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## DYSFUNCTIONAL LEADERSHIP'S CONTENTION WITH ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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In a global knowledge-based economy, organizational learning and innovation are the most critical assets for achieving sustainable organizational performance with a competitive edge.<sup>1</sup> A learning organization is a culture where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. Still, dysfunctional leadership fails to foster supportive learning cultures or implement tools shown to improve employee development and increase the propagation of information. Narcissistic leaders, for example, stagnate learning by devaluing autonomous learning, social collaboration, communication, and democratic staples such as strong shared values, empowerment, participation, and creativity in organizations.

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### I. DYSFUNCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: AN ANTITHESIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Leadership dedicated to an organizational learning culture commits to cultivate their organization and its members by providing a steady support system of

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<sup>1</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

encouragement for individual development, creativity, and innovation. Consider Paul: “For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul was describing knowledge creation as a constant and gradual process that requires leadership’s support for proper communication, social support, and learning opportunities, and, most importantly, autonomy. Learners must be provided the opportunity to grow autonomously with the confidence and cleverness to ask new questions in order to innovate.<sup>3</sup> Boa suggests that Paul’s desire was for the Colossian church to become a learning church where people could receive more than a lecture. Disciples of this organization could “come and, in the context of healthy relationships, experience, connect, reflect and test the fundamentals of the Christian faith.”<sup>4</sup> This Biblical illustration of organizational culture embraces learning where all participants are encouraged and expected to aggrandize, be part of the knowledge creation process, and develop innovative solutions to serve the organization and all of its members.

In a global knowledge-based economy, organizational learning and innovation are the most critical assets for achieving sustainable organizational performance with a competitive edge.<sup>5</sup> A learning organization is a culture. It is where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. Although research has uncovered a strong relationship between organizational learning, innovation, and organizational performance,<sup>6</sup> many leaders disregard these facts due to ignorance, arrogance, and egotism. These leaders exhibit a dysfunctional style by setting a tone of callousness and avoidance.

Rather than support organizational learning values, dysfunctional leadership avoids implementing productive and transformational learning initiatives, policies, and tools. The debilitating leadership may cite cost, security, and unknown effectiveness as reasons for their apprehension to support a learning organization, however the most common reason for hesitancy is actually an unwillingness to support a solution that is more geared towards sustained organizational growth than the immediate return of recognition. Dysfunctional leaders point to the need to advance initiatives that offer

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<sup>2</sup> Col 1:9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Boa, “The Learning Organization,” *Bible.org*, <http://bible.org/seriespage/learning-organization>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective Reading* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1978); David A. Garvin, *Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

immediate and known return on investment rather than policies that currently have few validated measurements.

The continued success of a learning organization can only be realized through deliberate and unrelenting development of a supportive culture that fosters communication and democracy. The culture aggregates autonomous learning and social collaboration to develop organizational members and induce knowledge creation processes. Although a learning organization culture has become synonymous with the steady and continuous success and abilities of organizations,<sup>7</sup> the narcissistic characteristics of dysfunctional leaders disallow the necessary organizational changes and policies that foster long-term organizational learning.

## II. DYSFUNCTION

Barbara Kellerman, research director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, has developed a list of common leadership tendencies of dysfunctional leaders: incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil. Although this list of traits is not exhaustive and is likely in a persistent state of evolution given our fast-paced global society, the overall theme is a general persona of egoism and an inability to put the organization's needs before his or her own—*narcissism*.<sup>8</sup> While it may be difficult to immediately recognize these traits and identify a dysfunctional and narcissistic leader due to his or her deceitfulness, the consequences of allowing such a leader to remain in authority are toxic and will spread through ill-conceived policies, follower selection, and the cultivation of a noxious culture.

Kofman and Senge (1993) argue that certain leaders' overemphasis on competition makes looking good more important than being good.<sup>9</sup> The authors claim that the fear of not looking good is what deters dysfunctional and narcissistic leaders from pursuing organizational learning. Egotism prevents them from acknowledging that they don't know everything and deters them from allowing the organization's members to take part in innovating organizational practices and policies. Dysfunctional leaders view the need to implement a learning culture as a sign of weakness, incompetence, and/or a personal character flaw. Chris Argyris refers to leaders' ability to avoid organizational learning as "skilled incompetence," or the skill of protecting the ego while turning a blind eye to potential incompetence.<sup>10</sup> In place of real learning, Kofman and Senge posit that dysfunctional leaders will implement quick fixes to solve competitive

<sup>7</sup> Anthony J. Dibella, (2003). "Organizations as Learning Portfolios" in *Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management*, eds. Mark Esterby-Smith and Marjorie A. Lyles (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 145-160.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Downs, *Beyond the Looking Glass: Overcoming the Corporate Culture of Corporate Narcissism* (New York: Amacom, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Fred Kofman and Peter M. Senge, "Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations," *Organizational Dynamics* 22, no. 2 (1993): 4-23.

<sup>10</sup> Argyris and Schön, *Organizational Learning*.

difficulties. These ill-considered solutions are produced as a means “to show results, and fast, regardless of the long-term, system-wide consequences.”<sup>11</sup>

Policies and tools that inspire a learning organization develop mature cultures rich with organizational values such as innovation, creativity, autonomy, and democracy.<sup>12</sup> The potential of mature cultures based on organizational learning cannot be realized when organizational decisions are determined in haste by ego-centric leadership. Egotistical leaders have been found to stagnate learning by devaluing democratic staples such as strong shared values,<sup>13</sup> empowerment, participation, and creativity in organizations.<sup>14</sup> The narcissistic leader that continues to avoid creativity and innovation will ultimately lead organization-wide incompetence from the top down. Dysfunctional rigidity will devastate an organization as the leader is unable or unwilling to adapt to the needs of an evolving modern organization. Kellerman describes such dysfunction as a means of fostering incompetence due to the lack of will or skill (or both) to sustain effective action.<sup>15</sup>

## II. FOLLOWERSHIP

The ability to attract and develop capable human resources is considered by many to be one of the most important competencies of modern organizations. In a healthy leader–follower relationship, creativity and innovation are nurtured through cultures driven by strong shared values.<sup>16</sup> Employees need to feel empowered to produce creative solutions. They need to know that all ideas will be heard and respected, and that their ideas will stimulate prompt action. Followers in a healthy organizational environment also expect and require some degree of influence over organizational decisions, particularly when the decision directly affects their team, working conditions, motivations, or environment. A complete lack of influence over organizational decisions may lead quality members of the organization to frustration due to a sense of powerlessness and lack of cohesion. Being an advocate for follower empowerment, participation, and creativity has surfaced as one of the most important traits of successful leadership. Although it is known that personnel must continue to transform to keep pace with change and to survive in the world economy,<sup>17</sup> the narcissistic leader argues that change is a process of boosting productivity rather than improving workers lives and increasing worker influence.

<sup>11</sup> Kofman and Senge, “Communities of Commitment,” 10.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Beckhard and Wendy Pritchard, *Changing the Essence: The Art of Creating and Leading Fundamental Change in Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Merrelyn Emery, *Participative Design for Participative Democracy* (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Peter M. Senge, “Personal Transformation,” *Executive Excellence* 11, no. 1 (1994): 17-19.

<sup>17</sup> R. Moilanen, “Finish Learning Organizations: Structure and Styles,” *The Entrepreneurial Executive*, no. 4 (1999): 1-40.

Even though Kellerman argues that “to insular (dysfunctional) leaders, human rights in general are less important than the rights, and even the needs and wants, of their specific constituencies,”<sup>18</sup> dysfunctional leaders cannot act alone. All leadership requires followership. Leadership requires individuals that are willing to align themselves with the vision set forth by the leader and work towards achieving common organizational goals. Dysfunctional leadership is no different and will likewise attract dysfunctional followers that contribute to the organization with many of the same dysfunctional and narcissistic traits that the leader possesses. A leader cannot maintain authority with dysfunctional characteristics such as being callous, corrupt, or insulated without follower support.

Riggio, Chaleef, and Lipman-Blumen suggest that followers may be the directing force in the leader–follower dichotomy.<sup>19</sup> This would suggest that leaders are “malleable products of cumulative followership actions,”<sup>20</sup> and that a dysfunctional leader is attracted to an organization due to the dysfunctional attributes of its members. Regardless of the level of follower influence, the relationship between leaders and followers is a partnership that must be substantiated and acted out. In order for narcissistic leadership to disallow a culture of organizational learning, a partnership of dysfunctional followers have to support the omission.

### III. LEARNING ORGANIZATION

One of the most difficult challenges facing organizations is to develop information processing mechanisms capable of coping with variety, uncertainty, coordination, and an unclear environment (Daft & Lengel, 1986).<sup>21</sup> To cope with this challenge, organizations are taking on learning as a core value of their environments and culture.<sup>22</sup> Organizational learning processes are the key to the continuous success of the organization and are derived from learning-based organizational changes and environment adaptation.<sup>23</sup> The primary concern of the learning organization is enhancing organizational capacity through a learning process that is performance-based and tied to business objectives.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, it is the structural aspects of the learning organization that promote and enhance the continuous learning

<sup>18</sup> Kellerman, *Bad Leadership*, 169

<sup>19</sup> Ronald E. Riggio, Ira Chaleef, and Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Art of Followership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel, “Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness and Structural Design,” *Management Science* 32 no. 5 (1986): 554-571.

<sup>22</sup> Ji Hoon Song, “The Effects of Learning Organization Culture on the Practices of Human Knowledge Creation: An Empirical Research Study in Korea,” *International Journal of Training and Development* 12, no. 4 (2008): 265-281.

<sup>23</sup> Argyris and Schön, *Organizational Learning*; Garvin, *Learning in Action*; Karen E. Watkins and Victoria J. Marsick, *Sculpting the Learning Organization: Lessons in the Art and Science of Systematic Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Michael J. Marquardt, *Building the Learning Organization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996); Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

process and, in turn, create organizational values.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately the shared organizational values developed in a learning organization will lead to individual development and process innovations.

Knowledge creation has become a core measurement of success for an organization with a culture of learning. Bossidy and Charan argue that if organizations fail to embrace practices that enhance knowledge creation they will lack the experts necessary to sustain long term competitiveness.<sup>26</sup> The “flatter” structure of modern organizations naturally leads to the need for increased knowledge creation through democracy, intrinsic motivation, and empowerment. Narcissistic leaders may allow the flattening of the organizational hierarchy as long as their personal influence and authority is maintained. However, flatter organizations often result in a lack of expertise separation requiring functional leaders to encourage followers to develop deeper skills. Successful leaders will combat the consequences from expertise separation through the promotion of effective knowledge creation processes. Dysfunctional leaders, however, will choose to implement basic learning programs that produce simple but quick measurable results rather than foster the deep specialization. In this case, the potential long-term success of the organization will be stifled.

#### IV. DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNICATION

Organizations implementing a culture of learning have thrived in a world of increasing interdependency and change.<sup>27</sup> When we speak of a learning organization, we are not describing a random phenomenon or labeling an independent reality. A learning organization is derived from a common set of democratic and communication factors that promote continuous and effective learning throughout the organization.<sup>28</sup> A learning culture shapes an environment that proactively adapts and innovates<sup>29</sup> through encouragement, support, and rich collective learning opportunities that promote communication to effectively manage knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Organizational learning involves setting the roles for all members as learners as well as facilitators in a common system.

The value of organizational democracy in the workplace is not a new concept. In 1970, Freire argued that a democratic society, which encourages participation by all its members, is needed to replace the learned helplessness.<sup>31</sup> Knowledge creation and distribution is at the heart of a learning organization and encouraging these methods of organizational development is a democratic process. Democracy, however, threatens

<sup>25</sup> J. H. Song, “The Effects of Learning Organization Culture on the Practices of Human Knowledge Creation: An Empirical Research Study in Korea,” *International Journal of Training and Development* 12, no. 4 (2008): 265-281.

<sup>26</sup> Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* (New York: Crown, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Senge, “Personal Transformation.”

<sup>28</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*. Watkins and Marsick, *Sculpting the Learning Organization*.

<sup>29</sup> Song, “The Effects of Learning Organization Culture.”

<sup>30</sup> Marquardt, *Building the Learning Organization*.

<sup>31</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

the narcissistic leader because ideally it results in more distributed and collaborative leadership. Dysfunctional egotistical leadership can obstruct organizational learning simply by disallowing democratic processes.

Learning cannot be accomplished in an environment where the majority of the members' needs, wants, and wishes are discounted and ignored. Callous leadership thwarts democracy and communication as it is too uncaring to value the voices of the organization's members. Further, the insulation of a dysfunctional leadership usually minimizes the motivation to sincerely value the welfare of others.

### *Communication*

Leaders need to energize, empower, support, and communicate.<sup>32</sup> Communication is a critical component to implementing organizational learning as it is the underlying conduit of successful collaborative objectives and emergent knowledge. Effective organizational communication improves knowledge transfer and change processes, allows learning to happen through the development of the organization's members, and results in greater commitment and involvement. More than organizational and technical processes, communication and knowledge creation are the result of cultivated human factors and therefore rely on nourishing human emotions and physical feelings. Dismissing the value of human factors, narcissistic leadership defines organizational structure in terms of unmalleable rules. They develop processes that ensure data flows structurally within the context of the leader's intention. It is vital to the egotistical leader that all organizational information exchange is either created by leadership, appears to be created by leadership, or has gone through processes that have been configured by leadership.

## V. AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AND SOCIAL COLLABORATION

During the first eighteen years of a person's life we rarely have any concept of knowledge creation. Instead we are fed information, provided all the materials, assignments, lectures, and homework to successfully pass class curricula and progress with a feeling of accomplishment. To the shock of those leaving high school, *surface learning* that is fed to you is no longer adequate; life suddenly requires deeper learning<sup>33</sup>—a product of knowledge creation and self-directed autonomous learning skills.

Developing a culture that is conducive to learning and the knowledge creation process requires greater clarity in the methods we communicate our expectations. Moreover, increased attention must be directed towards *developing* the *skill* of autonomous learning.<sup>34</sup> We are agents of change in this world as long as we apply

<sup>32</sup> Emery, *Participative Design for Participative Democracy*.

<sup>33</sup> David Newble and Robert Cannon, *A Handbook for Teachers in Universities and Colleges: A Guide to Improving Teaching Methods* (London: Kogan Page, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Diane Railton and Paul Watson, "Teaching Autonomy: Reading Groups and the Development of Autonomous Learning Practices," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 6 (2005): 182-193.

ourselves and are encouraged to apply ourselves to understanding and developing the world around us. Consider the leadership of King Josiah. When he desired to seek God's heart, he reconsidered the understood significance of the altars Solomon had built for his foreign wives nearly 300 years earlier (2 Kgs 23:13) and the altar in Bethel, where Jeroboam had set up a golden calf. After contemplation, Josiah recognized that Jeroboam had become distinguished as the man "who made Israel to sin" and therefore issued orders to destroy the Pagan altars and repair the temple of the Lord. These actions led to a rediscovery of the Book of Law and a reinstatement of the Passover Celebration. Due to autonomous action and innovation, Josiah accomplished what no king before him could.

The construction of autonomy, in its individual and collective dimensions, is in fact very close to the construction of the person's identity, both personal and social. The process of autonomization and the construction of the identity are intimately linked, and both depend on interactions with the other.<sup>35</sup> Developing the skill of autonomous learning coincides with the awareness of self as learner.<sup>36</sup> This in itself strips degrees of influence from the leader and is unacceptable for the narcissist. Therefore, rather than nurture autonomous development, dysfunctional leaders use social interactions to encourage a culture of dependency, disallowing followers to contribute to their personal growth intellectually.

Yorke argues that autonomous learning is most effective when "performance goals" are not "elevated above learning goals."<sup>37</sup> Autonomous learners develop through engaging and communicating with each other. Participation is part of the learning process such as in leader and peer discussions and debates. However, dysfunctional leadership does not commend a follower for exploring the range of possibilities. Instead, dysfunctional followers are praised only when aligning themselves with the "right answer." There is no emphasis on the learning process because it takes away organizational resources, and potential failures are often deemed to be a personal reflection of the leader.

### *Social Collaboration*

Labelle defines *autonomy* from the perspective of personal development through relationships with others.<sup>38</sup> While summarizing the theory of educational reciprocity, Blanchard and Jollivet-Blanchard state that education is an effect and not the cause of the relationship (i.e., reciprocity is educating more than educational).<sup>39</sup> Similarly,

<sup>35</sup> Jerome Eneau, "From Autonomy to Reciprocity, or Vice Versa? French Personalism's Contribution to a New Perspective on Self-Directed Learning," *Adult Education Quarterly* 58 no. 229 (2008): 229-248.

<sup>36</sup> Mike Rawson, "Learning to Learn: More than a Skillset," *Studies in Higher Education* 25, no. 2 (2000): 225-228.

<sup>37</sup> M. Yorke, "Formative Assessment in Higher Education: Moves Towards Theory and the Enhancement of Pedagogic Practice," *Higher Education* 45, no. 4 (2003): 477-501.

<sup>38</sup> Jean Marie Labelle, *Educational Reciprocity* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Eric Blanchard and Chantal Jollivet-Blanchard, *The Experience of Cooperation in Education: Why? How?* (Paris: L'Hartmattan, 2004).



autonomy is founded on the paradox that attachment to others is a quest for detachment (i.e., autonomy is more a form of interdependence than an illusion of independence). Therefore, when the aim of organizational learning is autonomy it must be constructed through attachment to others, exchange, and reciprocity.<sup>40</sup>

Social collaboration is a synergetic form of organizational learning that stimulates the knowledge creation process, transmission of knowledge, and the means by which organizational members maintain high levels of proficiency. Proficiency preservation is most evident when contrasting social collaborative learning to traditional techniques such as instructor-led classes. Most traditional methods of learning aim to make an immediate impact to learners' levels of proficiency, but learners are immediately subject to the gradual loss of retention, particularly if the skill is not directly and continually practiced. Social collaboration, on the other hand, moderates the knowledge drain by maintaining a constant stream of materials and learning opportunities, bolstering and maintaining individual and organizational knowledge levels.

Autonomous and social collaborative learning are continuous developmental tasks that provide little immediate value or return to the narcissistic leader. The egotistical characteristics of dysfunctional leadership have little concern for organizational members' long-term understanding or identity and the controlling characteristics of dysfunctional leadership view autonomous and social collaborative learning as unmaintained and unmediated. A dysfunctional leader positions themselves as a task and process manager rather than a human resource developer.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Knowledge itself is not fixed and permanent, but negotiated and permeable. Learning is an ongoing process that takes place within a network of complex social relationships.<sup>41</sup> Learning organizations require autonomous learning practices to progress beyond simply applying knowledge. Autonomous learning leaders, facilitators, followers, and students all contribute to knowledge creation and should be viewed as equal and one amongst many. This, unfortunately, is a direct assault on narcissistic leadership's egoism and appetite for authority.

Learning cultures represent a long-term systematic process focused on the continued development of followers rather than immediate returns and recognition for leadership. Due to narcissistic and other debilitating characteristics (incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil), dysfunctional leadership cannot foster supportive learning cultures or implement tools shown to improve employee development. Although failure to support an organizational learning culture is a failed policy for the organization and its members, dysfunctional leadership is only as strong and able as the followers that support it. Leaders and followers co-create and co-constitute leadership in the organization. Kellerman urges followers to take an active role in organizational life when they observe bad leadership. She encourages bold

<sup>40</sup> Eneau, "From Autonomy to Reciprocity."

<sup>41</sup> Railton and Watson, "Teaching Autonomy."

action asserting that followers have a right, even a duty, to take a stand against bad leadership.<sup>42</sup> Do anything less and followers will get the leadership they deserve.

Rather than practicing avoidance and ignoring continuous developmental opportunities for followers, leaders can decrease dysfunction by increasing communication and democratic processes while welcoming followers' contributions with attentiveness, confidence, and empathy.<sup>43</sup> Stifling communication through self-absorbed leadership will only limit creativity and innovation. By stimulating creativity and innovation through an organizational learning culture, successful leaders are able to capitalize on followers' abilities and create a productive environment that sustains ongoing organizational success. Reconsider the parable of Josiah. He commanded his people to spread God's Word openly. As the people shared the Word, the extent to which errors were being propagated and not hidden spread across the land and eventually reached King Josiah himself. He autonomously contemplated the misinformation, repented, and changed his ways.<sup>44</sup> Josiah's reform further magnifies the power of organizational learning including the social collaborative relationship to autonomous learning and innovation.

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#### About the Author

In the tradition of transformational and servant leaders, Raymie Grundhoefer's mission is to serve others through learning achievement. Currently completing the disertation phase of his doctorate in the organizational leadership program at Regent University, he has already earned a master's degree in organizational leadership from Gonzaga University, as well as a servant leadership certificate. Organizational learning has evolved as his primary research interest due to its direct relationship with personal interests: culture and innovation.

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<sup>42</sup> Kellerman, *Bad Leadership*.

<sup>43</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Chr 34:27-33.