

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 feelings, 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.

REFERENCES

- Ambrose, A. (1989) "Key Concepts of the Transitional Approach to Managing Change", in Klein, I (ed) *Working with Organisations*, Kestrel Print. London.

- Bennett, N., Wise, C., Woods, P. & Harvey, J. (2003) *Distributed leadership: a review of literature*. National College for School Leadership, UK.
- Chaucer, G. (2005) *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue*, Kolve, V & Olson, G (eds) Norton Critical Editions, New York.
- de Botton, A. (2004) *Status Anxiety*, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, London.
- Egan, G. (1994) *Working the Shadow Side: A Guide to Positive Behind the Scenes Management*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco.
- Garland, C. (2006) "Some are More Equal than Others: Oedipus, Dominance Hierarchies and the Establishment: a psychoanalytic point of view". OPUS Conference Paper: *Organisational and Social Dynamics: International perspectives from Group Relations, Psychoanalysis and Systems Theory*, November, London.
- Heifetz, R. (1994) *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Harvard University Press, Boston.
- Klein, M. (1988) *Envy and Gratitude and other works 1946—1963*, Virago, London.
- Lansky, M. (2008) "Jealousy and Envy in Othello: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Rivalrous Emotions", in Wurmser, L. & Jarass, H., *Jealousy and Envy: New Views about Two Powerful Feelings*, Psychoanalytic Inquiry Book Series, The Analytic Press, New York.
- Maguire, M. (1987) "Casting the Evil eye—women and envy", in Ernst, S. & Maguire, M. (eds) *Living with the Sphinx: Papers from the Women's Therapy Centre*, The Women's Press, London.
- Orbach, S. & Eichenbaum, L. (1987) *Bittersweet: Facing up to feelings of love, envy and competition in women's friendships*, Century, London.
- Obholzer, A. & Roberts, V. (1994) *The Unconscious at Work: Individual and Organisational Stress in the Human Services*, Routledge, London.
- Spillane, J. (2006) *Distributed Leadership*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco.
- Wurmser, L. & Jarass, H. (2008) *Jealousy and Envy: New Views about Two Powerful Feelings*, Psychoanalytic Inquiry Book Series, The Analytic Press, New York.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Marie Kane has had extensive experience in organisational development, acting as consultant, executive coach or lecturer in a wide variety of organisations. She runs her own organisational consultancy business, *Marie Kane & Associates*. She is an Associate of *Real World Group*, a spin-off company of the University of Leeds, which specialises in engaging transformational leadership, 360 degree feedback and coaching, and has conducted the most comprehensive work in this field in the UK public sector. She is an Associate of the Department of Applied Social Science, University of Stirling, where she has worked in leadership development. She is also an Associate of OPUS, (Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society) and a member of the Scottish Institute of Human Relations.