am not answering your question directly because the simple answer is I don't know the impact of afterwards for others. More, I am reflecting how there is such impact in the here and now.

So my skill is to get the whole group doing this inquiry together in a way that bonds them. I also give theory on projective identification which helps. Put simply projective identification is a theory that others put feelings they have not been able to process into us (although they do this unconsciously.) It is a preverbal form of language, because the baby cannot communicate its distress in words. So, if I feel fear in your presence, then perhaps your bullying ways are a way of getting me to feel the fear you can't or won't feel. If I feel envy in your presence, perhaps you are inviting me to feel your early deprivation. Understanding how projective identification works is not only useful for group supervision, but also for life. By paying attention to our reactions to people we can make good guesses as to what is going on inside them. We can only do this because we also have that part in us that allows us to resonate and receive the unconscious communication. So it is not only looking at how our beliefs and rules run the show, but how we can use our reactions to people to increase awareness and connection. And in relation to fear, we can notice in whose presence we feel fear, and surmise that perhaps they are frightened too. This is a very useful understanding in organisations which are often full of unacknowledged fear.

BF   I like your description of making a practice out of not taking anything personally - but simply noticing what feelings, rules and beliefs are activated in us and then inquiring about them. Being curious about what my reactions are telling me - about myself, or about others (through projective identification). You build a group dynamic where everyone is practicing this together, which is a completely different way of looking at challenges than most people are used to. Given that this is a big mindset shift - what helps to make this different way of thinking more of a habit to increase the possibility of change?

RS.   Byron Katie (www.thework.com), who taught me about inquiry, always said you did the work for the truth not to get a result, and a byproduct is a change or improvement. So I do this work for the love of the inquiry. I think that an over focus on change, transformation, improvement, goals feeds into a cultural norm. You are only as good as what you achieve or your last result. This is very understandable on one level, but not my interest. If you do the inquiry for the sake of it, change cannot not happen, but it may not be one that is predictable or controllable. If you just want the change, you don't get the inquiry, so you will have no process tools to deal with the next target.   I am interested in people's freedom to go back to an earlier theme. I think it is perfectly possible to be free in an organisation, but harder. But what imprisons us most, and we don't even realise, is our belief systems. And my work is to bring this to consciousness, individually and collectively. And to come back to our topic, the belief systems usually arise as a way of dealing with fear. And in the long run, unexamined, they restrict our freedom

Afterword

Reading this interview, it might seem very internal, psychological and not very practical, an angle you hint at with your question about what happens afterwards. And I think the teaching I do around projective identification is perhaps one of the most practical tools for ALL human relationships, as we get to learn how we transmit feelings to each other, especially fear. I have come to see that helping people to realise how frightened they are when done safely can be very useful. When it becomes a reflex to go from noticing judgment to asking what is the fear, we have the potential for a 24/7 meditation.

BF   I believe what you are teaching is profoundly important and helping organisations, e.g. hospitals or schools, would benefit enormously in terms of both patient and staff experiences if these insights were more widespread as I see fear cultures being re-enacted a lot. I think what you are saying is that this kind of inquiry helps to reduce fear, by firstly making us aware of it on an individual and collective level, and then using the inquiry to work towards looking how attached we are to the beliefs that keep it in place. And finally through an understanding of projective identification, we can see how people unconsciously pass fear to each other, especially when they are not in touch with it themselves. I will be writing about fear contagion in my article.

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About Robin and Ben

Robin Shohet is co-author with Peter Hawkins of *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, fourth edition published by the Open University Press in 2012 and editor of *Passionate Supervision*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2007) and *Supervision as Transformation*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2011). His latest book, *Clinical Supervision in the Medical Profession* is co-edited with Dr David Owen. He has been using Appreciative Inquiry with teams and organisations for the last ten years, and is currently writing about the spiritual dimension of supervision.

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Why don't we see?

A review of Margaret Heffernan's book "Wilful Blindness"

Robin Shohet

To do the deed, 'twere best not know myself

(Macbeth, Act II, Scene 2)

Publication details:

Wilful Blindness. Margaret Heffernan (2011). London: Simon and Schuster. 391 pages. £ 9.98

Image:

Bill Bragg (2015), from The New Yorker,

[Margaret Heffernan](#) is a distinguished entrepreneur, chief executive, author and academic.
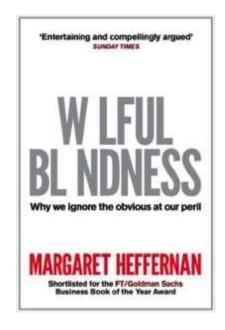

Although her book about 'Wilful Blindness' is not specifically about fear (the topic of this special edition of e-O&P), its message is that we don't want to see at all levels – from intrapersonal to societal - and the basis of this Wilful Blindness is a fear of what we might have to acknowledge or do if we allowed ourselves to know.

The book is well written and the author has researched her topic to show how pervasive this blindness is and how destructive is its impact. Chapter 1, *Affinity and Beyond,* opens with how, even with the best of intentions to practise diversity, we surround ourselves with people who think like us and can affirm our way of looking at the world (readers or authors of this journal?). In doing this, we see less and less, but we feel more comfort and greater certainty. I am reminded of a saying of the teacher of a form of self-inquiry, [Byron Katie](#), which would serve as an antidote – "if you want to know the Truth, get an enemy."

In the second chapter *Love is Blind*, Heffernan looks at blindness in close relationships, particularly the blindness that goes with not wanting to know about affairs. And she writes what in many ways what sums up the book, "It feels easier to be blind than to deal with uncomfortable feelings." (Page 38). She covers a father's sexual abuse in the family and the fears that a mother might have in allowing herself to know what she knows. Outside the family, Heffernan looks at Hitler's relationship with Albert Speer, his Minister of Armaments and War Production, and the positive transference that allowed Speer not to see what was going on. In her book, 'Time to Think', another author Nancy Kline works with a question that I think is very useful in confronting this wish not to know – "What do you know now, that you will only consciously know in a year?"

In the third chapter *Dangerous Convictions*, Heffernan writes how we work hard to defend our core beliefs and become blind to the evidence that could tell us we are wrong. In the world of consultancy, the consultant has the different perspective of an outsider, which is part of his or her value. However, in my supervision work, I have come across instances where because of the need to get work, the coach or consultant has held back in challenging belief systems in the individual or organisation for fear of upsetting the client.

We can all be very attached to our belief systems and when they are challenged we can fear losing our identity. In 'Wilful Blindness' Heffernan has interviewed so many people, quoted so much research, has argued so persuasively, that I was simultaneously excited and appalled at how often we don't want to know, and the cost of this neglect. There are, in this chapter, and others, examples of how the medical profession has not wanted to challenge existing norms, and only many years later, as for example in cases of childhood leukaemia and foetal x-rays or a surgeon who everyone knew was unsafe, has the truth emerged, usually because of the courage of a select few 'whistleblowers'. Challenging belief systems seems central to our work as authentic change agents, to raise awareness of how institutional power can be blind to itself.

In chapter five, *The Ostrich Instruction*, the author quotes research on understanding complicit silence in organisations. They found that many CEOs adopt a leadership style that ensures no one will ever tell them the truth. The logic is that you cannot fix a problem that you refuse to acknowledge. And if the problem isn't seen to be there, how can you be held responsible for it? Given the choice between conflict and change on the one hand and inertia on the other, the ostrich position can seem very attractive. In this chapter is a chilling case history of asbestos mining, where even those who had been adversely affected by the death of loved ones colluded with not wanting to know, and the person exposing the dangers was shunned by her own community who she was trying to help.

The sixth chapter *Just Following Orders* examines the famous Milgram experiments, where people administered what were shown as fatal doses of electric shock on the instructions of the experimenter. These were not bad or sadistic people, but they were putting their trust in authority. The author looks at the culture of targets and at how achieving them becomes so important that simple values become overshadowed. The notorious case of the Mid Staffs Health Trust, where The Francis Inquiry exposed grave

deficiencies in patient safety in 2013, comes to mind. In fact, obedience can be strong enough to blind us to our own self-interest.

The author writes

> *"What Milgram experiments demonstrate is that however much we think we won't obey, for the most part we do. It is a default behaviour, at least in part because its opposite – reflection, independent thinking – is so much more effortful. Obedience is another kind of short cut, in which we trust someone else's thinking above our own. It's easy and simple, especially when we are tired, distracted and don't want a fight (Heffernan p159).*

In *The Cult of Cultures,* the author looks at how the corporate world deliberately uses the need to belong and the fear of being excluded to reinforce conformity and to prevent challenges to the system. "Conformity is compelling because much of our sense of life's meaning depends on other people.… The carrot of belonging and the stick of exclusion are powerful enough to blind us to the consequence of our actions" (p 175-176).

It is much easier it is to be blind to consequences when you do not have to see them played out. Heffernan relates this to technology and to how people in power isolate themselves. "The bubble of power seals off bad news, inconvenient details, hostile opinions and messy realities, leaving you free to inhale the rarefied air of pure abstraction." (p. 222) She looks at specialisation and the case of the massive oil spillage at BP at Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and says the cost cutters did not know much about safety. Why should they? Further, "Companies are now organised in ways that can facilitate departments being structurally blind to each other. Outsourcing also adds to the whole problem of silos."

In the chapter *De-moralising Work,* she examines the negative impact of making money a primary motive for working. Many of us know this, but what I have enjoyed in this book is the case examples. For example, how it comes into medicine when diagnoses are made by doctors who have shares in the companies that do tests. She writes that it is easy to say – as Mrs Thatcher notoriously did – that there is no such thing as society when you are wealthy enough to insulate yourself from the more painful aspects of it. And an emphasis on money can blind us to our social relationships. People become commodities.

In the last chapter, *See Better*, she writes about the absurdity of certainty and the importance of staying with doubt and questioning. "Outsiders, - whether you call them Cassandras, devil's advocates, dissidents, troublemakers, fools or coaches are essential to any leader's ability to see." (p.308. As consultants, this outsider function is an essential part of our role. I wonder how much a need to please the , and fear of not getting or keeping the work, can interfere with this?

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and the author's numerous examples and interviews which support her arguments. She challenges us to be awake and not to opt for the specious comfort that wilful blindness can offer. This requires courage.

I will end with a quote from the beginning of the book which sums up for me the gist of Heffernan's position

> *"We may think being blind makes us safer, when in fact it leaves us crippled, vulnerable and powerless. But when we confront facts and fears, we achieve real power and unleash our capacity for change." (p. 5)*

References and links

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Image

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About the reviewer

Robin Shohet is co-author with Peter Hawkins of *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, fourth edition published by the Open University Press in 2012 and editor of *Passionate Supervision*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2007) and *Supervision as Transformation*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2011). His latest book, *Clinical Supervision in the Medical Profession* is co-edited with Dr David Owen. He has been using Appreciative Inquiry with teams and organisations for the last ten years, and is currently writing about the spiritual dimension of supervision.

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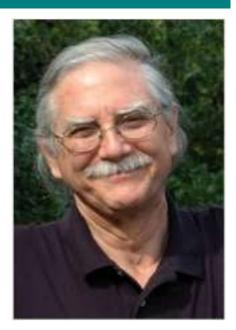
Reframing our selves

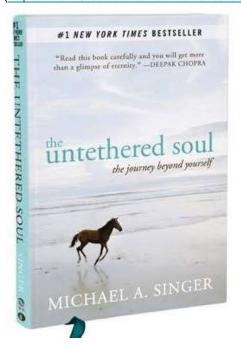## *A review of Michael Singer's book "The Untethered Soul"*

Robin Shohet

Michael Singer manages to combine deep spirituality through yoga and meditation with outstanding business success. For me, his book 'The Untethered Soul' starts where Heffernan's (also reviewed in this edition) finishes in that it goes into more detail about how and why we don't see. So Heffernan's book has a broad sweep, and Singer's goes into great depth into our internal worlds. Taken together, they complement each other.

Michael Singer

I have read dozens of books on spiritual topics but I have found this to be one of the clearest and most challenging. I am not surprised it was #1 on the New York Times bestseller list. It is a book on the nature of consciousness that asks us to go into a deep inquiry into the nature of self and mind. (http://untetheredsoul.com/untethered-soul)

In relation to the theme of this special edition of e-O&P, the author writes "Fear is the cause of every problem." (page 73). The book shows us why. Throughout, we are invited to confront our avoidance patterns that appear to keep us safe, but ultimately keep us frightened as we never move past our fears. And we develop belief systems that justify keeping the fear.

The book is not for the faint hearted,. If we really take on board what it says so cogently, we will be pursuing a line of inquiry that offers a very different perspective on our ways of seeing so-called problems. It challenges many of our cherished beliefs, and asks us to question who we think we are.

In terms of the work many of the readers of this special edition of e-O&P might do in helping others with their problems, the

author writes, "When a problem is disturbing you, don't ask, "What should I do about it?" Ask, "What part of me is being disturbed by this?" If you ask, "What should I do about it?", you've already fallen into believing that there really is a problem outside that must be dealt with." (page 15)

This reframing leads to an inquiry which he writes about throughout the book – who are you? Who is the "I" that has a problem? I think this is very important. Much of the focus of the world is on sorting out problems, rather than asking who has the problem.

In looking at how we contract – i.e. restrict - ourselves, he writes: "Closing is a habit and just like any other habit, it can be broken….You are allowing your mind to create triggers that open and close you." (page 45). I have noticed in my work, how valuable people have found it to examine their core beliefs - what Singer calls triggers - which they sometimes did not even realise they had (see the earlier interview in this edition with Ben Fuchs, where I describe this phenomenon.)

In the chapter *Transcending the Tendency to Close* Singer shows why protecting yourself does not work long term. This is something we might know intellectually, but find hard to live. He suggests that the moment you see the heart beginning to tense and get defensive, you stop whatever you are doing and become aware. Through reading this book (three times), I am catching the contractions earlier and earlier. Students of mindfulness will recognise similarities.

How does this relate to fear?

Coming more explicitly to the topic of fear, I will quote extensively from Singer's writing.

He suggests that we utilise the mind in an attempt to manipulate life for the purpose of not feeling fear:

> *"Because people don't deal with fear objectively, they don't understand it. They end up keeping their fear and trying to prevent things from happening that would stimulate it. They go through life attempting to create safety and control by defining how they need life to be in order to be ok. This is how the world becomes frightening." (page 71)*

As I write this, my mind goes to the pervasive obsession with Health and Safety which I think is constantly reminding us of how dangerous the world is.

> *"This (defining how life needs to be) may not sound frightening; it may sound safe. But it's not. If you do this, the world truly becomes threatening. Life becomes a 'me' against 'it' situation. When you have fear, insecurity or weakness inside of you, and you attempt to keep it from being stimulated, there will inevitably be events and changes in life that challenges your efforts. Because you resist these changes, you feel you are struggling with life…..Your definitions of desirable and undesirable, as well as good and bad all come about because you have defined how things need to be in order for you to be ok. The part of you inside that is not ok with itself can't face the natural unfolding of life because it's not under your control. If life unfolds in a way that stimulates your inner problems, then, by definition, it's not ok. It's really very simple: that which doesn't disturb you is ok and that which does disturb you is not." (p.72)*

As I write this I have a very dear friend who has been diagnosed with cancer. I went on to the website of Byron Katie (www.thework.com) where she talks about attitudes to cancer. She says if you can't love the cancer you will be projecting your unloving feelings around cancer on to the world at large because we are

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not accepting life as it is. This is a huge challenge, but I think this is what Singer is saying above – *what disturbs us is not ok and what doesn't disturb us is ok*. This makes perfect sense to me, but I find it very difficult to translate into everyday life. Surely, there are some things that are just not ok, period? But Byron Katie and Michael Singer ask us to even question these.

Around protection, control and worry Singer writes

> *"You will realise that your attempts to protect yourself from your problems actually create more problems. If you attempt to arrange people, places and things so they don't disturb you, it will begin to feel like life is against you. You'll feel that life is a struggle because you have to control and fight with everything. There will be competition, jealousy and fear. You will feel that anyone, at any moment, could cause you disturbance…That makes life a threat. That's why you have to worry so much. That's why you have all these dialogues going on inside your mind. You're either trying to figure out how to keep things from happening, or you're trying to figure out what do to do because they did happen." (p.73).*

Singer writes that once you have decided not to fight with life, you'll have to face the fear that was causing you to fight and that it is possible to have a life without fear if we are willing to have a deeper understanding of fear itself.

> *"Fear is caused by blockages in the flow of your energy. When your energy is blocked, it can't come up and feed your heart. Therefore your heart becomes weak. When your heart is weak, it becomes susceptible to lower vibrations and one of the lowest of all vibrations is fear. Fear is the cause of every problem." (p.73)*

The purpose of spiritual evolution, he writes, is to remove the blockages that cause your fear. The alternative is to protect your blockages so that you don't have to feel fear. To do this, however, you will have to control everything in order to avoid your inner issues.

Singer writes that if somebody does something that stimulates fear, you think they did something wrong. We have here the origins of projection, a defence mechanism that we know creates huge distress. In other words, behind every projection is a fear.

> *"Your mind's thoughts are disturbed by fears. You are either trying to stop suffering, controlling your environment to avoid suffering, or worrying about suffering in the future." (page 90)*

In the chapter *Pain. The Price of Freedom* he writes,

> *"Once you can face your disturbance, you will realise there is a layer of pain seated deep in the core of your heart. The pain is so uncomfortable, so challenging, and so destructive to the individual self, that your entire life is spent avoiding it." (page 99)*

and

> *"Real growth takes place when you finally decide to deal with the pain." (p.99)*

> *"The psyche is built around avoiding this pain and as a result it has fear of pain as its foundation…If you are doing something to avoid pain, then pain is running your life." (P100).*

"If you close around the pain and stop it from passing through, it will stay in you. Resistance is counterproductive. If you don't want the pain, why do you close round it and keep it? Do you think if you resist it, it will go away?" …. "This is what all the noise in your mind is. An attempt to avoid stored pain." (p.105)

"If you want to be free, you must first accept there is pain in your heart. You have stored it there. And you've done everything you can think of to keep it there, deep inside, so that you never have to feel it. There is also tremendous joy, beauty love and peace within you. But they are on the other side of pain." (p.105)

Singer writes that as the mind cannot understand the infinite, it creates models (I call them beliefs).

"You must now struggle day and night to make the world fit your model, and you label everything that doesn't fit as wrong, bad or unfair…..If anything can cause disturbance inside of you it means it hit your model (p.135). You must be willing to see that this need to protect yourself is where the entire personality comes from. It was created by building a mental and emotional structure to get away from a sense of fear. You are now standing face to face with the root of the psyche." (p133).

As part of the inquiry that is one of the themes of the book he writes,

"When your mind is disturbed, don't ask "What do I do about this?" Instead, ask "Who am I that notices this?" (p135).

I mentioned this at the beginning, and am mentioning it again, partly because the author does, and also because it is such a radical reframing. And he continues

"It is actually possible to never have another problem for the rest of your life. That is because events are not problems; they're just events."

How wonderful it would be to live that! I will write it again, as it had such an impact on me. "It is actually possible to never have another problem for the rest of your life. That is because events are not problems; they're just events."

I have quoted a lot from the book to give you a flavour of his writing. I hope I have done it justice, as there is so much more I could have written. As in Heffernan's book *Wilful Blindness*, the author shows how the mind works to avoid discomfort in a way that does not serve. My intention in reviewing both books together is that I think they could be useful to people - not just on a professional basis, but on a personal one too.

About the reviewer

Robin Shohet is co-author with Peter Hawkins of *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, fourth edition published by the Open University Press in 2012 and editor of *Passionate Supervision*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2007) and *Supervision as Transformation*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2011). His latest book, *Clinical Supervision in the Medical Profession* is co-edited with Dr David Owen. He has been using Appreciative Inquiry with teams and organisations for the last ten years, and is currently writing about the spiritual dimension of supervision.

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Date	More info at: amed.org.uk/events	
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September - December	u.lab: Leading From the Emerging Future A free, online course from MIT, 8 weeks, 5-10 hours per week, includes four live, global, broadcast sessions with Otto Scharmer et al	
21 October	AMED Writers' Group: 'Learning from our experiences through writing', with Melanie Greene	
26-28 October	39th Annual ISBE Conference, Paris. 'Institutional Voids, Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development.'	
Early December	Post-publication Gathering, London, on 'Fear in organisational life', exploring issues raised in the forthcoming Autumn edition of e-O&P', (Details to be confirmed.)	
Wb 1 December	Publication of the Winter 2016 edition of e-Organisations & People, Vol 23, No 4: 'Trust in organisational life'. Guest editor: Rob Warwick	
16 December	AMED Writers' Group: 'Highlights of our writing year, and Private Passions': AWG's annual end-of-year celebrations, with Bob MacKenzie and Writing Friends. (Details to be confirmed.)	
16-20 January 2017	Case Writing and Teaching Workshops, HEC, Paris, including 'Writing Effective Cases', with Trevor Williamson.	

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