A Touch of the ODs: Watch Out for the 'Organisational Dementors'!

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Abstract

Leaders and consultants are vulnerable to their work being misrepresented and 'used' by others to further personal agendas. Illustrated by personal consulting experiences, this paper serves as a reminder of just how susceptible those in positions of influence are to being used as pawns in internal political battles. Dependent on internal sponsors for continued access & support, such dangers are particularly problematic for external advisors, coaches and consultants.

1. Leadership Vulnerabilities – Setting the Scene

Drawing on case material from my work as an external executive coach and advisor in a number of public and private organisations, this paper highlights the importance of maintaining an acute political lens through which to filter organisational behaviour in order to 'keep safe'. The cases illustrate how the self-serving behaviour of leaders can subvert, frustrate and damage others. These matters are particularly relevant to *external* specialists who depend on internal sponsors both for continued support and to represent their work fairly & honestly.

One of the dangers of business life is how one's work can be claimed, subverted, misinterpreted and misused by others. This is a particularly potent danger for external advisors, executive coaches and management consultants because they have limited institutional power and – significantly – because they are both temporary and dispensable in the eyes of the client organisation.

Business organisations are, essentially, political entities. Now whilst most colleagues may generally operate ethically, collegially and collaboratively, my business experience suggests that organisations are also peppered with individuals hell-bent on achieving their own selfish agendas, come what may. So this article is a reminder to be aware and alert for some of the less appealing types of colleagues who, drawing on the Harry Potter novels[1], I describe in this article as 'Organisational Dementors (ODs)'.

For some, the pressure to succeed can result in leaders deciding that they just have to win; 'whatever it takes'. Such ambition can lead them to feed on the vulnerabilities and insecurities of colleagues and external specialists to further their own ends in much the same way as Rowling[2] describes the behavioural peculiarities of 'Dementors'! 'Dementors' are soul-less

creatures who feed on those around them with the primary objective of furthering their own ends and agenda. In her novels the very presence of a Dementor freezes the surrounding atmosphere, kills hope, destroys 'life' and leaves their victims as empty shells incapable of thought, devoid of hope, with deadened feelings and with no possibility of recovery. So in the workplace, the term 'Organisational Dementors' (ODs) would describe those who selfishly and unfeelingly operate in ways which suck the very life from others in order to get what they want. Nasty!

It is a reasonable expectation that those chosen to lead will do so with the interests of the organisation foremost in mind. This may be a somewhat false and illusory expectation however, as, according to Kramer , "contrary to expectations, colleagues and bosses may not have our well-being at heart. Indeed, many are often indifferent to us or see us as competitors".[3] This is a situation which, if accurate, demands vigilance to avoid work being plundered, misrepresented, diverted or destroyed. This is not to suggest that no one can be trusted, merely that most - perhaps all - work primarily towards their own interests. *How* they do so, however, will mark the difference between behaving as 'reasonable' people or as sociopathic, egocentric dictators.

It goes without saying - or should do - that those occupying positions of influence have been recruited to 'do' something and how they go about their work will reflect:

(i)   the actual work to be done,
(ii)   the history of former role holders[4],
(iii)   the culture of the organisation/department[5] ,
(iv)   their professional training & experience, *and*
(v)   their psychological characteristics[6].

So far so good, but what if success in the organisation seems to be unrelated to competent achievements, ethical strivings, good works or thoughtful efforts? What if the social morality of the workplace is seen to revolve around 'impression management', grandiose executive posturings, short-term gain, Groupthink[7] dynamics and the appeasement of its leaders? What if to survive and succeed it becomes necessary only to be *seen* to be a team player and where displaying the *right* management style and mirroring the behaviour of the organisation's power brokers is what gets rewarded? Such conditions would suggest that the structure has become corrupted and morphed into an internal political system primarily geared to meeting the status and power needs of the main players. If organisational 'success' becomes too dependent on the whims of a few influential leaders, the more toxic and dysfunctional that workplace is likely to have become. In turn, the more toxic the workplace becomes, the more vulnerable externals are to pressures to conform, inform or shape their work to meet the personal agendas of key leaders.

Of course different - ideally complementary - systems of influence will operate in any organisation but difficulties will arise if the informal influence patterns become *toxic* and subvert the workings of the organisations as a whole. Analysing the internal dynamics in any organisation is complicated because, as Jackall[8] suggests, everyone in the organisation

constructs their own view about what is going on, and where, "as a matter of survival, not to mention advancement, corporate managers have to keep their eye fixed not on the abstract principles but on the social framework of their world and its requirements"[9]. In such circumstances people become more vulnerable and expendable and this poses dangers for the politically naïve manager and for external advisors[10].

2. Executive Behaviour in the Raw – Some Case Material

Far from leaders being good, ethical, prudent, unemotional and honest we know leaders are not, by definition, necessarily 'a good thing'; necessary, yes, but not inevitably 'good'. Just how much havoc can be caused by dishonest leaders has become painfully apparent in recent times - re: Enron, Arthur Anderson *et al* - yet caution about the misuse of power is nothing new and has been researched and commented on[11]. In spite of the attention such matters are now receiving[12] it is intriguing to wonder why so little attention was given to monitoring & policing more carefully senior executive behaviour – at least until the fall-out surrounding such matters as the Enron debacle and the sub-prime scenarios hit the news and forced the situation.

Furthermore, although much has been written about executive misbehaviour, seemingly little - from my experiences - has actually been applied to inform daily organisational life as the cases which follow illustrate. It is one thing 'knowing' but quite another 'doing' something about it!

Four brief cases are outlined below to illustrate OD behaviour. In each case my role was as an external advisor, facilitator or coach, and in each case considerable personal and organisational harm took place (the details have been disguised for reasons of confidentiality).

Table 1: The Four Cases Outlined

Case Description	Overview	Impact on others	Impact on me as the 'external' consultant/ coach
OD- 1 'The Fight Academy' – "burn & churn'em"	Rising star who lost the plot; given 'free hand' to sort out problem unit; able & bright, but increasingly out of control; exploitive; rampant arrogance; style over substance; 'show', status & image driven; opinionated – eventually was removed from office	Fear, distress, and strain; 'In' & 'Out' groups; high 'churn' rate; bad news was withheld from the Boss – the organisation became dysfunctional; reputations & careers damaged	Became increasingly sidelined as client's attempts to draw me into collusive 'In' group rebuffed by me; access always open & I was called upon whenever crises arose; friendly & trusted relationship
OD- 2 'Macho Man' "Wham Bam Thank you Ma'am!"	Large 'Ego'- 'I lead' Heroic entry; big plans, given 'free hand' to sort it; arrogant; didn't listen; opinionated, believed own PR; confrontational – collapse of organisation & removed under cloud	Divisive 'In' and 'Out' groups; fear & caution; avoidance; 'brutal' style of management emerged; image over substance	Was tolerated - as had been advisor to previous MD - but then ejected when refused to suck-up, 'dish the dirt' and rubber stamp proposed change plan
OD-3 Danger - explosive device : approach with caution!	Bright, litigious minded; envious; confrontational; Status driven; opinionated, manipulative, destructive, disruptive – Unit badly damaged by his behaviour - escorted off the premises	Distrust, fear, terror, avoidance, stress; organisation broken & 'frozen' for a time	Attempts to manipulate & threaten countered; remained friendly and respectful
OD-4 Full exposure - Centre stage if you please!	Too image, status & ego aware; was his own 'Special One'; narcissistic; bright, able; opinionated; increasingly isolated, role diminished; not trusted; self-serving behaviour	Distrust - seen as a pain; avoidance; disliked; internal revolt; demanding of others but a bit of a slacker himself	Attempts to manipulate and collude countered; remained friendly and respectful

In all these cases top people crashed, careers were sabotaged, stress related illness was generated and colleagues were compromised, ignored, brutalised or ejected if they chose not to 'join the gang' or accede to pressure exerted on them to meet the demands of the senior leader in question. All four were bright, able, experienced and had a track record of delivery. All four held high views of themselves and were used to getting their way but found it difficult - unfamiliar even - to cope when their desires were thwarted or their initiatives challenged. In three of the cases employees minimised contact, withheld 'difficult' data, and fudged problems. All four could be described as behaving like a bully on a regular basis but they could also be disarmingly charming when it suited them. In each case the leader failed to meet the potential expected for them and - significantly - the potential they had projected for themselves. Many people were left drained, exhausted, pale, jittery, anxious, resigned to fate and fearful. In my view all qualify for the title of 'Organisational Dementor.'

I experienced strong compliance pressures to 'join the gang', go native (and become a true believer and a sycophant), disclose confidential information and take their side in debates and disagreements. Rebuffing such collusive connections and ties resulted in my contact being wound down in one case whilst in others it reinforced - to these leaders and others - the value of the external as a more independent voice and commentator on the leader's increasingly toxic and dysfunctional behaviour.

These case examples should come as no surprise to consultants versed in the literature of counter-productive workplace behaviour; indeed Downs considers "that bureaucratic officials … are significantly - though not solely - motivated by their own self-interest"[13], even when acting in a purely official capacity. He does not suggest that such motivations are necessarily unhelpful or against the wider interests of the organisation as a whole but that this self-interest factor remains and thus always needs to be considered in thinking about an official's behaviour. In *The Gamesman*[14], Michael Maccoby highlights how the challenge of competitive activity and the drive for power, conquests and status can take over and result in stealth and politicising as the way leaders operate to secure advancement. A culture of false confidence and arrogance leading to *hubris,* overconfidence, complacency and an exaggeration of personal strengths - together with an increase in the likelihood of narcissistic behaviour - are features of such leadership dysfunction[15]. Indeed, one of the dangers in securing executive prestige, status & power is that it can blind that person to what is actually happening around them; or as Pfeffer & Sutton put it, "… that the mere act of stepping into a powerful position can transform them (from wise, successful leaders) into stubborn, dumb, and evidence resistant jerks"[16].

Such tendencies, which describe leaders who find their priorities deviating from their formal responsibilities, have been concisely summarised by Lenconi[17] and re-cast in the form of five core temptations which face CEOs - and other executives - and which can then derail them if unaddressed. These are:

- a temptation to protect *ego & status* over *results*;
- a temptation for *popularity* over *accountability*;
- a wish for *certainty* & to be 'right' over *clarity*
- a temptation for *harmony* over *productive conflict*, *and*
- a desire for *invulnerability* over *trust*

The case material - coupled with the work of the writers cited above - illustrate just how easy it can be for status, prestige, power and envy to become the primary driving forces behind the behaviour of leaders and sponsors[18]. As Lasch puts it, "in a society in which the dream of success has been drained of any meaning beyond itself, men have nothing against which to measure their achievements expect the achievements of others"[19]. Driven by such personal needs, their goals may no longer be in alignment with their organisational responsibilities and in such circumstances, external consultants *et al* become more vulnerable to the hidden agendas of their sponsors. In each of the four cases profiled the leader was able to redefine the daily business agenda to meet their own needs and demands, albeit ultimately resulting in calamitous personal and organisational consequences.

Given that such situations occur, a key question is how to avoid becoming entrapped when you become aware that your boss, or your sponsor, is working more to their own agenda than that of the organisation's and how - at the same time - to maintain your integrity, health and professionalism.

So …

3. Watch out for the 'Organisational Dementors'!

It is all too easy for the pressure to succeed to become too much to handle, resulting in leaders adopting the types of destructive OD behaviour illustrated in Table 1. If my experiences are reasonably representative - and not too dramatic - we need to be as alert as we can be to the likelihood of 'Organisational Dementors' lurking in our midst *and* be sufficiently prepared to counter, neutralise or escape from their clutches should they decide to fix on us and try to do damage.

Many readers may well have experienced workplaces where the tone, atmosphere and behaviour of the staff reflected a feeling of hopeless 'doom & deadness', and where people behaved as if they were zombies; workplaces where collaborative and collegial working was absent and where staff seemed to exist only to meet the needs of the ODs around the place. So what can be done to lessen the likelihood and impact of an attack of the ODs and the damage they can cause?

One solution may simply be fostering a more healthy scepticism about executive behaviour and leader success which accepts the inherent irrationality of human nature and the fact that leaders are fallible, and will not get it 'right' all the time. A start on this could be made by countering some of the 'half truths' and 'conventional wisdoms' punted around about

leadership as these can both drive leader dysfunction *and* lead the unwary naïve believer to become more vulnerable to an attack of the ODs. For example the following may not be quite as justified as they are promoted to be:

- Leaders will work for the common good
- Organisations are functional
- The *status quo* is always worth preserving
- Teams are effective
- Consensus works
- The best rise to the top
- Cheats don't prosper
- Ethics matter
- 'What you see is what you get'
- 'Good' behaviour conquers 'bad'
- People will do their best
- Logic and analysis wins the day

That is not to say that these factors do not matter, or that they do not hold true in many instances, but they are not universal truths and too firm an adherence to them is likely to increase a manager's vulnerability to being manipulated by others. What is surprising is how such conventional wisdoms have had such a hold on management indoctrination for so long, and in the face of contrary evidence. Pfeffer & Sutton,[20] for example, suggest that many of the prescriptions about what will lead to executive success may be total nonsense, and Rosenweig[21] implores us to watch out for the 'halo effect' surrounding many business delusions such as 'the search for star performers', and the seductive notion of the hero leader.

It is also difficult to identify ODs - because of the many guises they adopt - and whilst challenging the myths about leadership is one strategy for keeping safe, another is to build your own table of 'leader types' which you can then use as a device for charting possible destructive leader behaviour. Table 2 is an example of what this could look like. It highlights different types of leader behaviour - derived from research studies - any one of which could mask an OD.

Table 2: ' Leader–Types (L-T)'

Author	L-T 1	L-T 2	L-T 3	L-T 4	L-T 5	L-T 6
Bing (2007)[22]	The Bully	The Disaster -Hunter	Paranoid	The Wimp (bureaucracy-crazy)	The Narcissist	
Downs (1967)[23]	Zealots	Climbers	Advocates	Conservers	Statesmen	
Maccoby (1976)[24]	The Craftsman	The Jungle -Fighter	The Company Man	The Gamesman		
Wicker (1996)[25]	The Bully	The Street -Fighter	The Enforcer	The Absentee Leader	The Busy-Body	The Controller

The table is not intended to be comprehensive but having such a framework readily to hand will help you to

(i)   notice and classify leader behaviour,
(ii)   categorise potential harmful behaviour directed against you and
(iii)   prompt you to decide how to counter it.

Be aware too of how followers and colleagues can also be toxic ODs as Frost, Kellerman, and Offerman have observed.[26]

The following table applies the different types of leaders shown in Table 2 to the case material in Table 1:

Table 3: Case Descriptions & 'Leader-Types'

1. Case Description	2. Overview	3. Impact on others	4. Possible 'Leader-Type'
'OD'-1 'The Fight Academy' – "burn & churn'em"	Able & bright; increasingly out of control; exploitive; arrogance; 'show', status & image driven; style over substance; opinionated – removed from office	Fear, distress, and strain; 'In' & 'Out' groups; 'high-churn' rate; bad news withheld from the Boss	- Bully - Climber - Narcissist - Climber - Jungle-fighter - Street- fighter
'OD'-2 Wham Bam Thank you Ma'am! – macho man	Large 'Ego'- Heroic entry; big plans, given 'free hand' to sort it; opinionated, believed own PR; confrontational; arrogant	Divisive 'In' and 'Out' groups; fear & caution; 'brutal' style; image over substance	- Bully - Climber - Narcissist - Jungle-fighter - Street- fighter
'OD'-3 Danger : explosive device – approach with Caution!	Bright, litigious minded; envious; confrontational; Status driven; opinionated, manipulative, destructive, disruptive	Distrust, fear, terror, avoidance, stress	- Bully - Climber - Jungle-fighter - Paranoid
'OD'-4 'Full Exposure' – Centre Stage if you please!	Too image, status & ego aware; narcissistic; bright, able; opinionated; not trusted; self-serving behaviour	Distrust - seen as a pain; avoidance; demanding of others but a slacker himself, lazy	- Bully - Climber - Narcissist - Absentee-Leader

Table 3 highlights seeming style similarities (see column 4) underlying the behaviour of the four toxic leaders profiled. Whilst these may or may not represent core features of 'Organisational Dementors', what is illustrated is the usefulness of having ways of classifying leader behaviour that can then be applied to case material to probe for underlying features of significance.

Being aware of such similarities may have (i) alerted me sooner to the possibility that certain leader style combinations are very unhealthy to be around, (ii) alerted me to be vigilant for

possible exploitative behaviour from them, and (iii) enabled me to anticipate & cope with their potentially disruptive behaviour.

So using this type of approach can help the wary leader and the external consultant 'keep an eye' on the behaviour of influential colleagues just in case they could be an Organisational Dementor in disguise!

In conclusion, the notion of 'Organisational Dementors' can be helpful in reminding leaders - and especially external consultants - to watch out for manipulation at work. The high expectations held of leaders combined with the pressure to perform can increase a leader's vulnerability both to be manipulated by others and - at the same time – manipulate others for their own personal ends.

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