Urban Putty

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The Myth of the Organization

There have been some very insightful discoveries about the undercurrents in work groups, over the last few years. Two Canadian researchers, Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries and Danny Miller, in a book entitled *The Neurotic Organization*, have collected much of the best research, and added it to their own work. Not only do they focus on the various types of neurotic leadership found in organizations, they also point out some interesting, but frequently overlooked and unacknowledged, and powerful dynamics among workers.

In a section entitled *Foundations of Organizational Culture* they focus on the shared fantasies of groups and the impact of these fantasies. First a quote from Freud:

> *A group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association (just as they arise within individuals in states of free imagination), and whose agreement with reality is never checked by any reasonable agency. The feelings of a group are always very simple and exaggerated. So that a group never knows doubt nor uncertainty.*

(from: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*)

A brief recounting of the few moments before the arrival of the senior V.P. of human resources, who was to chair the meeting:

> *While waiting for the senior VP's arrival, one of the vice-presidents of the subsidiary recounted his experiences during a recent flight in a small private airplane. To allow the plane to regain altitude, the VP had been asked to change seats to improve the weight distribution. He emphasized how anxious he had been—and how vulnerable we all so often are without realizing it. One of the other vice-presidents of the subsidiary then joined in, telling how one of the engines of a plane he was taking to Chicago had caught fire just before takeoff. He described the panic among the passengers that had ensued as they were marshaled out of the plane. This story, in turn, prompted still another executive to tell about his visit to Beirut. He told of how he had been greeted by sniper fire as he left his hotel. The conversation continued in the same vein until the senior vice-president finally made his appearance.* (p. 49)

And then the clincher:

> *The researchers/writers had long experience in this subsidiary of a major corporation, all of it pointing to the increasing anxiety of top managers about their positions. "They had felt under attack by the parent ever since the takeover…The airplane discussion (and many others in a similar vein) showed how widespread and pervasive the persecutory group fantasy really was."* (p. 49-50)

Kets de Vries and Miller then defer to another researcher, Bion, for his findings about group behaviour. First, groups have an overt, specific task to perform that necessitates co-operation and effort from the group members, a task that requires contact with reality and the ability to tolerate frustrations and control emotions. Bion believed, however, that quite apart from this "work group" behaviour, all groups are also dominated by a second characteristic—namely their basic assumptions. These operate at a more primitive level and are of a

regressive nature. Whereas the work group is more oriented toward reality, the "basic-assumption group" operates at a more primitive fantasy level. These basic assumption groups are expected to colour and influence any rational task that the work group has to undertake.

These basic assumptions are, we think, the principal organizing units that create organizational culture and commonly shared organizational myths, legends and stories. They operate at the social-fantasy level of organizations. After Bion, we have named the assumptions and their groups:

- Fight/flight
- Dependency
- Utopian

The groups can be recognized by their defensive mechanisms and accompanying emotions.

The **fight/flight** group members deny that any misfortune could be the result of their own actions. Self-reflection and insight are remarkably lacking. Only the "others" are to blame. The predominant emotions that originate from this group culture are anger, hate, fear and suspicion.

Dependency group members want to be sustained by a revered, omnipotent leader, a person who is dependable. The main dynamic in these groups is the need for idealization. Members wish to merge with the all-powerful leader and thereby share in his power. The primary emotion of the group in such a situation is elation, a feeling of oneness and security with the good and protective leader.

In a **utopian** culture, there is a messianic hope that in the future everything will finally work out and members will be delivered from their anxieties and fears. The group nourishes the illusion that in the future a new leader or a new idea will eventually solve all its problems. We can observe a sense of anticipation and a tendency to use fantasy in the form of daydreams to resolve conflict and obtain gratification. The predominant affects are hope and faith.

With both dependency and utopian, there is a pattern in which the elation (dependency) and/or the hope and faith (utopian) are unsustainable. In the first case, the elation conceals depressive feelings of members' own sense of inadequacy, envy of the prerogatives of the leader and guilt over feeling these emotions. In the second, the hope and faith can last only as long as the idea or leader remains "unborn". Given the excessive expectations of the group, it will be impossible for the idea or person ever to live up to its wants. (p. 50-51)

What kind of stories are you listening to in those "unrecorded moments" immediately before a formal meeting begins in your organization? What kind of characters stride through the stories which are circulating around your water-cooler (the metaphoric one), and what undercurrents can you detect about the really important collective unconscious in your department or division?

These findings would find theoretical support from an overlay of the Jungian persona/Shadow dimensions of the individual. Just as Kets de Vries and Miller use the family analogy to illustrate many of their observations and insights, so too, the individual is another lens for organizational observations.

We are interested in helping leaders to unpack those dynamics that aren't so easily and readily discernible.

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