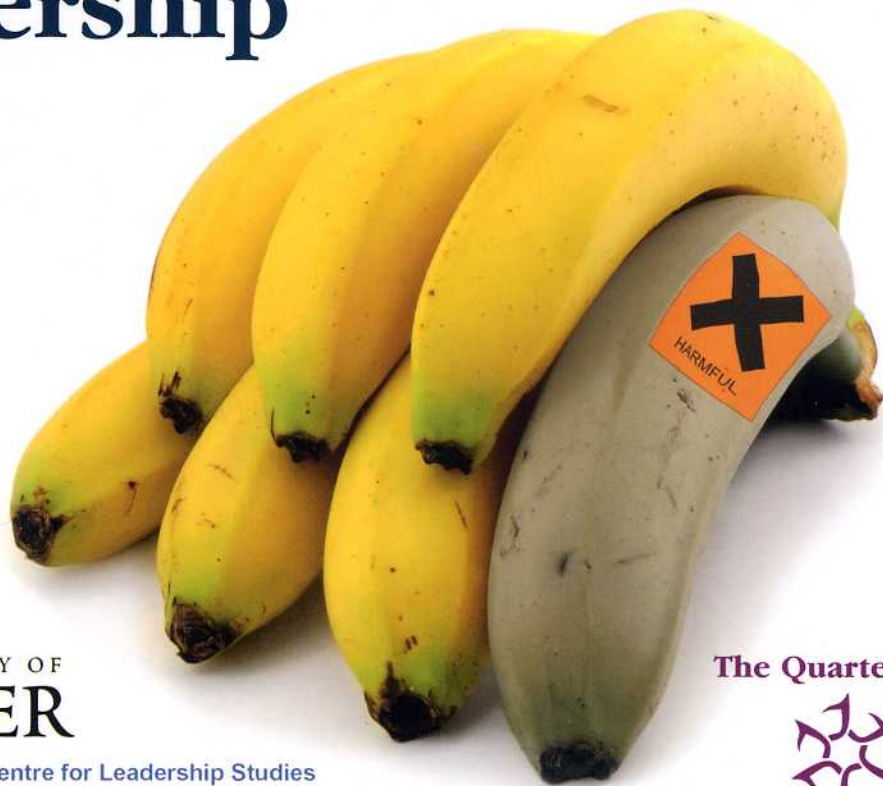


Organisations & People

Toxic Leadership



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Organisations & People

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL: TOXIC LEADERS & LEADERSHIP TOXICITY <i>Dr Michael Walton, Guest Editor</i>	3
GOOD, BAD, INDIFFERENT, MAD? A LEADERSHIP PARADOX <i>Michael Walton (Exeter Univ)</i> A broad, less sanitised, approach to examining leadership is proposed as a counter to much of the writing on leaders which integrates the good and the bad, the singular and the collective.	4
HOW DARK SIDE LEADERSHIP PERSONALITY DESTROYS TRUST AND DEGRADES ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS <i>Michael Benson (Personnel Decisions International) & Robert Hogan (Hogan Assessment Systems)</i> An exploration of the links between personality and leadership that demonstrates how dark side characteristics disrupt relationships and destroy trust in organisations.	10
THE DARK SIDE: DEFINING DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR <i>Merethe Schanke Aasland, Anders Skogstad & Ståle Einarsen (Bergen Univ, Norway)</i> A new model of destructive leadership that focuses on portrayed behaviours.	20
LEADERSHIP TOXICITY: SOURCES AND REMEDIES <i>Art Padilla (North Carolina State Univ) & Paul Mulvey (North Carolina State Univ)</i> A biological metaphor of toxic leadership considers four elements of toxicity: strength, levels, exposure and recovery, and three sources: leaders, followers, and contexts. Remedies to minimise destructive leadership are suggested.	29
ROLE CONTAMINATION <i>Jane Chapman & Susan Long (RMIT Univ, Melbourne)</i> Attempts to change work processes often fail because past behaviours have become institutionalised. A process is suggested for raising awareness of personal role history.	40
CORPORATE INNOVATION AND THE DISRUPTIVE CEO <i>Gary Oster (Regent Univ, Virginia Beach, VA)</i> When new leaders try to assert their power there can be serious implications for their organisation's ability to innovate and function efficiently.	49
THE ENIGMA OF AN UNINTENTIONALLY TOXIC LEADER <i>Alan Goldman (Arizona State Univ)</i> How one leader's unintentional toxicity affected others, the consequences and interpretations made, and the consultant analysis that led to resolution for an emotionally turbulent workplace.	55
A SHIFT OF INTENTION: FROM INEFFICIENCY TO TOXICITY IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT <i>Carol Jarvis (Bristol Business School, University of West England)</i> An exploration of how psychodynamics can help interpret a working culture and a look at the role of 'toxic handler'.	63

Organisations & People

CONTENTS

- LEGACY & MYTH: CONSEQUENCE OF LEADER DYSFUNCTION**
Margaret Davies
An exploration of how the interplay between a leader's behaviour, the internal climate, and external conditions facilitated leader dysfunction with consequences both for the organisation and the leader. 71
- HOW LEADERSHIP CAN DEVELOP INTO BULLYING**
Sheila White
An illustration of how a leader became a bully through the interplay of systemic factors such as external pressures on the organisation and excessive expectations. 79
- ORGANISATIONAL HELPLESSNESS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR**
Jenny Knight (Development with Attitude Ltd.)
A case study that describes a form of learned 'group' helplessness in the public sector. 87
- ENVY IN ORGANISATIONAL LIFE**
Marie Kane (Marie Kane & Assoc)
An article that advocates a clearer acknowledgement of the dynamic of organisational envy with some added suggestions to counter its toxic effects. 96
- TOXIC CELLULOID: REPRESENTATIONS OF BAD LEADERSHIP ON FILM AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**
Jon Billsberry (Open University) & Gareth Edwards (Leadership Foundation Trust)
An explanation and depiction of toxic leadership portrayed in seven films prior to an account of their usage in developmental settings. 104
- CONTROL MYTHS: HOW FOLLOWERS UNWITTINGLY KEEP TOXIC LEADERS IN POWER**
Jean Lipman-Blumen (Claremont Graduate Univ, CA)
A typography of Control Myths that influence 'follower' behaviour and some individual and group strategies for breaking their stranglehold. 111
- CONSTRAINTS ON LEADERS! TOXIC SOURCES?**
Michael Walton (Exeter Univ)
Triggers for toxic behaviour may arise from how leaders deal with workplace constraints and personal disappointments. Here a simple framework is introduced as one means of codifying possible leader reactions and describing the type of toxic behaviour that could follow. 121

Editorial: Toxic Leaders & Leadership Toxicity— Special Issue



Concerns about the misbehaviour of executives and the misuse of their position and power have intensified in recent years to become matters of profound public concern because they affect the well-being of so many and can undermine the standing and reputation of the organisations concerned.

I was, therefore, delighted to be given the opportunity of generating this collection of articles which are centred on difficult and complex fields of study that I believe should be at the forefront of every executive's mind as they go about their work. The articles in this O & P special issue offer insights about some of the underlying dynamics which can facilitate or impede—and in some instances destroy—an executive's capacity to lead and an organisation's ability to function.

The articles include contributions about destructive patterns of leadership; on the dynamics of leader dysfunction; the destructive effect of envy at work and on how followers may unwittingly keep toxic leaders in power. How Followers 'lead' their bosses and how organisation's can render their leaders impotent are matters also covered. The issue introduces interesting, potent, challenging and controversial material intended to stimulate thoughtful debate and practical action.

After an introduction, three articles are presented each of which offer a different perspective on leadership toxicity (Benson & Hogan; Aasland, Skogstad & Einarsen; and Padilla & Mulvey). They are written from academic and practitioner perspectives and based on extensive field work and research. These three articles set the scene for the case material which follows. Each case starkly illustrates the profound impact which the underlying emotional dynamics at work can exert and which, therefore, merit thoughtful study and understanding by consultants, business leaders, trainers and academics. All in all a mix of material which I hope you will find enlightening, useful and enjoyable to consider.

In conclusion, this collection of articles suggests to me that we could—and indeed should—prepare our leaders rather better than we do to understand, intervene and manage the complex dynamic web of interactions involved in leading and managing departments and organisations which have been so well illuminated by these articles. We owe this to our leaders, to their followers and to all those affected by dysfunctional leadership practices.

I am delighted by this Issue which I hope will be well read, stimulate more research, generate debate and discussion and help spur interest in the fields of study described by these authors.

Dr Michael Walton, Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, 25th May 2008

Good, Bad, Indifferent, Mad? A Leadership Paradox

MICHAEL WALTON



This article considers (i) that too much attention continues to be placed on emphasising the 'good' sides of leadership and that more sustained attention now needs to be given to examining dysfunctional, disruptive, toxic, counter-productive and 'bad' leadership and (ii) that too much emphasis is placed on the Leader alone as the architect of success and too little on the Leader-Follower-Other Triad.

A broader, and less sanitised, approach to examining and preparing for leadership is proposed that integrates the good and the bad, the singular and the collective.

KEYWORDS: Toxic leadership, bad leadership, sanitised leadership, 'full spectrum' leadership, leadership 'Left-of-the-Dial', Leader-Follower-Other Triad.

1. Examining Leaders' Behaviour-in-Action

This brief article suggests that a more equal focus on the 'good' *and* the 'bad' behaviour of leaders would be beneficial in the preparation for, and exercise of, business leadership as too little attention has been given to examining what those in positions of influence and authority in organisations do that is counter-productive, toxic and dysfunctional.

Such a balanced perspective will, however, require those within the 'leadership industry' to become better informed about the murkier sides of 'leadership' (and 'followership') and to present a less sanitised picture of what leaders and followers do in the workplace. Doing so

would recognise more overtly the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of leaders and emphasise the complex dynamics of leadership. As Schön comments:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest might be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose.

Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems and non rigorous inquiry?

(Schön, 1987:3)

Thus, this paper advocates moving towards the swampy ground of dealing more openly with (i) the covert and unconscious motivations and motives of leaders' and followers' behaviour, and (ii) towards illuminating errant deeds and dispelling myths of heroic, charismatic, omnipotent and 'faultless' leadership (and followership for that matter, too!). Whilst this paper does not address the importance of the psychological probing of an executive's persona to assess if they are 'fit for leadership' it does propose that a person's psychological make-up be taken more fully into consideration before appointment to positions of leadership are made.

A sound first step would be to expand conventional leadership development studies to include a fuller examination of the darker sides of leadership—the dysfunctional, disreputable, disruptive, destructive and toxic behaviours we see leaders *et al* exhibiting in the workplace. To look, therefore, at the full range of behaviours exhibited by leaders and not just those that appeal, are cosmetically acceptable or are seen to be 'nice to have'; to move beyond *Stepford* Leadership.

Whilst a number of prominent writers have highlighted the criticality of attending to such matters—and made major contributions to this field of study (e.g., Conger, 1990; Hogan, 2007; Kets de Vries, 1989, 2001; Levinson, 1978; Maccoby, 2000, 2007; Zaleznik, 1970, among others)—examining a candidate's psychological suitability for leadership, in spite of the popularisation of psychometric testing, generally seems still to be an also ran when most appointment decisions are made.

2. Adopting a 'Left-of-the-Dial' perspective

It is perhaps a 'no-brainer' that the behaviour of those in positions of authority matters to all of us—whether we perceive such behaviour to be good or bad, exemplary or faulty, considered or reckless, selfish or selfless, thoughtful or indeed thoughtless—yet it appears strange how little emphasis gets placed on examining such behavioural variations in a systematic and integrated manner. Whilst heroic achievements, cataclysmic failures, ego-centric behaviour and fat-cat bonuses grab the headlines—and energise the leadership press—moves towards a more penetrative understanding and assessment of the psychological suitability for corporate leadership remain somewhat stunted. Even when corporate scandals surface they tend to prompt somewhat voyeuristic descriptive accounts of what went on rather than a more reasoned analysis of events. Whilst these accounts may make interesting reading they rarely facilitate rigorous learning.

Many of this journal's readers probably see themselves as 'leader watchers' with each of us attempting, though our own biases and predispositions, to de-code the motivations of the executive behaviour we see exhibited before us. The more we can know about *why* our leaders tend to behave as they do the more likely we are to be able to predict how they may behave under varying circumstances and pressures in the future. Such predictions are critically important in the selection for top and pivotal leadership positions and are best based on understanding the full range of 'good' and 'bad' behaviour we see from leaders.

Although a more nuanced view of 'leadership' is now taking hold, leaders are still generally presented as if they will be flawless—and *good for us*—although this surmised essential goodness has been increasingly exposed as a myth through the continuing, and

world-wide, media reporting of instances of mismanagement, betrayal of trust, ego driven/fuelled behaviour, nepotism, greed, destructive envy, fraudulent and power-crazed behaviour, criminal behaviour and the blatant exploitation of positional and political power. It is salutary to speculate that the high profile cases reported are but the likely tip of an iceberg of a far larger number of less editorially attractive accounts of daily leadership misdemeanours and counter productive workplace behaviour within organisations.

However, through making the study of dysfunctional and disruptive leader (and follower) behaviour more acceptable, and viewing such instances as a normal and to be expected aspect of business life, we may be able to (i) prepare better those destined for leadership positions, (ii) be more thoughtful in matching leaders to different types of leadership challenges and contexts, and (iii) reduce the incidence of toxic leadership behaviour and number of dysfunctional followers.

So why might such a rosy-tinted view of leadership have prevailed for so long? It makes one wonder, if we are so smart, just what has been missed, neglected or denied in our studies on the behaviour of leaders (and their followers) in organisations. It may be that little has been missed but merely the concentration of attention has been too focused on particularly favoured facets of leadership to the relative neglect of other, more complex, less attractive or palatable, features of the behaviour of leaders.

Perhaps business leaders, practitioners, trainers, consultants, academics alike have fallen into a trap of emphasising what we want to see from, and believe about, those in whom trust is placed. Pretending perhaps that any accompanying 'bad bits' are exceptions rather than being an ever present part of the overall picture which then would demand fuller attention and consideration.

Thus, it may be that collectively we have been prone to only look at those parts of the leadership tapestry that we prefer to see and that we have tended, and been encouraged, to push to the side the more discreditable excesses of leaders 'as if' they don't exist. If so perhaps we now need to consciously re-focus and broaden our attention and, as it were, tune-in 'to the Left of the Dial' and attend more purposefully to the non-sanitised facets of leader behaviour and organisational dynamics that are lurking in the background to complement more conventional leadership training.

3. The Leader-Follower-Other (LFO) Triad

The second theme of this paper suggests that a leader's behaviour, toxic or otherwise, is the product of their relationships with those around them as much as it is a reflection of their personal psychological predispositions. In other words, 'bad' leadership is unlikely to be generated by the leader alone.

In defiance of much of the literature, effective leadership does not rest solely on the personal style, pronouncements, enactments and posturings of the leader. Leaders do depend on the actions of their followers, and other significant players, for success. Yet much of the leadership hype continues to venerate and promote 'the leader' as if all others are bystanders or servants waiting to blindly follow directions and orders from above. Consultants and practitioners know it is not as simple as this would suggest. Leaders, Followers and significant Others interact together symbiotically—but not necessarily with equal influence—as vital and active determinants of a leader's personal and organisational success.

Although the behaviour of leaders have, not unreasonably, received overwhelming attention, the behaviour of Followers is now receiving

increasingly more focused study and the recognition they merit in occupying a critical role in both enabling and disabling the success of their leaders (Frost, 2003; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla *et al* 2005).

If, however, leaders continue to be viewed and presented by business schools, trainers, writers, leadership Gurus *et al* as corporate celebrity ‘star players’, the font of all wisdom, the giver of instructions and the progenitor of business success then such views contrast sharply with the realities of practical leadership—contrasts that may trigger in leaders and followers, seemingly irrational, disruptive, dysfunctional or toxic behaviour.

Day-to-day leadership behaviour is a collaborative and relational phenomenon and could be viewed as revolving around the three dynamic sources as shown in Figure 1:

- Firstly — the leader whose behaviour patterns will reflect that leaders’s past practices, systems of beliefs, stylistic preferences and psychological make-up,
- secondly— the Leader-Follower & Leader-Other interactions and dynamics,
- and
- thirdly— the Leader’s perceptions & interpretations of the behaviour they observe from Followers, Peers and Others interacting together – leaders will watch and notice what is going on around them and make interpretations about what they see and what they imagine is being said.

Figure 1 depicts the primary interactions between the Leader with their Followers and significant Others (such as peers, professional colleagues, specialists and consultants). It also draws attention to the interactions that arise between Followers-Others which the Leader will

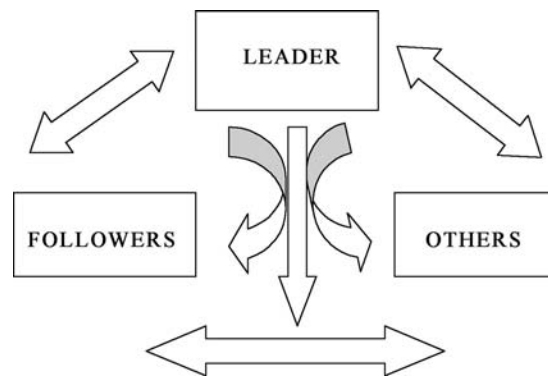


Figure 1: Key Leader Interactions (and Observations)

also be monitoring and keeping an eye on. The sense, and the importance, which the leader attaches to these third-party interactions will have an impact on the leader’s subsequent direct interactions with Followers and significant Others. The main message is that the leader, far from being the main determinant of their own success, is dependent upon—and exposed by—the behaviour of those around them in relation to the contextual challenges they face moment-to-moment.

Such a view, however, is rather different from the conventional notion of the leader as the main player heroically showing the way and highlights not only (i) the interdependency of the position of being a leader but also just (ii) how the key to leader success does not rest solely in the gift/hands of the leader alone but also in the hands of those they lead. Yet much in the contemporary leadership literature, and in the face of the corporate calamities of Enron *et al* (McLean & Elkind, 2004), still remains oriented towards charisma, heroic, and esoteric patterns of leadership. This may, however, betray the urgent need to adopt a more realistic and practical appreciation of leadership behaviour-in-context that is necessarily flawed and comes complete with warts and all.

A more ‘warts and all’ approach to leadership prompts a number of questions. If, for instance, leaders are not flawless and if they display human failings and make ‘mistakes’ are they necessarily ‘bad’? Do ‘bad behaviours’ make an

otherwise 'good' Leader a bad or dysfunctional one? Can a 'good' leader also be a 'bad' leader at one and the same time? To what extent might a leader behave in ways which are both functional and dysfunctional, constructive and destructive, toxic and non-toxic, good and bad? In other words, it is interesting to consider how leaders may be viewed differently by different people at the very same time depending on the context, past history, the immediate tasks to be addressed, levels of trust—or distrust—previously established, personal agendas, expectations and the mix of personality differences involved.

If so, in our preparation for leadership, and in our assessment of a leader's performance, do we allow enough flexibility for a leader to be seen in these multiple ways or are we overly encouraged to adopt a more polarised position whereby leaders are, for example, good or bad, right or wrong, toxic or non-toxic?

4. Are we there yet?

To summarise, in this author's view, too much attention since the mid-50s has been placed on promoting a rather idealised, cosmeticised and sanitised picture of leaders and leadership. Such naivety has masked the inherent potential for the misuse of a leader's power and influence and diminished the significant impact which Followers have on the success or otherwise of their Leaders. Whilst recent years have seen the emergence of a more rounded and realistic consideration of leaders (and followers) and the behaviours they display it has been, with notable exceptions, *as if* only the 'good' side was preferred. Since 2001, however, such a romantic perspective has become 'dead in the water' following the unraveling of the corporate misdemeanors at Enron, *et al.* Consequently, leadership theory, practice, training and development should no longer be approached in the

naïve cosmeticised way it had generally been previously viewed and promoted pre-Enron.

Tuning-in 'to the Left of the Dial' is a way of describing the need to attend to undesirable leader behaviour—such as excessive emotional outbursts, penalistic and sadistic work place behaviour, envy and destructive rivalry, the misuse of power and privilege, excessive ego-centric manipulation, criminal activity, falsification of records, bribery and corruption—that in the past may have been glossed over, neglected, excused or presented as atypical leadership phenomena in the conventional preparation for leadership (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan, 2007). Preparation for leadership needs to examine such behaviours in addition to those on the 'good' and more acceptable leadership wavelengths.

Whilst leaders are not all good, and leadership is not always good for us, through adopting a more expansive perspective on leadership behaviour we may be more able to maximise the good and minimise the toxic, bad and mad.

As Zimbardo comments:

Consider the possibility that each of us has the potential, or mental templates, to be saint or sinner, altruistic or selfish, gentle or cruel, submissive or dominant, sane or mad, good or evil (2007:229).

As for us as individuals, so too for us as leaders and followers.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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How Dark Side Leadership Personality Destroys Trust and Degrades Organisational Effectiveness

MICHAEL J. BENSON & ROBERT HOGAN



Drawing on more than 70 years of work in government, military, academia, private sector business and consulting, the authors describe how personality affects leadership in general, and how dark side personality explains toxic leadership. We focus on the links between personality and leadership to show how dark side characteristics disrupt relationships and destroy trust in organisations. We close by offering three practical recommendations to those responsible for improving organisational leadership.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Leadership toxicity, Leadership development, Dark side leadership.

Introduction

People seem implicitly to attach the word 'good' to the word 'leadership'. This tendency may explain why academic researchers have avoided studying managerial (and leadership) incompetence. The recent implosion of several organisations (i.e., Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, Hollinger International) and the associated media coverage has called attention to the existence of bad leaders. This article draws on the knowledge base concerning the dark side of personality to define the critical issues associated with managerial derailment and to offer guidance to leadership development practitioners. The paper is organised in three sections. First, we offer a definition of

leadership that differs from the standard view. Second, we define personality, describe a taxonomy of personality dimensions that characterise both effective and ineffective leadership, and show how these dimensions translate into leadership behaviour. Finally, we offer some suggestions for leadership development practitioners.

Defining Good and Bad Leadership

Researchers and practitioners often complain that there is no agreed upon definition of leadership—there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are people who study it

(Bass, 1990; Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2005). We find it helpful to focus on the functions of leadership rather than the characteristics of people who are in charge. Consistent with this orientation, we value the Roach and Behling (1984) definition, which argues that leadership should be defined in terms of the process of influencing a group toward accomplishing its goals (Den Hartog & Koopman, 2002; Hughes et al., 2005). This definition highlights three critical issues: (1) leadership is a process; (2) it implies influence (implicitly a bidirectional influence process); (3) it entails accomplishing a specified goal. Hogan and colleagues (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008) extend this definition by arguing that leadership should be understood in terms of both the 'ends'—accomplishing the goals of an organisation—and the 'means' of leadership—*building* and *maintaining* high performing teams. Obviously, the 'means' of leadership concern the processes by which the 'ends' (effective performance) are achieved.

As noted above, it is often assumed that all (or most) people in senior positions in organisations are good leaders, but this is clearly not the case (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Kellerman, 2004; 2008). In fact, this special issue as well as a special issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* (2007), and a spate of recent articles concerning toxic leadership, indicate a paradigm shift from learning leadership exclusively through the study of leadership effectiveness to learning about leadership by examining leadership *ineffectiveness*. To understand toxic leadership, it is useful to review some historical research on managerial derailment.

Research at the Center for Creative Leadership started this line of inquiry. McCall and Lombardo (1983) concluded that a combination of personal and performance flaws cause managers to derail and/or fail (see also Bentz, 1985; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988).

Some specific behaviours related to failure include: being insensitive; being aloof, cold, and arrogant; betraying trust; being overly ambitious; being burned out; having miscellaneous skill deficiencies. The problems identified by these researchers could be placed in three overarching categories: (1) managerial skills, (2) personal qualities, and (3) leadership abilities. Lombardo et al. (1988) extended this work by comparing derailed and successful managers; they found that derailed executives were rated significantly lower across scales concerning personal flaws (honour, sensitivity, composure) and managerial flaws (handling business complexity and staffing). Van Velsor and Leslie (1995) re-evaluated these 'causes' of derailment across time and culture and reached similar conclusions. As the trends of increased organisational complexity, globalisation, and downsizing continue, leaders will be called upon to deliver results more quickly and more accurately in spite of the dynamic environment. This requirement to deliver places a premium on a leader's ability to inspire performance beyond expectations from organisation members—to deliver on the 'means' of leadership. This focus on how results are accomplished support the idea that personal flaws (i.e., dysfunctional interpersonal tendencies) will become more important than poor managerial skills as key drivers of derailment (Hogan, 2006; Hogan & Benson, in press; Kellerman, 2008).

Recent publications attempt to specify more precisely the characteristics that define toxic leadership. The following themes come up repeatedly: exploitive; abusive; bullying; corrupt; undermining subordinates' effectiveness, well-being, or satisfaction; sabotage or working against the organisation's legitimate interests; unethical or illegal behaviour (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Walton, 2007a). It is worth noting, that this work takes a leader-centric view, whereas our view of

leadership specifically includes followers as a necessary consideration (see also Kellerman, 2008). Although a variety of leader behaviours can be considered toxic or destructive, we prefer to define toxicity in terms of any behaviour that, over the long-term, destroys the ability of people to work together productively in an organisation. We also believe that the propensity toward toxic leader behaviour can be predicted using an appropriate set of personality variables, referred to as measures of the 'bright' and 'dark side'; these measures also provide a way to mitigate the effects of toxic leadership.

Personality from the Bright and Dark Side

The word 'personality' can be defined in two ways: from the perspective of (1) the actor and (2) the observer. Personality from the actor's perspective concerns how people view themselves—this is their *identity*. In contrast, personality from the observer's perspective concerns how other people regard the actor—this is their *reputation*. The personality literature focuses on identity, but after 100 years, we have few useful generalisations about identity. We prefer to focus instead on reputation because it is easier to study, it has a well-defined structure

(the Five Factor Model), and the content and structure of reputation are well-replicated across cultures (see Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1999). Moreover, the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour; reputation is a summary of past behaviour, therefore it is the best possible data we have for predicting future performance.

Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan (1994) suggest that reputation has two aspects, which we refer to as the 'the bright side' and 'the dark side'. The bright side concerns individual differences in the ability to form social bonds and to advance one's career agenda. Table 1 presents the structure of the bright side of personality. In general, the bright side appears when people are at their best—during job interviews and other public performances—and is associated with career success; however, at more extreme levels even these 'bright side' characteristics can become shortcomings for leaders. The links between the bright side of personality and leadership have been studied extensively, focusing primarily on emergence and effectiveness. A number of meta-analyses provide compelling evidence that personality and leadership (Judge, et al., 2002; Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986) are correlated, but these studies do not concern the processes or mechanisms by which personality is translated into leadership outcomes.

Table 1: The Structure of the Bright Side of Personality

Bright Side Dimension	Related FFM Dimension	Definition	As a Strength	As a Shortcoming
Adjustment	Emotional Stability	Self confidence and resilience vs. guilt and self doubt	Calm under pressure	No sense of urgency
Ambition	Extraversion / Surgency	Competitiveness and drive vs. laziness and apathy	Takes initiative	Always competing
Sociability	Extraversion / Surgency	Approachable and outgoing vs. shy and retiring	Social self-confidence	Won't listen
Interpersonal Sensitivity	Agreeableness	Charming and attractive vs. tough and confrontational	Likeable	Avoids conflict
Prudence	Conscientiousness	Cautious, discrete, and conforming vs. reckless and defiant	Conscientious	Inflexible
Inquisitive	Openness to Experience	Curious and open minded vs. unimaginative	Creative	Eccentric
Learning Style	Openness to Experience	Smart and up to date vs. Poorly informed	Knowledgeable	Know it all

The focus on the FFM traits (i.e., the bright side) and positive leadership outcomes is important, but it only tells one part of the story. The ‘dark side’ concerns the behaviour we see in people during times of crisis or increased stress, it is the behaviour that one is likely to see when people either let down their guard or lack the additional resources to ‘check’ their outward behaviour. During times of crisis, leadership is at a premium and organisations can ill afford behaviour that undermines the capacity of teams to function. Hogan and Hogan (1997, 2001) studied the dimensions of reputation associated with interpersonal dysfunction and proposed a taxonomy of the causes of managerial derailment or failure. These personality-based reasons for failure fall into 11 categories, and these categories provide a taxonomy of the ‘dark side’. Table 2 presents this taxonomy of the dark side of personality.

There are two themes running through these dimensions that should be noted. First, as Table 2 shows, these dimensions contain both strengths and shortcomings, and some elevation on them is a good thing. For instance, a person who lacks creativity, visioning skills, and some ability to take calculated risks (i.e., mischievous and imaginative) would not be able to operate in the changing environments leaders find themselves in on a daily basis. However, when these behaviours become more extreme and calculated risk taking turns into reckless abandon and creativity and vision become disconnected from reality, bad things inevitably happen.

Second, it is critical to understand that these dysfunctional behaviours, at best, contribute to short-term success, but they inevitably impair long-term success and organisational health. It is also likely that, as a leader’s support dwindles, a downward spiral can begin that requires the

Table 2: The Structure of the ‘Dark Side’ of Personality

‘Dark Side’ Dimension	Definition	As a Strength	As a Shortcoming
Excitable	Mood swings, emotional outbursts, and inability to persist on projects	Empathy and concern	Emotional explosiveness
Skeptical	Mistrusting others, questioning their motives, and challenging their integrity	Social and political insight	Excessive suspicion
Cautious	Fearful of making mistakes, avoid making decisions, resisting change, using only proven solutions to problems, and alienating their staffs	Evaluates risks appropriately	Indecisiveness and risk aversion
Reserved	Remaining aloof, communicating poorly, and ignoring the welfare of their staffs	Emotionally unflappable	Insensitive and poor communicator
Leisurely	Procrastinating, pursuing their own agendas, and failing to set clear expectations for, or following through with commitments to, their staffs	Good social skills	Passive aggression
Bold	Feeling entitled, not sharing credit for success, blaming their mistakes on others, and not learning from experience, but are fearless about pursuing grand goals	Courage and energy	Overbearing and manipulative
Mischievous	Lying and breaking rules to test the limits, ignoring commitments, and thinking they can talk their way out of any problem	Unafraid of risk	Reckless and deceitful
Colourful	Needing to be the centre of attention, so that others can admire them, preoccupied with being noticed, unable to maintain focus, and resist sharing credit	Celebrations and entertainment	Impulsive and distractible
Imaginative	Thinking in eccentric ways, often changing their minds, and making strange decisions	Creativity and vision	Bad ideas
Diligent	Frustrating and disempowering their staffs with micro-management, poor prioritisation, and an inability to delegate	Hard work and high standards	Micromanagement
Dutiful	Sucking up to supervisors, unable to deny unrealistic requests, won’t stand up for their staffs and burn them out as a result	Corporate citizenship	Indecisiveness

The Downward Spiral of Dark Side Leadership Behaviour

If given time to reflect, most of us could call to mind several occasions where the leaders above us or around us engaged in behaviour that was so clearly destructive or toxic that we wondered how it could continue or be tolerated by the organisation. Our experiences support the notion that once organisational members can identify recurring toxic, 'dark side' leadership behaviours a pattern has been established. The patterned behaviour is often a result of a leader achieving short-term success and being reinforced for the accomplishments without concern for how the results were achieved. This initial short-term success and subsequent reinforcement of dark side behaviour marks the beginning of a 'downward spiral' toward derailment or failure that is difficult to impede or reverse.

Central to this downward spiral effect is that 'dark side' leadership behaviours affect the interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers. The crux of leadership is being able to accomplish the goals of the work unit or organisation through the efforts of others (the 'ends' of leadership). Furthermore, to deliver superior performance over the long-term, *how* results are achieved (i.e., building and maintaining high performing teams, the 'means' of leadership) requires organisational attention—interpersonal relationships founded on trust and mutual respect are imperative. 'Dark side' tendencies, as described in Table 2, undermine follower trust and respect; consequently, the strength of the interpersonal relationship bonds is tested. The first time the bonds are tested, it is possible that followers are willing to overlook the transgression and offer the leader the benefit of the doubt. However, as these toxic, 'dark side' transgressions become routine patterns of behaviour, followers are unlikely to provide the benefit of the doubt. Instead, followers will find ways to simply survive or 'get by' or worse, they may actively implement tactics to sabotage a leader or voluntarily leave the organisation (see Dirks, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). It is at this point that the downward spiral moves into high gear. Given the dysfunctional interpersonal relations and lack of trust between leader and follower, the leader has little choice about how to attempt to accomplish the work of the organisation except through a process of escalating reliance on more of the same toxic, 'dark side' behaviours. For example, consider the first three 'dark side' dimensions listed in Table 2. It is easy to see how a leader with these tendencies might create an early, global and transient impression as empathic, insightful, and a good judge of risk; however, as a leader becomes overly reliant on these tendencies, the 'true' aspects of emotional explosiveness, rank paranoia, and indecision emerge and the spiral begins. Unfortunately, without external intervention, the leader becomes even more reliant on these tendencies. As the over-reliance emerges, the dimensions as shortcomings will become clear, and the long-term interpersonal relationships will likely be damaged beyond repair.

leader to rely even more heavily on these ineffective behaviours which then further alienates subordinates (see *Downward Spiral* Insert).

To summarise, we agree with the view that "Who we are determines how we lead" (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005: 170). Thus, to understand effective and ineffective leadership, we need to

consider the entire spectrum of personality, defined in terms of reputation, and its consequences for positive and toxic leadership. Furthermore, evaluating leadership in terms of the dark side taxonomy allows a more process-oriented perspective on the personality-leadership performance linkage. Specifically, it

focuses attention on the 'means' of leadership and allows us to understand how the relationships between leader and followers become dysfunctional and make it difficult to accomplish the goals of the organisation. The research evidence supports the view that these dark side dimensions of personality predict leadership performance (Benson, 2006; Benson & Campbell, 2007; Judge, *et al.*, 2002). With these empirical links in mind, we now turn to the topic of leadership development.

Implications for Leadership Development

We can organise our recommendations in terms of three themes. First, leadership development programmes should be based on a valid, systematic approach. Second, they should be viewed from a systems perspective—leader-centric approaches are inadequate. Third, change and globalisation are here to stay; and this necessarily affects leadership development programmes.

1. SYSTEMATIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT.

Leadership development should be viewed as a team sport. Successful development depends on the commitment of the people in question, their leaders, and the organisation as a whole—this kind of commitment ensures accountability. Even with high levels of commitment and accountability, it is necessary to have a systematic development process. Hicks and Peterson (1999) describe development in terms of five steps. First, a person needs to know what to change (insight). Next, the person should want to change (motivation). Third, the person needs to know how to build new skills (capability). Fourth, the person needs an environment to practice newly developed skills. And, finally, there must be accountability in the system to

ensure that the change happens and is sustainable. With a systematic process in place, certain tools can be used to generate insight and motivation. For example, a valid multi-rater feedback tool can inform individual leaders about how bosses, peers, and direct reports see their performance and allow them to compare their perceptions of their performance with those of others. Furthermore, insight about personality tendencies and how they might affect their learning and development can be important, especially in light of the fact that everyone has some dark side tendencies (Hogan, 2006). Therefore, a variety of development tools is needed, while taking care not to bombard individual leaders with feedback information.

2. LEADER-CENTRIC APPROACHES ARE INADEQUATE.

Leadership development programmes tend to focus on the skills of specific leaders—and sometimes their heroic status (Walton, 2007b). There are several models available for analysing leadership behaviour. In particular, Walton's ACE model (Walton 2007a, 2007b) and Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's (2007) Toxic Triangle focus on: (1) the leader; (2) the culture, climate, and followers of the organisation; and (3) the external environment. In particular, these models focus on the interactions between the individual components of the model and the fact that many people at the top of organisations have leadership challenges. The working world is evolving away from the view of 'leaders-as-heroes' to a model that considers how leaders' behaviour affects their organisations and their members.

It is difficult to change personality tendencies, but it is possible to change behaviour to develop stronger leaders. Although 'dark side' tendencies are a necessary condition for destructive outcomes, they are not sufficient. Organisations and followers must also tolerate

these tendencies, and often they unwittingly enable them. One way to put toxic leaders 'on notice' is to educate and empower followers while creating an internal culture/climate that won't tolerate destructive leadership behaviour. Another way is to provide leaders of leaders a framework to evaluate more than the visible outcomes (i.e., profit and loss). The framework must include increased awareness of the 'invisible' costs extracted by some leaders solely focused on the tangible 'results at any cost' mentality. For example, broadening performance discussions to include a leader's impact on unit morale, citizenship behaviour, voluntary turnover, or occurrences of counterproductive work behaviours would help hold leaders accountable for how they produce results. Thus, organisations would be well-served to create a system of checks and balances (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Walton 2007a, 2007b).

3. CHANGE AND GLOBALISATION.

People in the leadership development business are often asked to develop leaders and to develop them quickly. In some parts of the world, impending retirements drive these requests and in other parts—namely, Brazil, Russia, India, and China—the rapidly growing economies drive the requests. We recently learned of an Indian company that plans to hire 20,000 employees, per annum, and they need to identify from the outset the 10-15% of the new hires who should be put on a leadership track to be ready for leadership positions in 2 years.

These are exciting times in the field of leadership development, but we must not lose track of the fundamental requirements of a leadership development system (i.e., systematic, robust, based on valid tools) outlined earlier in this article. It is also more important to resist the urge to promote people solely on the basis of their ability to achieve results. Promotions should be

based on two considerations regarding leadership performance. First, does the next level require the same skills as those people demonstrate in their current roles? Readiness for promotion must be judged against the skills or values required at the next higher level (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001). Second, firms must evaluate how results are being achieved (the 'means' of leadership) as well as the degree to which they are being achieved (the 'ends' of leadership). This is so because the short term success of some leaders is offset by the number of bodies they leave behind. If organisations set clear expectations about the 'means' of performance and a manager's ability to develop and sustain superior performance, then individuals and organisations will be more likely to survive and thrive in the long-run.

ENDPIECE

Although leadership toxicity, *per se*, is not a new phenomenon to organisations, a spate of organisational wrongdoing, ineffectiveness, and even outright collapse has called significant attention to the destructive and toxic role leaders can, and do, play in their organisations. It is clear that toxic leaders and the implications of their behaviour on organisational performance are a problem and require a shift in the way we understand and study leaders and their development. To this end, this article makes four important points. First, traditional definitions of leadership provide a good start, but in the end they are inadequate. Understanding leadership in terms of the 'means', building and maintaining high performing teams, and the 'ends', accomplishing the goals of the organisation, provides a process-oriented view focused equally on the results delivered as well as *how* those results are achieved (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008). Second, personality predicts leadership performance; both 'bright' and 'dark'

side traits are meaningful to that prediction. Third, and related to the expanded definition of leadership, leadership is about building and maintaining high performing teams. Bright side characteristics facilitate this ability; dark side characteristics debilitate it. Moreover, every leader has some elevated dark side characteristics; therefore, relying on personnel selection at the organisational level to screen out these candidates will not achieve the desired results. Finally, individual leaders will not be able to recognise their own dark side tendencies; therefore, a systematic, non-leader-centric, development process is necessary. The impact of leadership, good and bad, is indisputable. Organisations that fail to realise this fact and fail to move beyond the narrow 'leader-as-hero' model, will not deliver superior results.

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The Dark Side: Defining Destructive Leadership Behaviour

MERETHE SCHANKE AASLAND, ANDERS SKOGSTAD & STÅLE EINARSEN



Ever more focus is placed on managers and leaders who abuse subordinates or who abuse the organisation for their personal gains. This article presents a new model of destructive leadership by focusing on the behaviours these leaders portray.

KEYWORDS: Destructive leadership, tyrannical, derailed, laissez-faire, supportive-disloyal.

Setting the Scene

A bias exists in leadership research and writings, equating a leader with a good and efficient leader (Kellerman, 2004). In line with this, writings on leadership are often based on the implicit assumption that leadership will be improved by doing more of what is seen as good and productive. Reading a regular textbook on 'leadership', one notices that issues on inadequate, flawed, or even abusive aspects of leadership are absent (Tepper, 2000). Hence, leaders apparently shall not learn from their mistakes; nor shall they try to avoid possible pitfalls associated with being in a leadership position. Yet, in organisational climate research from the middle of the 1950's to the 1990's, 60% - 75% of

all employees typically reported that the worst aspect of their job was their immediate supervisor. Furthermore, research on bullying at work has documented that some 5% - 10% of employees in Europe are subjected to bullying at any one time (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Between 50% - 80% of all these cases of bullying involve a superior in the role of the alleged bully (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). Baumeister, Bratlavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs (2001) conclude there is overwhelming support for the notion that negative events in social interactions, such as misbehaviour from a leader, have a much stronger effect than do positive events on those exposed to them. Hence, understanding and preventing the "dark side of leadership" (Conger, 1990) may be as important

as understanding and emphasising the positive aspects of leadership.

In this article, we will describe the nature of the 'dark side' of leadership behaviour. Secondly, we propose a definition of such leadership that encompasses a wide range of possible behaviours described as problematic and stressful in the literature; introducing the concept of 'destructive leadership' as the overarching concept. Thirdly, building on this definition, we present a model of leadership behaviours that shows the main kinds of destructive leadership behaviours, and how they relate to constructive and efficient forms of leadership. In doing this, we claim that:

1. Destructive leadership behaviours come in many shapes and forms.
2. All leadership behaviours occur along two basic dimensions:
 - a. Pro-organisational versus anti-organisational behaviour, and
 - a. pro-subordinate versus anti-subordinate behaviour
3. Leaders are not necessarily 'either-or' in their behaviour; rather they may simultaneously enact both constructive and destructive behaviours.
4. Destructive leadership is not a separate and 'deviant' phenomenon, but constitutes a phenomenon that is closely related to constructive forms of leadership

The nature of the 'dark side' of leadership

A range of concepts have been introduced to describe the 'dark side' of leadership such as 'petty tyranny' (Ashforth, 1994), 'abusive supervision' (Tepper, 2000), 'dark side of leadership' (Conger, 1990), 'evil' leadership (Delbecq, 2001), 'toxic leadership' (Lipman-Blumen, 2005)

and 'bad' leadership (Kellerman, 2004). Ashforth (1994:126) defined a 'petty tyrant' as "someone who uses their power and authority oppressively, capriciously, and perhaps vindictively", describing six categories of behaviours portrayed by such leaders; arbitrariness and self-aggrandisement, belittling of subordinates, lack of consideration, a forcing style of conflict resolution, discouraging initiative, and non-contingent punishment. Likewise, 'abusive supervision' has been defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000: 178). Bies and Tripp (1998) identified the following characteristics of such abusive superiors; an obsession with details, perfection and loyalty, mood swings in form of sudden loud and angry tantrums, public criticism and belittling of subordinates, exercising raw power for personal gain, obsession with gathering personal information about employees, and the use of coercion to corrupt employees. Professor Svein Kile (1990: 26) identified six kinds of destructive leaders building on an interview study among Norwegian employees from a wide range of work sectors, namely:

The unmasked tyrant who openly abuses his/her power towards subordinates by yelling, belittling and punishing those who disagree with him/her;

the unassailable manipulator that may appear friendly and charming, but punishes subordinates who cross him/her by lying and spreading rumours about them;

the error hunter who spends considerable time looking for mistakes and weaknesses among subordinates;

the benevolent guardian who behaves like a stern parent towards his/her child, behaving in an agreeable, but degrading and passive-aggressive manner;

the liar and distorter who may behave in

a friendly manner, but lies about subordinates to superiors, takes credit for others' work accomplishments, and makes false accusations against subordinates; and

the weathercock who agrees with the person to whom he/she is currently talking to, but betrays subordinates' trust and breaks promises.

Delbecq (2001) points to similar behaviours in his description of 'evil' leadership behaviour, claiming that leaders may be far from effective when they are ruthless, humourless, obsessed with control, lacking empathy, being unduly judgmental, manipulative or self-aggrandising whereas Hogan (1994) describes similar characteristics of leaders who are arrogant, insensitive, vindictive, selfish and dishonest. Leaders may also display behaviours which primarily effect the organisation in a negative way, e.g. by reducing the quality and quantity of its performance, sabotaging its goal attainment, by damaging its relationships with customers and clients, or by stealing its resources; be it material resources, financial or time resources (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007).

From the studies highlighted it becomes apparent that leaders do not always act in the best interest of the organisation, but may instead be involved in corruption, lying, cheating and stealing or, in other ways, putting their self-interest ahead of the organisation's legitimate interest. Leaders may "act without integrity by dissembling and engaging in various other dishonourable behaviours", showing behaviours such as "corruption, hypocrisy, sabotage and manipulation, as well as other assorted unethical, illegal, and criminal acts" is how Lipman-Blumen (2005: 18) captures the essence of 'toxic leadership', whereas Conger claims that leaders may actually use their charismatic qualities, something often seen as an important asset of effective leaders, for personal gains and abu-

sively turn against what is good for their followers as well as the organisation (Conger, 1990).

Defining destructive leadership

Considering the breadth in the descriptions of the 'dark side' of leadership presented above, 'dark leadership' is clearly not *one* form of leadership behaviour, but may involve a variety of different leadership behaviours. Taking this diversity into account, and using the overarching concept of *destructive leadership* to describe all these kinds of behaviours, we define such leadership as:

repeated or illegal behaviours by a leader, supervisor or manager that violate the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates

(Einarsen et al., 2007: 10).

Hence, destructive leadership is, broadly speaking, any kind of behaviour that undermines or sabotages either subordinates or the organisation as such, including, but not restricted to, behaviour that is illegal, and covers behaviours that may undermine or sabotage the motivation, the well-being, or the job satisfaction of subordinates as well as behaviour that attack the goals, resources or effectiveness of the organisation. Our definition emphasises repeated destructive behaviours, as opposed to single behaviours, such as an isolated outburst of anger. Hence, a single 'mistake' by a leader is not necessarily indicative of a destructive leadership style. However, if such 'mistakes' become repeated they represent 'destructive leadership', irrespectively of their intentions or causes. Hence, we exclude intent from the definition of 'destructive leadership', embracing instances where there is

a clear intent to cause harm as well as instances of thoughtlessness or the lack of skills. As intent can only be verified by the leader in question, including it in the definition would only provide the leader with a final say in regarding the nature of the behaviour exhibited. And, does it really matter why a leader acts as he or she does, if their behaviour repeatedly harms the organisation and its employees? We claim that what factually matters is the actual behaviours and their potential consequences, rather than their underlying psychological motivations.

How then to decide what is and what is not destructive? According to our definition, destructive leadership behaviour is about behaviour that violates or is in opposition to what must be considered as the *legitimate interest* of the organisation. Consequently, undermining subordinates is not in the best interest of the organisation, at least not in any legitimate interest, as it would be in breach of the organisation's *duty of care* for its employees. Yet, employing the concept of legitimate interest, we narrow what an organisation can and cannot expect from its leaders to what must be seen as legitimate behaviour in a particular society. By legitimate we refer to what can be considered as legal, reasonable and justifiable for a given organisation in a given cultural context. Hence, what is perceived as destructive behaviour may vary between different cultures and societies over time, and to some extent between organisations, depending on their legitimate mission in a given society. For example, in times of war, risking an officer's life can probably not be seen as destructive, while doing so in times of peace and training clearly would. The other side of this coin is, of course, that at times organisations may claim something to be in their best interest, while it may become clear to a leader that it is not a legitimate claim. In such cases, not obeying would actually be constructive. Legally, in the long run, acting against what is legitimate is not in the best inter-

est of the organisation. Following this line of thought, blowing the whistle on misconduct is, therefore, in principle constructive behaviour by a leader.

A conceptual model of destructive leadership behaviour

In accordance with the above definition, we have developed a model that conceptualises the main kinds of destructive leadership behaviour and how destructive leadership relates to what is normally seen as constructive and effective forms of leadership (see figure 1).

The model has two dimensions, behaviours that are directed towards the motivation, well-being and job satisfaction of *subordinates* and behaviours that are directed towards the goals, efficiency and resources of the *organisation*. Furthermore, leaders may act supportively (pro) as well as against (anti) his or her *subordinates*. Likewise, leaders may act in line with (pro) as well as against (anti) the interest of the organisation. While many earlier models of leadership behaviour, such as the 'Managerial Grid' developed by Blake and Mouton (1985), are based on the assumption that leadership behaviour may be seen on a continuum from 'low' to 'high', we claim that we should rather look at behaviour on a continuum from being highly 'anti' to being highly 'pro'. Hence, in our model a leader may do worse things than being ineffective or just doing 'nothing'. The two dimensions are independent, meaning that a leader may act destructively on one dimension while simultaneously behaving constructively on the other (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007). For example, a leader who harasses his subordinates may still have a strong focus on task completion and organisational effectiveness. Likewise, a leader who is corrupt may still be highly supportive towards his subordinates. Yet, in both cases, the leader should be seen as portraying destructive

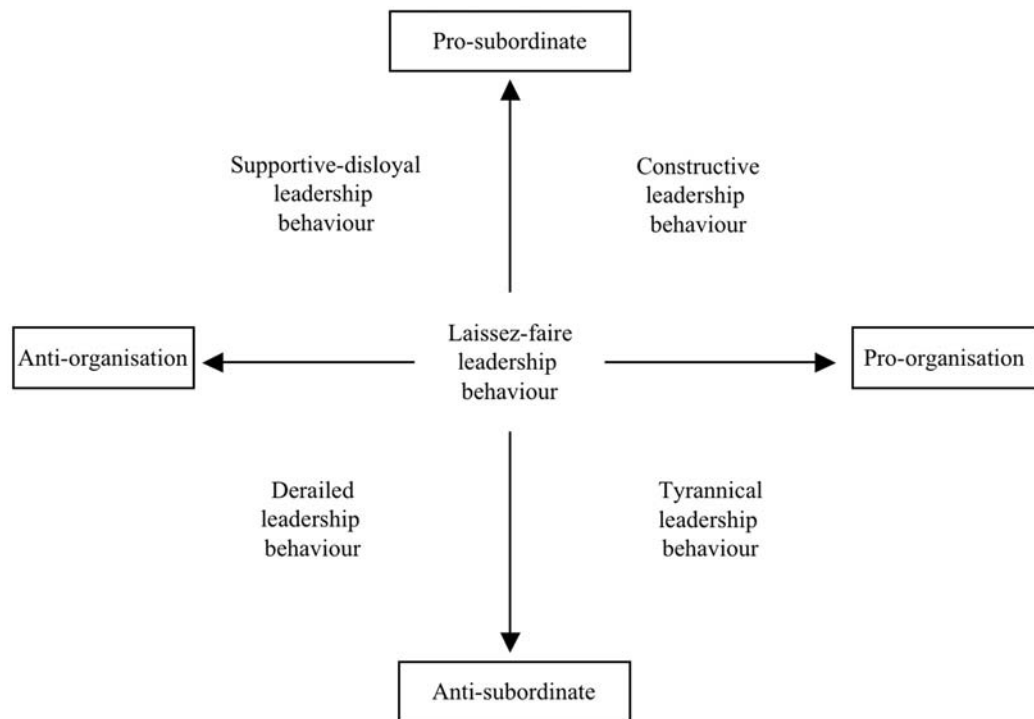


Figure 1: A model of destructive leadership behaviour

leadership. In our view effective and constructive leadership is only achieved when one consistently acts in accordance with the legitimate interest of the organisation *and* its employees.

The model thus portrays one passive and three active forms of destructive leadership, as well as a broad category of constructive forms of leadership. For this paper we will concentrate on the destructive forms of tyrannical-, supportive-disloyal-, and derailed leadership behaviours.

'Tyrannical leadership behaviour' is about displaying pro-organisational behaviours, combined with anti-subordinate behaviours (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007). These leaders, strictly speaking, may behave in accordance with the legitimate goals, tasks, missions and strategies of the organisation. However, they typically obtain results not through but at the cost of subordinates. They humiliate, belittle, and manipulate subordinates while still trying to 'get the job done'. Because *tyrannical* leaders may behave constructively towards the legitimate

goals of the organisation—while showing anti-subordinate behaviours—subordinates and superiors may evaluate the leader's behaviour quite differently. What upper-management may view as an efficient focus on task completion may simultaneously be viewed and experienced as bullying or unduly aggressive behaviours by subordinates (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007) and leaders who harass their subordinates may still function well in other work related assignments (Brodsky, 1976). Ma and colleagues (2004) describe leaders who are highly task-oriented—being high on expertise and efficiency, yet behave at the expense of subordinates' wellbeing—as 'the hired guns' and call this the *paradox of managerial tyranny*, arguing that such tyrannical leadership may lead to extraordinary performance, even when subordinates might suffer. Yet, this situation persists only as long as the tyrants' prime hold on subordinates lies in the leader's ability to create an elaborate justification for his/her tyrannical methods. Hence, its efficiency will be highly time-limited

and, in the long run, not in the legitimate interest of the organisation.

Its opposite is found in the '*Supportive-disloyal leadership behaviour*' where a leader shows pro-subordinate behaviours combined with anti-organisational behaviours. Such leaders may be highly supportive of their subordinates, but simultaneously steal resources from the organisation, be it material resources, time, or financial resources (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007). They may grant their employees more benefits than they are obliged to at the cost of the organisation, encourage a low work ethic and tolerate misconduct, and may lead their subordinates towards inefficiency, or towards other goals than those of the organisation, all while behaving in a comradely and friendly manner. They may also commit embezzlement or fraud or encourage subordinates to do so. The *supportive but disloyal leaders* have some features in common with the leadership style that Blake and Mouton (1985) termed 'country club management'. However, while 'country club management' has a minimum focus on production and efficiency, the supportive but disloyal leader actively behaves in a destructive manner on the organisational-oriented dimension. Another example of this type would be leaders who encourage loafing and low productivity among subordinates and who prioritise subordinates' personal interests at the expense of the organisation or its customers, clients or owners. Altheide and co-workers (1978) described a case where superiors rewarded subordinates for doing a good job by allowing them to steal products manufactured by the company, or they let products 'gather dust' so that employees could purchase them at a reduced price.

The third category, *Derailed leadership*, however, is about both anti-organisational as well as anti-subordinate behaviours. These leaders may bully, humiliate, manipulate, or deceive their subordinates, while simultaneously conducting anti-organisational behaviours in the

form of corruption, absenteeism, or fraud (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007). In a study of derailment among leaders, McCall and Lombardo (1983) studied leaders who achieved a high level of managerial responsibilities, but who did not go as high as the organisation had expected. They had plateaued, been demoted or fired, had accepted early retirement or had their responsibilities reduced. These leaders were moody or volatile under pressure. They reacted to failure by becoming defensive, tried to cover their mistakes rather than trying to resolve them, or once a problem became visible, blamed it on somebody else. They also showed insensitivity to others in the form of an abrasive, intimidating and bullying style of management, being seen as cold, aloof and arrogant, betraying others trust, failing to delegate tasks or to build proper teams. Many also spent too much time trying to please upper management, while failing to staff effectively, and being unable to think strategically. Although it may be in the best interest of both the organisation as well as the subordinates to stop such leaders, they may be situated in such a position of power that it makes them immune against such efforts. They may also successfully cover up the flaws of their leadership behaviour.

So far we have described three *active* forms of destructive leadership. Yet, destructive forms may also come in a *passive* variant, as is the case with *laissez-faire leadership* behaviour which is shown at the heart/centre of our model, as these leaders exert a minimum of effort to get required work done combined with a minimum of concern for subordinates (Bass & Avolio, 1995). Laissez-fair leaders do not intervene until problems are either brought to their attention or the problems become so serious that action is demanded and can no longer be avoided given the responsibilities associated with their position (Bass, 1990). Kelloway and co-workers (2005) argue that passive leadership is both *distinct from* and has negative effects *beyond* those attributed to a lack of constructive forms of

leadership. Laissez-faire leadership is not merely non-leadership (Stogdill, 1974).

The mere nomination of a leader awakes expectations among both subordinates and superiors which, when left unfulfilled, may have destructive consequences. A classic study by Lewin and co-workers (1939) showed that an inactive—*laissez-faire*—leader suppressed the quality and quantity of work conducted by a group of children. When the laissez-faire leader actually left the room physically, however, the performance of the children improved suggesting that working without a leader is more effective than working with an inactive leader who is avoiding his or her responsibilities. A study by Skogstad and colleagues (2007) showed systematic relationships between laissez-faire leadership behaviour and role stress and interpersonal conflict, which in turn predicted bullying at work, and supported the notion that *laissez-faire* is a destructive whilst ‘passive’ form of leadership. This kind of leadership behaviour clearly violates the legitimate interest of the organisation, by for example ‘stealing time’, as well as creating problems for subordinates when their legitimate ‘leadership’ expectations continually fail to be met.

Conclusion

Most writers on destructive leadership focus solely on behaviours that harm subordinates. Yet, examples prevail where leaders clearly do not act in the best interest of the organisation without necessarily being abusive towards subordinates. We, therefore, argue that it is fruitful to focus on both subordinates as well as the organisation when analysing and understanding what constitutes destructive leadership. This creates a broader framework for understanding this pertinent problem, underlining that

destructive leadership behaviour may come in many shapes and forms. Furthermore, a leader’s behaviour may have both destructive and constructive elements. During a given period leaders are not necessarily behaving either destructively *or* constructively, rather they may enact both constructive as well as destructive behaviour. Therefore, it may be confusing whether or not a leader is actually misbehaving. We believe the proposed model solves such confusions by taking into account both subordinates as well as the organisation. Our model also shows that destructive leadership is not necessarily a separate or ‘deviant’ phenomenon, far away from effective forms of leadership, but rather constitutes a phenomenon that is closely related to and sometimes even intertwined with constructive forms of leadership.

A leader may behave destructively for a number of reasons, including personality, stress, frustration, ignorance, habits, illnesses, inherited role expectations, or even by adhering to the predominant values in the organisational culture. Behaviour is always a result of a complex interplay between a wide range of internal and external factors, as well as being embedded in the particular situation of which it arises. Hence, our model is purely descriptive, helping us to understand that no matter why, those forms of behaviours constitute destructive behaviours. Although scientifically of profound interest, the “why” is actually of less importance than the “how” when dealing with destructive leadership in the real world of organisations. In this regard an important question is of course; how many leaders are actually able to consistently act within the constructive quadrant over time? Most, or only a few? And, what if leaders depart from the road of constructive leadership, in one or the other direction, be it for a longer or shorter time, how do they restore themselves as constructive leaders? As well as focusing on how leaders may ‘do good things better’, leadership

research and leadership training should address the issue that even good leaders, at times, may behave destructively. Even more so, how do they effectively change from bad to good behaviour?

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Leadership Toxicity: Sources and Remedies

ART PADILLA & PAUL MULVEY



Here a biological metaphor elucidates to the effects of toxic leadership using four elements: strength of toxin, levels or dosage of toxicity, time exposure and speed of recovery, and the three sources of possible toxins: leaders, followers, and organisational contexts. We suggest focusing on leadership outcomes and consequences is an appropriate way to consider toxic leadership and, secondly, a more comprehensive view of destructive leadership encompassing a leader, the followers, and the situational contexts or environments is needed. Finally, we offer remedies and prevention strategies to minimise possible destructive leadership.

KEYWORDS: Toxic leadership, organisational outcomes, leader derailment, leaders, susceptible followers, conducive environments, remedies, prevention strategies.

Introduction

Justice Potter Stewart, one of the wittier US Supreme Court justices, wrote this on the legal definition of obscenity:

“I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . [b]ut I know it when I see it . . . “

(*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964).

While Justice Stewart later regretted having written this opinion because of its legal imprecision, it underscores the challenges of characterising a term inherently ambiguous and difficult to define. Destructive leadership has many of the same definitional challenges.

In this paper we use the biological or chemical notion of toxicity as a metaphor to consider the effects of toxic leadership on organisations. In defining toxicity we focus on four elements: strength of toxin, levels or dosage of toxicity, time exposure and speed of recovery, and the three sources of possible toxins: leaders, followers, and organisational contexts. We first discuss definitional issues and conclude that the leader-centric focus of leadership research tends to obscure rather than to clarify matters. We also suggest two things: First, focusing on leadership outcomes and consequences is an appropriate way to consider toxic leadership. Second, a more comprehensive view of destructive leadership encompassing a leader, the followers, and the situational

contexts or environments is needed. We conclude by proposing several ways to minimise potentially toxic results by providing 'anti-venom' remedies that address the three leadership elements: leader, followers, and contexts.

What is destructive leadership?

An overarching definitional issue concerns process *versus* outcomes. While there are exceptions (O'Connor *et al.*, 1995; Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser, 2007), most scholars concentrate on leader behaviours (e.g., Allio, 2007; Goldman, 2006; Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Klein & House, 1995). In addition, other elements such as follower characteristics and behaviours or situational contexts that contribute to destructive leadership are seldom explored. Focusing on behaviours is perhaps more problematic than focusing on outcomes in considering destructive vs. constructive leadership. If there are destructive outcomes, for example, as in the case of Enron or Idi Amin's Uganda, destructive leadership has also been present. However, some leader behaviours, such as not listening, or some traits, such as narcissism, might not be desirable but they are also not necessarily associated with destructive outcomes.

Executive Derailment vs. Organisational Destruction

Undesirable traits or consequent behaviours like manipulation, intimidation, and coercion have been found to be associated with personal derailment (Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996). Eliot Spitzer's recent fall from the Governorship of the State of New York, USA, is emblematic of career derailment. We suggest these types of leader derailments mainly affect the leader; the

destruction is internally or personally focused. Once the toxic leader is removed, the organisation quickly returns to normal operation. On the other hand, if a flawed leader, working with susceptible followers and conducive situations and contexts, causes organisational destructiveness that leaves the group materially worse off, then destructive leadership is said to have occurred. The toxicity in such cases affects the organisation or group negatively in comparison to its rivals or competitors. If the toxicity is strong enough, adverse effects might extend beyond the immediate organisation and its members, as in the 1984 case of the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India (Kurzman, 1987; Weir, 1987). The distinction between behaviours or traits on the one hand and outcomes on the other seems useful in understanding destructive leadership and crucial in developing strategies to prevent or mitigate it.

In the case of a classic derailment of a leader, the implication is that either the followers (or stakeholders) and/or the environmental contexts are sufficiently strong and stable to overcome a leader's toxicity. There are no durable adverse effects on organisational performance, although the leader's family or his or her immediate colleagues might be significantly affected. In organisational situations where leaders do not derail, either destructive or constructive organisational outcomes would ensue depending on the dynamic interplay of leader, followers, and contexts. The relationships among these three elements—leader, followers, and organisational contexts—determine whether outcomes are ultimately constructive or not. The model below depicts these relationships.

This conceptual depiction emphasises three possible outcomes: personal derailment with negligible long-term consequences for the group or organisation; constructive outcomes; and destructive outcomes. The diagram underscores the fundamental interplay among the

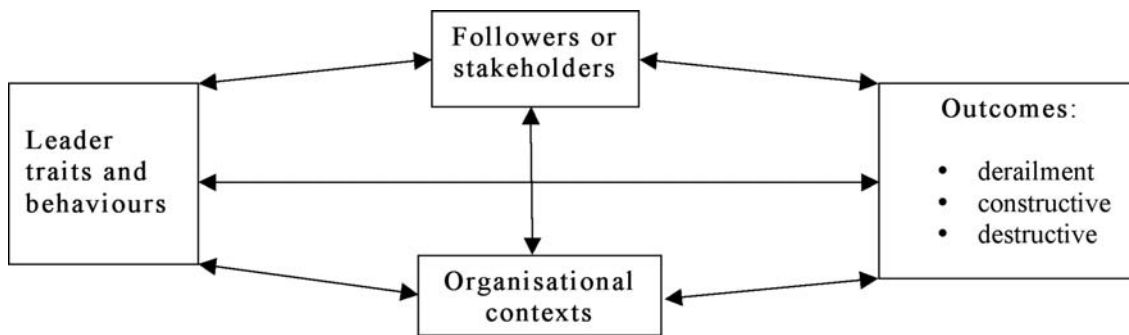


Figure 1

three elements. With strong, non-susceptible followers and effective organisational processes and rules, higher levels of leader toxicity (in the form of self-destructive traits and behaviours) will be associated with short-term and minimal organisational outcomes. Given strong, non-susceptible followers and effective organisational processes and rules, greater leader toxicity will tend to be associated with leader derailment or removal. On the other hand, greater leader toxicity, in concert with susceptible followers or weakened organisational environments, is more likely to result in destructive organisational outcomes. Greater leader toxicity traits or behaviours will also increase the likelihood that strong and non-susceptible followers will leave the organisation given the opportunity to do so. Moreover, the model suggests that stronger, less susceptible followers (more educated, with less power distance from leaders, with greater abilities to leave for better alternatives) can affect both the characteristics of leaders and of organisational contexts. Similarly, toxic leaders can, over time, adversely influence institutional conditions, the rule of law, as well as the relative independence and empowerment of followers.

A more useful definition of toxic leadership

Bennis (2007) and Vroom and Jago (2007) complain that definitions of leadership vary

considerably and that there are no accepted theories for its study. Hackman and Wageman (2007) have recently observed that one possible reason for these conditions is that the right questions haven't been asked. Leader attribution error, whereby leaders are given too much credit (or blame) for outcomes, is at the top of the inventory of such questions. Leader-centric research is explainable by three factors: popular conception, leader visibility, and difficulty in the simultaneous analysis of followers and situational contexts. Images of the warrior on horse yelling "Freedom!", or of the fallen governor at a press conference, are emblematic of popular conceptions about 'Leaders'. While there are situations in which leaders have tremendous impacts, and such instances are worth studying, there are many more situations where organisational contexts and follower characteristics and behaviours are the crucial ones to examine (Mintzberg, 1999).

The literature is ambivalent as well about 'goodness' and leadership (Kellerman, 2004). To some scholars, the words 'destructive' or 'toxic' do not belong in the same sentence with 'leadership'. According to this view, if it is unethical or immoral, it is not leadership (Burns, 1978, 2003). This perspective underscores the range of definitional difficulties and limits the ability to explore a wider variety of leadership and followership situations. Are toxic leaders totally or entirely destructive in terms of the outcomes?

Most leaders, whether generally considered to be toxic or not, are associated with constructive outcomes. Most are also associated with blunders and negative consequences for their followers or organisations. There are levels or ranges of toxicity in leaders, followers, and organisational contexts, with primarily toxic leaders on the negative end of the scale and non-toxic ones toward the constructive end of the scale. Toxic leadership also focuses on the needs and desires of the leader, and their closest associates, because the goals and objectives they seek might ultimately involve tactics of force and coercion. In totalitarian regimes, for example, the use of police controls and adherence to rigid policies to achieve/impose their goals are typical (Howell & Avolio, 1992; Padilla *et al.*, 2007; Sankowsky, 1995). The foregoing suggests that the definition of destructive leadership contains at least five elements (Padilla *et al.*, 2007):

- First—it exists along a continuum ranging from mostly destructive to mostly constructive results. This underscores that any sort of leadership will have positive and negative consequences.
- Second—it is associated with the interests of the leader rather than with the objectives of the group as a whole.
- Third—because it ultimately focuses on leader goals, it eventually involves coercion and force rather than persuasion and cooperation.
- Fourth—destructive leadership is principally manifested in the negative outcomes of the group in comparison to its competitors or rivals.
- Fifth—it requires the involvement of susceptible followers and conducive environments.

From these five definitional elements flow several avenues for testable hypotheses and further research. Next we consider the notion of toxicity.

Toxicity and its consequences

Toxicity is the degree to which exposure to a chemical or biological substance (or to some physical source, such as extreme noise or vibration) is able to produce damage or illness. In biological terms, toxicity refers to an exposed person, organ, or cell. Toxicity might refer to the effect on a whole organism, such as a human or a bacterium or a plant, or to part of an organism such as a cell (cytotoxicity) or an organ (organ toxicity) such as the kidney (nephrotoxicity). In organisational contexts we refer to toxicity as the type and level of toxic elements to which an organisation is exposed.

There are four important aspects to toxicity: strength of the toxin, dosage or level, time exposure and speed of recovery, and sources of possible toxins. A highly toxic agent such as cobra venom will have greater consequences than a comparable dosage of a weaker one like cat dander. In the case of Arthur Andersen, one of the 'Big Five' public accounting firms, both 'leader' and 'follower' toxic behaviour sealed the firm's fate from the time it was subpoenaed in November, 2001 to the time it surrendered its licenses in August, 2002 (Cahan & Zhang, 2006). Despite the founder's reputation for honesty, Arthur Andersen effectively ceased to exist after the firm's principals were convicted of obstruction of justice. Even though the US Supreme Court reversed the convictions in 2005 on technical grounds, 85,000 employees were unemployed and numerous organisations' accounts audited by Andersen became suspect.

Toxicological effects tend also to be dose-dependent. There are undetectable consequences to one-time exposure to minute amounts of mercury in certain kinds of fish such as tuna. On the other hand, drinking too much water, a substance not usually considered toxic, can over-saturate cells and lead to water intoxication. Similarly toxic leader behaviours can have undetectable effects in small amounts such

as the exploiting or devaluing of subordinates (Lubit, 2004), whereas in greater quantity this can lower motivation and employment tenure of these subordinates. In contrast, mildly toxic leader behaviour, such as avoiding negative feedback, can have destructive outcomes for the organisation if widely used.

The length of time of exposure is also related to toxicity. Longer or more repeated exposures will have greater consequences. Hambrick and D'Aveni (1992) found failing firms not only had divergent or dysfunctional top teams in their last years, but that the divergences became more pronounced as the failing firms approached bankruptcy. In terms of impacts, it is useful to recognise the ability of individual organisms or parts of organisms to resist, and to recover from, exposure to a given toxin. Some organisms are not affected at all to exposures that will destroy others. The ability to resist the effects of toxins depends on a variety of conditions, such as genetic pre-disposition or levels of previous exposure or acquired immunity to certain toxic agents. These factors in concert will determine the extent to which organisms are affected, how rapidly symptoms are exhibited, and the speed with which they might recover if they are affected at all. Even though the resignation of Eliot Spitzer as Governor of New York created media frenzy, the State of New York and its public institutions were not noticeably affected. Lieutenant Governor David Patterson assumed the governorship within a week after the Spitzer story was first reported publicly and the state and its agencies seemed to withstand the deleterious effects of a self-destructing leader (Cohen & Simpson, 2008).

A 'Toxic' Triangle

Padilla *et al.* (2007) have argued that destructive leadership occurs in a 'toxic triangle' including destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments and that the degree of

destructiveness can be measured by the level of toxicity among these three components. The three components are interactive, that is, each needs to have some level of toxicity or susceptibility to the toxin for negative effects to occur. Strassel (2008) notes how many reporters built careers on Spitzer leaks intended to bully innocent people and that the "press corps acted as an adjunct of Spitzer power, rather than a skeptic of it." The media, according to Strassel, colluded with Spitzer by not providing the needed level of checks and balances: Time Magazine had named Spitzer "Crusader of the Year;" Atlantic Monthly fulsomely referred to Spitzer as a "rock star;" the Washington Post compared him to Teddy Roosevelt (Strassel, 2008). We propose that destructive leadership occurs when the potential for toxicity from one vector of the toxic triangle is not counter-balanced by the other two vectors. (Figure 2)

One of the unexplored questions in the leadership literature is whether a toxic leader is sufficient to 'trump' strong and independent followers and stability and effectiveness in its institutions and organisational processes. Put differently, could a Mussolini, a Castro, or a Hitler survive in a healthy democracy? The other side of this question is whether an Abraham Lincoln could overcome a sorry environment and weak or corrupt followers. On the one hand, strong institutions, with adequate checks and balances, rule of law, and fair and

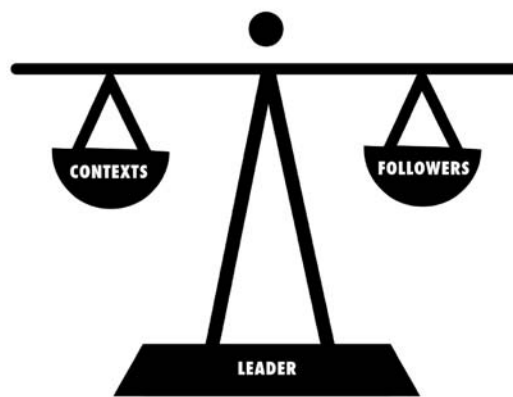


Figure 2: The toxic triangle.

established legal and social processes, might seem sufficient to overcome a toxic leader. An adoring and unquestioning media—successfully seduced perhaps by a toxic leader can contribute to the toxicity.

How permanent is the damage and how quickly can organisations recover from leadership toxicity? At what point does a toxic leader significantly reduce the effectiveness of organisational members, units within the organisation, or the organisation itself? What time lags exist in the process? Even though leaders like WorldCom CEO Bernard Ebbers are still serving their prison sentences, WorldCom filed for and then emerged from bankruptcy as MCI in 2002. Later, in 2005, MCI was acquired by Verizon Communications for \$7.6 billion. The damage was still significant as many investors recouped only a small portion of their investment.

Preventing destructive leadership

A major concern for practitioners (i.e., managers, leaders, public officials, and consultants) is how to prevent the negative effects of toxic leadership. In medical terms, are there prophylactics and antidotes? Below, we review several prescriptions for the prevention of and solutions for destructive leadership. They follow the three parts of the toxic triangle focusing on the leader, the followers, and the context. Before presenting these prescriptions, however, it is useful to provide a caveat. Many aspects of the more serious destructive leadership problems might be called 'wicked' (Rittel & Webber, 1973), ill-structured (Mitroff & Mason, 1980), or messes (Ackoff, 1974). 'Wicked problems' are those that are interrelated with other problems and have incomplete, contradictory, or changing requirements. They are not easily solved and the introduction of change might not solve the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Avoiding or Removing the Destructive Leader

A) LEADER SELECTION, DEVELOPMENT, OR DIAGNOSIS:

Many leaders, and therefore most destructive leaders, rise through hierarchies in organisations. For established organisations, political and corporate leaders usually have vast experience prior to rising to their leadership position. They are developed, placed, or selected from a large pool of contenders. At each stage of their ascent it is possible to observe toxic behaviours and to take appropriate action. However, it is not safe to assume that toxic leaders have displayed toxic behaviours characteristics prior to their rise to their leadership position. For example, Ken Lay (Enron CEO) was well liked in his community in Houston, Texas, and did not display visibly destructive traits or engage in toxic behaviours during most of his term in corporate leadership. On the other hand, Lay's hand-picked chief financial officer, Andrew Fastow, had a reputation for arrogant aggressiveness and combative behaviour (Raghavan, 2002: A1). More recently, Elliot Spitzer's rapid rise in New York politics was associated with arrogance, hubris, and with the accumulation of adversaries, although he was elected to the governor's office with 69% of the vote (Barron, 2008; Cohen and Efrati, 2008).

An important predictor of future behaviour is previous behaviour. Yet, many executive selection or succession processes often do not explore relationships with former co-workers and supervisors very carefully (Hogan *et al.*, 1994) to identify traits or behaviours characteristic of destructive leaders. It is also difficult to require candidates for high positions to complete selection assessment procedures because boards of directors do not wish to offend or drive off a perceived limited supply of talent. Personality inventories are widely used in gov-

ernment and industry. In fact, eighty-nine of the *Fortune 100* companies employ the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) in their selection and promotion processes (Pepper, Kolesnikov-Jessop, & Hermann, 2005). Although there are some personality inventories, such as the Big Five, that include measures of counterproductive behaviour (*i.e.*, neuroticism), most personality measures focus on productive job-related behaviour and not counterproductive behaviours. Despite their ability to identify potential issues, one problem is that responses to psychometric questionnaires can be faked (Martin, Bowen & Hunt, 2002; Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999) and it is unclear just how widely personality inventories are used currently at the executive level.

A subset of personality measures are those focusing on specific traits such as honesty or integrity. A review of the research reports that there is compelling evidence that many integrity tests possess above-zero validity for certain criteria, such as counterproductive behaviour in the workplace (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993). However, there are concerns about classification errors (*e.g.*, answering too honestly), and similar to personality tests noted above, fakability. Furthermore, according to a review conducted by the U.S. federal government's Office of Technological Assessment, 95.6 percent of people who fail integrity tests are incorrectly classified as dishonest—an error rate far worse than that of the notoriously unreliable polygraph machine (Office of Technological Assessment, 1990). It may be that we are not testing all of the right people, the leaders.

A final source of selection, development, or diagnosis might be used to weed out the destructive leader is executive development. Executive development includes activities targeted at developing the leadership and content area skills and competencies of those who have or might have executive positions in organisations. It is unclear if and how often

these programs focus on identifying destructive leaders, if ethics training is included, and how this development is successfully transferred back to behaviour in organisational settings.

In sum, a destructive leader's toxic personality and behaviours have not been the focus of executive selection practices. Although there is considerable evidence that personality is related to managerial success (Hogan *et al.*, 1994; Judge *et al.*, 2002; Moutafi, *et al.*, 2007), further research is necessary. One possible intervention is introducing leadership development programmes focused on the creation of independent thinking. Professional and higher education can also place more emphasis on the development of ethical behaviour through courses and special seminars that focus on real cases and consequences.

B) EMPOWERING FOLLOWERS:

Another approach to prevent or solve the problem of the toxic leader is to focus on followers. Walton (2007) identified this as the internal context. Padilla *et al.* (2007) identified two types of susceptible followers, *conformers* and *colluders*. Conformers passively allow leaders to engage in destructive leadership by virtue of their unmet needs, negative core self-evaluations, and immaturity. Conversely, because colluders ambitiously desire to promote themselves and pursue their selfish goals, they often conspire with destructive leaders. Intervention for the colluders should follow the same prescriptions as for leaders noted above.

Intervention for the conformers requires a different path. The several dozen corporate scandals during the last decade suggest possible solutions. Many of these toxic situations have been uncovered by whistleblowers (*e.g.*, Cynthia Cooper of Worldcom and Sherron Watkins of

Enron). Internal reporting of organisational wrongdoing is the most common type of initial whistle blowing (Miceli & Near, 1984). Unfortunately, such reports often arrive too late to prevent much of the damage. Investors have lost money, employees have lost jobs and retirement funds have disappeared, and public confidence in large corporations is shaken. However, strengthening the organisation's culture might empower conformers to engage in whistle blowing or other preventative behaviour. One major deterrent to whistle blowing is that it requires a psychologically robust individual to be able to withstand the pressures their actions will unleash upon them. Whistleblowers typically report economic losses, psychological distress, and major health problems as a result of disclosing wrongdoing.

Section 806 of the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act in the US is designed to encourage employees of public companies to come forward with otherwise confidential information about financial crimes. It directs companies to protect employees who provide information about corporate financial wrongdoing by implementing safeguard procedures. According to US law, organisations cannot penalise or discriminate against whistleblowers. Also, the law encourages whistle blowing in publicly held companies by supporting a culture sympathetic to employees having doubts that the company is following the law. Finally, it requires boards of directors' audit committees to implement tracking systems for anonymous information from employees (Verschoor, 2003).

Evidence suggests that corporations have either eliminated toxic leadership conditions or the law is not protecting whistleblowers. Between the passing of the law in July 2002 and July 2007 about 1,000 individuals filed complaints. Although some were withdrawn and settled, only three won at the Administrative Review Board in the Department of Labor (Shine, 2007).

C) ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENT:

The third component in the toxic triangle is the environment that surrounds leaders, followers, and their interactions. Leadership theorists recognise that the context matters (e.g., Hackman & Wageman, 2007, Vroom & Jago, 2007). Padilla *et al.* (2007) argue that four environmental factors are conducive for destructive leadership:

- Absence of checks and balances.
- Instability.
- Perceived threat.
- Cultural values.

Organisations and governments operate in a system of varying levels of checks and balances. At the national level, governments with transparent policy processes, strong civic and legal institutions, and functioning under fair rules of law clearly have fewer destructive leadership episodes (Padilla *et al.*, 2007; Transparency International, 2005). However, shorter leader/CEO tenure might lead to a shorter period during which to make a mark, thus creating an incentive to make a quicker impact by taking ethical short-cuts in the process (Lublin, 2007; Padilla, 2005). Such public, transparent, and visible processes and procedures in an organisation's environment are indispensable in preventing or mitigating toxic consequences.

In the US and Europe, corporate boards of directors are taking a stronger interest in monitoring CEO behaviour and performance (Gandossy, & Sonnenfeldt, 2004). In the US and the UK, recent changes including the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (2002), the reinvigoration of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (1977) and the Cadbury Committee Report (1992) promote several initiatives for stronger board oversight. These initiatives include greater independence for the board of directors, a completely independent audit committee, and stronger internal controls. Other changes that would strengthen

governance in the US include limiting the number of boards on which a person can serve and recognising the rights of stockholders to a direct role in board oversight by allowing them to nominate directors. Finally, although the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (2002) includes deterrents by authorising criminal penalties for violators, it remains to be seen if it has been working. The evidence thus far is inconclusive given the relatively short time since its inception.

Another significant check and balance reform related to the avoidance of toxic results is to require formal separation of CEO and chair of the board positions. In contrast to the US, separate CEO and chair positions are now common practice in Europe (*i.e.*, Dahya and Travlos, 2000; Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Barratt, 2006) whereas a recent study found that one person shared the CEO and chair roles in 80% of US firms while 90% of UK firms divided these roles (Strategic Direction, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

We use here the concept of toxicity as a metaphor to consider the effects of toxic leadership on organisations. We suggest that focusing on organisational outcomes, rather than on leader traits or behaviours, is a fruitful way to examine toxic leadership. This perspective allows for a distinction between inwardly focused destructiveness (as in leader derailment from the fast track) versus those situations where leader, follower, and contexts combine to produce destructive or constructive outcomes. It also provides a more comprehensive view of destructive leadership encompassing a leader, the followers, and the situational contexts or environments. We observe that solutions to the problem of toxic leadership are particularly vexing as they often have aspects of wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). We conclude by suggesting sev-

eral ways to minimise the likelihood of toxic results with 'anti-venom' remedies addressing the three leadership elements: leader, followers, and contexts. Many of our prescriptions are external interventions and beg the question: Will external interventions limit the frequency of toxic leaders? Ethicists do not universally agree with this approach and suggest also focusing on selection and development of ethical leaders (Bragues, 2008).

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Role Contamination

JANE CHAPMAN & SUSAN LONG



Roles are never neutral—they are modified by the holder's personal history. When a role appears dysfunctional through the holder's personal biography, there is always a danger the resulting 'poison' becomes institutionalised and pollutes role successors. Attempts to reframe work systems can fail because past role behaviours are entrenched. The authors raise the question: Is the poison in the person or the bottle? New role incumbents who fail to explore the history of their roles, do so at their, and their organisations, peril. A process for raising awareness is suggested.

KEYWORDS: Role history, dysfunctional behaviour, role biography.

Introduction

This article considers how roles develop their own histories. The roles we assume in organisations are not neutral: they come with a past! We claim that a history dwells within a role and that its implications become unconsciously written onto the behaviours, thoughts and feelings of future role incumbents. How such implications are enacted depends on several factors, including the capacity of the role incumbent first to become aware of the history of their role and then to explore and be thoughtful about it. Some implications might be benign or quite positive. For example, for the most part, the role of *mentor* has positive implications. Other roles do not. We are

especially interested in how the interaction between a role (with its implicit history), and the role-holder (with their own biography of past roles), might result in a corrupt, perverse, or what might more colloquially be termed 'poisonous' role. By this we mean a role that itself might 'poison' or 'contaminate' its incumbents and the wider organisational system.

Our exploration is linked to previous work on role history and the phenomena of role and task corruption and perversity (Chapman 1999, 2003; Long, 2006, 2008). A role does not sit alone. It is influenced by and influences all other roles within an organisational system. Thus, if a role becomes poisonous, all linked roles—and their tasks—are affected. Traditionally, we might have thought that bad, corrupt or perverse

behaviours are the result of bad, corrupt or perverse individuals—and certainly role holders are responsible for their good and bad behaviour—but in this paper we pursue the case of the poison being in the bottle (*i.e.* the ‘role’) as much as in the person (*i.e.* its incumbent).

The Person or the Role?

Our work has considered the ways roles are affected by their incumbents and how, when joining an organisation, new role holders go through a process of finding, making and taking roles (Bazelgette & Reed, 2006). First they conceptualise, and make sense for themselves, the nature of the system they are entering; then they shape the role within that understanding and according to their own dispositions and valencies (Bion, 1961) and, finally, take up the authority and discretion available to that role. In this process, roles are molded by persons to fit with their experience and what they think will be expected of them. We expect new CEOs, for example, to bring their own ideas to their roles and often their employees wait with hope, or trepidation, for what a new leader will bring and how this will affect their own position.

But what of the other side to this picture? How does the role shape and affect the person? Much as newcomers bring their own personal attributes and qualities to roles, so roles have an impact on their incumbents, usually at the less-than-conscious level. Long (2006) describes the ‘role biographies’ that people build over their careers extending back to roles taken in childhood right through to their current positions. Role biographies shape the person as much as the person has shaped them.

As examples of this type of influence, we believe that, because of the way they have been enacted in the past, some roles would be virtually impossible to take up once again in the future. The Fuhrer of Germany is perhaps an

example; as, too, eventually, the role of Enron’s CEO. Indeed, some roles are so contaminated that no one *wants* to take them up and they become permanent vacancies.

How can we know if a role is poisonous?

It is our central hypothesis that roles have histories that can and need to be viewed somewhat independently of their individual role-holders. The more potent the role history, the greater is the capacity of the role to become ‘active’ in influencing the thinking and behaviour of succeeding incumbents, other roles and incumbents and the organisational system-as-a-whole, for good or for ill (Gilmore, 2006).

Below is a list of likely ‘indicators’: tell-tale signs that help decide whether a problem is as much or more located in the ‘bottle’ (role) as in the person (incumbent).

- Persistent evidence of collective psychological defences against stress or anxiety: such as denial, confusion (lack of clarity about what is going on), frustration, dishonesty, subversion, anxiety, rage, unthinking dependency *particularly* where recurrence of these sets up a pattern at odds with the usual behaviour of the current incumbent(s).
- A sense in the incumbent that he or she is ‘driven’, compelled to behaviour that perpetuates role and task corruption and results in an ongoing sense-in-role of being ‘not themselves’.
- A sense that the role and its incumbent are at the ‘centre of a web’ of interactions, where the role seems to act as an *attractor* of organisational and role problems within the organisation. (An analogy is where the adolescent in a family system acts out the aggression, frustration and identity-confusion of the whole family: not necessarily

because s/he is by nature aggressive, frustrated and confused, but because s/he is *the adolescent*. The role and all the other roles in the system somehow 'expect' this and will respond accordingly within that 'organisation'.)

- The presence of perverse behaviour and attitudes that both centre on and flow from the role(s) under review (Long, 2008). Such perverse dynamics can be identified through narcissism; denial; manipulation (the collusive drawing in of other roles and their incumbents) and objectification (where people become viewed as instruments or tools, rather than interacting healthily and enjoyably within their designated work roles).

The 'Founding Role' Experience

Because we see how roles draw their potency from their histories, the 'Founding' role—that is the role as enacted by its first incumbent—is critical in establishing its subsequent and consequent positive or negative influence throughout its organisational life. While Chapman (1999) describes *task power* and its capacity to influence the ability to work well, both in its originating and associated systems, here we look at *role power*. In the following case history, we note how the Founder of the company so thoroughly imbued the 'Founder' role with 'Godfather'-like attitudes and behaviours that this style and way of thinking permeated the role whilst he occupied it. The role then 'captured' his successor, who was constrained by its history.

It can, however, be a mistake simply to blame the role founder for how any role comes to be discharged and experienced at a later time as the *role experience* that has emerged is an amalgam of influences only one of which is the Founder's personality. Indeed a founding role becomes influential because of at least four

kinds of power. The types of power described below have some overlap with those described by French and Raven (1959). They are predicated on:

- Its founder's personality and patterns of behaviour (*personal power*).
- Its place within the role structure of the organisation (*structural power*).
- The way it is thought of by its founder, successors and the incumbents of other roles (*the power of the role idea*) (Reed 1976; Mant, 1977).
- What it gives to and picks up from (a) other roles and role-holders (b) the way task and boundaries function in the system; and (c) the cultural context of its own and other systems (*ambient power*).

Case Study

The following case is significantly disguised. It represents some of the dynamics encountered in our consultancy work and demonstrates our ideas while maintaining confidentiality with our clients who we are calling Henry and David.

Henry was the founder of a small electronics company. He was entrepreneurial by nature and gathered around himself a small group of hard-working engineers. Henry's style was to lead as if he were the head of a family. Indeed, one of his sons joined the company as a graduate five years after it began. By then, the company had about 500 employees and an executive group. This consisted of Henry, his operations manager, the office manager and his head of sales. The company continued to grow and was eventually bought by a larger company, but Henry was retained as CEO.

Henry's style didn't change. He was used to having his orders carried out unquestioningly. He regarded his senior managers, who had been with him from the start, as 'mates' as much as

employees. Although the company now was part of a larger group and had specialised functional divisions, its internal systems hadn't developed the kind of sophistication that matched the company's growth. Real strategic planning was lacking. In a smaller way, their story was similar to that of Heath International Holdings, the giant Australian insurance company that collapsed in 2001 (Long, 2008; Owen, 2003). In that case, the board rarely questioned the managing director, Ray Williams, or was ignored when it did. Decisions regarding directions for the company were made on the basis of hunches formed by Williams from flimsy information. He led as if he were leading a small group. So did Henry. You didn't really cross Henry. Basically goodhearted, he was stubborn and 'knew best'.

The company no longer grew. Its profits began to drop. Henry left. He was encouraged with a departure package. A new man was appointed—David.

David had a very different, consultative approach. His ideas for the expansion of the company into new markets were thoroughly researched. He wanted sophisticated systems and consistency in policies, procedures and culture. He brought in consultants. But the senior managers, engineers and technicians already had their own ways of doing things and David continued to come up against brick walls when it came to internal change. While he convincingly linked future scenario-planning internally to the plans of other companies of their group, and got agreement in meetings, the agreed changes never occurred. Problems kept appearing. Privately he believed that his senior management was incompetent and would never be able to take on the changes required.

Underlying this was a culture that had learned to say 'yes' to the boss, but actually had learned to then do what was practical and necessary to avoid possible disasters. Under Henry, the leadership role had become dictatorial and big decisions had been made virtually by him

alone. But everyone else, although benefiting from his successes, had had to use their authority to recognise and counteract his mistakes. Furthermore, Henry had often stepped outside the role; no longer managing, but letting personal interests dictate his decisions.

David had wanted the role to be different, but had come up against a culture that had learned to work *around* the CEO role rather than work it. The leading role had become corrupted (Chapman, 2003) and that corruption lay in a role that had become both anti-task and anti-reality: anti-task because it required the boss to behave as a father, and anti-reality because it treated the system as if it were a family rather than a company (*i.e.* the *role-ideas* were changed (Reed, 1976).

This corruption affected other roles in the system so that senior manager and technician roles had grown thick skins around them and incumbents were making decisions that satisfied their own needs rather than fulfilling the larger system task. The entrenched family-like dynamic and the satisfaction of personal needs rather than the pursuit of the company's real work lay at the heart of the poison that settled into Henry's original role.

Another way of understanding what happened here is to say that the founding role experience was so powerful that *the role could not be succeeded*: it remained 'Henry's Role' even after he had gone.

In response to the lack of 'progress' he was experiencing, David began to think that the only way he could get his managers to act differently was to be more forceful. He had the authority to make the changes he wanted and he exercised it. One day, he began to feel that he was becoming like Henry. Although still consultative, everything seemed to be easier with the managers if, paradoxically, he went along with them in many situations and was dictatorial in others. It was as if everything in the system seemed overtly to support change, but nothing actually

changed. The CEO role in this organisation had become one that was led and pushed, cajoled and flattered, by the company. The corruption that had earlier occurred in the role was managed and contained by an organisational culture that was now partially crippled by its own 'management' of that earlier role- and system-corruption.

In retrospect, Henry was not himself a corrupt person. He did a lot in his founding role that was good but the role was corrupted because it entrenched the behavior and a way of thinking that denied the reality of clearly and openly addressing (i) what was actually the real task of the CEO to accomplish, and (ii) the real purpose of the organisation to deliver.

Collusion dominated the system, the legacy of which forced David and his colleagues to behave 'as if' they were a family rather than a commercially oriented, task-focused engineering company. This led to a defensive cultural adaptation to the CEO role and subsequently to other key roles within the company.

When David came, he inherited—unknowingly—a role that was itself poisoned. This affected the way he could find, take and make the role his own. This had significant implications for his tenure of office and the degree of success that it was possible for him to deliver. While we might feel sympathy for David—as the parent company scapegoated him, for not 'turning the company around'—yet essentially, David had been severely constrained by the system that had formed around and perpetuated an initially contaminated CEO role.

What we have described is, in *role-power* terms, a case where:

- The founding CEO had a dominant, patriarchal, non-consultative personality (*personal power*).
- He was the boss (*structural power*).
- His subordinates at first 'obeyed' his dominance, and then subverted it, acting from a

role idea that had him as Father of an extended family whose members had to maintain the hierarchy, manage him and preserve the role idea, while satisfying their own personal needs; (*power of the role idea*).

- All significant role holders colluded to maintain the fantasy that the company was a family even when it was absorbed into a larger organisation. Note that the CEO was not replaced at the time of the takeover. To have done so would have undermined the company buyer's *idea* of what they were buying. Thus the total *context* in which the role was embedded reinforced the way it was forming (ambient power).

Given such a scenario, few if any individual role-holders could have much chance of change when inheriting so contaminated a role. The poison was both powerful and endemic and became so systemically lodged within the company that any enduring change would also need to come from a total-system change.

Guarding Against the Poisonous Influence

So what can be done to address such cases? The following framework suggests working systemically towards re-forming original roles in order that successors might take up the positive implications contained in the 'Founding' role and ameliorate the negative ones. Whilst we have focused in this case on the role of the Founding figure, the same approach could be applied to all significant organisational roles.

We suggest here a framework for examining and working with contaminated roles. In terms of our case what, for instance, were the factors that would lead David to repeat Henry's mistakes despite his best intentions?

1. WHO DOES THE WORK?

The first step is to examine how the role is being enacted. Role incumbents can re-examine their own roles to some extent. But to work alone in, and with, a contaminated role denies the systemic nature of its origins. If the role itself is 'active' in impacting negatively on the work of the organisation, then working with the role requires a systemic approach to understand those factors that might be keeping the dysfunction in place and discover what may need to be different. Ideally, such an approach will involve a *role consultant* to bring an external, disinterested and uncontaminated perspective to the work. (Gould, Stapley & Stein 2004; Newton, Long & Sievers, 2006).

In approaching the problem of contaminated roles, we have found it important to beware of scapegoating the person-in-role, or even the role itself, without seeing it within its wider organisational context. Pathologising the person or the role on its own as the location or source of guilt and blame will only lead to further contamination, both of the role and of the system-as-a-whole.

2. ADOPTING A 'SYSTEMIC APPROACH'

Working with any roles requires the acknowledgment that all organisations are systems and completely interactive. They are neither aggregates of people (employee A + employee B + ... = the organisation), nor aggregates of roles (role A + role B + ... = the organisation). What affects one affects all. If poison is present, poison pervades the system as a whole.

As explored earlier, roles have histories. The role itself can be *active* in the organisation as well as the role-holder. Even perhaps when the role is unoccupied, the role-idea is held in the system. Thus, what appears to be behaviour that the incumbent brings to the role will, to some

extent or other, be behaviour that the role brings to the incumbent. This happened for David, in our case example. Further, in founding the role, Henry, over time, entered into collusion with his system to pretend that the CEO was in some way not part of the system but a lone entity super-imposed on the company. Thus, Henry was 'boss' and was permitted to dictate. While other managers appeared to obey his dictates, they acted quite independently. Given this inheritance, David's chances of successful change were subverted from the start; not by people alone but by his occupancy of a contaminated role and the broader expectations which that 'role' attracted from the organisation at large.

Too often newly appointed managers take the attitude of discarding the past and focusing on the future. They may do this for several reasons. They don't want to be associated with the mistakes of the past. They want to be seen as bringers of hope, as new brooms. Perhaps unconsciously, they want to help their systems to overcome the pain or guilt of past mistakes. But some acknowledgement of the past is required to move on, lest unfinished business remains and festers. In our case example, by denying the past and only looking to the future, David could not appreciate sufficiently the formal, informal, stated and unstated, overt and hidden dynamics associated with the role of the CEO. In turn this blocked him from learning from the system mistakes that occurred prior to his arrival. He perhaps missed or dismissed possible ways of working that could have proved critical to his success in his inherited role.

3. DIAGNOSIS

Adopting a systems approach requires a search for tell-tale signs of dysfunctional behaviour-in-role which could suggest contamination. These

will normally be noticed through repeating patterns of behaviour such as denial, avoidance, conflict, subversion, destruction of boundaries and acting 'out of role' together with conflicts of interest, unquestioning dependency or favoritism.

Importantly in recognising and understanding the past, the system through its members accepts accountability for what has gone before. Without such a perspective individuals or individual roles become increasingly vulnerable to being scapegoated as incompetent, unmotivated or resistant. It may seem an easy solution to blame some-one or some one role for all that went wrong. However, this is rarely satisfactory because the system then cannot accept necessary changes and the same old bad roles and role behaviours recur. Henry's senior managers' roles were also complicit in his role behaviour and thus in the contamination which persisted.

When scapegoating occurs, individuals come to be blamed for problems in the system, and managers attempt to isolate those whom they regard as poor performers, either to protect the scapegoated person (s), or prevent further perceived incompetence. While we do not deny the reality of incompetence, often this is exaggerated in organisations where the incompetence becomes the focus and the poisonous history of the role is missed. There the ills of the wider system are cast upon the backs of scapegoats 'as if' it was their entire fault alone.

4. DIFFERENTIATION

It is important to differentiate the person from the role and then examine how the two interact. Useful questions for the role-holders to ask themselves are:

- I am struggling with my role. Can I look at the history of my role as well as the history of me?

- Is there any match between recurring patterns in the role-history and the patterns in my own 'role-biography'—that is, roles throughout my life?
- Having found a similarity of patterns in the role history and my own role biography, what choices do I have? Am I doomed to play out the history enacted by past role holders? Can I join with other roles to locate and draw on the organisational energy to find, make and take up the role differently? Can I *re-engineer* the role-history for myself? ... for related roles? ... for role successors?

Such questions provide a process for studying the difference between what a role brings to the person and what the person brings to a role, and for exploring the options for reshaping the role-experience. We find from our own work as role consultants that it is only in reshaping the role experience that the role's influence in the system can be more clearly seen and described and the potential created for it to be transformed. This is an important point. In our case history, David was attempting to redefine roles and responsibilities, but his own and his managers' *experience* of their respective roles and *role ideas* remained the same and continuously mirrored their past.

5. RESHAPING THE ROLE ENVIRONMENT

From a systems perspective we then consider reshaping the role environment. Here, the interactivity of role(s)-to-role(s) within the total system must be brought about. Evidence of role contamination in the system can be discerned through the identification of patterns in role behaviour that do not initially appear to 'make sense' and where perpetuation of some type of reduced organisational performance is collusively allowed to persist.

The types of questions for the organisation as a system to consider are:

- Can we look at the histories of the roles and other structures in the system?
- Are there patterns in the histories of interacting roles that throw up problems similar to those we are currently experiencing?
- Are there patterns of *experience*: recurring ideas, words, feelings, images that characterise role-holding throughout the system?
- Given any patterns, what choices do we have?

Again, it is fruitful to refrain from scapegoating either the primary contaminated role or its incumbent.

Conclusion

Roles have histories in our organisations and these histories influence the behaviour and thoughts of newcomers as they find, make and take up their roles. When a role becomes ‘contaminated’ or ‘poisoned’ the effects of this can spread to successors and other roles in the organisation. These effects appear despite the good intents of those coming into the role.

Attempts by individuals to guard against these deeply embedded and covert effects—to improve their capacities, put in better work systems or change the culture—are often to no avail because organisations-as-systems maintain past practices even though they may be toxic or dysfunctional. Such practices are entrenched in the history of the organisations’ roles. ‘De-toxification’ can only be achieved through (i) understanding the nature of this persistence, (ii) uncovering and defining its dynamic roots and why the role has developed its particular history, (iii) what ends it served, (iv) the surrounding

collusion from other roles and then (v) through attempting broader systemic change.

A major lesson implicit in our work on role history is that if new role incumbents fail to explore the history of their roles, it is to their and the organisation’s peril.

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Corporate Innovation & the Disruptive CEO

GARY OSTER, DSL



Innovation is the lifeblood of every corporation, an essential ingredient of future viability and growth. When a new CEO is introduced from outside, an unintended consequence is often the immediate and protracted hobbling of company innovation programmes as the CEO employs a number of methodologies in his or her quest for control. To hedge possible leadership toxicity, the Directors and media must foster a fully ambidextrous corporation, with an appropriate balance of efficiency & effectiveness, value capture & innovation.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, innovation, executive succession, succession planning and management, CEO, diversity, corporate values, metrics, organisational antibodies.

Introduction

Whilst this may sound surprising, the early leadership actions of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) new to a company may ultimately have a profoundly negative impact upon the success of the enterprise. Shareholders, directors and the business media anticipate—and can prompt—for the short-term goals of a new CEO to be to gain control and demonstrate an obvious break from the past, establish a new found focus, and deliver higher levels of efficiency and order in the organisation.

Indeed the CEO typically employs a number of methods in his or her quest for control, including replacement of key leadership with executives familiar to the CEO, a shortening of

the planning horizon, focusing on new company-wide metrics, the rendering of routine tasks into clearly written procedures and plans, and the elimination of *everything* within the company that does not tangibly contribute to corporate value. The *jihad* for efficiency by the new CEO often turns the corporate focus away from customers and inward toward organisational mechanisms, significantly reducing staff diversity, compromising both internal sharing of information and development of institutional memory, ignores or refutes legacy corporate values, and encourages ‘corporate antibodies’ to attack perceived inefficiencies within the corporate body.

An unintended consequence of these changes is the protracted hobbling of company

innovation programmes which can, however, provide an essential ingredient of future corporate viability and growth. Through the relentless focus on efficiency, the new CEO sows the seeds for the long-term diminution of the organisation and, his or her own eventual dismissal. This paper reviews symptoms of toxic leadership relative to corporate innovation, and posits specific steps that corporate Directors and CEOs must take to ensure a fully ambidextrous corporation, one with an appropriate balance of efficiency & effectiveness, value capture & innovation.

Innovation: The Lifeblood of Every Corporation

The globalisation of the dynamic economic marketplace demands that every company consider innovation as part and parcel of its existence. Menacing competitors rapidly appear from domestic and international environments, often wielding new and powerful technologies that obviate the need for the special product, service, or idea developed and long-nurtured by the company. As strategist Gary Hamel (2002) noted: “Out there in some garage is an entrepreneur who’s forging a bullet with your company’s name on it. You’ve got one option now—to shoot first. You’ve got to out-innovate the innovators” (Kelley, 2001:3). General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt sees the contemporary importance of innovation as “The only long-term source of profit, and the only reason to invest in a company, is your confidence in its ability to innovate” (Schwartz, 2004: 204).

To summarise as IDEO CEO David Kelley has commented “The biggest single trend we’ve observed is the growing acknowledgement of innovation as a centerpiece of corporate strategies and initiatives. What’s more, we’ve noticed that the more senior the executives, the more likely they are to frame their companies’ needs in the context of innovation” (Kelley, 2001:3). So

what then are the likely consequences should the CEO and their senior executives buck this trend and opt for the toxic leadership option instead?

Introduction of a New CEO

Why do corporations recruit and install a new Chief Executive Officer? There are many reasons, including the incapacitation, death, retirement, or transfer of the current CEO, a merger of the company into a larger conglomerate, or the failure of current leadership to reach goals specified by corporate owners. In many cases it may be that the current CEO has not exhibited the capabilities, nor shown the inclination, to hire associates with the abilities to encourage protracted organic growth in the corporation.

The change to a new CEO may be rapid, shrouded in mystery, and indeed may not be aligned with the specific needs of the organisation. As Rakesh Khurana noted: “Because external CEO searches are generally undertaken by companies in the throes of real or perceived crisis, boards of directors and various corporate constituents hope that the outsider CEO will be their saviour...boards of directors bent on finding a corporate messiah are not much interested in ordinary qualifications (e.g. knowledge of their company or relevant industry or functional back-ground). Rather, the kind of candidate considered qualified for the role of corporate savior is one who is thought to possess charisma” (2002: x).

Whatever the previous experience of the new CEO, the expectations of shareholders, Board of Directors, and business media are often looking for a clear and decisive break from the corporate past. They anticipate a newfound focus, increased efficiency, and more order within the organisation, and—of course—a near-term increase in sales and corporate growth.

Fast Track To Recovery?

Often, the fundamental goal—demand even—of a new CEO is to gain *control*, to convert perceived chaos into tangible order. Visible actions of the CEO to demonstrate success at altering the trajectory of the organisation usually include:

- **Personnel:** Significant changes in line and staff personnel are initiated. All ‘non-essential’ employees are removed from the corporate roles. Some senior executives are replaced by confidantes of the new CEO, usually those who worked with the CEO at a previous company, whose honesty and loyalty the CEO trusts, and who are routinely agreeable and positively responsive when called on by the CEO. In an effort to reduce the uncontrollable and ensure harmony and unity of purpose, new employees across the organisation are often chosen who most resemble an archetype represented by the CEO: “This preference for similarity shapes hiring and promotion, resulting in what Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter calls ‘homosocial reproduction’.” (Sutton 2002: 46). It is not unusual for corporations to hire the vast majority of new managers and executives from a specific company, university, fraternity, religious institution, or sport. The result of this however may be the introduction of personnel with values dramatically different from the legacy personnel resulting in operational dislocations and providing the bases for a profound internal fragmentation of the organisation—between those who are deemed ‘OK’ and those not so blessed.
- **Metrics:** To ensure universal understanding of the new corporate objectives, an incoming CEO generally institutes new performance measures. These are typically few in number, focused upon numerical

inputs, simple to gather and understand, incremental in nature, and feature abbreviated planning horizons. Any activities of the corporation that cannot be easily understood as directly contributing to the achievement of superior results on this simple scorecard are considered superfluous. Uniformly avoided is consideration of ‘wicked problems’, those problems facing the corporation that feature incomplete, contradictory, or changing requirements, and solutions that may be unclear. In summary ‘simple’ figures may be seen as the way to approach, and counter, complex multi-dimensional issues.

- **Policies and Procedures:** In an effort to solidify control of corporate operations, the regular workplace tasks of employees are rendered into simple, concise procedures. Work activities are precisely sequenced and every activity that does not immediately and tangibly contribute to corporate value is discarded. The emphasis is on formalised rules, reduction in requisite inputs, and elimination of risk, deviation, and error—a ‘cook-book’ approach to complexity management.
- **Sales:** Because of the very real fiscal crisis facing a new CEO, a critical goal is usually to rapidly ramp up sales using existing products and sales channels. Although special pricing deals and efforts to expand into new markets may commence, the goal is to sell what *is*, not what may be in the future nor what increasingly demanding and picky customers may be wanting.

The new CEO and his legacy associates initiate the actions long-expounded by most business schools to lead the company out of its current morass. While short-term control is realised, so too is the time clock triggered on the ultimate demise of the corporation’s innovation capabilities.

Overcoming a Myopic Obsession for Efficiency

What is worrying, however, is how bright, energetic, and resourceful CEOs who accomplish the short-term expectations established by shareholders, Directors, and the business media may inadvertently sow the seeds for an even greater corporate cataclysm, including their own ultimate demise. How might this be so? Because the furtive quest for *efficiency* may prove to be substantively toxic, and ultimately decimate *innovation* within the organisation so essential to corporate viability and growth. Efficiency may crowd out innovation and spell long-term doom for the corporation.

A more sustainable approach by an incoming CEO, however, would be one that balances the immediate and shorter-term imperatives already outlined with an eye to the continuing and future sustainability of the organisation thorough protecting its innovative and reflective capabilities. A fundamental goal of corporate leadership should be “To build a company where innovation is a way of life, rather than a rare accident that can’t be explained or replicated, people need to discard, and often reverse, their deeply ingrained beliefs about how to treat people and make decisions.” (Sutton 2002: 3).

To keep corporate innovation afloat in the new sea of efficiency, the CEO must be proactive in four key action areas:

1. Customers: To focus solely on efficiency turns the corporate focus away from customers and inward toward organisational mechanisms, to the ultimate detriment of the corporation. Every business enterprise must be viscerally obsessed with the real and perceived needs of prospective customers. To mitigate the toxic effects of corporate efficiency programmes, the

CEO must continually encourage intimacy with existing and prospective customers.

2. Workplace Diversity: Converse to the stifling harmony and ‘yea-saying’ demanded by most toxic CEOs, struggling companies need to intentionally diversify their workforce to gain fresh (and different) ideas. Gyskiewicz considers that “The single most important strategy for enhancing creativity in teams is deliberately building in cross-fertilisation by selecting members with a broad range of skills and backgrounds” (1999: 62). Intentional workplace diversity leads to a positive form of interpersonal friction.

3. Institutional Learning: Organisations obsessed with the goals of efficiency often develop strict policies and procedures which encourage the ‘corporate antibodies’, the nay sayers and Devil’s Advocates who seek to derail innovation efforts. Davila considers that “To achieve innovation success, a company must overcome the organisational ‘antibodies’ that inevitably come out to attack and defeat innovations. Typically, the more radical the innovation and the more it challenges the *status quo*, the more and stronger are the antibodies. Also, the greater the past successes of the company, the greater are the organisational antibodies” (Davila 2006: 23).

4. Values: All activities of an organisation, including planning, strategy, hiring, and objectives realisation, are considered through the lens of the corporate values. The single most important role of a CEO who ultimately seeks to maximize both efficiency and innovation is to initially

discover an organisation's fundamental values and continually align the corporate mission, vision, strategy, and structure, with those values. As Labovitz puts it: "Imagine working in an organisation where every member, from top management to the newly hired employee, shares an understanding of the business, its goals and purpose. Imagine working in a department where everyone knows how he or she contributes to the company's business strategy. Imagine being on a team whose every member can clearly state the needs of the company's customers and how the team contributes to satisfying those needs" (1997: 4). Clearly enunciated corporate values function as the bedrock upon which all other organisational actions are built to achieve the realisation of the corporate vision.

Conclusion

A new CEO designated by Directors to refocus and energise the organisation routinely employs specific methodologies, including replacement of key leadership, development and implementation of new metrics, imposition of simplified policies and procedures, and the application of focused parsimony to eliminate all that does not visibly contribute to corporate value. The obsession with efficiency contaminates corporate innovation efforts by encouraging organisational narcissism and the focus is directed away from customers and toward internal activities, the employee base is intentionally homogenised, and the sharing of crucial information and legacy values is compromised.

Alternatively, the decisions of a CEO must focus upon specific steps to ensure a fully ambidextrous corporation, one with an appropriate balance of efficiency & effectiveness, value

capture & innovation: "But the postindustrial company can't be all one thing or all another. Instead, it must be all of many things—all focus *and* all experimentation...all optimisation *and* all innovation—all" (Hamel 2002: 26). The delicate ongoing dance between efficiency and innovation will never be easy. However as Davila has noted, "The real challenge is managing creativity and value creation side-by-side without compromising either one" (2006: 21).

From his or her very first meeting with Board members, the prospective CEO must emphasise the concomitant importance of efficiency *and* innovation. In doing this personal courage is essential: "After making a decision to change, you must be tough enough to follow through. This means facing up to wrenching choices about people and resources, some of which will undoubtedly cause you emotional pain" (Bossidy 2004: 231). It is those very choices that determine the critical balance between efficiency and innovation, and render the position of corporate leader so critical to success.

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The Enigma of an Unintentionally Toxic Leader

ART GOLDMAN



The focus of this article is the phenomenon of an accomplished leader driven by unconscious psychological forces which detrimentally impact on an organisation. The cause of individual dysfunction is often misinterpreted through emotional filters. Yet whatever the cause, there will be consequences for an organisation's effectiveness at many levels. Here is a case study of how one leader's unintentional toxicity affected those around him and beyond, the consequences and interpretations made, and finally, the consultant's analysis that led to resolution for an emotionally turbulent and impulsive workplace.

KEYWORDS: Destructive behaviours, ADHD, leadership toxicity, unintentionally toxic leader, dysfunctional organisations, leadership coaching, dark side organisational behaviour.

Alongside well established research into positive leadership (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007; Nelson & Cooper, 2007) a darker and dysfunctional side of organisational behaviour has recently emerged as a topic of serious concern to management researchers, practitioners and consultants (Goldman, 2006; Griffin, O'Leary and Kelly, 2004; Kellerman, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Lubit, 2004). Influenced by the role of toxic leaders in the disturbing corporate practices of Bear Stearns, Enron, Arthur Anderson and Fortune 500s both public and private sectors seek assessments, downside protection, alternatives and antidotes to the dysfunctional and hurtful agendas undermining organisational life. How can organisations better anticipate destructive

leader behaviours that derail corporate covenants?

Of widespread interest is the premeditated, unscrupulous agendas and organisational misbehaviour of unethical leaders (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). Far less scrutinised, however, is the unintentionally toxic behaviour of otherwise accomplished and successful leaders arguably acting out of psychological turbulence and driven by obsessions, phobias and narcissism (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Maccoby, 2007) and personality disorders (Goldman, 2006). The unsettling phenomenon of an accomplished leader driven by unconscious psychological forces and toxically impacting an organisation is the focus of this article. This dark side of leadership and organisational behaviour

represents a pressing yet difficult to assess terrain for management scholars, consultants and practitioners.

Writing from the vantage point of an external consultant I provide a perspective less visible to the academic and practitioner communities in part due to the dictates of consultant-client privilege. In the consulting case and narrative that follows I alter both the names and identities of the client organisation and its members in order to preserve client confidentiality.

A Problem in Leadership

The Missile Weaponisation Division at Cornelius Ltd has struggled at its companywide, quarterly meetings. Jason Javaman, Sr. Manager of the MW Division has emerged at these meetings as an 'abrasive, cocky, impulsive, forgetful, interrupting and fidgeting motor mouth who rubs much of the workforce the wrong way'. To paraphrase, Dr. Percy Sandoval, CEO of Cornelius, Javaman effectively alienates 90% of Cornelius employees. In a word he is 'dysfunctional'.

Javaman frequently does not allow his subordinates to finish a sentence without interrupting them; he blurts out inappropriate, crude answers to problems and questions generated at company meetings. From the perspective of an outside observer it appears as if Javaman is barely in control of his own behaviour at times—as if his emotions have run amok and he is oblivious to the central role of emotional intelligence to leadership (Goleman, 1997, 2006). Javaman constantly fidgets, checks for phone messages, scans the internet on his lap top, gets subsumed in text messages and is not always mentally or emotionally available for colleagues and staff. In his personal office space Javaman is perpetually in disarray with stacks of misplaced papers and files, countless messages on scraps of paper, plastic grocery bags full of personal credit card invoices and utility bills, and

random notes and old newspapers thrown about the floor and shoved into filing cabinets and bookshelves. The manager is chronically running late, forgetting about scheduled appointments and meetings, misplacing memos and documents, and forever searching for emails on his PC monitor and Blackberry.

During company meetings Javaman has a very tough time presiding over his employees. He is, in the eyes of his employees, seemingly disinterested in what subordinates have to say, receiving personal cell phone calls and text messages during proceedings, and typically excuses himself several times during a meeting for the bath room, allegedly urgent messages and pressing executive matters. At board meetings Javaman appears to be looking around the room and dissecting every air duct and spider's web. He is oddly distracted by the hum of the air conditioner, an array of emotions and the thoughts playing in his mind. He pays little attention to powerpoint presentations. When called upon he sometimes stumbles and pretends to be attuned to the proceedings. His simple physical presence at group meetings represents a minefield of interpersonal disasters.

Impact of the Toxic Leader

Based upon reports from CEO, Dr. Sandoval, top management has increasingly noticed that at least a dozen or more engineers in Javaman's division seem to be following suit and unwittingly mirroring their boss's bad behaviour. They regularly interrupt each other, act impatient and abrasive, fidget like crazy, multitask to the point of absurdity, frequently run late and seem unable to focus adequately on pending projects. First it was Javaman and later his engineers who appeared to be in constant disarray, losing their professional demeanor, and increasingly transforming themselves into abrasive, distracting colleagues lacking in rudimentary public deco-

rum and etiquette. It would seem, following the prompts of their leader, a single engineer's dysfunctional behaviour morphed into a toxic division-wide phenomenon impacting both internal and external customers.

The head of HR, Jean Claude Artaud, attempted to address some of the troubling and mounting complaints surrounding Javaman. Artaud found Javaman to be quite charming at Cornelius luncheons and cocktail gatherings but extremely frustrating and evasive when questioned about the strange, divisive behaviour engulfing colleagues and customers. Javaman smilingly assured Artaud that it was just a case of overload and long hours. During their second meeting Artaud directly addressed instances of mishaps and conflict within the Missiles Weaponisation Division. The HR director became increasingly frustrated with the evasive, shallow, brush off given him by Javaman. In his nicest available inflection Artaud offered Javaman a referral to speak with a psychotherapist in the employee assistance programme. Javaman laughed out loud and immediately rejected the idea, arguing that ... *"perhaps you need to first find an employee with some psychological problems if you want to bring some business to EAP. I realise they're lonely up there on the 7th floor. Maybe hang out in my division and pluck out an engineer or two for therapy. I won't mind. Have a nice day."* Javaman proceeded to leave the room after announcing that 'our meeting is now officially over'. Artaud was dumbfounded and reluctantly moved the issue back upstairs to the CEO, Dr. Sandoval.

Sandoval was already privy to much of what was happening in the Missile Weaponisation Division and he was also aware of Javaman's denial and resistance when confronted with his disruptive behaviour and of HR's referral to the EAP. Sandoval's conviction that "I have a problem with Javaman that is increasingly metastasizing and becoming a companywide issue" was compounded when he personally

received an email from a top tier corporate customer in the Middle East who informed Dr. Sandoval that they were about to shift their business to a competitor if they had to have any further direct dealings with Javaman.

Consultant And Ceo

Faced with the inability of HR and the EAP to treat Javaman, Dr. Sandoval felt even greater pressure and urgency to turnaround the troubling behaviour of his engineers before it further impacted the Missile Weaponisation Division and the entire organisation. Following a recommendation, I was invited by Dr. Sandoval to become involved as the external consultant and leadership coach to the organisation. At our second meeting I attempted to obtain background information on the Javaman situation, on the reports of Javaman's agitated behaviour with HR, about Javaman's refusal of HR's referral to the EAP, and the overall state of affairs at Cornelius Ltd. and specifically within Javaman's Division. Dr. Sandoval articulated his concern for Javaman, Javaman's Division and the greater good of Cornelius Ltd. In Dr. Sandoval's way of seeing things...

Mr. Jason Javaman has been an enigma for all involved at Cornelius Ltd. He is loved, he is repelled. He is superior. He is a fool. He is the best and the worst. It all started with the frazzled Mr. Javaman, the brilliant but absent minded professor and discombobulated engineer. The problem is that Javaman's frenzied behaviour and utter confusion seemed to be spreading like a virus. His people skills are abysmal. And people skills are going into the dumpsters throughout his division! It is sad. Phone calls are met with frequent interruptions and failure to wait a turn to speak. They somehow manage to have their multiple cell phones and pagers ringing whenever I am attempting to address them in a quarterly meeting. Although I have struggled to understand these toxic

behaviours as a divisional or even companywide epidemic, I nevertheless have to come back to Javaman as the nucleus, the centre of the storm. He is genesis! He is an enigma!

For both Sandoval and much of Cornelius Ltd., the erratic, enigmatic, conflict provoking behaviour centered about Javaman had reached an intolerable point. The stressor that put Dr. Sandoval over the edge was an email he received from the top tier Middle East corporate client threatening to terminate further business dealings if they did not provide a leadership alternative to Javaman. Moreover, it was evident to Sandoval that Javaman was clearly not receptive to any of the attempts at dialogue or assistance offered by the HR director or the EAP head counsellor.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that Javaman also had a history as a successful leader who had been instrumental in Cornelius' early global ambitions and international sales over recent years. Percy Sandoval was particularly adamant about pointing out the 'complex and enigmatic personality' of Javaman in the workplace and made a point of insisting that I not overlook that Javaman's repertoire included a turbo-charged, ultra-motivational upside that provided some impressive 'fuel injected' leadership. In summary, Javaman was both extremely productive and seriously destructive to his colleagues and subordinates. His dysfunctional behaviour had spread and he was a toxic leader in the company. The CEO wanted an antidote, a remedy, a potion and medication that will break the source and reach of Javaman's behavioural virus!

From Needs Assessment To Intervention

Based upon subsequent interviews with the CEO, a series of consultations with Jason

Javaman, extended dialogues with staff and engineers, and three weeks of participant observer involvement, I was ready to utilise 360 degree feedback in the hope of obtaining both a qualitative and a quantitative perspective. I was not surprised to learn from HR that there had been three 'ludicrous' attempts at 360 degree feedback in the Javaman's Division and in the company at large that were marked by a total lack of follow-up and support from upper echelon leadership. There were numerous reports on Javaman's striking disregard for the data generated by the failed 360 attempts. The costly 360 degree data reports from before were dumped in Javaman's office amongst old newspapers, coupons, bills, and twelve year old files chaotically stuffed in Javaman's file cabinet.

A fresh attempt was made to try 360 degree feedback involving briefings about the power and impact of properly administered and collaborative 360 feedback and a detailed tutorial in the hope of soliciting some serious support from Javaman's division and upper echelon leadership. This time around, top leaders, HR and all relevant Cornelius players were brought on board. With such commitment in place the 360 degree feedback was administered.

Javaman was overwhelmingly rated as a poor listener, displaying abysmal relationship and team building skills and with significant interpersonal shortcomings. In addition, there were many superlatives and much respect also shown Javaman. In the words of CEO Sandoval, Javaman was an 'enigmatic leader.' This time around, however, the data was carefully scrutinised and interpreted with full participation from Javaman. Javaman settled down and carefully listened to the overwhelming criticisms as well as the numerous reports on his leadership ability and strengths. He began to accept that he was perceived as a brilliant, innovative, and sometimes charming leader who was also an abrasive, impatient, disorganised leader who was 'perpetrating relationship damage'.

Leadership Coaching & Clinical Psychotherapy

During my first two sessions with Javaman following the 360 results I focused primarily on tangibles within the workplace and the need to secure a 'professional organiser'. Javaman subsequently worked with an administrative assistant to bring some semblance of order to his office resulting in 35-40 storage boxes of material being discarded. During this period of several weeks I worked with Javaman on skills such as priorities, emails, delegation, time management, face-to-face contact with the workforce, increasing efficiency with staff, subordinates and customers, and work scheduling.

Throughout the course of coaching, numerous references were made to the 360 degree feedback findings as Javaman struggled to be less defensive and more accepting of the assessments. He was not pleased with the behavioural critiques and patterns that had emerged but his devastation was somewhat tempered by the strong positives he had also received.

As we proceeded deeper into the consultation the fine line between leadership coaching and clinical psychotherapy became increasingly blurred as many of Javaman's shortcomings as well as positive behaviours appeared to be linked to an extremely hyperactive, impatient mental, emotional and interpersonal *modus operandi*. I observed behaviours in our face-to-face dialogues that mirrored or mimicked the 'dysfunctional behaviours' reported in his workplace. In routinely obtaining a case history of Javaman's childhood and adult home life I found that his past was characterised by some of the same behaviours reported on the shop floor of Cornelius: disorganisation; lateness; interruptions; extreme impatience; losing keys and constantly misplacing documents and essential tools for daily workplace functioning. I sensed that Javaman was indeed 'driven by a motor'; for example, he displayed a frantic, hurried and out-

of-proportion pacing to otherwise routine activities. A variety of symptoms signaled that there was a strong chance that Javaman was suffering from adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—ADHD (Hallowell and Ratey, 1994; Hartmann *et al*, 1996; Wender, 1995). Indications were that he had been in a state of significant mental and emotional disarray since childhood and that his disorder was deeply interwoven in his behaviour that was wreaking havoc at Cornelius Ltd. His erratic and difficult-to-control patterns of behaviour were not only troubling Javaman, himself, but he was also unwittingly 'perpetuating ADHD networks of dysfunctional behaviour' throughout engineers' ranks of the company (see American Psychiatric Association, 2000: 85-93).

The ADHD assessment, however, was not limited to Javaman. It also applied to the Missile Weaponisation Division. The long term ADHD toxicity had metastasised and impacted many of the divisional members and overall operations. Suffice to say that much as the pathology of one member of a family inevitably envelops the lives of all members, the toxicity of an organisational leader can be similarly diffused and penetrating ultimately undermining growing numbers of a workforce (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Goldman 2006).

The Javaman toxicity had spread and escalated throughout the workplace, resulting in an overall disorganised, frazzled, forgetful, impulsive, driven, 'chronically late' blueprint that had etched itself deeply and profoundly within the behaviour of the organisation as a whole.

Individual And Organisational Interventions

The far-reaching, debilitating consequences of Javaman's behavioural disturbance required both individual and organisational interventions to break the patterns of toxicity established.

Foremost was a collaborative organisational effort consisting of the leadership coach, CEO Sandoval, the HR and the EAP director of Cornelius Ltd. Following Javaman's ADHD diagnosis it became apparent that the toxicity was in fact largely 'unintentional'. Curiously, Javaman was quite relieved by the diagnosis and he immediately offered to waive his confidentiality and aggressively communicated his 'behavioural issues' throughout the organisation—incurring a mixture of confusion, empathy and much good will. In conjunction with the diagnosis Javaman received prescription drug therapy, coaching for his division and his family, and the extended use of a 'clutter consultant' who worked 24/7 with Javaman in establishing a filing system and order to his office life.

Particularly significant was the involvement of the leadership coach, an intervention which had been reluctantly agreed upon by upper management. In addition Javaman was provided with an Associate Senior Manager/Assistant Director who took responsibility for the majority of the 'left brain' administrative functions which allowed a new freedom for Javaman to develop his talented 'right brain' leadership in areas of R&D, innovation and team work.

Discussion

From meetings with CEO Sandoval, members of the executive board and the 360 degree data it became apparent that despite his toxicity and 'idiosyncrasies' that Mr. Javaman received over ninety percent support from colleagues and subordinates. Co-workers took notice of Javaman's innovativeness, enthusiasm, ground breaking vision and ability to work with teams—largely overshadowing his annoying and destructive tendencies of chronic lateness, disorder, rude and abrasive behaviour, extreme disorganisation and other dysfunctional behaviours related to his ADHD disorder (American Psychiatric

Association, 2000; Weiss, 1996; Wender, 1995). Intent upon salvaging their toxic yet productive leader, Cornelius Ltd. subscribed to the approach of,

- (a) assessing and treating Javaman as an executive suffering from a behavioural disorder;
- (b) adjusting, attuning and modifying organisational operations to accentuate Javaman's primary contributions to the organisation (innovative, creative, interpersonal, team, enthusiasm); and
- (c) minimising his deficiencies (timeliness; organisation; distractedness). Fortunately, Cornelius Ltd. had deep enough pockets to create a second leadership position alongside Javaman en route to a successful restructuring of both Javaman's position and the Weaponisation Division of the company.

Post Script

Two years following the individual and organisational interventions Cornelius Ltd. has reported a rise in innovation and productivity in the Weaponisation Division. Periodic consultation has proceeded on both the organisational and individual level with Javaman receiving both leadership coaching and psychotherapy on a regular (weekly) basis. During this period Javaman has received two awards for outstanding innovations and he has also significantly improved interpersonal and team level relationships with his colleagues and peers. On the deficit side, Javaman was the target of an internal grievance for 'irrational and explosive treatment in the workplace'. This grievance was settled amiably through the Cornelius ombudsperson and had been a pressing subject for several months during Javaman's leadership coaching and psychotherapy sessions. The gravity and

immediacy of the problem subsided and Javaman's toxic behaviour was in the words of CEO Sandoval, 'in remission'.

Two years on Javaman and his division are far less divisive, experiencing a newly formulated camaraderie and team success and are breaking innovative and lucrative ground with a growing international clientele. Javaman increasingly illustrates insightful, creative and inspired leadership as the 'clutter' is progressively removed from his desk and interpersonal work life. After much debate and deep doubts expressed behind closed doors by HR and upper management, the depth and quality of Javaman's work has overshadowed his battles with ADHD and a related intermittent explosive disorder (American Psychiatric Association: 2000: 663-667).

Interestingly the alleged spread of ADHD symptoms and behaviours among Javaman's colleagues has quietly subsided throughout the division and the organisation confirming the leadership coach's prediction that collective remission was inevitable following the turnaround and recovery of their leader. Upper echelon management states that Javaman will stay. He is a worthy investment for Cornelius Ltd..

Implications

This article raises concerns surrounding unintentional leadership toxicity as depicted in the case of an enigmatic leader—whose abruptness, impatience and rude behaviour juxtaposed with his exemplary, transformational leadership—assessed as suffering from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Cornelius Ltd. is not unique in its inability to assess unintentionally toxic behaviour in its leader as top management, HR and internal experts typically lack the expertise needed to distinguish between intentionally destructive, unethical

leader behaviour and the unintentional misbehaviour of a psychologically troubled leader. Based on this consultation case organisations are alerted to the complexity and enigmas of leadership toxicity which may extend beyond the selfish and clandestine and into the neurotic and disordered terrain of psychological disturbances. A key question remains—'Are organisations adequately prepared to assess and work with toxic leadership?' As this case illustrates a driven and successful leader may harbour positive as well as dysfunctional motivations (Lowman, 2002). I invite you to entertain this broad terrain and expand your organisational repertoire into assessment of unintentional leadership toxicity.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Alan Goldman Ph.D. is a Professor of Management in the School of Global Management and Leadership, Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA. Goldman's research

interests and recent publications are in the area of toxic leadership and dysfunctional organisational behaviour. He is the author of seven books and approximately 100 published papers, articles, chapters, conference papers and proceedings. Goldman has twice received 'top paper' awards for his toxic leadership research from the Academy of Management, Management Consulting Division. Goldman recently served as Guest Editor (2006) for a special edition of the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* on "Dysfunctional Leadership and Organisations." Alan Goldman is active as a management consultant, leadership coach and psychotherapist as he combines his background in OB, leadership, communication and clinical psychology in his research and writings. Goldman is board certified in psychology and regularly travels into the farther reaches of leadership toxicity and pathology in the midst of doing organisational therapy. Another area of research, travels and publications has been Japan, as Goldman lived in Tokyo and has published books and articles on U.S.-Japanese cross cultural management, leadership, expatriations and toxicity. Alan Goldman can be reached via email at alan.goldman@asu.edu.

A Shift of Intention: From Inefficiency to Toxicity in the Working Environment

CAROL JARVIS



The introduction of an American presidential style CEO into a patriarchal European organisation shifted this company from comfortable progress towards anxiety, uncertainty and instability. This article explores how psychodynamics helped interpret what was happening under the surface and looks at a role of a 'toxic handler'.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, toxic, psychodynamics, anxiety.

Introduction

Humans have a knack for getting trapped in webs of their own creation ... Organisations and their members become trapped by constructions of reality that, at best, give an imperfect grasp on the world.

Morgan 2006: 207

Morgan (2006) uses the metaphor of the 'psychic prison' to describe how the emotions, and particularly anxiety, that accompany working in groups and organisations can act as self-limiters, as we develop mechanisms to defend ourselves against them.

In this article, based on a case study, I trace the impact on the European arm of a global travel services business, head-quartered in the USA, of the move from a mild, home grown management team to the appointment of a much younger, aggressive, presidential CEO in the wake of a leveraged buy-out. This change of personnel at the senior level brought with it a significant shift in intention on the part of the senior management team; from a patriarchy with tens of years of history with the organisation and satisfaction with remote reporting of steady growth, to the introduction of a share price-focused turnaround specialist from a manufacturing background, looking at a five year tenure and associated reward.

I suggest that this change and, in particular, the very different leadership style of the new CEO moved an organisation from a position of inefficiency that nonetheless produced steady growth and a stable working environment, to a toxic working environment characterised by anxiety, uncertainty and instability. I explore how psychodynamics can help to interpret what is happening and go on to look critically at a number of consultancy interventions. I conclude by noting how a small number of individuals succeeded in using the uncertainty created to promote change and innovation.

Case Study Background

After postponing his visit a number of times, the new CEO appointed to deliver the Initial Public Offering (IPO) made his first visit to the European Division of this American multinational in the travel industry. The European senior management team had watched his webcasts and been in contact through intermediaries and email broadcasts, but this had only served to increase tension, for whilst his rhetoric suggested Europe was an important part of the organisation's growth plans, the detail of his talk had been all about what was happening elsewhere.

Greg, the new CEO, and the former colleagues he had begun to appoint to the senior management team, were from a very different mould than the managers (all men) they replaced. The previous US-based senior management team (SMT) comprised older men who had worked their way up through the organisation. Having worked hard to reach the top, they tended to believe they had 'earned the right' to enjoy the fruits of their labours. Their management style was characterised by targets and reports and, as long as the organisation continued to achieve steady growth, they were content to leave their divisional management teams

around the world to manage and report the detail. An observer described it as being about 'shining your shoes and getting your story straight'. Although the SMT's offices in the American headquarters were, quite literally, soundproofed from the rest of the building their long association with the organisation brought with it an assumption that those on the top team would act in its best interests and those of its employees.

A Shift of Intention: The New CEO

By contrast, Greg and his new appointees all had manufacturing backgrounds and a more rigorous and 'hard-nosed' approach to managing. They gave priority to managing the expectations of financial analysts. The leveraged buy-out had left the company with a huge debt that had to be serviced and a group of shareholders whose main interest was, quite naturally, in reaping the dividends from their investment. The new senior management team brought with them an emphasis on new methods based largely on manufacturing management and tomorrow's targeted outcomes were often talked of as though they were already in place today.

Greg also took a higher profile than the previous senior managers. He gave quarterly webcasts, and his communications were everywhere. He came over as younger and virile with perfect appearance. On numbers and business levers he talked a good talk but was rather more evasive when it came to people issues. This was summed up in his edict 'no stories—just facts, data, analysis'. He talked of 'the workers' and of '*eliminating* posts'. He could be emotional himself—for example he was described as 'throwing a hissy fit' when things did not go his way—but he did not embrace emotion from other members of the business. As one consultant who

tried to make sense of his curious mixture of passion and dispassion commented:

In a manufacturing environment, the widget produced can't reveal anything of the tears that have gone into making it... Widgets are not bleeding in front of you, and their pain is not visible to customers—that's not the same when you treat staff like that, it shows through to customers.

As well as introducing colleagues from former employment into the corporate senior management team in the US, Greg appointed external consultants who he felt he could work with and trust. Both groups adopted the approach of telling the CEO what he wanted to hear—for example adopting organisational structures and performance improvement strategies based on manufacturing 'best practice', rather than something from the service industry which may have been more appropriate to this organisation's needs. And the few challengers in the existing organisation were simply ignored or moved aside.

The consultants' structural recommendations were implemented to varying effect since few funds and little attention were made available for their implementation. Then, when the promised financial and other benefits were not realised, there followed a series of escalating threats, with each party trying to blame and scapegoat the other. New consulting firms were brought in, each adopting a different approach and each adding to the 'blame-the-predecessor' culture. In the end, five different firms were used in less than two years with no real attempt made to integrate and learn from the work they had produced.

All this added to confusion and uncertainty, increasing the levels of anxiety still further. And since these various external consultants were so closely associated with the CEO, the European leadership team were simultaneously concerned that the consultants' poor performance would

be attributed to inadequacies in their own leadership and management than by the poor judgement being exercised by their new boss.

The Influence of Anxiety and Emotion

Above we see two very different styles of leadership—laissez-faire from the former CEO, and autocratic from Greg. On the surface the European management team responded to them in very similar ways; they talked things up and put a gloss on their performance. But below the surface, the reasons they did not 'tell it as it is' were quite different. Pre-IPO they were doing what they think was being asked of them—shining their shoes and telling a good story. Post-IPO their motivation was fear—it is just too dangerous to present information that Greg does not want to hear; there is no discourse, no consultation; and they 'live in fear of being brutalised'.

Neither of these responses is particularly healthy. In the first case the organisation was in a position of inefficiency. In the second, a toxic working environment characterised by anxiety, uncertainty and instability had been created. Psychodynamic thinking can be helpful to explore some of the implications of the high levels of anxiety and uncertainty found in the organisation post-IPO.

In brief, psychodynamics argues that anxiety is ever-present and that how effectively we are able to maintain our focus on the task in hand, will depend on the levels of anxiety present and how we respond to them. Furthermore, all members of an organisation bring their 'history' into a group and these combine to create that group's unique psychodynamic patterning and ways of functioning.

Bion (1961), a leading psychodynamic thinker, claims that all groups have a double task—the task above the surface that they formally exist to do and the task below the surface

that involves dealing with emotion in the group. In his view, when levels of emotion—and particularly anxiety—become too high, the group will go ‘off-task’ and ‘forget’ what it is there to do. He describes a group behaving in this way as a ‘basic assumption group’. Bion (1961) suggests three forms of basic assumption behaviour based on different ‘fantasies’: fight/flight (the adrenaline response to danger, to confront it or flee); dependency (the heroic leader is seen as almost superhuman and on whom the group’s hope rest); and pairing (a focus on a hopeful fantasy of the future, avoiding the difficult issues of today). Superficially, a group in ‘basic assumption’ mode may appear to be fully engaged in its formal task, however, much of its energy is actually directed at playing out its fantasy as noted above.

Interestingly, groups may oscillate between staying ‘on-task’ (an effective work group) and drifting ‘off-task’ (a group in ‘basic assumption’ mode). Going ‘off-task’ may be as simple as postponing discussing a difficult agenda item by devoting the time to social chat (flight), or it may

reach a stage where the group is no longer capable of getting itself back ‘on-task’ and delivering against its objectives. In this case study, many members of the European senior management appear to spend a considerable proportion of their time working ‘off-task’.

A Psychodynamic Interpretation of Events

In response to the levels of uncontained anxiety experienced by many of the senior managers in Europe, and drawing on the ideas outlined above, we can see a cycle of failure and mistrust developing, as shown in Figure 1.

A good example of how this cycle of mistrust developed and was reinforced is Greg’s insistence that he wanted ‘no stories—just facts, data, analysis.’

In the climate of fear and uncertainty that prevailed, this was taken literally. The senior managers gave Greg exactly what they thought

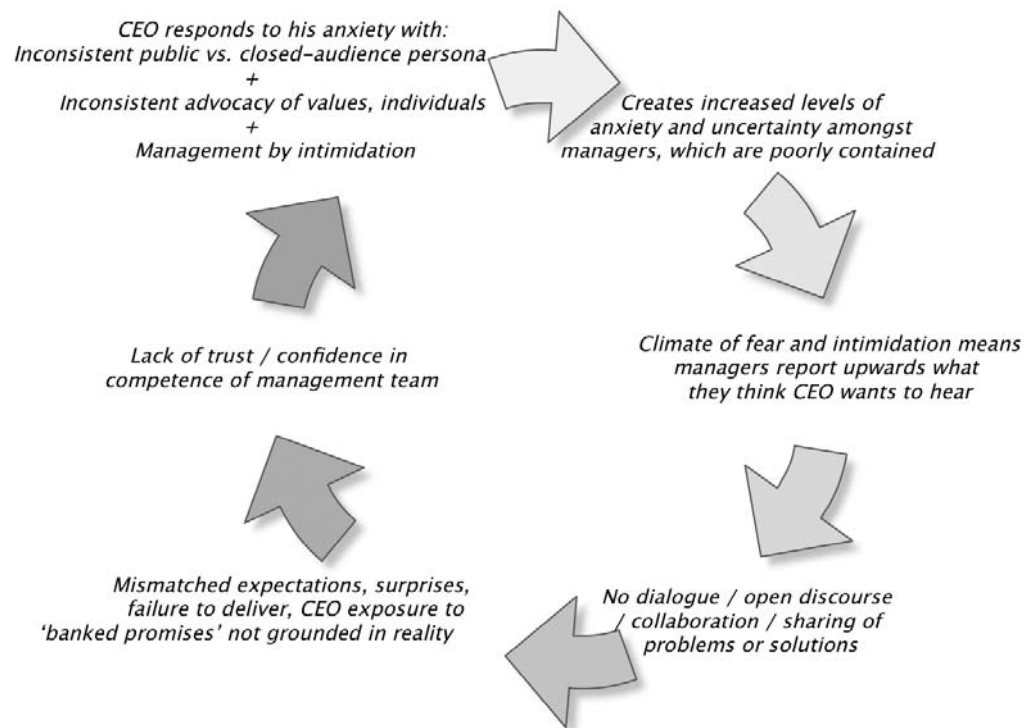


Figure 1: A Cycle of Mistrust

he wanted; lots of sets of numbers with little or no commentary to support them. Without any real dialogue or discussion, the numbers looked incoherent, with no obvious theme or indication of how they had been arrived at, and there was no way to correct this misunderstanding of what Greg had actually been asking for. Greg lost trust in the capability of the senior managers in Europe—he felt only the incompetent could provide so little support for their arguments and so consulted them even less. The less the Europeans saw of him, the less predictable they perceived his behaviour to be, the more intimidating he seemed and the more likely they became to tell him what they thought he wanted to hear. Thus a seemingly simple request designed to discourage ‘talking-up’ actually served to increase it.

Their aim became to prepare broad strategic plans that presented performance with a positive spin, whilst covering up weaker areas and any bad news. But since the new CEO proclaimed expertise in almost every functional domain (“I wrote the book about sales, there’s no greater salesman than me”; “There’s nothing I don’t know about competency models, like most aspects of HR & people management”), and exerted a tighter control over the setting of performance targets and planning, there was a growing perception that there was ‘nowhere to hide’. This provoked even more anxiety; at the same time that the senior managers in Europe felt increasing concern about their ability to deliver the results Greg expected, and had promised to financial analysts. The European management team’s well-established strategy of ‘putting a gloss on things’ seemed likely to be less and less successful. As a group they began to move further off-task. Although on the surface, they appeared to be working hard to deliver the results, below the surface much of their energy was spent on developing new concealment and blame avoidance strategies.

Gabriel (1999: 145) describes this as a ‘narcissistic process’ where:

We commit an inordinate amount of time to sustaining the leader’s image of how the organisation should be working, as opposed to actually working.

The interpretation here is that the followers (the European management team) were protecting the leader (Greg) by not exposing him to the reality that his dream would not be fulfilled. By concealing problems in this way, the followers were putting the organisation, rather than simply the leader, at increased risk of defeat and were contributing to significant organisational dysfunction.

Through his narcissism and unwillingness to countenance failure, Greg introduced more anxiety into the system and did not provide ‘good enough’ containment of the anxiety generated. This anxiety was then ‘passed around’ (French, 2001). He could indeed be described as a toxic leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2005:29) whose “*destructive behaviours and dysfunctional personal qualities* generated a serious and enduring poisonous effect” on his followers.

Behind the somewhat bullying façade, there is some suggestion that Greg felt insecure and anxious. For example, his desire to surround himself with trusted colleagues and advisors, who only told him what he wanted to hear; or his unwillingness to engage with the differences of a service business environment but to keep looking to manufacturing, where he had acknowledged expertise. He turned a blind eye to information he did not want to hear, ‘threw a hissy fit’, and then moved on to the next fantasy—telling the analysts what he thought they wanted to hear and thus mirroring the relationship that had developed with the European leadership team. And whilst the men he replaced felt secure in the knowledge that they had ‘earned the right’ to their position, Greg knew that in the competitive world of the IPO

specialist, he would be judged only on the success of his last job. He therefore needed to 'cover his back' and ensure there was always someone else to scapegoat or blame when and if he failed to deliver the fantasy.

The Role of the Toxic Handler

As levels of anxiety in the organisation increased, so it became even more important to find containment for this anxiety if the group was to stay 'on-task'. One way of providing this 'anxiety containing' function, is through the emergence of toxic handlers, someone Frost and Robinson (1999: 98) describe as:

a manager who voluntarily handles the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organisational life.

The toxic handler is typically in a relatively senior position internally or is an external consultant. The role is an informal one—on top of the manager's/consultant's normal workload—and involves 'absorbing the heat' and finding ways of imparting difficult information. It is a draining role and toxic handlers often put themselves at increased risk of stress and burnout. In the case study, one European Vice President, Simon, took on the role of toxic handler, despite the risk to his future in the organisation. Although Simon risked much by putting his head above the parapet in this way, he was working from a position of some strength, due to his high level of performance and historical standing in the organisation.

Simon's approach was two pronged. On the one hand he established himself as an intermediary who could soak-up a great deal of the toxicity from the leadership team and on the other he sought to equip his European board colleagues with 'behind-the-scenes' support from consultants specialising in individual and

leadership team development. The appointment of consultants, this time selected by Simon, rather than the CEO, to help individual senior managers deal with the impact of the new management regime—including, ironically, other consultants—proved to be a valuable lifeline for the European leadership, and helped to restore some self-belief in this beleaguered team.

These consultants provided support, protection and advocacy; they offered consistency and some sense of continuity across the fads and initiatives introduced by the new regime; and, perhaps most importantly, they worked with key members of the European team to strengthen their belief in their own abilities and contribution. They were able to contain and hold the anxiety that was being generated, a capability missing in Greg's leadership.

Simon, meanwhile, positioned himself as a toxic handler by assuming the role of European 'Lead' in the transformation process, in an attempt to ameliorate as much dysfunction as he could before being pushed out. In taking on this role, Simon and the consultants he employed enabled the European leadership team to find some forward momentum and to keep focused on the task of building the business. To this extent it was an important and successful strategy. However, the consultants' tenure, paid for as it was from funds that Simon had managed to keep control of and heavily dependent on his continued presence, was always shaky and they were limited in the actions they could take, without attracting too much attention from senior management in the US. Additionally, by acting as toxic handlers, Simon and the consultants he employed protected the European management, making movement possible but not really tackling the root cause of their problems; the underlying dysfunctional patterns of relationship between Greg and the European management team remained undisturbed. Greg continued to turn a blind eye to information he did not want to acknowledge and most mem-

bers of the European leadership team, whilst taking up their roles with a little more authority, still played along by presenting only the information they thought Greg wanted to hear.

Anxiety can Play a Positive Role

It was something of a revelation for the European Executives to be confronted by Simon and the consultants he appointed with the realisation that there was a high risk that they would largely be seen as a product of yesterday and not fit for tomorrow. Some resisted such a possibility—‘not in my job description’, ‘speak with my lawyer’, ‘we’re already doing that’, etc.. Others adopted ‘every-man-for-himself’ approaches. Side deals were created to create new, albeit artificial, senior posts in order to ‘keep loyal people’. Several however, were able to contain their anxieties and distaste about the new management regime and at the same time recognise weaknesses in the leadership of the division under their own tenure and thus get on with the real work of the organisation.

For example, several managers with outside experience saw the introduction of the new regime as an opportunity to move the organisation forward where before there was no mechanism to advance. They seemed to believe that for all the distasteful aspects of the CEO’s leadership, the impatience and sense of urgency driven by his need for quick, bankable results provided an opportunity to remove existing barriers to advancement of their own projects and agendas. Like him or not they could now use the CEO’s mantras to remove obstacles and forward their careers by adopting—or at least pretending to subscribe to—the new ways of working.

For these individuals, there had been ‘good enough’ containment of anxiety, and as a result learning had been promoted, rather than discouraged (Vince, 1998). But why are some individuals able to contain their anxiety, when

many are not? The former can be seen to have some common characteristics. In particular, they were not members of the inner circle that had direct contact with Greg, so the impact of his bullying was mediated through the European management team; they were often newcomers who had limited exposure to the organisation’s history; and they did have prior management experience, which had generally been positive. Perhaps most importantly of all, they perceived that they had other options; they could ‘get out’ if they really considered they needed to do so.

The perception of other options, combined with a sense of self-worth and recognition of their own expertise is a significant enabler, allowing these individuals to take the kind of risks others might find terrifying. They were able to use the anxiety—their own and the anxiety present in the system—that accompanies uncertainty to create a developmental space where uncertainty encouraged, rather than blocked, change and innovation. In doing so, they nullified the toxic qualities of the leader, to both their own and the organisation’s benefit.

Conclusion

This article has indicated how a psychodynamic approach, with its emphasis on what is happening below the surface, can cast a different light on our understanding of organisational situations. In the case study organisation, the European management team responded to a change in the senior management team in the US by seemingly changing little; they continued to try to present information in the best possible light, omitting the details Greg and his colleagues in the US might find unpalatable. However, Greg’s more narcissistic leadership, his emphasis on impressing the financial analysts rather than the staff, his apparently unpredictable behaviour, and the demanding growth targets he set with little or no

consultation, increased their perceptions of risk and uncertainty, and with it the levels of anxiety in the system. In response to this increased anxiety, the European management team spent more and more of its time working 'off-task', protecting Greg's dream—and, as they saw it, their own jobs—and less time on the real work of securing the organisation's future.

At this point, the introduction of a toxic handler (Simon) and a team of consultants to provide support, protection and a sense of consistency, created a 'good enough' container for their anxiety and allowed a small group of managers to find the psychological space to move forward and refocus their energy on their formal task. I suggest that by paying more attention to psychodynamics, and thus what is going on below the surface, organisations can gain fresh insights into their self-limiting defence mechanisms that may help them to overcome some of their barriers to change and development so often experienced.

Note: This article has been prepared in collaboration with a consultant to the case study organisation. In view of the sensitive nature of some of this material, he wishes to remain anonymous to protect client confidentiality. I would nonetheless like to acknowledge the significant contribution he has made to this article.

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Legacy & Myth: Consequences of Leader Dysfunction

MARGARET DAVIES



This article is based on research and observations recorded whilst working as an external culture change agent for a medium sized organisation and explores how the interplay between the leader's behaviour, the internal climate, and external conditions facilitated leader dysfunction with consequences both for the organisation and the leader.

KEYWORDS: Leader, leadership, executive, derailment, dysfunction, toxicity, ACE Framework, culture change, Hogan, detachment.

Introduction

The concept of leader dysfunction is becoming increasingly useful when consulting on organisational performance. Accurate diagnosis of dysfunction, perhaps through interventions such as executive coaching, and an exploration of a willingness of the executive to change may enable leaders to (i) examine if they are operating in ways that are unhelpful, and (ii) prepared to move away from behaviour diagnosed as dysfunctional. However, our efforts as practitioners may be ineffective if we do not at the same time draw attention to the consequences of such behaviour and its impact on organisational performance. In other words,

it is more than solely an executive's individual behaviour that may be causing organisational grief, dysfunction or disruption.

This article is based on research and observations recorded whilst working as an external culture change agent for a medium sized organisation. By drawing on the ACE Framework for Leader Success (Walton, 2007a) it examines how the interplay between the three dimensions of leader behaviour; internal climate and external conditions facilitated leader dysfunction. It then explores how the legacy of this dysfunctional behaviour, fuelled by myth, and embedded within a culture of mistrust propelled the leader on the road to potential derailment.

Leaders, Leaders, Leaders ...

The study of the positive attributes of leaders has been a key part of leadership research for sixty years exemplified, for example, in notions such as 'the charismatic leader' (Weber, 1947) and the 'transformational leader' (Burns, 1978). Only relatively recently has a consideration of why leaders fail brought into question the issue referred to as 'leadership dysfunction' (Walton, 2007b) and 'derailment' (Brittain & Van Velsor, 1996; McCartney & Campbell, 2006; McIntosh & Rima, 2007, Prince, 2005). Indeed the psychological resilience of leaders under pressure is becoming an increasingly important factor to consider in their ability to sustain effective organisational performance in increasingly complex, rapidly changing and competitive environments. When faced with such ambiguity, demands and intellectual challenges that this brings, the ability of leaders to exhibit exemplary behaviour is tested. It is the combination of such circumstances that generate conditions, which then facilitate the potential for leaders to display dysfunctional behaviour such as arrogance, detachment, perfectionism and emotional volatility as responses to the challenges they face in their work. Dysfunctional behaviour by the executive can erode the trust and commitment of colleagues and, if it becomes norm, may be the 'beginning of the end' of a leader's tenure and even start to spell doom for the organisation at large.

The Case Study that follows concerns the CEO and leadership team of a medium sized organisation and is examined by applying the ACE Framework for Leader Success (Walton 2007a). During the period in question I was working for this organisation as an external agent for culture change, and was actively involved from early 2006 in designing and implementing interventions over a period of 18 months.

Theoretical context

The 'ACE' Framework as described by Walton (2007b) is "useful to identify combinations of conditions that may contribute to, and possibly facilitate, dysfunctional executive behaviour". It suggests that three sets of factors need to be considered when examining leader success and guarding against leader failure and dysfunction: firstly, the psychological and behavioural characteristics of the executive(s) involved, next an examination of the internal 'state' of the organisation, and, finally an assessment of the changing external circumstances and conditions impacting on that organisation. Crucially it is the combination of particular factors, predispositions and circumstances that can lead both to successful as well as dysfunctional and destructive outcomes.

In this instance, the ACE Framework is used as a model to retrospectively consider how the interplay of the three factors led to leader failure. (See Figure 1.)

For several years the organisation in question had been failing both in terms of the quality of its service offering and its financial performance. The future of the organisation was under threat and a new CEO was put in place in 2003. During this time, the external conditions were difficult. The organisation was under pressure from the external bodies that partially funded it and regulated the service offering. Over a period of three years, the CEO and the Finance Director worked hard to improve the financial situation and attain a satisfactory level of service offering.

Their focus and commitment stabilised the organisation to the extent that it was able to begin to move into a period of consolidation and then growth. At this point, however, the priorities of the external body that partially funded the organisation were changing and the organisation found that it could not rely on the same degree of financial support in the future. The organisation responded to this uncertainty with

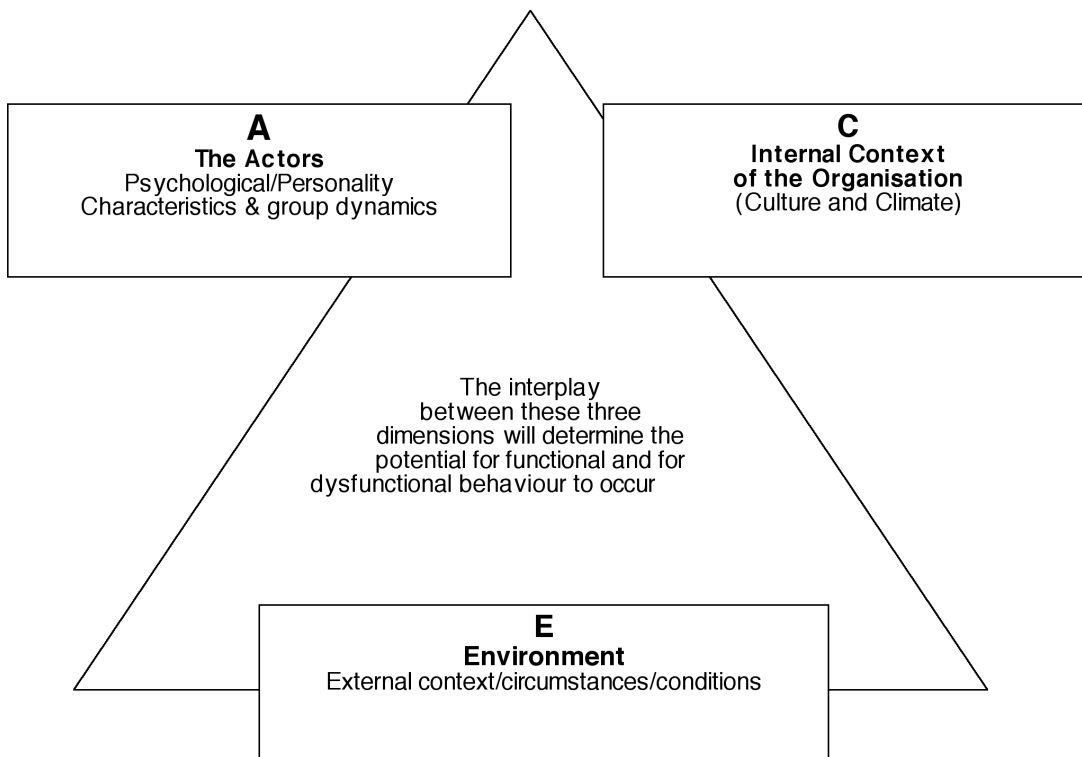


Figure 1: The ACE Framework External Conditions

a shift of emphasis in the strategic plan. This included:

- The development of new service offerings targeted to new markets.
- Further improvements to the core services provided.
- A repositioning of the brand to differentiate the organisation from its competitors.

The desired outcome was for the organisation to realise increased income from new markets so decreasing its need—and level of dependency—for funding on the external body in question. However, the organisation was also acutely aware that a drop in the level of funding during this period would have a serious impact on the ability of the organisation to function and grow. Indeed, there were two episodes during the time I was working with them where the organisation was once again forced to take serious remedial measures to improve their financial sit-

uation, measures which included a reduction in the workforce.

In summary, the organisation required a level of security from external funding to operate effectively. The external context however was susceptible to change, which meant that the funding was becoming less secure and, therefore, the organisation needed to change its core funding bases if it was to survive.

Internal context

It was at this point in late 2005 that the leadership team began to express concerns about the attitudes and behaviour of some employees in managerial and customer facing roles. They believed that for the organisation to change and grow culture change was required and a number of consultants were asked to present their thoughts on culture change to the leadership

team. Following a number of competitive presentations I was asked to take on this assignment and began by assessing the prevailing internal culture and checking employee behaviour against the organisation's values, which were transmitted in the way work was undertaken in the organisation. A questionnaire was sent to all staff and supplemented by an extended focus group approach with a cross section of employees to collect this information.

The results showed that employees were generally committed to the services the organisation provided and believed their customers' needs came first. Many attempted to do their jobs to the best of their ability, often looking for opportunities to develop their role and felt they were able to make a difference, valued their colleagues and were satisfied in their work. Whilst most employees recognised the financial challenges faced by the organisation they believed they could do their jobs more effectively if budgets were not so tight; the results also indicated that only managers felt well remunerated for their work. My interviews also highlighted a sense of frustration with many staff working long hours and thinking they could do their job more efficiently. A high degree of fire-fighting in particular, was reported—*“Everyone is asking you to do last minute things”*—resulting from inefficient information systems, and many staff reported consequent stress.

Some employees felt they had insufficient knowledge to deliver a quality service to some customers. Management support was reported as variable across the organisation with meetings between managers and direct reports often infrequent and very task focussed.

Feedback, especially positive feedback, was not the norm, and resulted in employees not feeling valued, unsure of their career paths and unclear how to realise their potential at work. Many employees did not feel trusted by management and there was a reluctance to take responsibility and ownership for issues because

of the blame culture, which had taken hold within the organisation. This was illustrated by comments such as:

“I get copied in on emails because people are covering their backs.”

A significant number of employees were undecided or did not have faith in their manager and mistrusted the leadership team's ability to enable success to be achieved. Reference was made in the group discussions to individuals, who had been 'let go' and a perception that 'challenging management' could lead to dismissal. A level of insecurity was evident in some staff: *“Firing people has made us feel insecure”*.

In summary, the years of failure had negatively impacted employee engagement. In some cases this had led to a sense of insecurity and helplessness resulting in a lack of willingness to take ownership and responsibility, consequently generating feelings of apathy within the organisation. There were some employee relation issues and my work revealed that the Performance Management and Recruitment and Selection processes were not robust. The need, and a desire, for change was expressed.

The internal culture could be described as striving, friendly, reactive, insecure, chaotic and negative.

The Actors

During the initial period of the assignment, the consultant met with the leadership team to discuss their views on the prevailing culture and their leadership styles. Three members of the team were primarily involved in these discussions, the CEO, the Finance Director and the Deputy CEO. There was a perception in the top team that some members of staff were not fully committed to the organisation with the CEO commenting on people leaving before the working day was over.

He believed his leadership style to be 'patriarchal'. It became clear, however, that the CEO and the Finance Director had become detached from many people in the organisation. They seemed unaware of some of the major issues their colleagues were facing and what needed their support and attention. Communication to employees by the CEO often focussed on the challenging external circumstances—to the neglect of addressing cohesion, communication and collaboration internally—and this affected staff morale badly as the following comment illustrates:

"The CEO's addresses are so negative, you leave with your knuckles scraping the floor".

Reasons for some 'people' decisions made by the leadership team, especially concerning staff that had left, had not been clearly communicated to employees, leaving staff to draw their own conclusions along the lines of '*some faces don't fit*' and reinforcing feelings of insecurity.

Top team dynamics

At the start of the culture change process, the leadership team's dynamics were problematic and relations between members on the team were difficult although the CEO and Deputy CEO worked well together and tended to be the drivers of change. Their complimentary personality types possibly helped this relationship in that the CEO was a very able strategic thinker and the Deputy CEO exercised extensive interpersonal skills and a determined focus on people issues. Their relationship was often fuelled by their enjoyment of debate, which meant that these two were the main contributors at leadership team meetings leaving the other two members of the team disenfranchised, and 'out of it', to a certain large extent.

During this period of change, the CEO wanted to introduce a new management structure but had concerns about the competency of the Finance Director and the ability of the fourth director to take the organisation through the changes required. These reservations fractured the working relationships with these two colleague Directors; 'things' became strained between the CEO and the FD. Exchanges became less frequent and these two expressed dissatisfaction with each other, in particular, to the Deputy CEO who was a confidant of both the CEO and the FD.

Under increasing pressure the CEO and the FD exhibited dysfunctional behaviour in that they became more detached from and mistrustful of each other. Subsequently, the FD and the fourth director left the organisation leaving only the CEO and the Deputy CEO to lead and manage operations, and progress the structural changes that had been initiated.

Following the departures of these directors, the CEO and the Deputy CEO were increasingly reliant upon the next tier of management. This group comprised a number of Department Heads, some of whom mistrusted the CEO and several of whom lacked a degree of confidence. Investment in their development thus became a priority.

The culture change intervention

Prior to the departure of the Finance Director and the fourth Director I had presented the results of the questionnaire and group discussions and recommended an action plan for change. This had been agreed with the leadership team. The work began in early summer 2006 and included a number of interventions aimed to move the organisation away from a culture of friendly chaos, blame and mistrust of management to a more open, innovative and efficient way of working.

The intervention included:

1. Facilitation of Department Head team meetings to build trust and collaboration and encourage ownership of, and responsibility for, the day-to-day operation of the organisation.
2. The formation of cross company teams across departments led by key managers to review key organisational processes. Recommendations for improvements included a more rigorous annual performance appraisal linked to objectives and regular meetings between managers and direct reports to monitor progress. All functional leads and key managers attended training on how to implement this process.
3. I also proposed that the two remaining members of the top team—the CEO and the Deputy Director—complete psychometric profiling to build their awareness of their leadership styles to be followed by regular coaching sessions.

During this period a more objective selection process was used for the recruitment of the new Director of Enterprise, including a two day Assessment Centre.

Although the consulting assignment was disrupted by the departure of the two directors, the work was well received and staff participated with enthusiasm in the interventions outlined above. This was largely because the CEO and Deputy CEO were fully behind the culture change intervention and staff saw positive changes resulting from their feedback. The CEO was fully committed to the action plan and was very supportive of my involvement.

Towards the end of 2006, a residential off-site, involving the CEO, the Deputy CEO, the new Director of Enterprise and Department Heads, was held to further build trust and collaboration and explore ideas for the new service

offering. As a result of the feedback report from the questionnaire and group discussions, the CEO's addresses to staff were much more upbeat and informative than in earlier times. Furthermore, the Department Heads themselves were operating more effectively as a team as evidenced by their increased collaboration and improved relationships. They were also actively managing conflict in their own teams and trust between the CEO and his functional leads had improved.

My recommendations for next steps were discussed with the CEO, Deputy CEO and the new Director of Enterprise and included regular coaching support for the CEO and a number of the Department Heads and a structured management development plan for the functional lead team. These interventions had the aim of building the personal and team management skills of the eleven key managers involved. Longer-term recommendations included a Talent Management programme, support to other key employees and further facilitative culture change interventions at the 'customer face'.

I heard nothing for some weeks and then the CEO informed me that the new Director of Enterprise, who had a background in HR, was exploring the option of handling the management development internally. I waited a few more weeks and then expressed my concern to the CEO that the momentum for culture change was being lost. In response, he gave the go ahead to progress with the planned interventions in mid-2007. After two months work, the organisation again found itself in serious financial difficulties and the work was suspended.

Reviewing the interplay—Legacy and Myth and lasting impressions

Whilst implementing the culture change interventions the legacy of the 'failing years' became apparent in many forms each of which influ-

enced contemporary behaviour within the organisation. For example, in how the attitude of employees was affected by colleagues who had left 'under a cloud' and the failure of the leadership team to clearly explain the reasons for such decisions led to conjecture and the myth that the CEO might 'move out' anyone at any time if it suited him. Whilst far from the intentions of the CEO, his 'unexplained behaviours'—purposefully so for ethical reasons—nevertheless generated and reinforced a legacy of insecurity and expressed mistrust that emerged during the group discussions.

Following the departure of the two directors, the CEO and the Deputy CEO were the only permanent members of the leadership team for a period of six months and struggled to keep the organisation moving forward during times of change. The internal context ('C') over this period put the CEO under increasing pressure. Several key roles remained unfilled or were being covered by members of staff 'acting up'. At the end of 2006 the Deputy CEO left on maternity leave and the CEO found himself with only the new Director of Enterprise for support. The increased work pressure—and the increasing number of operational issues that required the CEO's direct attention—increasingly distanced and isolated him from others through the sheer weight of work. But this merely served to reinforce and intensify the legacy of mistrust as he began to sink under the tasks eating up his time. He found himself spending an excessive amount of time on HR issues, which had the unintended effect of denying his key staff sufficient productive planning and motivational time.

In addition, the financial conditions worsened putting the organisation under increasing pressure to perform within an increasingly hostile financial context. These external conditions (E) intensified when the CEO found himself the victim of a grievance claim for poor leadership, bullying and harassment and subsequently under the spotlight from key external

stakeholders when having to defend himself against these allegations.

The CEO did not overcome the pressures arising from the external conditions *and* the internal context he was working within resulting in his untimely departure from the organisation.

CONCLUSION

This case study illustrates how behaviour by a capable corporate leader under pressure from (i) within his own organisation, and (ii) externally, may become dysfunctional and lead to failure through the erosion of trust, loyalty and respect.

The story begins with how the impact of increasing externally generated pressures for enhanced performance (the External Circumstances 'E') negatively impacted upon the behaviour of the CEO and the other directors. The behaviour of the CEO and the FD (the Actors 'A'), under pressure, was to focus upon what needed to be done in the short term to save this organisation. This led to them withdrawing regular contact from many of their employees and in paying insufficient attention to managing more carefully employee relations and maintaining employee motivation. This fuelled myths about the CEO's leadership style leaving a legacy of mistrust among employees and shaping the internal culture and climate ('C').

The CEO was a very intelligent, compassionate and committed individual with a fervent belief in his organisation's service offering. He was able to concentrate on the job in hand without being influenced by the emotions of those around him. Hogan and Hogan (2004) captured the dysfunctional behaviour displayed under pressure and described it as 'independent / detached' behaviour. These are individuals, who are happy to spend time alone, are self sufficient and independent. When stressed they may become somewhat indifferent to social feedback

and unaware how their actions affect other people. They may become withdrawn and may be hard to work with because others may find it difficult, because of their lack of communication and inattention to social and interpersonal details, to share their thoughts with them.

In this case, the CEO under such extreme external pressure did exhibit detached behaviour and although he became aware of the need to involve his key managers and department heads more in strategic and operational issues, did not prioritise this and take appropriate action. Many employees found him increasingly difficult to get close to and share ideas. This was compounded by his preferred communication style which, when under pressure, was directive rather than consultative, especially with members of staff who were less confident or whom he did not wholly respect. During times of change, and periods of pressure, such uncommunicative behaviour patterns from those at the top of an organisation can be expected to result in organisational distress, a culture of blame and increasing lack of belief in the capability and suitability of those at the top to remain in post. In this case, the result was the untimely departure of, in normal circumstances, a very capable leader.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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How Leadership Can Develop Into Bullying: A Case Analysis

SHEILA WHITE

This article illustrates how a leader became a bully through the interplay of a range of systemic factors such as external pressures on the organisation and excessive expectations. Psychodynamic concepts are used to give insights into the defences used by the bully and fellow employees. Implications for practice include a risk analysis and recommendations for the management of bullying.

KEYWORDS: Systems, splitting, envy, projection, boundaries.

Introduction

There is ample evidence that bullying is damaging psychologically and physically to employees (Adams, 1996, Field, 1996). There is also evidence that bullying is costly to organisations in terms of increased absenteeism, low productivity, low morale, high turnover of staff and litigation costs (Rayner, Hoel and Cooper, 2002). Although we know much about the outcomes of bullying, we have little empirical knowledge about how bullying scenarios are generated.

In this article I draw on my research on workplace bullying, in a public sector organisation, to illustrate how bullying is an

outcome of a complex interplay of systemic organisational factors. These include (i) the external environment of an organisation, (ii) the internal organisational context such as culture and structure, (iii) group dynamics, and (iv) individual behavioural dispositions.

The article is in four parts.

1. A case study of bullying.
2. De-coding bullying at work: how psychodynamic concepts can aid an understanding of bullying.
3. An analysis of the described bullying scenario.
4. Implications for practice.

1. A case study of bullying

BACKGROUND TO THE CASE STUDY

The case study is taken from my research on the psychodynamics of workplace bullying (White, 2007). I was particularly interested in the motives of individuals within bullying scenarios, *e.g.* why bullies bully, why some individuals become victims and the role played by the audience, *i.e.* those who are aware of bullying.

Access to the organisation studied was through an employee who was concerned about the high levels of bullying he encountered at work. In negotiations with the HR director it was decided that I could look at bullying as part of an on-going study of stress and was invited to carry out semi-structured interviews on stress with volunteers from three teams, which the HR director identified containing possible bullying scenarios. Data was also gathered from incidental observations, from my emotional responses and those of interviewees. My feedback to the organisation was in the form of a report on a systemic understanding of sources of stress and coping strategies.

THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

At the time of my research the organisation was undergoing a programme of radical change with many of the changes being driven by external stakeholders. There were government pressures on management to introduce new working practices, *e.g.* to become more customer focussed, to be more accountable and to have a more diverse workforce. The pace of change required was rapid, giving little time for the assimilation of new practices into the systems and culture of the organisation before the next change initiative arrived.

Top management failed to acknowledge the impact of these changes on the stress levels of their employees. There were few outlets for the expression of stress and, as admitting to being under stress was not deemed to be acceptable in this culture, many of these feelings were repressed.

Furthermore, communication from the top of the organisation was often unclear and ambiguous. For example, an announcement of staff cuts was made at the same time as employees were being 'ordered' to work in a more healthy way and go home early. Employees had become increasingly cynical of dictates from top management. They did not feel valued by senior managers or within the organisation as a whole and so sought recognition from within their teams.

THE BULLYING SCENARIO

The scenario described was derived from interviews with members from one of the teams.

The team leader, who had been appointed from outside of the public sector and in the face of internal competition from within his team, was unfamiliar with the ways of working in the British Civil Service. The appointing top managers had high expectations of the new leader and he, in turn, had high expectations of himself and of the project for which he was now responsible.

I interviewed him, and some of his team, about a year after he had been appointed. By then he had firmly established his authority but his abrasive management style was unfamiliar to his team and not welcomed by them. He openly criticised staff in meetings. An interviewee likened his behaviour to being given a public flogging.

The leader identified very strongly with the project for which he was responsible. As a team member said: "You prove your allegiance to him

because he *is* the project.” Another interviewee added: “We are focussed on one thing only, getting our project through the next phase. It is what is dictated. That’s what our output is going to be and hell, or high water, won’t stop us from that objective. It’s quite brutal. There is a leader at the top and we go where he tells us for better or for worse. He has a cutting edge—you will bloody well do it.”

It became apparent from my work that he did not trust his staff but constantly tested them by suddenly making demands, as if to see how they would react. For example, just as staff were getting ready to go on holiday, he gave them extra work or changed the way he wanted things done. These actions created high levels of anxiety, resentment and disillusionment and reinforced how team members generally found the leader to be inconsistent. He could be very decisive but often changed his mind late into the decision making process. He could be charming but would suddenly become angry.

The leader was particularly angry when he heard that key staff were leaving his team, especially when he had had specifically trained them for particular tasks. The situation was aggravated by some staff who withheld information from him. This action may have been their covert way of ‘hitting’ back at the leader and certainly increased the pressure on him.

Generally team members did not feel valued by him and to cope with the high levels of anxiety, they took defensive action. Some staff had left; others were planning to leave, or had fantasies of escaping. One employee idealised him as a defence against her anxiety. In summary, the team had fallen into subservience, unable to speak out and challenge him overtly. Staff became increasingly isolated from each other and as the team became less cohesive, an impasse developed in the team dynamics, which limited the potential for healthy employee interaction.

Over time targets had begun to slip and there were increasing difficulties with recruitment to the team that had developed a reputation for being a brutal one in which to work. Employees who were looking for promotion perceived this team to be a risky environment, from the point of view of career development, and avoided it.

The scenario described raises questions as to how, over a period of just over a year, the newly appointed external ‘highflyer’, on whom top management had such high expectations, came to be experienced as a bully by his staff and how the team had developed a deeply negative reputation. So:

Why did this leader become a bully?

How did the organisational context facilitate bullying?

How did team dynamics foster bullying?

The next section outlines theoretical concepts which can aid an understanding of the complex nature of bullying and the concepts will then be used to examine these three questions.

2. De-coding bullying at work: how psychodynamic concepts can aid an understanding of bullying

A PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH

Central in applying a psychodynamic approach to bullying behaviour is an assumption that bullying occurs not just on a conscious level but on subconscious and unconscious levels too; that unconscious ideas and desires have a determining and motivating influence on a person’s conscious thoughts, emotions and actions. As Gabriel (1999) comments, each of us is often unaware of these influences as they may relate back to childhood and/or are generated in

response to past traumatic events and experiences.

Four core psychodynamic concepts are used here to examine the case outlined above: 'splitting', 'envy', 'projection' and 'boundary testing'.

SPLITTING

It is often observed how bullies appear to have a Jekyll and Hyde nature, a personality that shows extremes of character, charming to some and evil to others (Adams, 1996). In psychodynamic terms this characteristic reflects a 'splitting' on subconscious and unconscious levels.

'Splitting' means precisely that; splitting of an 'object', be that a person, a value, or a concept, into two different parts that are exclusively identified as 'good' and 'bad' (Stapley, 2006:56).

But why might bullies choose to see people and situations in this way as either 'good' or 'bad'?

ENVY

Victims suggest that the motive of bullies is envy (Seigne, 1998, Vartia, 1996). Envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it for that other person (Klein, 1957). The envy of a bully probably involves both 'stealing' and 'spoiling' something which the bully wants but which he, or she, sees the target of bullying as already possessing. As an example, bullies identify with objects, or with the goodness of others, which they then seek to take or 'steal', although such a decision may be taken on unconscious or subconscious levels.

Perversely, whilst they may then feel satisfied because they are identifying with the object,

or quality, of their desire, this may be insufficient to meet their needs. They may also have to get rid of their feelings of badness by 'spoiling' or 'poisoning' others. This toxic dynamic involves the concept of 'projection'.

PROJECTION

One way of getting rid of feelings of badness is to project such 'bad' feelings and vibes on to others. Projection here literally means throwing in front of oneself—rather like a light being projected on to a screen—those qualities, feelings, wishes, which the individual often refuses to recognise in him, or herself, on to another (*i.e.* the targeted) person. In this way the bully puts onto selected others his, or her, 'bad' feelings and feels better within him, or herself, for having done so.

BOUNDARY TESTING

When projecting their negative feelings on to others, bullies may also be testing them—for example, by criticising, humiliating, and undermining them (Field, 2006)—perhaps to see what they can get away with. At an unconscious level they are attempting to find someone who will become a 'container' for those feelings, *i.e.* someone who can own those 'bad' feelings on their behalf.

If, however, the target of the bully's projections has firm boundaries, such as a clear and realistic sense of self, they will be more able to stand up to the bully and resist the projections. However, if individuals have weak boundaries, as with a low level of self-confidence or sense of self, they are likely (perhaps unconsciously) to accept the negative projections of the bully and carry, or 'contain', such negative feelings for the bully. When this happens, the bully no longer has 'ownership' of those unwanted aspects of

his, or herself, and perhaps even feels fully justified by the bullying behaviour they exhibit because of the way the 'target' has, seemingly, taken-in the projections involved.

3. Analysis of the bullying scenario

Using these concepts I now look at the ways in which the organisational context and the team dynamics may have triggered, and perhaps sustained, the bully's behaviour.

The organisational context facilitated bullying through the following factors:

- External pressures and high expectations: envy and splitting

There were external pressures on the organisation to have a more diverse workforce. Appointed as an 'external', the bully came from a very different working background from his staff, and, with the high expectations heaped upon him, may have been envious of his staff's knowledge and familiarity with the organisation's existing systems and ways of working. In defending against the uncertainty and anxiety this may have provoked in him, he may well have identified very strongly with the team's project 'as if' it was an object for him alone to possess, control and successfully deliver and, through doing so, prove his worth.

Given his uncertainty, it may well have required him to diminish and denigrate the standing and role of his staff in order for him to feel good and more secure. In denying his dependency on others for his success, he perceived himself and the project to be 'good' and his staff to be 'bad'. Splitting into 'good' and 'bad' may have also been a defence against the potential for failure and shame intensified by the high expectations of top management and his expectations for the project.

- A clash of old and new ways: projection

The success of the team-based structure was dependent on keeping core expertise but the pay and promotion system had yet to be adapted to meet these needs. The bully seemed less able, than other leaders, to work through the difficulties this created, particularly in terms of generating loyalty within his team. He seemed to project these anxieties on to others as a means of defending himself against the possibility that he might actually be unable to keep key staff; they may, and did, let him down. He may also have projected his anxieties on to others as a means of defending himself against the possibility that he might be the cause of some of the difficulties being experienced in making the new systems work well.

- A repressive culture: projection and boundary testing

Negative aspects of the culture of the organisation, e.g. poor communication, repression of anxieties, lack of recognition and cynicism, were mirrored more in this team than in other teams. It would appear that the bully, unlike other leaders, was not able to work through these anxieties on behalf of his staff. One means by which he could defend against his anxieties about being in an unfamiliar culture and under high expectations from the top team was to project his anxieties on to others, testing them in different ways to find weaknesses in their boundaries and projecting onto others his anxieties for them to carry and 'contain' for him.

HOW THE TEAM DYNAMICS FOSTERED BULLYING

The four concepts, briefly outlined, provide some clues about why the leader began to work in bullying ways and the defences he utilised to protect himself from acknowledging his part in

creating the increasingly dysfunctional team he was leading. In addition, in this case, a vacuum of information and a vacuum of recognition contributed and fuelled the bullying behaviours observed.

- Vacuums of support within the team: fantasy Bullying occurs around vacuums in organisations (White, 2007) and in this case a vacuum of support developed beneath this bully. Created in two ways, (firstly, he was denied information from immediate staff and secondly, team members were submissive and were unable to work collectively to set boundaries for him), this vacuum, or void, made the leader feel even more insecure and anxious in his role as team leader. To defend against these feelings, his fantasies about 'his' ownership of the project and his expectations for it replaced reality and increasingly distanced him from those around him which in turn intensified the mutual anxieties that characterised this team's dynamics.

4. Implications for practice

This case analysis illustrates how a leader became a bully through an interplay of many different organisational factors, *e.g.* external pressures, inconsistencies in communication from top management, repression of anxieties, defensive responses of the leader to being in this organisational context, information blockages within his team, and other the defensive responses of individuals to the bullying behaviour. These findings would imply that for the prevention and management of bullying scenarios to be effective, an holistic approach is needed, *i.e.* one which looks across a wide range of issues, for example, identifying areas of risk, examining leadership styles and looking at the ways in which employees engage with their work and with others.

In summary: Bullying is more likely to occur in organisations where:

- There is a lack of appreciation of the value of human capital.
- There is little acknowledgement of psychological welfare.
- The culture of the organisation, or group, is unable to assimilate difference.
- Topics such as 'wellness' and mental health are platitudes rather than being of genuine concern.
- Communication is poor.
- Anxieties are repressed.
- Staff is new to the organisation.
- Clear boundaries are not set *e.g.* job descriptions are not clear.
- Expectations of performance are unrealistically high.
- There are vacuums of support.
- There is very strong identification with targets.
- There is a lack of group cohesion.

Given the contextual conditions shown above, the following generic recommendations are made for managing bullying scenarios and creating less toxic environments. There are no quick fixes and for actions to be effective they need to be context determined.

I. BOUNDARY SETTING AND CONTAINMENT

Firm boundaries need to be put in place if interventions to curb a bully's behaviour are to be successful, *e.g.* job descriptions clarified, complete with information regarding the legal obligations of line managers for the psychological welfare of staff.

Bullies channel much energy into defensive actions thereby giving themselves little opportunity to reflect on the impact of their behaviour on others. Reflective opportunities

need to be provided for them, e.g. through counselling, etc.

2. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

HR directors, mediators and line managers could benefit from a broader toolbox of knowledge that would enable them to understand the dynamics of bullying. This might include:

- (i) Knowledge of concepts such as containment, splitting, projection and boundaries, and how these can give different insights into the more personal aspects of leadership (Goffee & Jones, 2006) and the roles played by the followers of toxic leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).
- (ii) Knowledge of the subconscious and unconscious dynamics of organisational life, e.g. how impasses can develop in groups when individuals collude on subconscious and unconscious levels to defend against potentially toxic projections.
- (iii) An awareness of how organisational vacuums of support, such as delays in recruiting staff, overly slow or indecisive decision making, etc., generate the potential for bullying situations to take hold.
- (vi) An awareness that in times of constant and rapid change, whilst little time is allowed for mourning the passing of old ways, if the emotional processes of disruption and change are not acknowledged, anxieties will be repressed and may re-emerge as bullying.

Conclusion

The psychodynamic approach to understanding bullying offers a less familiar but nevertheless complementary one to the more conventional ways of studying bullying in organisations.

Rather than focussing on specific aspects of bullying, this paper illustrates how a bullying scenario arose from a complex interplay of factors, e.g. external drivers of change, structural, cultural and strategic aspects of the organisation, as well as the behavioural and emotional responses of the group and individuals.

Whilst the potential for the development of toxic bullying scenarios existed within the organisation not all the leaders there became bullies and not all the teams became toxic. The concepts of splitting, envy, projection and boundaries offered insights into the defensive responses used by the bully and team members. The bully tried to defend against the anxieties, generated within the organisation, within the team and within himself, in various ways such as splitting, projecting his feelings on to the team, and testing the robustness of the psychological boundaries of others. Within his team, not all members succumbed to his 'poisonous' projections and became victims but used a variety of defences, such as idealisation, fantasy and isolation, to counter their boss's bullying approaches.

The case briefly noted how when employees become emotionally disorientated there was a loss of effective engagement with others and with the tasks in hand, both of which adversely affected performance levels and personal well-being.

I have argued that through an understanding of the systemic nature of bullying, and of unconscious and subconscious processes in organisations, that the potential for bullying can be identified, preventative action taken, problematic scenarios more effectively managed and healthier working environments created.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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Organisational Helplessness in the Public Sector

DR JENNY KNIGHT



This article is about how an organisation can get 'stuck'—unable to change, despite wanting to change. The findings are based on a case study, and describe a particular form of learned helplessness that is applicable to whole organisations. The model explains the persistence of 'group-helplessness' in the public sector.

KEYWORDS: Change, learned helplessness, culture, self-defeating, defensive, morale, stuck organisations, toxicity.

Management theory, over the last couple of decades, has been dominated by the need for organisations to have vision, to be change-ready, dynamic, constantly improving and journeying towards excellence. Those in positions of influence in particular are expected to guide, direct, shape and enable their organisation to function effectively—but what if such guidance and direction is absent or 'stuck'?

This article explores why organisations may get 'stuck'; seemingly unable to make the right changes to ensure future success, despite knowing what is wrong and knowing what needs to change. It is a case study of one such organisation; a complex organisation where so much had changed, but nothing had changed as a result of

the changes. On the contrary, things appeared to be getting worse. This organisation displayed a particular kind of toxicity—damaging behaviours arising from a detrimental collective mindset.

The organisation

'Bandhill' Council delivers important services (housing, education and social care and health) to all groups in the local region, including the most vulnerable. Like many others in the early 1990s, Bandhill had been through large-scale change—a protracted merger of three organisations and three distinct cultures.

Approximately four years after the merger, and following a period of small scale changes in

staff, structures and job roles, a team of consultants were brought in by the Chief Executive to assess the culture and performance of the organisation. This was prompted by a sharp fall in performance standards in some areas, combined with data from staff surveys which suggested low motivation across the organisation. Managers and staff came together to hear the results of this assessment.

I was present at the meeting in my capacity as a consultant recently commissioned to design and deliver a leadership development programme for the Council. The consultants delivered harsh and highly critical messages, describing the organisation as process driven, transactional, incremental, operating 'silo' working and a provider of poor services. There was general agreement in the room that things needed to change.

What was of particular interest to me was how the consultants appeared to be merely confirming what staff already knew. Everyone seemed clear about the problems, and about what needed to change. It appeared, on the surface, very simple. From my perspective this 'illusion of knowledge' appeared to make people feel comfortable. I had a 'hunch' that, despite a prevailing acknowledgement that things needed to change, nothing much would. This organisation seemed to be 'stuck', despite knowing that it had a problem, knowing that it needed to change and probably being more than capable of doing so.

As a visiting consultant I asked myself the following questions:

- What is the most significant problem facing this organisation, which is the root cause of all the others?
- Why do employees appear to be locked into behaviours which are self-defeating?
- Do staff have anything else to say which would shed light on what is blocking good performance?

These questions were the catalysts for shaping a research study. Despite a range of data gathering exercises, the information the organisation had obtained about itself appeared to me to be somewhat limited. Descriptions of the organisation as inward looking, silo working etc., were worrying, given that the role of the organisation was to provide a wide range of critical outreach services for people in the localities served. What I was not clear about, however, was how these performance deficits had developed, *i.e.* what was the root cause? What in the history of the organisation had created these problems? There was no doubt in my mind that the majority of employees within this organisation were perfectly able to work and behave in different ways. So what was stopping them?

The field-work study

The purpose of the research was to find out what was stopping this organisation from making positive change and then to use this information in the formulation of a leadership development programme. Interestingly, and perplexingly, the information gathered by the team of consultants had not been acted on—things remained the same despite the recognition that there were behavioural and performance problems within the organisation.

The initial data collection revolved around the following questions:

- What is like working here?
- What, if anything, do you think is the organisation's problem?
- What is your relationship with or contribution to the way things are?
- What makes you happy working here?
- What makes you unhappy?
- When you are unhappy how do you get through your working day?
- What do you think needs to happen in this organisation?

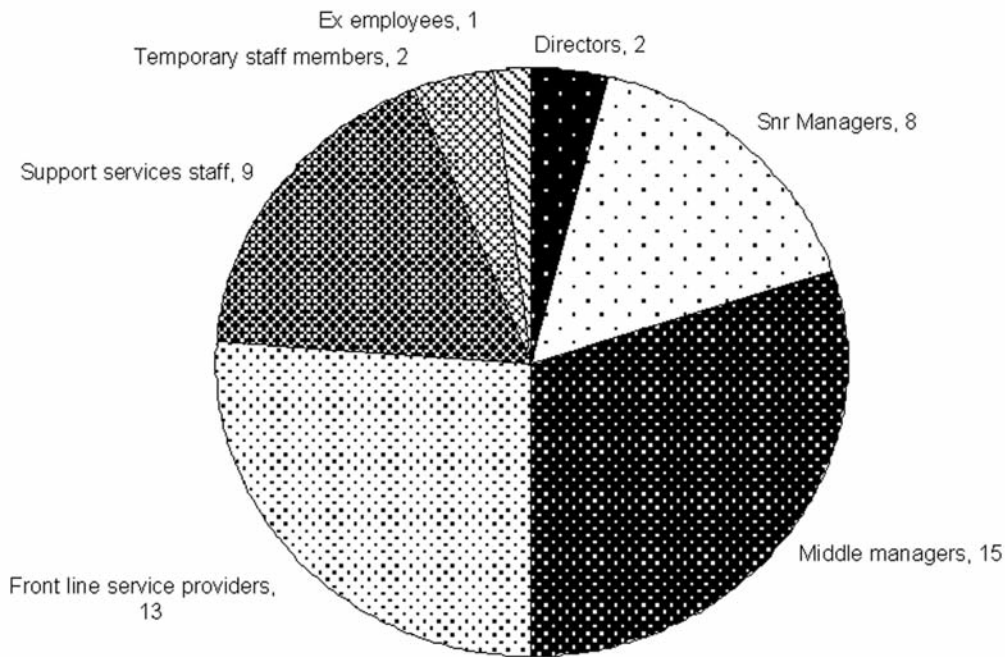


Figure 1: Overall breakdown of sample group

Fifty interviews were undertaken with people working at all levels in the organisation and across all departments. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours and I selected a representative sample of participants, who were invited to take part in the study. All accepted the invitation.

Initial responses

The responses were fascinating. In response to the first question *all* participants presented a negative, although unclear, picture of an organisation which was confusing, and where the rules were unclear. There was no deviation from this message. The following quote captures what people were saying:

The rules aren't explicit. It's a game. It's like Alice in Wonderland playing croquet . . . the hoops are soldiers, the balls are hedgehogs and the mallets are flamingos. The hoops walk around, the ball goes where it likes, the mallets are unwieldy. How do you know if you've won, or scored a point?

This message was repeated time and time again. There seemed to be a lack of understanding about the way things should be done; what was regarded as good performance and to be rewarded, and what constituted poor performance which would be sanctioned. This suggested a lack of a dominant *culture*.

Probably, the most straightforward and the most commonly held view of the definition of organisational culture is 'how things are done around here' (Atkinson, 1990). Atkinson explains organisational culture as reflecting the underlying assumptions about the way work is performed; what is acceptable and not acceptable and the behaviour and actions which are encouraged and not encouraged. Commonly used words relating to culture, according to Schein (1985), are '*shared*' or '*held in common*' such as norms, values, behaviour patterns, rituals, traditions. These descriptions provided me with my first clue—that in this organisation there was no shared understanding of how things were done. Whilst likely to be as a direct result of continuous change, this appeared to still be the case five years on from the most

significant change the organisation had experienced. Why might this have been the case?

One conclusion is that there remained a distinct lack of effective leadership in this changing organisation, resulting in a lack of collective vision, sense of purpose and clarity about expectations. Joyce (1999, 2000) describes how public services in the UK went through a very difficult time during the 1980s and 1990s, and Wilson and Game (2002) identify the most prominent themes underpinning Local Government changes and initiatives introduced during the 1990s, emphasising the high levels of change and uncertainty experienced across the sector during this period. Competition, democratic accountability, modernisation, diminished managerial discretion and an increase in external monitoring and auditing were established. Such changes will have affected morale, and the nature and quality of leadership, not only in Bandhill Council but more widely within Local Government as a whole, as employees found it increasingly necessary to defend their positions, compete for jobs and justify their corporate existence.

Busy, Busy, Busy ...

In response to the question ‘what, if anything, is the organisation’s problem?’ participants *all* described an organisation full of people who were not saying what they really thought and which was unable to change, but where everyone seemed very busy—as demonstrated by the following quotes:

- It’s like the emperor’s new clothes—no-one ever says the truth . . .
- . . . critical mass of ‘wreckers’ they maintain the anti-movement.
- Others don’t care . . . they are the status quoers . . .
- . . . ‘busy-ness. We are all busy. Why?

It was difficult to find out what participants thought they did not know—all those interviewed displayed high levels of suspicion verging, at times, on paranoia. None were able to give direct, or relevant, examples of what it was they felt unclear about. What *was* emerging from the data, however, was a pervasive *climate* of fear, suspicion and defensiveness. Furnham (1997) likens the notion of an organisation’s climate to the weather. Applied to organisations, the word may be said to relate to the prevailing ‘atmosphere’ surrounding the organisation, the level of morale and the feelings of belonging.

So far the work was revealing an organisation with a lack of shared understanding of the way things were done (culture), and, as a result, a pernicious climate of fear and suspicion had developed. It would be fair to say that the large-scale changes faced by staff had, to a significant degree, created this set of circumstances. Writers on organisational change provide a range of perspectives on the effects of change on individuals, some referring directly to the work of Kubler-Ross (1969) on personal reaction to trauma. For example, Senge (1999) tackles the issue of fear and anxiety in recipients of change, whereas Hayes (2002) provides models of transition and looks at changes in self-esteem experienced during transitions.

When asked what their relationship with, or contribution to, the problem was participants were not sure. Most did not feel it was their fault, although many began to question themselves about this:

- I’m part of the problem but not out of choice.
- I’m powerless—probably everyone you interview will say that...who is accountable?’
- I’m not part of it...but maybe I am.....What is it I have to do to be not part of it?’

Whilst maintaining a strong sense of self-esteem—evidenced by the lively engagement in the research process, and by the way partici-

pants refused to see themselves as directly contributing to the problem—interviewees appeared to have lost a sense of a way forward. They appeared to believe they were not to blame for the way things were although there was some acknowledgement they were now not helping matters. However, they did not appear to understand how they should conduct themselves. They talked of feeling confused, desperate, unclear about what was expected of them, unsure about what to do in order to ‘do the right thing’, etc. This confusion about their role and part in the organisation as a whole is likely to have militated against personal action to create positive change within such a ‘stuck’ and confused organisation.

Participants were surprisingly complementary about people when asked what made them happy working there! They talked of the good variety of people and of working with staff they trusted and respected. This seemed to contradict the earlier messages of mistrust, suspicion and confusion about the ‘rules’. Participants further contradicted themselves in response to the question ‘what makes you unhappy’ by describing the organisation as ‘two-faced’, full of ‘so much scheming’, and a place where it was not possible to live by your ethics:

I suffer when I know I’m not living by my ethics, but I can’t because of the memory of those who did live by their ethics.

(This respondent felt they were unable to behave in an ethical way, and that they needed to adopt covert personal strategies in order to ‘survive’ in the organisation).

Considering a ‘Dark’ side

Clements and Washbush (1999) stress the importance of examining the ‘dark side’ of

leader-follower dynamics to better understand the process of influence, and Lipman-Bluman (2005) describes toxic leaders as ‘predatory sociopaths’. Her suggestion that followers will resist challenging toxic leadership in order to feel safe is interesting in the context of the above participant’s comment. He was, perhaps, seeking to remain part of the ‘community’ by colluding with unethical behaviours (Lipman-Bluman, 2005).

Respondents talked of keeping their heads down and focusing on their own areas of work; acting bad behaviours out on others (*‘because they made me do it...’*) and sustaining relationships with personal ‘champions’ or ‘protectors’.

When asked what needed to happen in Bandhill for the future there was no consistent response. Respondents came up with completely contradictory answers—some suggesting that the organisation needed to start again; others saying that nothing more should change; others saying that people should make change happen—the word ‘change’ was used repeatedly, but in different ways.

The key messages, then, were:

- The organisation is confusing and the rules are unclear.
- ‘It’s not my fault’.
- The people are nice.
- The organisation is bad.
- I keep my head down and make sure I’m protected.
- I don’t know what needs to happen (based on a complete lack of consistency in response to this message).

It seemed to me that in order to find a ‘cure’ for this organisation, I needed to find a definition of its ‘condition’—the condition which was the root cause of all the symptoms. How the condition was contracted seemed reasonably

clear—as a result of change—but what was the condition? Was this a *toxic* organisation?

Helplessness, habit and homeostasis

The work on general systems theory (de Board, 1978) provides a possible explanation for the pervading climate in Bandhill. De Board notes how if an individual is under intense anxiety (which was the case for people working in this organisation during periods of change and uncertainty) it is likely that personal energy will be invested into defence mechanisms—strategies and tactics to remain ‘safe’ and, more importantly, employed! These may include a range of political behaviours such as withholding information, pleasing the most powerful, stealing others’ ideas, etc. This will reduce energy being available for legitimate work, *i.e.* providing high quality services for local people, and identifying areas for improvement. This may provide some explanation for the poor performance of the organisation and the perception that people were busy—perhaps busy defending themselves? (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1970). Jaques hypothesises that within the life of an organisation a collective defence against anxiety is one of the primary elements that bind individuals within the organisation together.

This provides some explanation as to why organisational change is so difficult; why it would appear organisations become ‘stuck’, and why loss of control will/can reinforce defensive behaviours resulting in more suspicion, more hostility and more aggression within Bandhill Council. And it may be fair to assume that defensive and protective behaviours become ‘how things are done around here’. In the absence of clear functional work norms, the cultural norm which became especially prominent is to ‘watch your back’, ‘take no risks’—hence reinforcing

the propensity for ‘silo working’ and enhanced self protection.

Where does ‘stuck-ness’ come from?

This organisation, then, appeared to be displaying a range of symptoms (*i.e.* poor performance and defensive behaviours such as ‘silo-working’) arising from a lack of shared understanding of the way things were done. It is highly likely that the significant changes described earlier had contributed to these circumstances.

The work on social defence systems pointed me towards *learned* helplessness, which is made up of the following critical components (Hiroto & Seligman, 1975):

1. Lack of clarity about the relationship between actions and outcomes:

In this organisation there was confusion about ‘the rules’ following rapid and unpredictable change initiatives.

2. Decrease in incentive motivation as a result of this lack of clarity:

Respondents made it clear in interview they ‘kept their heads down’ and took no risks, due to their distrust of the organisation.

3. Inability to learn when exposed to relationships between actions and outcomes:

When this study began five years after the merger, participants remained unclear about the ‘rules’ despite the fact that the significant change was over and, although smaller change initiatives were still being introduced, the organisation was in a period of *relative* stability.

4. Emotional change—anxiety and depression:

Although participants articulated their confusion and frustration about the situation, it would not be accu-

rate to say that they displayed high levels of anxiety or indeed depression. Interviewees were quite clear that it was not their fault, and that they felt that in any other circumstances they would be able to do an excellent job! An additional aspect of learned helplessness is, then:

5. The belief that anyone in this situation would be unclear and unable to influence the circumstances (Martinko, 1995) This is ‘universal’ learned helplessness, whereby the individual chooses to believe that *anyone* would experience the same lack of clarity ensures that their self-esteem remains intact.

BUT for how long can this go on? Hiroto and Seligman (1975) state that induced helplessness is trait-like; they acknowledge that the state of helplessness must have limits across time and situations. So why, five years after merger, when people had left the organisation and new staff had been appointed, were we still seeing the characteristics of learned helplessness?

Perhaps because it was being vicariously shared between colleagues with new people joining the organisation who were quickly learning ‘the rules’—*i.e.* that there are no rules except that you are helpless and cannot effect change, so why bother to try.

A dysfunctional spiral of helplessness

What could be described as a cycle of ‘vicarious helplessness’ is shown in the sequence which follows:

We watch others being helpless: we see others unable to make sense of their circumstances, leading to a state *where* . . .

We learn, through conversation, that we, too, are helpless in this situation: We talk about

it, and discover that the problems others are experiencing are not their’s alone—that we, too, are in a situation where we have little if any control, *and that* . . .

As a result of this belief we are unable to find solutions to problems either as individuals or as part of a group: Because we believe we are helpless, we experience ‘cognitive deficit’, so . . .

*We continue, for as long as we all need to, to remind ourselves that it’s not our fault, and that we are **all** helpless:* Thereby maintaining our self-esteem, and establishing strong and mutually supportive relationships with our colleagues who, of course, we regard as ‘great’ people! We are, after all, as the consultants stated, an ‘inward looking organisation’.

Reviewing this organisation in this way has enabled me to identify some of the key components likely to be necessary for organisational health and long-term success.

Metamorphosis

I have described an organisation that had become a closed system as a result of large-scale change. It was a place where people sustained relationships and worked hard (everyone was ‘busy’) to maintain their self-esteem by re-visiting the fact that they were helpless—they believed that they could not act because they did not know the ‘rules’. As a consequence, organisational and operational performance suffered as people directed their efforts towards self protective and defensive behaviours rather than towards functional collaborative work. This organisation could be described as in a toxic state of ‘unresourcefulness’—an organisation in a state of *Universal, Vicarious Learned Helplessness*. (Hiroto and Seligman, 1975; Martinko, 1995).

One means of countering such inward-looking and self-defeating processes is to think of the organisation as an ‘open system’ within which

varying skills, knowledge and experiences are applied to the 'conversion' of an organisation's expressed vision and strategy into outputs and outcomes by the organisation (Zagier-Roberts, 1994). In order to develop an 'open system', thereby reducing feelings of anxiety due to lack of clarity, a collective understanding about the organisation's environment and a collective vision for the future needs to be developed.

This would then enable staff working on the 'boundaries' of their organisation, or in their part of the organisation, to see the reasons for, and then reach compromises for, the good of the whole. To create such a meaningful vision it is necessary to 'scan' the environment within which the organisation is operating, for example:

- What is driving change, both externally and internally?
- What unique contribution does our organisation make to society?
- What do our stakeholders want?
- What threats or opportunities emanate from our stakeholders?
- What do I personally and passionately want to make happen?
- Are we heading in the right direction, given possible political, economical, social and technological change?

The process of 'scanning' will throw up data, which helps to clarify meaning and purpose about what we do and how the way we do it matters. This thinking process should be taking place at *all* levels in the organisation so that everyone understands the problems, issues and future challenges to a greater or lesser degree. The level of understanding creates a willingness to work in collaboration and to make sacrifices and reach compromises where appropriate. Such an approach informs the development of a meaningful organisation vision, with identified strategies to ensure success.

For Bandhill, it was clear that at the point of large-scale change there was little collective understanding about what mattered and why it mattered as individuals defended their positions. As a consequence the organisation suffered because it failed to engage with its workforce.

Conclusion

This case is about an organisation where people had few expectations about the possibility of changing the internal culture; a culture they acknowledged and had agreed was ineffective and 'stuck' and which was suffering the dysfunctional and toxic consequences of high levels of uncertainty as a result of change. Insight into just how such a condition had arisen was gained through a number of in-depth interviews focusing on the underlying systemic dynamics, which seemed to have generated and maintained such a dysfunctional working culture.

Organisations can become 'unstuck' through developing a shared sense of what matters; a shared vision for the future; a shared acceptance that small or large scale change is about improvement and development in response to emerging priorities; a feeling that all staff are part of setting direction and achieving the correct outcomes and that, given their knowledge of the context and parameters, they can be trusted to do the right thing. They can become organisations where there is a shared understanding of why and how things are done.

The intervention is likely to have constructive consequences for people who are no longer taking small-scale decisions 'in the dark', and are more able to accept the need to make—and engage constructively with—continuous change. This is the start of developing a culture of distributed leadership (West-Burnham, 2004) and enhanced team working (Robbins, H. and Finlay, M., 1997), and will reduce the need for

those defensive behaviours generated as a result of uncertainty and anxiety.

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But Who Shall Stand Before Envy? Towards an Aetiology of Envy in Organisational Life

MARIE KANE



Envy is a powerful yet relatively uncharted dynamic in organisational life. It does not feature on the cultural radar of most leadership/management development work, yet in terms of loss of key staff, derailment of work, quenching of creativity, the operation of envy has formidable powers to disrupt organisational functioning. The article advocates a clearer acknowledgement of the dynamic of organisational envy with some suggestions to counter its toxic effects.

KEYWORDS: Envy, shame, creativity, toxicity, envious leadership, succession planning.

“Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy?”

(Proverbs: 27: 4).

This article asserts that the dynamic of envy plays a covert and insidious role in organisational life and that it needs to be more formally recognised and confronted. It is argued that envy particularly attacks creativity in the workplace, and that a more informed approach to this phenomenon would help alleviate its toxic potential.

In my organisational work over the past 20 years I have been impressed by how often the expression and/or the fear of envy appears as a significant, if relatively uncharted, dynamic in what Egan (1994) termed ‘the shadow side’ of organisational life.

Whilst in recent years there has been some illuminative writing on this subject, it has been largely confined to the sphere of interpersonal relations, and there is not as yet a generalised recognition and understanding of the operation of envy in the workplace. What appears especially interesting from the perspective of leadership and management development is the continuing reluctance to move this issue from the sphere of private, individual experience to a more open place where it could be considered as a recognised component of organisational dynamics and, as such, subject to scrutiny and challenge.

In the 1990s the phenomenon of workplace bullying became widely acknowledged and provided a context within which individual

experiences of bullying could be situated and understood. Prior to this, bullying had been largely seen as an unfortunate individual experience, happening outside the realm of organisational policy and action.

I believe that we need a similar ‘surfacing’ and delineation of the dynamic of envy in organisational life. Although the envious attack is depressingly ubiquitous and distressing, and often a salient component of toxicity in organisations, we need a more rigorous examination of this phenomenon as, without this understanding, individuals remain isolated, bewildered and stunned by its manifestation, unable to situate their experience within a wider framework.

Obholzer notes that:

Although there is a substantial body of work on envy in intra and interpersonal relationships, there is little written about its manifestation in institutions. Yet is it clear that envy in institutional processes is one of the key destructive phenomena, particularly in relation to figures in authority. (1994: 44).

The three brief cameos below describe manifestations of envy in organisational life.

Cameo One

A young worker is very keen and enthusiastic. He seeks to develop his understanding by attending courses and seminars (often in his own time). He has hopes to develop the service the organisation provides—he is conscientious and hard working and very well liked and appreciated by the service users and peers. His manager, however, pours cold and contemptuous water on all his training and ideas and enthusiasm. After a year of feeling squashed and denigrated, the young man leaves the organisation.

Cameo Two

At an international conference on organisational dynamics, a workshop presenter explored a compelling case about John, a Chief Executive from a private sector organisation who had been recruited specifically to revitalise a failing transnational organisation and who had been patently successful in delivering this goal. After only 18 months, however, John was obliged to leave the organisation, ‘brought down’ by a combination of a few Board members protecting vested interests and the tacitly supported undermining of his authority by an internal rival. A measure of John’s effectiveness and integrity was the fact that the employees of the organisation had so respected his leadership that they called for a strike to seek his reinstatement.

Cameo Three

At a charged and painful meeting of an organisational working group which was exploring a sustained internal attack on its externally very successful new venture, a puzzled and bewildered voice asked: “*Why is the organisation shooting itself in the foot?*” This was indeed the key question. The new venture had had the enthusiastic backing of the organisation’s members who had long called for this kind of engagement with the external world and for this kind of extension of the work of the organisation—yet when this new venture was established, and widely acknowledged to be an exciting and hopeful new avenue for the organisation—it was undermined and eventually rendered inoperable by some elements within the organisational leadership through a combination of denigration and the fostering of spurious internal competition.

The phenomenon of envious spoiling is widespread and a regular feature of individual and organisational consultancy work—and

features largely in the gossip and grapevine of organisational life—yet somehow it maintains a position in the ‘shadow side’, as there is little open discussion and analysis of the operation of envy at work.

What is common to the scenarios outlined above and what are the features of an envious attack which distinguish it from other dysfunctional organisational dynamics? Is this dynamic to be subsumed under the general heading of ‘bullying’ or are there distinctive features which we can identify and which merit special attention?

Defining ‘Envy’

Envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it.

is Klein’s description in her landmark study of envy and gratitude (1988:181). Spoiling and denigration are fundamental components of envious feelings, as the apparent or imagined success of the other person can cause a distress in the envious person which seems to be only alleviated by an attack on the envied person or the work of that person. There is something uniquely shameful and malignant about envy because the envied person (colleague/leader) is resented for what is admirable about that person—their capabilities, their achievements, personal qualities—not for any injustice or cruelty which might conceivably be seen as some kind of justifiable provocation.

More recent work on envy (Wurmser & Jarass, 2008) has explored the deep and often hidden, often unconscious, sense of shame and diminishment in the envious person, and how the success or attributes of another person seems to throw into bitter relief the seeming absence of these qualities in the envious onlooker. Rather than feel an almost unbearable

sense of diminishment, this ‘other person’ has to be made to pay for arousing these corrosive feelings. These envious feelings, however, must remain hidden at all cost as, whilst it is felt that one can be legitimately angry and that one can own up to jealousy and rivalry (at a push), envy is so deeply shameful that exposure is profoundly humiliating and the envious person will go to any lengths to deny having these feeling, indeed, the denial is often so profound that these envious feelings are not allowed to emerge into the conscious thinking of the envious person.

Lansky notes:

. . . . being exposed as envious poses, in and of itself, the danger of mortifying shame, often the shame accompanying exposure of the self as envious, is unbearable.” (2008: 31).

Because of the hidden and shameful nature of envy, its operation in organisational life is covert, poisonous and manifest in surprise attacks which erupt from the shadow side in unforeseen and malevolent forays.

Envy as an attack on creativity in organisational life

Explorations of envy in organisational life do not feature on the cultural radar of most management/leadership development work. However, in terms of loss of key staff, derailment of work, quenching of creativity, demotivation, pain and suffering, the operation of envy has formidable powers to disrupt organisational functioning as the three cameos illustrate. In order to minimise the nefarious effects of envy, there needs to be a clearer acknowledgement of its existence.

An initial step could be to identify situations that are likely to stir up envious and destructive feelings, and a key feature of these situations is the exercise of creativity. Ambrose clearly stated

a maxim which provided useful insight into my own organisational experience and many of my clients. He wrote:

Creativity nearly always engenders destructiveness in one form or another, and shifting the status quo in an organisation is sure to lead to rivalry and other negative feelings in some quarters.

(Ambrose, 1989: 150).

There is something about someone taking up their full authority and creativity and making something happen which we can find difficult to bear, perhaps because their very success seems to highlight failings in ourselves which then generates feelings of inadequacy. Creativity entails changing the known order of things; it requires courage and initiative, but this very proactivity can arouse a negative reaction in others who resent this ability. The creative person has broken rank, moved outside the corral, and, in our colloquial but telling language, needs to be *cut down to size, put in their place*. (The Japanese use a more brutal metaphor: “*The nail that sticks out gets hammered down*”). We know that this is so and our instinctive fear of being ‘hammered down’ can act as a cautionary brake to our creativity and potency, depriving our organisations, as well as ourselves, of the exercise of our full powers. For example, a team member may hang back from offering much needed leadership in a particular situation for fear of the negative consequences which might follow an exercise of proactive leadership.

Organisational consequences of denial of envy

The highly successful, attractive and generally well-liked manager of a residential care establishment had turned round the failing institution, greatly increasing service provision and garnering some national awards in the

process. She then found herself the subject of an anonymous complaint to the relevant regulatory body. A full investigation found no evidence of malpractice. A further anonymous complaint was made the following year—again the manager was cleared of any malpractice.

She left the organisation after the completion of the second investigation, disillusioned and dispirited as her Director had failed to take seriously her suspicion that the complaints were spoiling tactics from two disgruntled staff members. How might this have been managed differently? Had her Director been able to acknowledge the possible operation of an envious attack, that recognition and acknowledgement in itself would have supported the manager who would have felt less alone in withstanding the onslaught.

It is as if there is an unspoken deal that we all need to stay roughly in the same place in our work groups—colleagues should not outshine each other; subordinates must not outshine the boss—any breaking of ranks, any truly creative act disturbs the order of the known and can stir up competitive and envious feelings. Garland describes:

... the universal human tendency to position the self in relation to others along a scale, usually conceived of as vertical, of relative power, worth, weightiness, significance or importance—judging oneself to be either ‘one up’ or ‘one down’.
(2006: 2).

Hierarchical rankings remain hugely important in organisational life, despite valiant attempts at distributed leadership (Bennett *et al*, 2003; Spillane, 2006) and flatter structures. Position in the hierarchy is hotly contested. Any creative act which impacts upon a person’s notional ‘vertical scale’ will disturb and disrupt their sense of positioning and may be resented for so doing. If a colleague shines, it can be felt to be at the expense of our own position, and the more

insecure a leader is in their own authority, the less able is s/he to tolerate the competence of colleagues.

Alain de Botton's treatise on *Status Anxiety* explores the idea of this internal comparative barometer and insists on the importance of relative position in terms of self esteem:

If our position on the ladder is a matter of such concern, it is because our self-conception is so dependent upon what others make of us. Rare individuals aside (Socrates, Jesus) we rely on signs of respect from the world to feel tolerable to ourselves. (De Botton, 2004: 4).

Within our organisational group, our relative position is clearly visible and the jockeying for position and status is a source of much organisational conflict.

In one organisation I consulted to, the rivalry between two opposing 'wings' of the organisation threatened to absorb the vital energy which needed to be more usefully deployed in developing service provision. Both wings represented important and valid directions which the organisation needed to encompass. However, if the leader is seen to clearly favour and value one set of ideas at the expense of the wider set of organisational values, this will exacerbate underlying rivalries. The feelings of inclusion and exclusion, of being favoured and being devalued, need to be addressed and worked through, otherwise there is a risk of envious sabotage and a loss of a potentially creative integration.

The Nefarious Impact of an Envious Leadership

There is nothing inherently wrong with rivalry and competition—in healthy doses these can add excitement and challenge to the workplace. A leadership, however, that is envious of

creativity and the successor generation, can exert a truly nefarious impact on the work and potential capability of the organisation. The three cameos at the head of this article illustrate how elements in the leadership stratum were unable to tolerate creativity, competence and enthusiasm in the successor generation, and moved to extinguish what was perceived (consciously or unconsciously) as a potential threat which might unsettle their own position and weaken their own control of the organisation.

This is where we can most clearly observe the perversity of the envious impulse as what was extinguished was that which was identified by the other stakeholders in these cameo organisations as being what the organisation most needed. However, strands within the leadership of these organisations perceived that the espousal of these new ideas and practices would result in a lessening of their own organisational standing so they moved to extinguish the perceived threat and thus protect their own status and position.

In the international conference of Cameo 2, participants sought to find some reason to locate the blame in John, the highly competent CEO, for his own downfall. There was a heated atmosphere in the seminar group as participants argued over the reasons why John—patently successful in his role—had, nevertheless, been forced out of the organisation by a small clique within the Board. Despite the clear evidence presented that John was an able and competent CEO (for whose reinstatement the mass of employees were prepared to strike), there were people who argued that John must have been the author of his own demise—he must surely have been lacking in political skill to have been the subject of such an attack.

The contemplation of pure envy seems to confirm our deepest fears about its destructive potential—*“who shall stand before envy?”*—no wonder it is the most feared of

the Deadly Sins, as Chaucer's (2005) Parson pointed out.

How envy impedes succession planning

An important challenge facing those in leadership positions is that eventually they have to cede power and control to the successor generation. For people whose self-image is very closely identified with the positional power of their organisational role, this indeed poses itself as a truly difficult challenge, and there are some who find this too difficult to achieve; they are unable to envisage the diminution of their own power and position and are, therefore, unable to contemplate the identification and development of their successors. The development of successors feels too close to the realisation of their own demise and, therefore, needs to be avoided. The emergence of talent and creativity in the next generation becomes too difficult to contemplate. This can result in a stultifying lack of emergent talent as 'successors' are chosen precisely because they cannot pose a real threat. Loyalty is valued and rewarded rather than talent and ability. For an organisational leadership envious of creativity, potential successors can only be tolerated as long as they *know their place* on the organisational ladder; they may be allowed to play a relatively subsidiary role, as long as they do not challenge the supremacy of the leader/s:

I certainly believe that envy, particularly on the part of older established members towards newer recruits to the organisation, plays a major and problematic part in institutions. For example, it takes the form of initiation procedures and offers of 'supervision' that are at least unconsciously intended to squeeze creativity out of the newcomer and to get them institutionalised as soon as possible. (Anton Obholzer, personal communication, 2006)

Some conclusions

Envy, rivalry, competitive feelings are part of the human condition. Do we just need to accept this, and hope these emotions can be contained within organisational life without causing too much damage, or are there actions which can be taken to dilute their toxic effect? I am proposing that, just as organisations got tough on bullying and harassment, organisational leaders, consultants and human resources personnel need to get tougher on the untrammelled operation of envy which can drain the creative potential from an organisation and inhibit the identification and development of what Heifetz (1994) called 'the adaptive challenge', a key task facing the leadership of the organisation.

There are three key steps to developing a strategy to address the toxic effects of envy.

1. Clearly acknowledge the existence of

envy. The first and all-important step in dealing with envy in organisational life is to acknowledge its existence. The recognition and understanding of the dynamic of envy is, of itself, *doing* something and will provide a context and a basis from which individual experiences of this phenomenon can be better understood. I am proposing a more thoughtful approach to these aspects of organisational functioning, however, not a glib labelling of every oppositional move as an envious attack. All of us are subject to feelings of envy, whether or not we are able to acknowledge this. We have different ways of managing our envy—rather than feel the deeply unpleasant emotions of envy, some people may seek to stir it up in others, projecting their own envy into other people (*e.g.* a recent by-line advertising a new "impossibly thin, incredibly powerful" laptop proudly urges the buyer to "*Inspire Envy*").

Another person however will deprecate and minimise their own achievements for fear of stirring up the envious feelings in those around them. Other people will greatly inhibit their own potential through fear of imagined retribution.

2. Prepare people for possible negative reactions to the manifestation of creativity.

While there will be some people with a benign view of human nature who vigorously deny or deprecate the manifestation of envy in organisational life, in my experience, the majority of people find it helpful to consider the possible negative consequences which might result if they exercise their creativity on the 'forewarned is forearmed' basis. Ambrose (1989: 150) noted that "Any change agent embarking upon the transition of a social system from an established status quo to a new and more effective form of functioning ... can succeed only if he is able to tolerate problems of these kinds."

Undertaking a 'risk analysis' which formally includes a consideration of the possibility of envious attacks and possible counter-strategies may go some way towards lessening their impact should such dynamics be experienced. It could be very useful to ask individuals to consider how their creative organisational initiatives might be experienced by others in the organisation, and to help them conduct a 'stakeholder analysis' which would identify people who might oppose their initiative and to consider how best to manage this opposition.

3. Reframe envy as a source of useful intelligence.

A helpful approach to envy is to see it as a conduit to useful information about one's own aspirations and the aspirations of colleagues/managers. Thus we need to

interrogate ourselves to seek to determine precisely what it is that the other person seems to possess that we would like for ourselves and why we might be experiencing the envious feelings. We are then in a position to start to think about how we could access this for ourselves, rather than seek to spoil it for the other person. Orbach & Eichenbaum (1987), for example, ask us to consider envy as the signpost to our own desire. This powerful concept of envy as a signal about our own needs uncovers the potentially empowering energy of envy if we can but understand this intelligence and refrain from acting it out in an unreflective way.

This kind of internal, reflective conversation will be more difficult to engage with on an organisational level but would involve creating an internal organisational climate where the exercise of creativity and the ability to be proactive can be more widely accessed by more people.

Egan's (1994) assertion that 80% of managerial time is spent dealing with the irrationalities of the organisation points to the need for a more psychologically informed approach to organisational life which is alert to the consequences of below the surface organisational phenomena, including hidden envious attacks and which, through thoughtful anticipation and understanding of such dynamics, can help detoxify the organisational climate.

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Toxic Celluloid: Representations of Bad Leadership on Film and Implications for Leadership Development

JON BILLSBERRY & GARETH EDWARDS



*This article relates seven cinematic examples of toxic leadership to the purpose of explaining how the practitioner might use them for leadership development. The article begins with an explanation of toxic leadership before a discussion about how film might be used for development. The main body of the article centres on the depiction of toxic leadership in seven films (*Path to War*, *The Bounty*, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, *Swimming with Sharks*, *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Erin Brockovich* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*) prior to an explanation of their usage in developmental settings.*

KEYWORDS: Toxic leadership, ACE framework, cinema, incompetence, rigidity, intemperance, callousness, corruptness, insularity and evilness, toxicity.

Introduction

The notion of toxic leadership can dichotomise the discussion of leadership into images of good and bad leaders. In doing so, it can mask the complexity of toxic leadership and promote simplistic leadership analysis. To avoid this trap in a developmental environment, we advocate the use of feature films as these can be selected to show a more subtle and complex picture of toxicity. Keeping the development practitioner's perspective in mind, this article identifies and critically reviews seven cinematic examples of toxic leadership; the goal being to provide a set of examples that practitioners can use in devel-

opmental settings. Seven films have been chosen to illustrate each one of Kellerman's (2004) seven dimensions of 'bad' leadership: Incompetence (*Path to War*), Rigidity (*The Bounty*), Intemperance (*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*), Callousness (*Swimming with Sharks*), Corruptness (*The Smartest Guys in the Room*), Insularity (*Erin Brockovich*) and Evilness (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*). These films are individually described using Walton's (2007) ACE framework which brings out the interplay between the actors, the context and the environment in shaping toxic leadership. The article ends with some suggestions for how these films might be used in a developmental setting.

Toxic Leadership

The phenomenon of ‘toxic’ or ‘bad’ leadership has been articulated from a number of different perspectives. Firstly, it has been described as a psychological problem. This perspective centres on toxic or bad leaders possessing a narcissistic personality. Narcissists, as Maccoby (2000) suggests, are independent and not easily impressed. They are innovators and are driven in business to gain power and glory. In a toxic sense, this leads to a sensitivity to criticism, poor listening skills and a lack of empathy. However, there are also positive sides with regard to leadership, where narcissistic leaders tend to have good visionary ability and are able to attract followers (Maccoby, 2000). This is a direction explored by Lipman-Blumen (2005) who asks the question, why are followers attracted to toxic leaders? Lipman-Blumen argues that these leaders appeal to people’s deepest needs, playing on their anxieties and fears, on their yearnings for security, high self-esteem and significance, and on their desire for noble enterprises and even immorality. This suggests, therefore, that followers hold a level of responsibility for toxicity in leadership, something that is explained by the work of Kellerman (2004).

Kellerman’s (2004) conceptualisation sees ‘leadership’ as a relational perspective, in that it involves followers as well as leaders and suggests that seven dimensions of ‘bad’ leadership exist (Kellerman, 2004: 40-46):

- Incompetence—the leader and at least some followers lack the will or skill (or both) to sustain effective action. With regard to at least one important leadership challenge, they do not create positive change.
- Rigidity—the leaders and at least some followers are stiff and unyielding. Although they may be competent, they are unable or unwill-

ing to adapt to new ideas, new information, or changing times.

- Intemperance—the leader lacks self-control and is aided and abetted by followers who are unwilling or unable to intervene effectively.
- Callousness—the leader and at least some followers are uncaring or unkind. Ignored or discounted are the needs, wants, and wishes of most members of the group or organisation, especially subordinates.
- Corruptness—the leader and at least some followers lie, cheat, or steal. To a degree that exceeds the norm, they put self-interest ahead of the public interest.
- Insularity—the leader and at least some followers minimize or disregard the health and welfare of “the other”; that is, those outside the group or organisation for which they are directly responsible.
- Evilness—the leader and at least some followers commit atrocities. They use pain as an instrument of power. The harm done to men, women, and children is severe rather than slight. The harm can be physical, psychological, or both.

Before explaining how Kellerman’s dimensions might be illustrated using films, it is important to note Kellerman’s warning that we must explore context as well. To take account of this, we will be using Walton’s ACE Framework to describe the presentation of toxic leadership in our chosen films. This framework explores the issue of toxic leadership from a wider perspective and promotes analysis through three lenses—behaviour, context and environment (Walton, 2007). Walton’s ACE framework and Kellerman’s dimensions provide useful tools when exploring toxic leadership on celluloid. Film enables us to explore the concept in a wider context than that of just ‘the leader’; it enables us to explore context, environment, as well as leader-follower relationships and behaviour.

Development through film

Over the past ten years, there has been an explosion of interest in using cinema to examine management and leadership behaviour. Indeed, so much so, that film is now seen as a core part of the armoury of management developers. When feature films are used for leadership development, the learners do more than just see things with their own eyes; they can richly interact with the unfolding drama. Directors design their feature films to engage the viewers and use various tricks and techniques to draw viewers into the plot and to warm to the characters. Compared to television programmes, this is a more urgent endeavour. In films, the engagement has to be almost instantaneous, which has obvious benefits for using these tools with practitioners as they are drawn into the process very quickly. Film vividly and captivantly brings leadership to life; think of the 'I am Spartacus' scene or Maximus (Russell Crowe) rallying his troops at the start of *Gladiator*. Such compelling material encourages the individual interpretation of leadership situations. The way that people respond to these scenes helps them understand themselves and this, in turn, encourages practitioners to find their own understanding of leadership.

Furthermore, although most feature films are either fictional or directors' interpretations of real events, most endeavour to portray realistic human behaviours even in fantasy settings. Hence, films are not just open to varying interpretation, but they can mirror the complexity of human behaviour. Films can vividly show the interplay of thoughts, emotions and desires, people's development and transitions, the relationships between individuals and interactions with environments, and the ambiguous nature of causality, which accords with Walton's (2007) ACE framework. In short, there is a richness and complexity to the portrayal of leadership on the screen that is difficult to replicate with any other medium.

Cinematic Representations of Toxic Leadership

Having set the scene, the remainder of this article describes how feature films can be used for illustrating toxic leadership with practitioners. Each section begins with a concise synopsis of the plot, followed by an explanation of how the dimension of bad leadership is portrayed in the film bringing out the interplay of actors, contexts and environments in the manner advocated by Walton (2007). Each section ends with a list of other films that could be used to illustrate the same dimension of bad leadership in case the developer seeks alternatives or wishes to highlight different aspects of the concept.

Incompetence (*Path to War*, 2002, John Frankenheimer).

Synopsis. *Path to War* dramatically recreates the events in the White House during the 1960s as the USA became more deeply involved in the Vietnam conflict. In particular, the film follows the decision-making of Lyndon B. Johnson (Michael Gambon) who, after being elected with the biggest majority in US history, stumbles step-by-step into a protracted war that derails all his other policies. The film follows the key moments in the war, drawing out the decision making that led America to these points.

Toxic Leadership. In this film, Johnson is sympathetically depicted as a well-meaning and bright person who wants to do the right thing. He does not want Americans to die—he desperately worries about every man he sends into battle and personally signs every death notice to families—and he wants to help the people of South Vietnam. But he lives in the shadow of Kennedy's ghost: "President Kennedy did not lose Vietnam and I'm not going to lose Vietnam." He wants to 'nip it in the bud', but the guerrilla war escalates and the decision makers in the White House are unaccustomed to fighting revolutionary soldiers in a jungle. He uses reason to make decisions, but fails to realise the

passion and the 'hearts and mind' drive of the opposition. The backdrop to the war decision making is the social rights movement, anti-poverty legislation and later, the anti-war campaigns. In this film, incompetence is portrayed as an error that bright and well-meaning people can fall into when the circumstances place them in a situation that they are detached from and do not understand properly.

Alternatives. Incompetence is depicted in many ways. It is ridiculed in films like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Oh! What a Lovely War*, *Trading Places* and *Anchorman*, but taken more seriously in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, *A Bridge Too Far* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

Rigidity (*The Bounty*, 1984, Roger Donaldson).

Synopsis. *The Bounty* is the third cinematic retelling of the mutiny on HMS Bounty during the ship's voyage to Tahiti in 1787-1789. The core of the film focuses on this voyage which, by and large, was uneventful, followed by an account of the three months in which the Bounty stopped over in Tahiti. During this stopover many of the crew develop relationships with the local girls. Towards the end of this visit, Bligh (Anthony Hopkins) realises his crew has lost a lot of its discipline, so he clamps down and tries to re-instil naval behaviour on the ship. This ultimately leads to mutiny.

Toxic Leadership. In this version of the story, Bligh is portrayed as an archetypal British naval commander who maintains discipline with excessive punishment. Nevertheless, his character is written sympathetically as an individual trained and brought up in the English naval tradition of authoritarian leadership. To some extent, Bligh is portrayed as a victim of the system. However, his desire to circumnavigate the globe is shown as a personal weakness because it threatens the safety of the ship. In addition, his prudishness and overreactions are depicted as character flaws.

Despite all these factors related to Bligh, the film suggests that the causes of the mutiny do not lie simply with Bligh's authoritarian clamp-down on leaving Tahiti, but with the contrast of the discipline with the idyllic lifestyle the sailors had led on the island. These sailors were used to the discipline, but following three months of paradise their expectations and motives had changed and they were primed to mutiny.

Alternatives. Similar plotlines can be found in *Crimson Tide* and *Battleship Potemkin* where rigidity causes uprising. In a similar vein, the community leader in *Pleasantville* is shown as a rigid and inflexible individual trying to rally the community to resist change.

Intemperance (*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, 1992, Nicholas Meyer).

Synopsis. As the second Star Trek film, *The Wrath of Khan* develops a story that first appeared in the TV show. In the original programme, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) had captured and exiled super-humans from a eugenics war to a remote planet. When the USS Enterprise revisits the area some years later for scientific testing, Kirk comes face-to-face with the remnants of the exiled superhumans, led by Khan Noonian Singh (Ricardo Montalban). The lush uninhabited planet Kirk had exiled them to had shifted in its orbit and become a desert. Khan seeks revenge on Kirk and uses his enhanced intellect to plot the exiles' escape. He obtains the upper hand over Kirk, but rather than withdraw when damaged, he keeps tracking Kirk to gain his revenge, which ultimately leads to his, and his crew's, doom.

Toxic Leadership. Khan is a leader with very high levels of physical and intellectual power. When he uses these, he succeeds. But he comes undone when emotion takes over. Kirk gains the advantage because he is able to antagonise Khan and play to his emotions. In this state, Khan's intelligence is overridden by his emotions and his intemperance comes to the fore. This portrayal of intemperance is particularly interesting

because it is the product of more than personal weakness. It is fuelled by the years of exile on a desert planet during which time Khan broods about the man who consigned him there; Kirk. Hence, this is a more complex depiction of intemperance than commonly depicted in celluloid and it is interesting that it is the weakness that brings down an otherwise brilliant leader.

Alternatives. Other examples of cinematic intemperance leadership flaws include Sonny (James Cann) in *The Godfather*, Calvera (Eli Wallach) in *The Magnificent Seven*, Captain Michael Brennan (Nick Nolte) in *Q&A*, and Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) in *Gladiator*.

Callousness (*Swimming with Sharks*, 2003, George Huang).

Synopsis. *Swimming with Sharks* is a satire on the Hollywood film industry. The key idea underpinning the film is that the quickest way to the top is on the coat tails of a major player. Guy (Frank Whalley) joins a production studio as the personal assistant to Buddy (Kevin Spacey). Buddy is depicted as an extremely callous manager who revels in insulting everyone around him: "My bath mat means more to me than you do". Guy grows tired of the constant abuse and humiliation and eventually kidnaps and tortures Buddy, whose job and persona he acquires.

Toxic Leadership. Buddy's callousness is encapsulated in one particular scene early in the film. It is Guy's first day in the company and Buddy asks him for *Sweet 'n' Low* to sweeten his coffee. Guy cannot find any and brings him *Equal* instead. Buddy responds with the following diatribe: "Do me a fucking favour. Shut up and learn. Look, I know this is your first day and you don't really know how things work around here, so, I will tell you. YOU HAVE NO BRAIN. No judgement calls are necessary. What you think means nothing. What you feel means nothing. You are here for me. You are here to protect my interests and to serve my needs. So, while it may look like a little thing to you, when I ask for a packet of *Sweet 'n' Low*, that's what I want. And

it is your responsibility now, to see that I get what I want. Am I clear?" This extract can be interpreted in several ways. The most obvious is that Buddy has no concern for Guy's feelings. Another is that Buddy knows exactly how this will impact on Guy's feelings and he is doing it deliberately to bully him into subservience. In any case, Buddy's callousness is presented as a personality flaw. Interestingly though, when the previously mild-mannered Guy becomes an executive, he adopts the persona of Buddy which raises the question of whether it is the person, the place, or the interplay of the two that creates such callous behaviour.

Alternatives. A very similar role to Buddy is Miranda Priestley (Meryl Streep) in *The Devil Wears Prada*, who indulges in near-identical abuse of a new personal assistant. Other examples are Bill 'The Butcher' Cutting (Daniel Day-Lewis) in *The Gangs of New York* and Gordon Gecko (Michael Douglas) in *Wall Street*.

Corruptness (Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room, 2005, Alex Gibney)

Synopsis. This documentary charts the rise and fall of Enron, an oil trading company that became one of the greatest corporate scandals in American history. The filmmakers use interviews, along with corporate audio and video to describe both the reasons behind the company's extreme lifecycle and the impact it has had on people, both inside and outside the corporation.

Toxic Leadership. As a portrayal of corruptness, this film projects the notion of a 'moral vacuum' upon the minds of Enron's senior executives and the capitalist system in which the organisation operated. Although the executives are shown as money-grabbing and heartless, they are also shown as victims of a business environment where increasing profits have to be delivered every year.

Alternatives. There are many alternative films that can be used to illustrate corruptness.

These include *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Chinatown*, *L.A. Confidential*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *The Untouchables*, *American Gangster*, *Scarface*, *The Big Heat* and *Hoffa*.

Insularity (*Erin Brockovich*, 2000, Steven Soderbergh).

Synopsis. Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts) is a twice-divorced single mother who, desperate for work, joins a small legal firm. She soon discovers a series of devastating illnesses in a local community that she is able to link to contaminated water being deposited by a California power company. Erin Brockovich works with the community to file a suit against the power company, which they win.

Toxic Leadership. In this film, the polluting corporation is only seen through its deeds: the pollution of a local community and their attempt to hush it up, and the behaviour of their lawyers. In this way, the director (Steven Soderbergh) depicts the executives of the corporation with the same insularity in which they regard the community they are destroying. These are faceless executives whose evil intentions are amplified by their absence. In terms of learning and development, this absence is fascinating as it allows the viewer free rein to ponder the behaviour and motives of the insular organisation.

Alternatives. Other films that depict insular leadership include *Gandhi* (i.e. General Dyer and the massacre at Amritsar), *Thirteen Days*, and *Roger & Me* (although Roger Smith's insularity appears to be a contrivance of the director).

Evilness (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 2005, Mike Newell)

Synopsis. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* is the fourth of the Harry Potter series. In this film, Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) and his friends are in their fourth year at Hogwarts School for Magicians. One of the first scenes in the film is the Quidditch World Championship which is

interrupted by the appearance of Death Eaters, followers of the evil Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes), who wreak havoc and bring fear to the world of wizards. The main plot line in the film is based around the Triwizard Tournament in which the champions of three wizard schools must compete. Harry finds himself in the tournament and has to confront several life-threatening challenges. When he finally reaches the prize, along with Cedric Diggory (Robert Pattinson), the two are whisked off to confront Voldemort in a classic good-versus-evil fight.

Toxic Leadership. The menace of Voldemort is a theme running throughout this film; his very name striking fear in the hearts of wizards who dare not speak it. Although Voldemort is an extremely powerful wizard, he has been weakened by his clash with Harry (and his parents) when Harry was an infant. Still weakened, he must remain hidden. However, the memories of his past deeds still haunt the wizard world. A few symbolic deeds, such as the havoc at the Quidditch World Championships, encourage his past followers who band together again and spread fear of Voldemort's return.

When Harry comes face-to-face with Voldemort at the end of the film, Voldemort's evilness is displayed when he kills Cedric and Harry barely escapes with his life. In the series of films (and books), Voldemort's evil is depicted as a wizard with great ability who was corrupted by his power. This is an evil person who attracts followers by playing to people's weaknesses of greed and ambition.

Alternatives. Examples of other evil leaders in films include Adolf Hitler (Bruno Ganz) in *Downfall*, Genghis Khan (Omar Sharif) in the eponymously titled film, Idi Amin (Forest Whitaker) in *The Last King of Scotland*, Darth Vader (James Earl Jones and Keith Prowse) in three *Star Wars*' movies, and Sauron in the three *Lord of the Rings*' movies.

Concluding Remarks

The selected movies were deliberately chosen to illustrate how feature films from a wide variety of backgrounds can be used to illustrate the variety, prevalence, complexity, pervasiveness and dysfunctionality of toxic leadership. The range of genre includes fantasy, science fiction, historical drama, contemporary drama, dramatic reconstruction and documentary. These films portray toxic leadership in different ways including reports of actual events, dramatic scenes of toxicity, and films where the toxicity is in the background. By choosing this wide range of films, the purpose was to give the leadership developer a sense of the variety of opportunity afforded by using feature films.

In all cases, the toxicity illustrated in these films defies easy explanation. Each viewer will interpret the characters, contexts, situations, causations and implications differently. In doing so, the use of these films allows the developer to situate toxicity in relation to the learners' own values and attitudes thereby making what can be experienced as a theoretical subject far more personal and relevant.

The films can be used in different ways. Perhaps the most natural way of using films is to show clips to illustrate aspects of toxic leadership as a prompt for discussion and application to the organisation in question. An alternative approach, which increases the viewer's involvement, is to ask practitioners to study the whole film prior to a development session guided by questions (see Billsberry and Gilbert, 2008).

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Control Myths: How Followers Unwittingly Keep Toxic Leaders in Power

JEAN LIPMAN-BLUMEN



This article presents a typology of Control Myths, unconscious mechanisms carrying the force of societal norms that operate to control followers' behaviour and guarantee devotion to toxic and non-toxic leaders alike. These Control Myths, linked to powerful human needs identified by Freud, Maslow, and others, drive followers to police their own actions and inaction. Toxic leaders are thus freed up to inflict serious and enduring harm without impediments. The article presents both individual and group strategies for breaking the stranglehold Control Myths have on followers' behaviour.

KEYWORDS: Toxic leaders, control myths, rationalisations, noble vision, human needs, societal norms, destructive legacies, achievement, safety, inferiority, isolation, self-esteem, aesthetics, self-actualisation, immortality, transcendence, personal strategies, reframing, testing reality, alternative information, group strategies, coalitions, accountability, whistleblowers, term limits.

With some exceptions (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a,b, 2008; Maccoby, 2004a,b; Riggio et al, 2008; Walton, 2007a,b) the growing literature on toxic leaders focuses tightly on the leaders themselves (De Vries, 1997; Maccoby, 2004; Kellerman, 2004). True, we need a better understanding of what makes toxic leaders tick to head them off at the pass. Nonetheless, concentrating exclusively on the myriad ways that toxic leaders harm their followers not only exaggerates the leaders' power but also obscures how followers unwittingly sustain them.

At first glance, this might sound like 'blaming the victim'. Clearly, leaders in all arenas, from corporate to military, have substantial formal resources at their disposal to promote, demote,

discharge, even detain and decapitate us, symbolically or, on occasion, physically. Nor are they obliged to rely simply on the overt tools tied to formal authority. They can also draw upon their informal arsenal to intimidate, ignore, and otherwise incapacitate us.

Nonetheless, begging the readers' indulgence, I shall argue that many of us do not need leaders to make us toe the line. Instead, we do it on our own, using Control Myths that germinate from the ordinary rationalisations we give ourselves for our inaction. Having tasted the narcotising weed of Control Myths, we also convince others to follow suit.

Rather than blaming the victims, my two-fold goal is to free them: first, by exposing the hidden forces we followers use, initially on ourselves

and then on others, leaving us vulnerable to toxic leaders; second, by suggesting some rudimentary tools for sundering our chains.

Toxic Leaders' Longevity

Granted that leaders can be pretty powerful, still we followers are not mere weaklings, either. Yet, the track record is clear: Followers often tolerate toxic leaders and for surprisingly long periods of time despite the apparent harm they are suffering. Hitler's death-dealing reign lasted from 1933 until his suicide in 1945. Mao ruled China from 1949 until his death from natural causes in 1976, and Stalin led the USSR from 1928 until 1953, expiring peacefully in his bed. No need to recount the lives snuffed out, the miseries inflicted.

Hitler, Mao, and Stalin are just the big boys, with guns and tanks to back them up. But, what about the smaller guys, the toxic leaders we witness daily, corporate, governmental, third sector, and religious leaders, without armies and without atomic stockpiles? Lord Conrad Moffat Black strode the international media stage from 1986, when he purchased the *Daily Telegraph*, until his forced resignation as both CEO and chairman of Hollinger International in 2003, accused of bilking the company of £99m. Another example: Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee, enjoyed a scandal-ridden career for 21 years. Samaranch retired in his own sweet time. His still-enthralled IOC bid him a fond adieu by renaming the Olympic Museum, in Lausanne, Switzerland, in his honour.

Toxic Leaders' Destructive Legacies

Not only do many toxic leaders have great longevity; they also strew great destruction in

their wake. Jeffrey Skilling and Kenneth Lay, of Enron, Jean-Marie Messier of Vivendi Universal, and Cardinal Bernard Law, Archbishop of the pedophile-plagued Boston Archdiocese all left their organisations in extremis, if not in extinction. And these are just a few front-runners in the long cavalcade of toxic leaders.

Clearly, many toxic leaders have both staying and slaying power. Yet, the nagging question remains: How do they do it? Why do their followers, who clearly outnumber them, often by the millions, continue to tolerate, even to venerate, them?

While past attention has been riveted primarily on how toxic leaders control followers, this paper draws attention to one set of mechanisms—Control Myths—by which followers control *themselves* and others. By shouldering the leaders' work of keeping the followers in line, self-controlling followers, despite their complaints, leave toxic leaders free to go merrily on their destructive way.

Control Myths: A Two-Step Process

Control Myths emerge through a subtle two-step process. First, followers shape a set of *rationalisations*, by which they convince themselves that they *cannot* resist or overthrow a toxic leader. Rationalisations usually take the form of pragmatic reasons or simple reality assessments—like the need for a paycheque—that seem reasonable enough at first glance. Not surprisingly, toxic leaders eagerly egg them on. They reinforce these rationalisations by baring their organisational teeth, cajoling the followers, or sometimes seductively inviting them into the charmed circle of the decision-making elite.

Second, these rationalisations gradually grow stronger, reaching full strength within the followers' superego. There they rigidify and function as unconscious *Control Myths*. Nestled

deep in our unconscious, Control Myths gradually gain the inhibiting force of societal norms. In this new and stronger form, Control Myths warn followers that they **must not** resist the toxic leader's harmful agenda, lest they suffer dire consequences. In this way, the rationalisation that we need this particular job hardens into a normative Control Myth, warning us that too many career changes listed on our résumé signal our inability to keep a position. The transformation from personal explanation to powerful societal norm has occurred unnoticed.

Because Control Myths operate deep within our unconscious, we followers march to their muffled drumbeat hardly noticing that the parade leads straight through the prison yard, to a customised cell of our own making, one we unwittingly enter of our own accord and casually slam shut. Before long and despite our pain, we followers imperceptibly have trained ourselves, and frequently our comrades, to "shut up and put up" with the toxic leader.

By allowing these Control Myths to stifle our resistance to toxic leaders, we followers free up the toxic leaders' efforts, time, and resources. Liberated from patrolling the dike of their followers' acquiescence, these pernicious leaders can concentrate full bore on their game plan.

The Fountainhead of Human Needs

Our rationalisations for tolerating toxic leaders that eventually morph into powerful Control Myths flow from the deep-seated fountainhead of our human needs. An impressive list of theorists, from Freud (1959) to Fromm (1941) to Becker (1973, 1975) to Maslow (1954, 1971), has described these needs as the source of human action. Less commonly have these needs been viewed as the wellspring of our *inaction*.

Initially we explain our behavior to ourselves and others through rationalisations linked

to our basic human needs for biological and physiological sustenance, for safety, belonging and love, and for self-esteem. Our rationalisations also flow from our cognitive and aesthetic needs, and ultimately from our yearning for self-actualisation and transcendence. At first glance, these explanations ring true, primarily because they reflect the surface of reality.

As these commonsensical rationalisations rigidify into deeply held Control Myths, they convince us of our personal limitations. They speak to us with the indisputable force of societal norms that we violate at our peril. Hidden from view, these Control Myths undermine our ability to resist toxic leaders. We use them to regulate not only our own behavior, but that of other potential resisters.

A Typology of Control Myths

We can identify at least seven general categories of Control Myths. We expect that the reader can point to many others.

Type 1, Physiological/Achievement Myths: *Control Myths that cause us to worry about losing our livelihood and other benefits that we need to meet our (and our family's) physiological needs and society's achievement standards*

Type 1 Control Myths feed on our situational fears (Hankiss, 2001), those fears stimulated by the routine daily events that threaten us. The media report the economy could falter at any moment, jobs are becoming scarce, or the housing market is in meltdown. As responsible adults, we worry that there are bills to be paid or that our college-bound children and grandchildren need our help.

Type 1 Control Myths, like their six cousins, warn us against violating important social norms. For example, they caution us against jeopardising our livelihoods and our careers, lest we fail in our socially-expected 'good provider'

roles. They caution us that rebelling against leaders who control our organisational and professional lives also can prevent our reaching the achievement norms set by our society.

Followers realise that the leader's resources far exceed their own, primarily because the leader holds the keys to the institutional coffers. Remaining in the leader's good graces may allow us to share in these resources, thereby helping us vault society's high achievement bar. In good times, that can mean tasty treats from the leader's benefits' platter, ranging from our mentor's advice and political support, to promotions, options, and opulent retirement packages, and the list goes on. In bad times, loyalists know they are less likely than their rebellious colleagues to encounter pink slips (P45's) in their mailboxes.

Type 2, Inferiority/Safety Myths: Control Myths that make us feel inferior to the omnipotent, omniscient leader and convince us the leader will keep us safe.

This set of Control Myths revolves around our perception of the leader as hero and saviour. By contrast, we view ourselves as weaker and less knowledgeable. Magnifying the leader's strength and wisdom allows us to rest confidently in a cocoon of presumed safety. Such a leader can protect us from our enemies, as well as from a catalogue of other disasters, be they natural, technological, social, or political. Some examples: "The leader is stronger and knows more than I do." "I shouldn't challenge the leader because I'm not privy to the intelligence s/he has which may be the reason for the leader's seemingly toxic action."

Self-medicated in this way, we accept our infirmities as naturally as preadolescent children acknowledge their dependency on their parents' reassuring power. We take comfort from the presence of our strong champion, who knows and acts in our best interests, or so it seems. Protection by an all-knowing and powerful

leader also absolves us of learning and maturing, not to mention growing stronger and more self-sufficient.

Because we often perceive leaders, particularly charismatic leaders, as endowed with divine grace or 'mana', we dare not challenge them. Their sometimes vaunted connection to a higher power only intensifies the intimidation we feel. When we believe the gods favour the leader, challenging that favoured hero risks the gods' anger, as well.

When we believe we are less knowledgeable and weaker than our heroic leaders, we also tend to conclude they have our best interests at heart. Yes, the leader loves us and won't let anything bad happen to us. Nonetheless, much like the loving parents of adolescents who demand their children leave the party by 10:30 p.m., provoking sneers from their classmates, these 'stronger, wiser' leaders may assess our 'best interests' inaccurately, especially in changing contexts.

Of course, we might eventually chafe under the yoke of our saviour's directives. Still, we remain silent and immobile, knowing our paycheck will arrive on time, and the roof will stay in place over our heads.

While the leader is wise, the followers are no mere dupes. We note uneasily from the corner of our eye that these same heroic strengths and wisdom the leader uses to protect and help us today can easily be turned against us tomorrow. So resisting our saviour's directives can be hazardous to our organisational, political, sometimes even our physical health.

Type 3, Isolation/Self-esteem Myths: Control Myths instill us with the fear of other serious repercussions, including social death by isolation or exile from the charmed circle (i.e., the Garden of Eden) and loss of self-esteem

Type 3 Control Myths draw their potency from the fear of devastating repercussions: social death by isolation, expulsion from the

group, possibly exile from our profession or industry. Our deep-seated needs for belonging and self-esteem are at grave risk. The reprisals that mark us as traitors and non-team players, warranting expulsion, are especially intimidating.

These consequences are particularly grave because we humans cannot survive outside the social group and remain human for very long. Social death, with its real-life documented pain (Alford, 2001), can be far more terrifying than physical death, whose threat we cushion by euphemistic images, often adorning it with perfumed garlands of immortality. Exiled from the group, we lose our identity and our sense of self.

Challenging the leader lumps us with 'the others', the non-followers who, toxic leaders insist, contaminate the pure, exemplary world they are trying to create. So, we, too, become contaminated, pariahs whom members of 'the chosen' must avoid at all costs. When our resistance drives the leader to tear up our membership card, we automatically become targets, caught in the cross-hairs of the leader's displeasure. Labeled 'the other', we lose our standing in the group and, with it, much of our self-esteem derived, as it is, from our reflection in the eyes of significant others.

Type 4, Status Quo/Aesthetics Myths: *Control Myths that warn us against disturbing the status quo that satisfies our need for order and aesthetics;*

Type 4 Control Myths help to maintain the status quo, that complex but orderly and aesthetic arrangement of distinctive roles, responsibilities, rights, and expectations we all recognise as society. Our human need for orderliness and aesthetics pushes us to uphold the status quo. In fact, we frequently consider *taking action* to restore order or protect beauty. Only rarely do we notice how these needs compel our *inaction*.

The *status quo* provides stability, assuring us

that we can count on all the accepted social arrangements and promises upon which we have built our life. What was true when we retired last night is true this morning, as well. Whoever challenges the leader is, *ipso facto*, questioning the social arrangements by which we order our lives, at least within the purview of the leader. Challenging the boss' dismissal of a worthy colleague constitutes an attack on the structure and authority—indeed, the very heart—of the organisation.

We all recognise the leader/follower dyad as a power relationship (Lipman-Blumen, 1984), integral to the power structure of the society in its many permutations. Power relationships have flourished since the woolly mammoth's era, and they're not likely to die off very soon. Besides, power relationships have their function: They offer the weaker members of society protection and the stronger members certain compensatory entitlements. And that's only part of the story, a story of such historical gravitas that it does not require repeating here.

The *status quo* garners protection wherever it can, resisting all efforts to change it. The power balance between leaders and followers lies at its core. In fact, when one leader is overthrown, followers tend to install a new leader, but someone recognised as leader nonetheless. That happened after the French Revolution, its call for 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' notwithstanding. In the late 1960's and early '70s, a similar dynamic occurred during both the student revolution, with its call for 'flower power', and the Women's Movement, with its deliberately non-hierarchical structures. Paradoxically, despite a new leader's previous identity as a follower, in this new role, the follower's mantle is inevitably discarded and replaced by leaders' robes. Thus change is permitted while order is restored.

Type 5, Meaning Myths: *Control Myths that reveal the complexity of life and reassure us that, because the leader knows more than we*

do, our need to understand and find meaning and beauty in our lives will be met;

Type 5 Control Myths remind us that the complex world in which we all live requires a skilled navigator. Otherwise, how do we make sense of such complexity? So, swearing allegiance to the toxic leader who knows the scoop, who's 'been there, done that', reassures us that we can count on this leader, even if we must put up with some actions and policies we despise.

Leaders pledge to satisfy our deep need for understanding and meaning. They claim they can wrestle with the big questions of life and guarantee us the key to unlock the mystery of our unique lives.

Without meaning, our lives have little point. In the worst of complex circumstances, we still seek meaning, if only to explain our suffering. The wisdom in Nietzsche's well-known contention that "those who have a 'why' to live for can bear almost any 'how'" captures the essence of Type 5 Control Myths. When leaders promise to help us find meaning in our lives, we readily succumb, quelling our urge to challenge their toxic actions and attributes.

Type 6, Self-actualisation Myths: Control Myths that help us avoid the drudgery and responsibilities of leadership, thereby liberating us to pursue self-actualisation while simultaneously satisfying society's achievement norm;

Type 6 Control Myths pledge we can devote ourselves to fulfilling our potential, to doing what pleases us. Rooted in what Maslow called our need for 'self-actualisation', they caution that overthrowing the toxic leader will inevitably force us to fill the leadership void. For most of us, that means forfeiting our more self-indulgent dreams. In addition, self-actualising is crucial if we are to meet the achievement norm set by society.

By choosing self-actualisation, we are opting to do our own thing, while the leader takes action and decisions in our name. Leadership,

after all, is not just red carpets and rubbing shoulders with nobility. Leadership demands relentless work. Much of the time, leadership is pure drudgery, boredom, and loneliness, with occasional heart-thumping terror. So, why not let someone else attend boring budget meetings and engage in tense contract negotiations, while we ponder a solution to the Riemann Hypothesis? But the tradeoff is grim: gaining our freedom to self-actualise in exchange for accepting whatever choice—toxic or constructive—that the leader makes on our behalf.

For some small set of individuals, leadership offers self-actualisation. Leadership then becomes an end itself. Yet, leadership without a larger purpose beyond one's own self-fulfillment ultimately proves empty for that leader and dangerous for others. For the very best of leaders, leadership is but the mechanism by which a larger purpose is achieved. Yet, how do we tell the players without a scorecard?

Type 7, Immortality Myths: Control Myths that entice us with promises of ennoblement and immortality by participating in the toxic leader's 'noble (if flawed) vision', thus fulfilling our need for transcendence.

While most of the previous Control Myths primarily targeted our weaknesses, Type 7 Control Myths speak to our most positive strengths: our human yearnings for ennoblement and dreams of immortality. This final set of Control Myths also draws strength from our need for self-actualisation, but, more significantly, from our need to transcend the confines of our narcissistic egos. And we meet our needs for transcendence and immortality by dedication to a cause greater than ourselves, one that benefits not simply those we love, but those we don't even know, maybe even the dreaded 'other'.

Immortality Myths beckon us to complete some critical piece of this unfinished world: eradicating poverty, eliminating cancer or

Alzheimer's disease, maybe vanquishing hunger. The list is long. These myths are singularly seductive because they speak to our better angels, to that noble, if sometimes somnolent, core within each of us. Leaders who urge us to join their Peace Movement touch the epicenter of our humanity. Not surprisingly, we are extremely vulnerable to such leaders.

But here's the rub: Immortality Control Myths are fraught with immense danger, the danger of mistaking a toxic leader's grandiose illusion for a noble vision (Lipman-Blumen 2005b). How do we avoid falling for the leader's tantalising vision of restoring a wounded nation's former glory, when it actually veils a darker, more sinister goal of genocide? How do we ferret out the seeds of toxicity within the still pristine vision or pinpoint the moment when an authentically noble vision mutates into a toxic enterprise?

Immortality Control Myths are hard to shuck off. We commit ourselves wholeheartedly because the leader's goals seem so pure, so ennobling, so worthy of our complete dedication. Because Immortality Control Myths address our nobler spirit, they make us feel good, unselfish, and authentic. The added bonus of shining immortality renders them quite irresistible. The deep commitment these myths command is hard to renounce before their fulfillment. So we hang on, desperately hoping we are mistaken about the leader's toxicity.

Breaking the Stranglehold of Control Myths

By heeding the Control Myths, we followers learn to stifle our impulses to challenge toxic leaders. If we are to resist, perchance unseat, toxic leaders, we must dredge these inhibitors from our unconscious, acknowledge them, neutralise them, and view ourselves as courageous, 'can do' constituents. The following strategies

are aimed at breaking the power Control Myths have over followers.

Some strategies can vaporise Control Myths while they are still rationalisations. Others re-examine and restructure them in ways that enable us to break free. Although there are no easy answers, let's examine a few strategies we can use on our own and some others that call for a group.

PERSONAL STRATEGIES

Strategy 1: Rethinking Ourselves: Because behaviour begins with thinking, the language we use to *think about ourselves and others* facilitates or inhibits our taking action. So, perhaps the first step in dealing with toxic leaders—or any leader, for that matter—is to think of ourselves not as passive *followers*, but as agentic *constituents*, people who 'set up' or 'found' something. As founders, we gain ownership that followers do not have. With ownership comes the right to demand change.

Strategy 2: Reframing the Situation: Reframing how we *think* about a situation also helps change our *feelings* about our ability to respond. Cognitive behavioural therapy (Beck, 1979) offers a useful perspective: Correcting our irrational, incorrect thinking about a seemingly impossible situation promotes a more realistic assessment of our circumstances and our ability to cope with them. We realise we can break the problem down into manageable, sequential steps. We switch from feeling incompetent to competent. An effective response now seems possible.

Timing is also important: Reframing our rationalisations *before* they rigidify into Control Myths that are harder to dredge up from our unconscious lessens our feelings of disempowerment. We are more likely to discover alternative paths. For example, try reframing our

rationalisation *from* “I cannot challenge the leader because I cannot afford to lose this job” *to* “Helping the leader to avoid this blunder will make the leader recognise me as a valuable sounding board he can’t afford to fire.” Reframing the situation encourages positive, comfortable action.

Strategy 3: Testing Reality: Many of our immobilising rationalisations are based on misinformation. Instead of remaining immobilised by the thought of losing your current position, investigate other opportunities in your field to ensure a soft landing. Instead of worrying about imagined reprisals, investigate what consequences, if any, other protesters actually suffered.

Strategy 4: Tapping Alternative Information Sources: Believing that the toxic leader is basing her decision on information to which you do not have access can prevent you from acting. Develop your own alternative sources of information. Besides knowledge gleaned from savvy colleagues and outsiders, the Internet is a limitless well of information. The truism ‘Knowledge is power’ can give you wings.

GROUP STRATEGIES

The following strategies can help constituents join forces to take action against a toxic leader, either by limiting the destructive behaviour, changing it altogether, or by unseating the leader.

Strategy 1: Identify Like-minded Associates: Determine who else shares your concerns. Bringing these folks together will reinforce your own sense of reality and help you develop a group strategy. After meeting one-on-one, convene the whole group. If, in this

process, you discover no one else agrees with your assessment, don’t just ride off solo into battle, Don Quixote style. Instead, engage in a ‘watchful waiting’ strategy (also recommended for treating some prostate cancers) to determine if you are being paranoid or if there is genuine cause for concern—or both.

Strategy 2: Form a Coalition: We all know there is strength in numbers. Enlist the most respected opinion leaders in the group. Confronting a toxic leader as a group, rather than individually, is more likely to impress that leader with the substantial support for your position. A group confrontation creates witnesses, thereby eliminating a ‘he said, she said’ situation. In addition, the leader will find it harder to eliminate an entire group than one Lone Ranger dissident.

Strategy 3: Counsel the Leader Early: Stop the leader the first time she makes a toxic decision or engages in destructive behaviour. Offer to counsel her, with feedback and benchmarks. Alerting the leader that constituents are monitoring her behaviour may make her think twice before acting. If the toxic behaviour persists, urge the coalition to demand changes with definite time lines and clear penalties.

Strategy 4: Create Structures for Holding Leaders Accountable: Schedule regular accountability sessions, whether they take the form of executive sessions for a relatively small number of senior people or Town Meetings at which a larger constituency questions the leader. Firm, but non-hostile, inquiries usually produce the best results.

Another structure for holding the leader accountable is a Constituents/Employees Advisory Board, with rotating membership. The members should be selected by the larger body of constituents, not the leader whose behaviour you are trying to reshape.

Strategy 5: Institute Policies for Protecting

Protesters and Whistleblowers: When a clear and safe process exists for registering complaints about a toxic leader's behaviour, protesters and whistleblowers are more likely to emerge. Confidentiality and legal protection for protestors must be integral to the policies.

Strategy 6: Mandate Term Limits:

Setting term limits lets leaders know they don't have lifetime tenure. Looking to a specified time when they must step down can have a very sobering effect on all leaders, good and bad. Term limits remind leaders they need a solid reputation to ensure their next position. Or, if they are stepping back into the same organisation, envisioning their future reception as a peer among former abused constituents can hold toxic leaders in check.

Strategy 7: Create a Transparent Leader

Selection Process: Even when a small, select committee or board makes the final decision, an open selection process helps to ensure that leadership candidates are completely vetted by all levels and groups of constituents.

Strategy 8: Alert the Media:

Bringing in the media has its own risks, given that the media understandably have their own agenda. Sometimes, however, shedding light on the toxic practices is the only way to curtail them.

Strategy 9: Oust the Leader:

If confronting the toxic leader doesn't yield results, the coalition's next step should be to develop a strategy for unseating the leader. Ousting the leader requires the support of many groups, internal and external. So expect to work hard and plan discretely, lest alerting the leader to the threat prompts him to mobilise a counterattack.

Strategy 10: Abandon Ship:

Sometimes it becomes apparent that your most stalwart, courageous efforts are doomed and/or the

costs—physical, emotional, political, professional, or financial—to you or your family are too great. Then it is time to leave and seek a more positive environment. You've given your best! Hold your head high!

In sum, strong constituents are the best antidote to toxic leaders. Yet, unconscious Control Myths, operating with the force of social norms, exercise an insidious hold over followers. The result: Followers keep themselves in line. Only by confronting these immobilising Control Myths and seizing the initiative can constituents detoxify or, if necessary, remove destructive leaders. This paper suggests two sets of strategies, one for individual constituents, the other for constituents who band together to oppose toxic leaders. *Bon chance!*

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Prof. Lipman-Blumen is the author of seven books, including *The Allure of Toxic Leaders* (Oxford University Press), *Connective Leadership* (Oxford), *Hot Groups*, with Harold J. Leavitt (Oxford), and *The Art of Followership*, co-edited with Ron Riggio & Ira Chaleff (Jossey-Bass).

Dealing with the Inevitability of Constraints: Toxic Sources?

MICHAEL WALTON



This article suggests that triggers for toxic behaviour may arise as a consequence of how leaders deal with the inevitability of workplace constraints and personal disappointments. A simple framework is introduced as one means of codifying possible leader reactions and describing the type of toxic behaviour that could follow.

KEYWORDS: Toxic leaders, toxic leadership, tempered radicals, free radicals in the workplace, toxicity at work.

Chained or unchained freedom?

A leadership role confers a wide range of rights and privileges; it accords power and status and allow freedoms of action to influence the course of events within an organisation. Such influence, status and power, however, is not without constraints and most leaders are not quite as ‘free to lead’ and pursue their own agendas as they may have anticipated or desired (Chapman & Long, 2008; Davies, 2008; Kane, 2008; Knight 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2008).

The relationship between a leader and their organisation is problematic (Walton, 2008). On the one hand they have been appointed to accomplish what their appointees have deter-

mined—to make things happen, give appropriate direction, take responsibility—and be custodians of their staff and the assets of the organisation. They are required to be responsible, responsive, considered and accountable in fulfilling their corporate role. At the same time each leader will have their own personal agenda, have a desire to be recognised and valued for what they do and, when the time comes, leave a legacy of success as evidence of their worth as a leader.

The compatibility of these two sets of agenda, the organisational and the personal, may be sufficiently congruent to allow the leader to ‘feel at home’ and do well come what may. But what if these agendas are potentially antagonistic? What if the organisational agenda threatens to

overwhelm and submerge the personal one; what if the personal one is so driven that it subverts the organisation to its own ends? What if the leader feels so free and empowered that they feel they can do what they want and be as radical as they desire? What if the leader comes to feel imprisoned and captured, toothless and constrained? Such questions show how a leader could become vulnerable to being 'radicalised' by their ego and/or vulnerable to being 'radicalised' by the organisation—both scenarios representing bases for concern and capable of generating toxic behaviour.

The clashing of personal and organisational agenda at work is a feature of organisational life as leaders *et al* seek to progress their own needs whilst, at the same time, meeting the legitimate needs of those around them. Whilst this is not necessarily problematic, difficulties can arise however, both if a leader feels their initiatives to be unfairly or unreasonably blocked and, perversely perhaps, if they are given too full an endorsement to achieve their ambitions and told to 'just do what you think is necessary!'

How a leader responds to such situations could offer clues about the type of dysfunctional and toxic behaviour to which they may be prone and is the focus for this article.

Possible origins of 'radical/toxic' behaviour

The inherent psychological fragility of organisational life can easily be forgotten in the drive to meet targets, complete internal procedures, attend meetings, review stock reports and market trends, answer emails and attend to the needs of one's Blackberry (Walton, 2005). Yet beneath all the smoke, mirrors and distractions generated through daily organisational behaviour a leader's basic concerns about personal status, position, integrity and freedom remain. If it is felt these are being met so much to the

good; if not then trouble may be lurking just around the corner.

My working hypothesis here is that the more the leader feels able to accomplish their personal objectives—and through their preferred ways of working—the more they will be content to maintain the organisational *status quo*. Conversely, the less they feel this the more they may wish to find ways of changing, overtly or covertly, the *status quo* to suit their needs; to loosen the constraints under which they consider they are operating. Such changes may, however, prove to be toxic to those around them and to the organisation at large.

Leaders, in spite of their position, are not necessarily able to do as they wish without first influencing key institutional figures and influential followers who, however, may prefer things to remain as they are. In such instances, leaders could be said to be faced with two choices; either they can remain or they can decide to leave. It is with the actions and influencing strategy of those who remain—and who have to contend with the elation of 'getting their way' or the frustration of being told 'No'—which this article now concerns itself.

To have achieved a senior institutional position leaders have been successful and will, on appointment, have convinced their appointees of their suitability for leadership. Furthermore, they will have become accustomed in the past to having their demands met and in having their own way more often than not. When this pattern fails to continue—and at some point in a leader's career this will be the case—leaders may experience a dislocation between what has gone before and the current situation. If they have been 'constrained' this may cause a leader to question their capability and competence. Shock, dismay, surprise, confusion, anger and heightened ontological anxiety may follow prompting, in a variation of the fight-flight response, either (i) a retreat or (ii) a stiffening

of resolve to push more firmly for what they want. Hitting up against the limitations of leadership could be experienced for some leaders as deeply unsettling and, depending on their psychological make-up, prompt covert as well as overt reactions intended to re-assert their influence and position.

On the other hand, a leader who comes to find that their ideas and proposals are accepted too readily may be prompted into making increasingly grandiose and narcissistic demands which may result in dysfunctional and toxic behaviour. So toxic behaviour may be induced through a leader feeling thwarted or blocked as well as through being lauded.

Such leadership reactions could destabilise their organisation in a similar manner to the behaviour of a 'free radical'. A 'Free Radical' is the term used to describe the behaviour of an unstable atom or molecule that seeks to stabilise itself in a manner which makes unstable a previously stable atom or molecule. This in turn is capable of setting off a change-reaction that becomes difficult to control and may damage a previously ordered, regulated and fully-functioning system. So here I am thinking about a leader who behaves as if they can do what they like (*i.e.* a 'loose cannon') or of a leader who feels deeply frustrated and blocked (*i.e.* an 'alienated subversive') and whose subsequent resentful behaviour covertly starts to undermine organisational stability.

Both types of 'leader free-radicals' will be disruptive and damaging but in different ways and for different reasons. Each would be capable of initiating a destabilising change chain-reaction. Meyerson (2001) coined the term 'tempered radicals' to describe those whose constructively challenging behaviour within an organisation remains just within the bounds of what is acceptable whilst retaining their personal integrity and authenticity in their drive for change. In this way they seek to move

things on but avoid adopting too radical an approach that could lead to their removal/expulsion from the systems they are in the process of changing.

The term '*free radicals*' can also be used to highlight, legitimise and sanction innovative, and potentially, 'radical' initiatives. In this way a leader with radical ideas can be acknowledged and recognised as such and given the opportunity to develop new ideas and ways of working in a bounded way which minimises the potentially de-stabilising impact of 'free radical' behaviour.

Tempered Freedom & Untempered Repression

Simply stated, my supposition is that when accomplished people are given too much or too little organisational 'freedom' the potential for toxic and dysfunctional behaviour is increased.

In Figure 1 below, (i) the degree of freedom of action an organisation allows its leaders is contrasted with (ii) the extent to which a leader adapts, or *tempers*, their behaviour to that organisation. This produces a simple framework for looking at a leader's behaviour in context. On the horizontal axis a leader's behaviour is described as 'freed' (*i.e.* relatively unconstrained by the *organisation*) or as 'captured' (*i.e.* where there is little scope for independent action, rule flexibility or decision-making discretion), whereas on the vertical axis the contrast is between 'tempered' (*i.e.* where the leader has adapted *their behaviour* to the organisation) or 'untempered' (*i.e.* where the leader has chosen not to adapt their behaviour to the settings in which they find their self).

Combining these dimensions results in four different conditions each of which suggests the feelings, and likely behaviour, of a leader in that quadrant—three of which may well incubate toxic leadership.

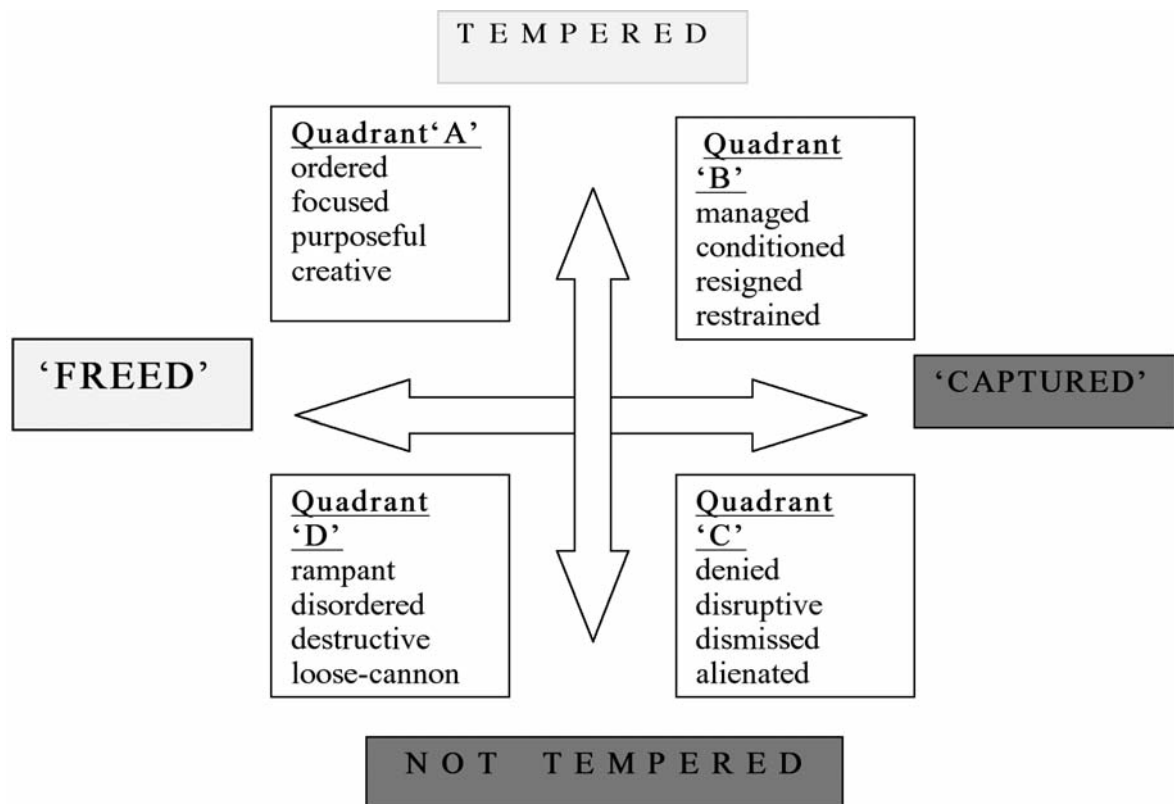


Figure 1: Potential Responses to Constraints

Quadrant 'A': little toxic potential; change & achievement oriented leadership

Quadrant 'B': some toxic potential; steady state & *status quo* leadership

Quadrant 'C': high toxic potential; covert action, passive aggressive behaviour

Quadrant 'D': very high toxic potential; high profile, disruptive, dramatic

This simple framework can be used to speculate what might be at the heart of seemingly unhelpful or dysfunctional leader behaviour and generate discussion. It may just be that the leader has come to feel too cramped and unable to show what they can do, or indeed that they have been given too much rope and are in danger of losing perspective and doing themselves irreparable/considerable harm and setting off dysfunctional and destructive change chain-reactions.

Each Quadrant describes different leader features, and each will have a different psycho-

logical intensity and feel. For instance, in Quadrant 'A' the leader is more likely to demonstrate purposeful achievement oriented behaviour because they have been allowed to work creatively and freely, whereas in Quadrant 'D' the same creativeness—without sufficient boundary limitations—increases the likelihood that this leader will begin to behave more like a 'loose-cannon' and in a disordered, unfocused and rampant manner. In Quadrant 'A' the feel may be collaborative and 'safe'; in Quadrant 'D' it is more likely to feel unstable and downright dangerous.

As noted earlier when a leader's behaviour is untempered—in relation to the contexts within which they are working—potentially destructive behaviour may result. This is particularly so if they feel their contributions to be unreasonably or unfairly blocked. Danger also lurks when a leader's proposals are unreservedly sanctioned. However, the toxic potential in both

scenarios is greatly reduced if the leader can position whatever responses they have received within organisational constraints & boundaries which they can see as legitimate and which they view as fair and reasonable.

Antioxidant Responses

This article suggests leader angst is partly generated by how a leader behaves when their proposals are denied and/or accepted wholeheartedly (*i.e.* how they characteristically respond to constraints). If valid it would seem prudent to find a simple way of describing and then unpicking such reactions to stimulate discussion about a leader's behaviour. Figure 1 offers a basic framework around which to hold such a discussion.

As leaders regularly have to come to terms with personal and professional disappointments, frustrations and constraints such a simple methodology would appear to be of value. Such an approach could become the equivalent of introducing an antioxidant agent to inhibit—perhaps terminate—'free radical' activity and begin to re-balance a situation that may have become toxic, more unpredictable and unstable.

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