Managing the Unconscious at Work

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INTRODUCTION

It is a common experience at work, as it is in life, that plans that are made are not carried out, that decisions that are agreed are not enacted, and that timetables that seem obvious somehow turn out to be unmanageable. All of the above are examples where decisions or plans made on the basis of rational, logical, conscious thought somehow turn out to have been flawed in their planning or execution. It is of abiding interest to us all not only why things go wrong but, perhaps even more importantly, why they keep on going wrong or, to put it another way, why it is so difficult to learn from experience. And it is central to the task of management that the presence of such phenomena is acknowledged, that understanding of them is worked on, and that management has plans for addressing them.

There are many ways of looking at the above problems, and these ways are represented by a great many different schools of thought and theory about management and organizational consultancy. The fact that many of these schools claim to be comprehensive vehicles for understanding, obviating the need for working with other approaches, makes the situation even more difficult for managers to address.

This chapter is about a way of looking at the factors that seem to contribute to the sabotaging of managerial and organizational processes as outlined above. It is based on psychoanalytic and applied group relations theories, and assumes that many of the processes that contribute to organizational difficulties are unconscious in nature. By this I mean that the leadership, the management, and the members are not aware of what the underlying factors are that motivate their behaviour, nor are they in touch with the fact that their behaviour has a destructive effect on the organization. In fact, they often believe the opposite: that their behaviour is in the service, for example, of principle, truth, or good will.

Before I go on to elaborate some basic principles of understanding and managing these processes along psychoanalytic lines, I would like to place this approach into an overall context. In the widest sense, I believe that all theories in whatever field are systems of containing our anxiety of ‘not knowing’. The psychological function of a theory is thus, in part, a way of containing our fear of being lost and overwhelmed. At another level, that of the philosophy of science (Popper 1934), it is a way of producing a hypothesis that can be put to the test, and thus modified by experience. The theories that are used as part of the psychoanalytic model of understanding unconscious processes in organizations are no exception to the above rule. They have the advantage of providing us with a grid of understanding, within which we can interpret our observations; they also have the disadvantage of holding us down with preconceptions, diminishing our opportunities for seeing phenomena afresh. From a narrower perspective, I must state that psychoanalytic models of looking at organizations do not, and should not, claim to be all-encompassing models of understanding and managing organizations. They have to be applied in conjunction and co-operation with sociopsychological theories, as well as with management theories and structures based on external reality.
WORK AND THE MANAGEMENT OF WORK IN OUR SOCIETY

In order for us to pursue the concept of unconscious processes at work, it is important for us to give some thought to the function which work serves in society, for only then are we in a position to manage 'in context'. At its most basic work is the activity necessary for society's survival. In Western society nowadays, as the importance of such structures as the extended family and religion diminishes, work and work institutions (or their lack, in the form of unemployment) are increasingly important as central pillars of our personal identity. Take away our work, whether through redundancy, retirement, the closure of institutions, or other factors, and we are increasingly lost, subject to physical and mental illness, and more at risk of death. Nowadays, much of our work is is the form of membership of organizations and institutions, so that any change in their structure or management threaten to shake the very pillars of our personal and professional identity. To a degree, this explains the ubiquitous natur of resistance to change in institutions— something that keeps on coming as surprise to many a manager.

However, apart from the role of giving us some key building blocks in the creation of our identity, work and work institutions also serve another function through enabling us to partake in a group and institutional process. They then give us the chance to be institutionalized in the sense that Goffman (1961) use the word. We all know about the negative aspects of institutionalization, as described by Goffman, E. J. Miller (1993c), and many others. There is less discussion of the process of members welcoming the process of institutionalization, as it relieves them of the strain of having to manage individual thought and action and instead allows them to opt into some institutional group norm of thinking or, perhaps better put, to non-thinking behaviour.

Change in the organization and loss of membership threatens or severs the bond of belonging, and hence causes resistance or turbulence, such as is witnessed in many work organizations. A manager who thus believes that change is possible without turbulence and resistance is in my view not in touch with reality, but is instead in a state of wishful thinking about self and organization, as well as being in a state of denial such as is described in Steiner's (1985) paper 'Turning a Blind Eye'.

THE ROLE OF ANXIETY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

If we build on the above picture of what function work and work places serve, we thus come up with two views. The conscious view is that the workplace is there to perform its work task, and we are there as members to perform our work roles within the structure of the overall work organization. The unconscious view would be that the work institution is there to give one a sense of personal identity, to take one out of the heat of individual personal thought and decision making, and to provide one with group membership for the provision of ‘comfort’, both personally and in society. The two perceptions are quite obviously in conflict, a conflict that I believe often throws light on some of the difficulties experienced in work organizations. For what is clear is that activity and work performance that are in the service of the organization’s primary task are not necessarily, in fact are unlikely to be, the same sort of activity that is engaged in in pursuit of unconscious individual and group processes which further the ‘membership’ function outlined above.
If we now introduce the concept of management, we find the following. It is not really possible to speak of management without at the same time coupling the concept to change. Management without change means managing the status quo, and as the environment is in a constant process of change, management — to keep the status quo — must mean eventually managing oneself out of existence. Just as management is about the process of change — though naturally there is some choice about the nature and speed of the changes envisaged — so change is inevitably associated with anxiety. At both a conscious and unconscious level, the management of change is therefore the management of anxiety and of resistance arising from the anxiety.

If the above hypothesis is correct, namely that management is about change, which in turn causes anxiety, then it is important for us to understand as much as possible about the nature of the anxieties aroused. This is where the essential connection is to be made between psychoanalysis, which is about understanding unconscious anxieties, and the workplace where these anxieties manifest themselves through unconscious acting out, both individually and on a group and institution-wide basis, with a consequent sabotaging of consciously reached decisions.

I use the plural, anxieties, because there are different anxieties operating at different levels. In order to address them adequately in management and in consultancy, we need to make some differentiations. I propose three categories for which I believe there is strong evidence:

- primitive anxiety;
- anxiety arising from the nature of the work;
- personal anxiety.

**Primitive anxiety**

By primitive anxiety I mean an ever-present, all-pervasive anxiety that is the fate of mankind. A great many authors, philosophers, anthropologists, and psychologists have written about it. Spitz (1957), writing of the work of anthropologist and psychoanalyst, Geza Roheim, said, ‘he saw in culture a huge network of more or less successful attitudes to protect mankind against the dangers of object loss, the colossal efforts made by a baby who is afraid of being left alone in the dark. This was the main stream of his entire work, as expressed in nearly two hundred papers and books.’ The network of culture — which fundamentally consists of institutions, be they totemic clans, religious rites, or their present-day counterparts, work institutions — is intended to fend off the dread of the unknown. We do not, however, need to go to Australian Aboriginal studies, as Roheim did, in order to find primitive rituals full of symbolism. Anyone with a three-year-old can observe them hop into bed so that the ‘monsters under the bed’ don’t get them, or witness them not stepping on the cracks in the pavement lest some unspeakable horror befall them. And three-year-olds don’t ‘disappear’ with development. They get ‘covered’ by layers of growing up, but the three-year-old remains as a core, both creative and problematic. And rituals to ward off evil are not confined to children; how many of us walk lightly under a ladder, or don’t give Friday the thirteenth a second thought?
Many psychoanalytic authors, including Freud (1913) have written on this theme. Bion (1961: 141) writes, ‘I hope to show that in his contact with the complexities of life in a group, the adult resorts, in what may be a massive regression, to mechanisms described by Melanie Klein as typical of the earliest phases of mental life.’ Esther Bick (1987), who introduced infant observation into the training of child psychotherapists and psychoanalysts in Britain, spoke of the individual's fear of being ‘lost in space’. John Bowlby (1969), using yet another language, speaks of separation anxiety. I believe that all the above are writing about the same pervasive primitive anxiety. And just as Australian Aborigines and Kalahari Bushmen band together and create rituals and institutions to hold them together—to provide them with a 'social skin', so to speak—so do we. In our case, however, many of the social institutions of the past, such as those Bion wrote about—the Church, the Army, the Nobility—are no longer generally available, and so we imbue existing everyday work institutions with protective defensive functions. For the purpose of this thesis, I am therefore suggesting that workplace institutions serve many of the associative-defensive purposes that primitive tribal or religious groupings served in the past. Evidence for this being so can be found when there is severance of the bond, such as in redundancy or retirement. More importantly for management, it can also be found when there is an attempt to change the institution. It is of vital importance for managers to realize that any attempt to change an institution will thus immediately cause a defensive backlash, particularly from those who have ‘colonized’ the particular institution for the specific purpose of giving them ‘containment’, in Bion’s terms, for their primitive anxieties.

**Anxiety arising from the nature of the work**

The second category of anxiety is that arising from the nature of the work. Elliot Jaques’ (1955) classic theoretical paper, ‘Social Systems as a Defence against Persecutory and Depressive Anxiety’, was followed by Isabel Menzies’ (1960) paper, in which she applied these concepts to a nursing hierarchy in a large teaching hospital. Both Jaques and Menzies built on the work of Melanie Klein, specifically her ideas of the very primitive anxieties and mental mechanisms in the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein 1959). Menzies in her study makes the points that working with patients brings the nurse face to face with very primitive anxieties about death, sadistic attacks on the object, and that the health field in general operates in a way in which taboos about such things as privacy, nakedness, and sexuality are of necessity regularly transgressed. The result is an upsurge of primitive anxiety that has to be defended against, and the resulting defence mechanisms have an ‘industry-wide’, institutional, and individual component. By ‘industry-wide’ I mean that defence mechanisms arising in the staff group of, say, a premature baby intensive care unit in Naples, London, Stockholm, and Vienna are likely to have a great deal in common in spite of different social and health care systems, because the nature of the anxiety, namely death in infants, is the common factor in the work.

It needs to be remembered that the concept of work-related hazards, such as silicosis in miners or scrotal cancer in Victorian chimney-sweeps, is a well established public health concept. What I am arguing for is a widening of the concept to include psychological hazards leading to staff and institutional burnout and thus impaired institutional functioning, with key implications for managers, staff, and clients alike. The assumption is that there is anxiety specific to and arising from the nature of the work and that the institution defends itself against this anxiety in such a way that the emphasis of
the structure is on defence-related rather than work-related functioning. In other words, the pressure is for defence-related activity to come to the foreground, with the result that the primary task of the institution is neglected. This represents a shift from ‘on task’ to ‘off task’ functioning. If this is correct, then it is important for managers to realize that any attempt to alter the specific way in which work is organized in their institution must, by definition, mean a disruption of the anxiety-holding system, with a consequent release into the structure of anxiety and resistance to change. Most of the work in this area has been done in hospitals and related organizations. It is, however, obvious that there are many jobs in society where the workers are constantly in the shadow of danger. One need, for example, only think of the nuclear industry to realize what a heavy price we might all pay if defensive blindness against the risks inherent in the work were to become part of the work ethic.

The lesson to be learned is not that no change should be envisaged— far from it. The lesson is that change will elicit resistance, that the nature of the underlying anxiety can be ascertained both in principle and by observation, and that addressing this anxiety in the context of an overall process of the management of change can make for a more effective organization, both in terms of work output and in terms of staff morale.

**Personal anxiety**
The third level of anxiety is the personal one in which external societal and, more commonly, work issues trigger off, in the individual’s own inner world, elements of past personal experience, both conscious and unconscious, with resulting disturbance that may manifest itself at work.

An example would be of a nurse in training whose mother had died of breast cancer. Finding herself, in the early stages of her career, with sole responsibility for the night-shift in a female surgery ward where many of the patients had had mastectomies for breast cancer, this nurse suffered a breakdown. In this case, it is likely that a personal, unmetabolized psychic enclave of grief was detonated by the heavy exposure to grief and distress arising from the work. The choice of career in this instance might itself have been determined by unconscious reparative mechanisms in response to the loss of mother. A further example might be of a member in a law firm who got seriously out of role in her handling of a divorce case. The case had many similarities to her parents’ divorce when she was 14, an experience that was the unconscious inspiration for her choice of the Law as a career. This is an example of where a personal experience led not only to a career but, for the lawyer who had made no connection between her past experience and her career choice, also to the creation of a professional Achilles’ heel just waiting for the ‘right’ client to activate it.

An additional factor here is the concept of ‘valency’, a term that Bion (1961) borrowed from chemistry to designate an individual’s tendency-cumunconscious-vulnerability to being drawn into one or other basic assumption type of functioning. The concept is of relevance to understanding and managing institutions and staff groups, because institutions themselves are inclined to one or other type of basic assumption functioning as a result of the nature of the work they are doing and, sometimes, of the leadership culture ‘handed down’ within the organization. The outcome is that there is often an unconscious ‘matching’ process between individual and organization, which adds to the quantum of
resistance to change, for any change that is then proposed requires not only a change in work outlook and practice but also a concurrent inner world change.

It is clear that, so far, the contribution from psychoanalysis has been about the functions that work and other institutions serve in helping us contain various levels of anxiety. It needs to be clearly stated that these ways of coping with anxiety are essentially defences against anxiety. In other words, the underlying anxiety is not recognized and the defensive structures are unconsciously assembled on both an individual and group basis. To an extent, of course, one ‘inherits’ styles of defence mechanisms from one’s parents, one’s family, one’s work institution, and one’s culture. The essential feature of this way of looking at behaviour is, however, not that there should not be defence mechanisms, but rather that defence mechanisms one unconsciously ‘falls into’ are not effective, do not address the problem, and often lead to an escalation of the problem.

What contribution can psychoanalysis make to understanding such processes? As is clear from the preceding discussion, psychoanalysis can help us to understand and think about the various levels of anxiety and to put in place containing mechanisms for managing the anxieties arising from the work. Without such mechanisms there is the constant risk that the institution is swamped by processes that take it ‘off task’.

**PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE MANAGEMENT PROCESS**

A psychoanalytic perspective on management would need to take into account not only the anxieties mentioned in the previous section but also the mechanism needed to contain them, in the sense that Bion uses the concept of ‘containment’. What is required therefore is a ‘state of mind’ in leadership and in management which is adequately in touch with the threats to the organization and to its survival. These threats could arise from either side of the institutional boundary— in my view management is thus essentially a boundary-keeping and facilitating function. But this means a great deal more than performing a mere ‘gatekeeper’ function, for it requires not only judgement about the degree and nature of the ‘cross-border traffic’ but also judgement as regards timing, symbolism, and the conscious and unconscious elements involved.

By ‘cross-border traffic’, I mean information about the outside world that needs to be taken in by the institution in order for it to be able to adapt to the changing environment and for there to be an opportunity for this information to be held up against the backdrop of the primary task of the institution so that the necessary adaptation can be made to the mode of working. (I am here using the term institution as defined by Wesley Carr (1996) when he refers to it as the picture we carry in the mind, as opposed to organization which he regards as the bricks and mortar of the workplace.) Equally the outside world needs to be informed about the ‘goings-on’ in the institution, be they products or changes in the state of mind of the management and the staff.

The timing of these information flows with their concurrent emotional change is obviously a matter of importance and judgement for it involves at times the risk of being overwhelmed by the information flow inward, just as there is the risk of ‘acting out’ in the information flow outwards. By this I mean that a surfeit of information inward can shift the institution into the paranoid schizoid end of the
spectrum of functioning whereby, via processes such as scapegoating, good and bad characteristics and actions are located in separate parts of the system (for example, in different departments or in ‘management’ or in ‘staff’, ‘us’ and ‘them’), rather than being understood as coexisting throughout the system. This is not only counter-productive to the work and thus the survival of the organization but can result in poorly thought out or poorly timed responses that in effect are the institutional equivalent of the ‘acting out’ process seen in patients. In this latter process, the response is concretely enacted rather than experienced, thought about, and fed back in a way that leads to open dialogue.

The boundary-managing function therefore has to have as a core element a containing function that can take up and hold on to the excesses of the flow that risk overwhelming the system. Information can then be channelled on when conditions are more favourable for it to be heard in such a way that it can be thoughtfully acted upon.

An understanding of symbolic communication or miscommunication is therefore essential in monitoring the flow, for it is not uncommon for a supposedly innocuous piece of information to cause great offence. Likewise keeping a weather eye open for the unsaid, unacknowledged, and sometimes unconscious element of communication is essential as part of an early warning system of trouble in the making.

What is required of management in this ‘sitting on the boundary’ state of mind is adequate connection with the inside of the organization matched by the equivalent connection with the outside world; a sense of belonging to both systems and yet to neither. I am not, however, advocating an opportunistic ‘sitting on the fence’ type of role, for the position I am describing is anchored by the need for an acute awareness of the primary task of the organization on the one hand and, more importantly, by the ideas that the management needs to hold on behalf of the institution (Obholzer 1996).

The risk to the manager is to ‘give in’ to the pull of either inside or outside forces and thus to become identified and ‘captured’ in a group psychological sense. While being in such a state of capture is undoubtedly more ‘comfortable’, psychically speaking, it brings with it the risks described so lucidly by Pierre Turquet (1975) in his paper, ‘Threats to Identity in the Large Group’. Melanie Klein’s concepts of splitting and of projective identification arose from her particular interest in work with children and thus with the most primitive mental mechanisms. It is, of course, these very primitive mechanisms that manifest themselves par excellence in group processes. They throw light on the process whereby unacceptable aspects of the self, or of the institution, are split off and perceived in others. The price of employing this defensive mechanism is of course that there is no pressure to review one’s own working practices, thus reducing the chance of learning from experience in the service of adaptation.

What is required for the manager is thus what in a clinical sense would be described as a ‘depressive position’ way of functioning— of being in touch with both inner-world and outer-world phenomena in a balanced, overall, containing way.

To me the most important psychoanalytic concept that contributes to understanding the containing function of management is, however, little spoken about in the management literature. It is the concept of detachment, that is, of careful and considerable observation of what is going on in a framework as
free of preconception as possible—something that all psychoanalysts strive for. Put another way, it relates to the story of the man who was observed searching the ground under a streetlight. A passer-by asked him what he was looking for. The man replied that he was looking for a bunch of keys he had lost. ‘Did you lose them here?’ asked the passer-by. ‘No,’ said the searcher, ‘but the light is better here.’

This phenomenon of searching ‘where the light is better’, that is, in an area with which we are already familiar, as opposed to allowing ourselves the experience of searching in the unknown dark where we might actually find the answer, seems to me to be a very important management issue. The capacity to stand the experience of not knowing and of not falling into premature pseudo-understanding and action is obviously to be valued and fostered.

It is important not only from the perspective of having a thinking institution but also from the perspective of allowing the greatest opportunity for the creativity of the members and of the institution as a whole to emerge. In order for that to happen the necessary structures for containment need to be in place in the institution — clarity of primary task, leadership, and authority, and the resources, particularly time, so that issues other than and beyond the mere struggle for everyday survival can be addressed.

CONCLUSION
In a recent paper Elliot Jaques discusses and rejects his earlier (1955) seminal paper and adopts a revised view that ‘it is badly organized social systems that arouse psychotic anxieties’ (Jaques 1995: 343). I agree with him on this, but it begs the question of whether any systems are ever so well organized that anxiety does not ‘slosh around in them’. I believe not. As managers it is, however, essential for us to understand that a work organization that has clarity of primary task as a constant in the management process, however difficult to achieve as a definitive outcome, is already half-way there to the process of damping down the excesses of institutional anxiety.

The emphasis on primary task must necessarily be followed by attention to authority and power and to matters of role, role definition, and differentiation of resources, time, and boundaries. All of these are absolutely central components of the concept of containment. The process could be described by analogy with roll-on roll-off ferries. These ships are at risk of capsizing because even relatively little water entering the vessel is not contained and can therefore flow to and build up on one side of the vessel, thus upsetting its stability. The addition of internal partitions prevents the sloshing about and reduces to a minimum the destructive effect of water on board. Symbolically, the ferry is the institution, the water the unconscious and anti-task processes. Where there is no clarity of task and structure, the anti-task processes are allowed free flow; the presence of such structures instead contains the processes and localizes them to minimize their destructive effect and allow them to be tackled.

This brings us back to the concept of containment and to the specific contribution which the psychoanalytic understanding of containment can make to the practice of management. Bion (1962) described a process whereby the mother took in and accepted the child’s projections of discomfort and distress, metabolized them, and returned them to the child in an improved and partly
understood form. The mother thus acted as the additional purifying agent for the child-mother dyad, a process the child itself was not capable of performing.

The leader and management of an organization in essence need to perform a similar task of containment for the staff. This does not mean the creation of a dependency situation such as is implied by a mother-child dyadic model; it needs to be based on a model of role performance by all concerned in a way that acknowledges both their skills and deficits. By virtue of both role and transference processes, the leader and management should be in the best position to perform the containment functions outlined above. And, as mentioned previously, in order for the containment function to be adequately addressed and for the work to be seen and managed in context, the overall constructs and concepts outlined in this chapter need to be available, in order to provide reference points against which the overall enterprise and its functioning can be evaluated.

The whole idea of managing the unconscious is of course a contradiction in terms. A more accurate phrase might be: managing the organization in a state of awareness of the existence of unconscious processes. There is no doubt in my mind that an awareness of the ubiquitous nature and the destructive quality of unconscious processes in institutions can help to minimize their impact. Put more positively, such an awareness can help to harness unconscious processes in the service of creative institutional functioning.