

The Enigma of an Unintentionally Toxic Leader

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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

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