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# Corporate life and the imagination: The place of unconscious processes in the world of business

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## ABSTRACT

The question giving shape to this paper is: Can the workplace in today's corporate world ever be constructed, legitimately, as a psychological place? This paper will argue that it is the responsibility of the individual to engage their imaginative processes and learn the art of soul making. The corporation may encourage its members to be creative and imaginative but mostly its activities will militate against these activities. Reference will be made to a research project for a major production site (BP Oil Australia) that evaluated an espoused psychological goal (improved production and improved creativity) as its outcome. The author conducted the evaluation of this leadership development initiative that shed light on the vexed question that is the focus of this paper. The findings of the research indicate that corporate life has evolved into a totally above-world enterprise where transparency of decision making, policy planning, and implementation is the sought-after ideal. This very conscious and heroic-ego world roots out any semblance of under-world (unconscious) forces.

Over the past decade we have witnessed a plethora of enthusiastic literature on what has been suggested as a new paradigm of leadership: leadership from the inside out as it were. Stephen Covey referred to it as "A great movement ... taking place throughout the world ... an empowerment philosophy that turns bosses into servants and coaches" (Covey, 1989, p. xi).

There is a very understandable desire to build a work culture that is people-centred, is characterised by high trust, and that encourages innovation and risk taking. Employees want to believe that such a workplace is possible. Senior managers would like to be seen as positive human beings doing the best for their staff. And, organisational consultants readily market the vision of a collaborative (rather than competitive) professional environment as an energy-giving platform for change. The ideal of being "driven by *inner* motivation toward achieving a common purpose" (Covey, 1989, p. xii) is indeed a seductive dream.

As one casts an evaluating eye across

the rhetoric and the practice of corporate life a number of questions arise. Firstly, What is the psychological status of this novel paradigm? A question that might be rephrased as: can the needs of the *collective psyche* ever be responsive to the needs of the individual? And secondly: what might an evaluative study of a well-intended organisational development intervention, designed to produce a transformative leaders, show?

Both questions will be addressed over the course of this paper. A brief description of a recently completed research study will set the scene for the subsequent psychological reflection. The perspective of analytical psychology, following the tradition of Carl Jung and James Hillman, challenges what has become a fashionable view. The consultants to industry have recently (over the past two decades) appropriated the language of personal transformation that has traditionally been at the heart of analytical work in the clinic. This migration of language, while sounding adventurous and attractive to the ears of consultants and academics, does not sit well either pragmatically or

conceptually.

### Method

The author was engaged to evaluate the effectiveness of a leadership development program in a production plant of a multi-national corporation based in Australia. The decision was made to use a phenomenological approach that uses the lived experience of the participants to both construct descriptions of, and ascribe significance to, the learning experience.

In-depth interviews were conducted prior to the launching of the program, midway through, and at a six-month follow-up. Participants comprised the entire leadership team (n = 28), a sample of professional staff directly reporting to members of the leadership team (n = 8) and a sample of operational and administrative support staff (n = 7).

Inviting the participants to speak of their actual experience of leadership over the duration of the program was used to assess the effectiveness of the program. The interviews explored each individual's experience by open-ended questioning focused across five themes, namely: sense of self, enjoyment of work, quality of relationships, capacity to take action and, openness to change. Given that these themes reflected the general content of the planned change program, effectiveness was gauged by monitoring experienced changes over time. For each of the three phases (before, middle and end) of the research interviews, a series of narratives were configured that created an unfolding plot, over time, and concluded in a number of outcomes that represented an explanatory story.

Narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) was used to draw together the diverse threads of events and experiences and integrate them into a whole.<sup>1</sup> The data (transcripts of the interviews) were scrutinized for individual events or

expressions that provided an understanding of how leadership was experienced. The eventual narrative was shaped by the interaction of motives and events or the tension of opposing forces. The result of the narrative analysis was an emplotted narrative offering an account of how the final outcome had come about.<sup>2</sup>

The change program aimed at creating a high level of transformational leadership in the designated leadership team. The literature is in general agreement that this manner of leadership is achieved by "articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and providing individualized support, effective leaders change the basic values, beliefs, attitudes of followers so that they are willing to perform beyond the minimum levels specified by the organization" (Podsakoff, Mackenzie & Bommer, 1996, p. 260). The model was one of personal development and inner leadership. The intended effect was that the individual change would cascade down throughout the organisation. The aim was to involve the whole person (thoughts, images, emotions, judgements) and for the learning to be experiential rather than conceptual.

### Results

After the passage of eighteen months the majority of the members of the leadership team spoke of a change-for-the-better in the areas of teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership culture, and job satisfaction. That this did not amount to transformational leadership was indicated by the increase in the felt them-and-us culture on the part of the support and operational staff. Whilst communication had improved within the leadership team it had gone from poor to very poor between leaders and followers.

A significant number of the leadership team had acquired new words and concepts that they felt facilitated their within-group communication but this new language also acted as a barrier to communicating to

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anyone outside of the group.<sup>3</sup>

### Discussion

Participants in the study universally expressed their satisfaction with the interviewing experience. Researchers were frequently told by those participating in the study that the interviewing process was a positive experience. In the eyes of the majority of the leadership team the leadership development initiative had been a qualified success. In contrast, for those who were not designated leaders it had aggravated an already difficult situation. What had been promoted as a program that would lead to organisational transformation had led to the key group becoming more introverted and self-interested, which resulted in a cocoon-effect as viewed by those outside of the group. The discrepancy between the experience of the interviews, the expectations for significant change that had been promoted, and the experienced outcomes, was a source of increasing cynicism and diminishing morale over the course of the program.

As the principal researcher evaluating this work I have sought to make sense of this apparent failure. There is no doubt that senior management was vigorously supportive of the initiative. The external organisational change agents were competent in articulating and implementing their inputs. At best, individual leaders had engaged more with whole-person learning than was their previous practice and this was judged by them to be more satisfying. It was not uncommon for these leaders to comment during their interviews that they were doing this work, putting into practice new found insights and communication strategies, for their personal advantage and trusted that at some latter stage it would be of benefit to the organisation. The question arose: was this costly initiative of ultimate value to the corporation? And at a more philosophical level: was there a conflation of expectations based on a confusion of what constitutes corporate wellbeing and what constitutes

individual wellbeing? It was as if everyone involved wanted the program to work but that the impetus of the effort was misdirected.

### Jung and the collective psyche

One of Jung's significant contributions to depth psychology was the distinction he made between personal aspects of psyche and collective aspects of psyche.<sup>4</sup> In daily living he saw a certain trade-off between individual needs and collective needs.

From a sociological perspective, there is a straightforward negotiation between conflicting individual and corporate needs. This horse-trading is inevitably experienced as difficult, but at the same moment perfectly understandable, in a professional workplace. From a psychological (meaning *psychic*) perspective, there is room for much confusion. Jung was concerned that in personal analysis, when unconscious material is assimilated and the analysand identifies with the collective psyche, the resulting experience was "psychic inflation" or a feeling of "godlikeness." Such a phenomenon jeopardises the wellbeing of the individual and is a curse for those around him/her. Jung was specific: the analysand sees "many things that before were invisible. Since his knowledge was helpful to him, he readily assumes that it would be useful to others. In this way he is liable to become arrogant; it may be well meant, but it is nonetheless annoying to other people. He feels as though he possesses a key that opens many, perhaps even all, doors" (Jung, 1966, ¶ 224).

Inviting an engagement with unconscious material is not necessarily a boon for every aspect of day-to-day living. Having an external consultant offering the prospect of a transformed organisation if only key leaders learn to lead as whole people neglects to inform participants that there is also a down side. Invite psyche, especially the unconscious elements, to the workplace and there will be trouble ... "the human psyche exhibits certain functions or

tendencies which, on account of their collective nature, are opposed to individual needs" (Jung, 1966, ¶ 235). In corporate life, one could thus predict that any assimilation of unconscious material by senior personnel would lead to considerable dismay, even mayhem.

The desire, well intentioned though it is, to bring soul/psyche into the workplace all too easily becomes a desire for a state of *participation mystique*<sup>5</sup> -- a corporation espousing the place of soul, but totally failing to realise that engaging with soul (unconsciousness processes) is the business of the under-world and not of the above-world. The prospect of personal and corporate transformation is highly seductive when contrasted with the mundane world of one's professional experience. However, as the images of seduction and of the under-world, as described in myth, continually tell us: any journey into the under-world is an experience of finding oneself (usually as a consequence of being seized by an irresistible force) bereft of competence, powerless, suffering intensely -- all this is transformation!

As Aldo Carotenuto has said: "Persephone is kidnapped, prey to seduction that radically transforms her destiny. To fulfil that destiny, Persephone must die to herself; she must descend into Hades -- a mythologem that is repeated in the tale of the Sumerian goddess Inanna, the Mesopotamian Ishtar, and the Japanese Amaterasu" (Carotenuto, 2002, pp. 50-51). No senior management actually wants the workplace to be "one that stresses personal responsibility and is open to art and sex in all their dark, unconscious mysteries"<sup>6</sup> (Paglia, 1992, p.vii). Historically, the professional workplace has been experienced as a safe haven for profession development, which was always emotionally safe, and at the same time, a straight jacket for the soul.

### A psychological attitude

Corporate life has evolved into a totally above-world enterprise where transparency of decision making, policy planning, and implementation is the sought-after ideal. This is very much the world of the heroic ego, as the day-world ego wants to root out any semblance of under-world forces. Hercules, the day-world hero *par excellence*, "does not know how to behave in the under-world" (Hillman, 1979, p. 110). The ways of Hercules: muscular actions; absence of imagination; are not effective in the underworld. Corporate life ennobles the man-of-action, the Herculean ego, and the way of the sword. It is appropriate for this to be so as the performance demands of the workplace are akin to the twelve Labours of Hercules and one needs to be suitably armed. That the human psyche is more than the heroic ego of the day-world reality is a fundamental tenant of analytical psychology. But what is the place, if there is one, for the imaginative ego in the corporate world?

Myths, according to Hillman (1979), tell us that "we may not use the sword in the underworld; we may only struggle with the shades in close embrace or throw stones" (pp. 113-114). And he proceeds to explain that the reason for this is because the heroic ego "lacks the metaphorical understanding that comes with image-work, [and] it makes wrong moves, and these violently" (p. 115). The imagination that the corporate world desires to commandeer is one in the service of the heroic ego and not one that assists the "ego-shade adjust to his underworld milieu" (p. 108). In the corporate world there would seem to be no place for a Virgil to assist our Dante and remind us to *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate (Abandon every hope, ye that enter.)*<sup>7</sup>

The human psyche is orientated in two directions: to the outer world and to the inner world. The workplace wants near total attention and knows that muscle power is what it most desires. However, as the myth

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of Hercules reminds us, there is one task (attending to the under-world) for which the honed skills of the above-world will not be effective. All the corporate world can manage is a toe in the water of the imagination (skills of the under-world). What is cannot handle, and thus has no desire for, is to be taken across the river by the ferryman (the imaginative ego) and to be fully on the other side. Under-world forces are ruled out because they do not contribute to core business. Joseph's Campbell's stages of the hero's journey<sup>8</sup> are often used in workshops on leadership development (and were used in the program referred to in this paper) but the focus is inevitably on the ego-hero and not a descent into the underworld. The place of the underworld, the soulful place of the imaginative ego, is a place of no return. *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate* is not just a clever and troublesome warning, it is a stark reality of the psyche.

### A workable solution

Just as Hercules' Labours were essentially in the above-world (eleven twelfths in fact!) and only one (an essential one!) in the under-world, the same can be said of the imagination: "one has to be unpsychological most of the time in order to be psychological some of the time" (Berry, 1992, p. 424). I am here equating 'psychological' with 'imaginative' or 'fantasy,' processes so much loved in analytical psychology. Gaston Bachelard (1987) reminded us that "Imagination is not, as its etymology would suggest, the faculty of forming images of reality; rather it is the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which *sing* reality" (p.15). The corporation (I would include here an educational institution such as a university) is very much a design to make the most of reality and certainly not to go beyond it. In a psychological sense it is not designed to be a place of soul making<sup>9</sup> (see Russell, 2003). Only on the odd occasion (like one twelfth of the time) does it need to seek out pathways

for change and new life.

While I have argued that the professional workplace can never be like a true poem that finds "a way to integrate the hesitations and ambiguities which alone can free us from realism, [and] allow us to dream" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 32) it can have a moment "some of the time." My intention is to be positive and pragmatic; positive, in that I do see soul-work as part of our shared corporate life, and pragmatic, in that the place of soul is particular and partial, never general and integrative.

David White, poet and communicator to Corporate America, has argued for the benefits of weaving the inner world of soul and creativity with the outer world of form and matter but adds that in the vast amount of management literature, "very few authors are willing to take the soul seriously" (White, 1994, p. 14). My contention is that there is a very good reason for this reluctance to invite, with serious intent, the under-world into the workplace. Certainly professional life should be meaningful, personally and financially rewarding, but this is not soul-making. Equating soul with these non-contestably desirable aspects, and thus make it acceptable to the demands of sunlight, is to demean it. Organisations are pretending, whether they know it or not, when their leaders speak of nourishing soul-life as part of their core business. It didn't work in the case of the study mentioned above and myths tell us that one spends time in the under-world only for very particular reasons. Traditionally the under-world is a place of dramatic change (dying to the old ways and tentatively beginning a new life) and organisations prize stability only wishing to engage in radical change when the environment demands it for reasons of survival.

Soul-making is essentially a personal responsibility not a corporate one. To attribute such a responsibility to the institution is to set oneself up to experience failed expectations. We can bring a soulful orientation to the workplace, and it can be of great benefit to

those with whom we work, but to this end the institution is neutral and so it should be. The archetype that awakens the sleeping soul, as revealed in myth, folk tales, and art forms, is the visitation of love (Hillman, 1972, p. 55). This archetype plays havoc with the demands of the workplace.

### Conclusion

The core business of a commercial corporation is found in the management of material products: their production, organisation, and delivery. In contrast, the core business of an individual is to engage with both material *and* imaginative products. Conflating corporate and individual business is not sound psychology (specifically, analytical psychology), is out of kilter with our traditional mythology, and is not supported by the empirical evidence in the study reported in this paper. While the multinational corporation has, in principle, the capacity to foster imaginal, or soulful, experience, in practice it is inadvisable and can never be integral to its core business. On the individual level, however, it is a very different story.

### Notes

1. Polkinghorne (1995) argues for the usefulness of the meaning-producing operation of the narrative plot. "Plot is the narrative structure through which people understand and describe the relationship among the events and choices of their lives. Plots function to compose or configure events into a story by: (a) delimiting a temporal range which marks the beginning and end of the story, (b) providing criteria for the selection of events to be included in the story, (c) temporally ordering events into an unfolding movement culminating in a conclusion, and (d) clarifying or making explicit the meaning events have as contributors to the story as a unified whole" (p. 7).

2. The actual narratives, nine in total, were documented in the Research Report to the client. It was the client's wish that its

corporate identity not be public knowledge but gave permission for the research work to be referred to in any scholarly publication.

3. The 48-page Research Report to the client consisted of 30 pages of data shaped into 9 narratives with each narrative being an account of the success or otherwise of the leadership program. This manner of data presentation proved to be highly attractive to all stakeholders. A measure of the communicative value of this form of presentation of the results was that the CEO asked that the narratives be dramatically presented and workshopped with the entire work force. The in-depth interviews were carried out by three researchers including the author. The overall direction of the research was the author's decision but individual style in interviewing was encouraged.

4. For Jung, the *psyche* (*Seele* in German) encompassed both the personal and collective, and the conscious and unconscious, in human experience.

5. Jung used this term to convey an experience of mutual influence, which is largely unconscious and thus powerful in its effect on the surrounding environment.

6. Camille Paglia used these words to refer to a "new kind of feminism" that she judged to be needed by women in today's Western world.

7. The final line of the inscription over the gateway to Hell.

*Inferno*, Canto 111, Line 9 by Dante Alighieri.

8. Campbell himself does not shy away from the deathly implications of the hero's initiation.

9. James Hillman refers to this capacity by the Latin words *anima mundi*, and prefers to see it as an action statement, making soul in the world, rather than finding soul as though it were an entity to be discovered. For Hillman (1993) "... *anima mundi* indicates

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the animated possibilities presented by each thing as it is, its sensuous presentation as a face bespeaking its interior image – in short, its availability to imagination, its presence as a *psychic reality*” (p. 101).

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