

Organisational Helplessness in the Public Sector

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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?

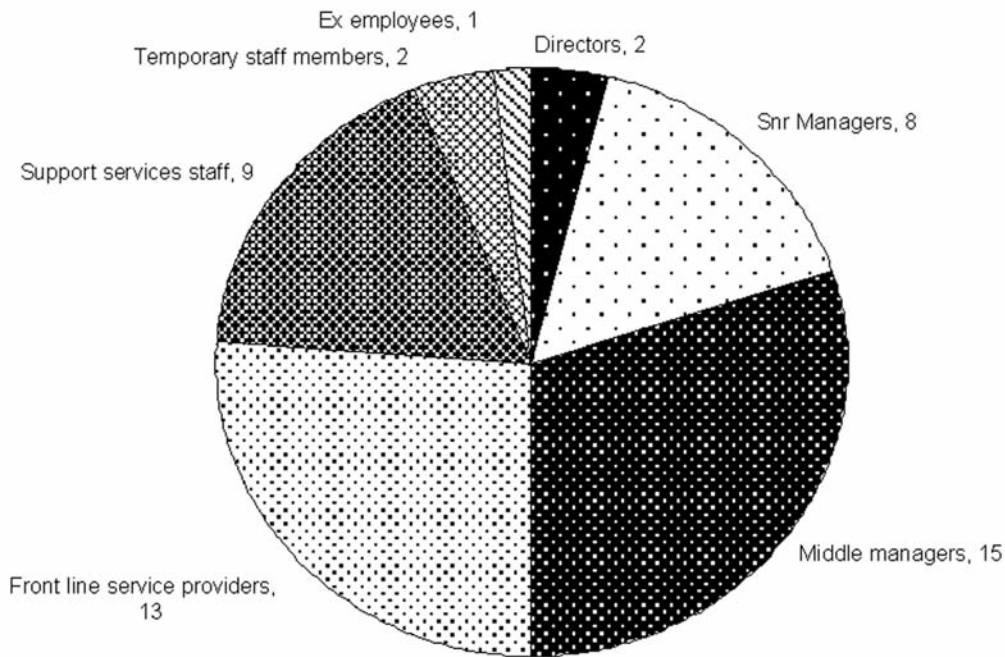


Figure 1: Overall breakdown of sample group

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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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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