

A Strategic Threat to Policy Leadership?

Draft for Discussion

In the first half of 2004, three high profile enquires were reported in the press. Each dealt with the same topic, the adequacy of the national intelligence system. In the US, the congressional enquiry examined the function of the intelligence system as it related to 9/11, in the UK the Butler enquiry investigated the basis on which that country elected to go to war in Iraq, while in Australia the Flood enquiry investigated the same.

In each case, the elected administration was found to be blameless. What was found was that there had been systemic failure on the part of the intelligence system, the system whose responsibility it was to furnish its government with the best intelligence advice available. In his summary remarks, the head of the US congressional enquiry claimed‘and above all, a failure of imagination’.

The purpose of this paper is to explore why such systemic failure of imagination occurred and to raise the possibility that such systemic failure is presently occurring everywhere and probably always has. We are unable to manage that which we do not understand.

Governments and large corporations everywhere have boards of management and senior executive teams that are served by their own intelligence agencies, bodies of dedicated professionals whose role it is to provide the best professional advice to their masters to aid the effective governance of their organization. These ‘intelligence agencies’ are rarely named as such; rather they are called ‘policy units’ or similar. Yet their task is the same – to scan the environment, look for early signs of opportunity and threat and to propose strategic policy accordingly. Those observations and recommendations must then be fed up the line to those at the helm of the organization. Those recommendations, of necessity, may suggest a change of direction. It is for this reason that each and every one of those policy bodies is at risk of the same systemic failures identified in the three enquiries mentioned above.

An explanation is warranted at this point. If it is a responsibility of policy officers to flag to their masters and colleagues potential opportunities and threats to the systems for which they work, then this draft is an example of the exercise of such responsibility. The author is an organizational psychologist whose doctoral research examines how individual differences can result in people seeking out particular organizational roles that are consistent with their personalities and interests. In consequence, particular organizational roles and functions tend to attract similar people in those roles, people who are different from people attracted to other roles. The consequence of that is separate clusters which, in combination, can render the organization highly innovative, mediocre or ineffective.

Work organisations depend on members occupying roles of authority to ensure the predictable performance of organisational tasks. Authority offers a legitimate base to have power and from which to influence others and bring about the completion of work tasks. It is legitimate power vested in particular people or positions for systems purposes.

In traditional bureaucratic organisations, office holders become authorised by the power of the office they occupy. In more collaborative work arrangements, organisation members become authorised less through their identification with particular offices and more through their negotiations with other members about task performances. Hence authority is more

about the ways that the organisations members authorise and de-authorise both others and themselves in the course of doing their work.

A number of personality factors help account for how organisation members frame and perform superior and subordinate roles. An example is the authoritarian personality which is associated with power-seeking, and has attributes that include conservatism, emotional coldness, hostility towards minority groups, and resistance to change. Such people are attracted to autocratic leaders. Hence individuals have particular motives or needs to establish specific types of authority relations in which they feel comfortable.

Hence people are drawn to create or enact authority relations partly on the basis of compelling, deep seated personality attributes of which they may be only partly aware. In other words, different personality types prefer different types of authority relations and hence different types of organisational structures. It is the author's personal view that policy officers would tend to be selected from a pool of people from the first category, below, rather than from the other two.

Table 1 shows the three internal models of authority.

	Dependent	Counterdependent	Interdependent
Stance towards authority	Emphasises hierarchical roles of superior and subordinate, whose relationships are governed by the rules of formal organisations	Undermines or dismisses hierarchical roles of superior and subordinate	Emphasises interdependencies among people occupying various hierarchical roles, acknowledging both person and role dimensions.
Underlying assumptions	Authority itself is of paramount importance. Relationships structured according to rules of hierarchy. Personal dimensions of people are suspect to the extent they undermine authority relations.	Authority itself is of minimal importance. Authority is suspect to the extent it undermines personal expression. Nonrole data are trustworthy.	Authority is a collaborative process. Different hierarchical positions offer different equally valid and complementary perspectives. Relationships are structured in terms of role and personal dimensions. One without the other is suspect.
Sense of self in relation to authority	One's self is found - defined, constructed, maintained - in relationships of authority. Hierarchical position gives sense of self; without such relationships, one's self is lost.	One's self is found outside hierarchy and relationships of authority. In such relationships, one's self becomes lost, engulfed or abandoned, denied or suppressed, deconstructed.	One's self is found in its simultaneous dependence on and independence from hierarchical relationships of authority.

Corresponding pattern of attachment	Anxious resistant: Uncertain if others will be available, responsive helpful. Tends to cling to authority relations, anxious about exploring the world.	Anxious avoidant: No confidence in others helping, expects rejection. Seeks to be emotionally self-sufficient, withdraws from authority relations.	Secure: Confident in authority relations, in which others are available, responsive and helpful. Bold in exploring the world: sense of simultaneous connections and independence.
Operating strategies	Emphasizes hierarchy, status differences. Encourages dependency along hierarchical structures (in self and others). Idealizes authority and its representatives (in self and others). De-emphasizes personal thoughts and feelings.	Dismisses status differences, de-emphasizes hierarchy. Rebels against authority (own, others) with confrontation or withdrawal. Denies dependency (in self or others). Seeks to pull self and others out of role relationships.	Emphasizes person-in-role within hierarchical relationships. Contributes personal thoughts, feelings within authority interactions. Acknowledges both personal and role dimensions (of self and others). Emphasizes simultaneous dependence and independence. (p27)

These authority relationships operate largely outside of consciousness, yet their consequences collectively for organizations and governments are enormous.

So fundamental is this phenomenon, it is found across all mammals. Research with mice investigated:

1. How social roles differences could be manipulated;
2. which part of the behavioural differences had to be ascribed to those role differences; and
3. which part of the behavioural differences was due to innate trait factors.

Dominance appeared to determine the behaviour of an individual mouse to a great extent. Becoming dominant or subordinate was mainly dependent upon coincidence and contingencies and only to a limited extent on body weight, self-will etc.

Roles of interest were alpha (dominant), beta (subordinate) and omega (outcast). Every time a group of four males and two females was placed in a large observatory cage for the first time, in the first few days there was no clear alpha, betas or omegas. In the course of the following days or weeks an alpha male mouse would emerge whilst the differences in the subordinate males would be rather vague. Eventually behaviour patterns emerged. The subordinate mice who adapted to the initiatives of the alpha were less often disturbed by aggressive attacks by the alpha. The subordinates who put up more resistance were more often attacked, and tended only to be active when the alpha was asleep.

These gradually developed behavioural differences between subordinates can be labelled as 'staying' (beta types) and 'fleeing' (omega types), since the latter showed a tendency to flee the territory if possible. In experimental situations in which opportunities for fleeing are provided, a large proportion of the young subordinate males flee the territory.

In the process of a subordinate gradually becoming an omega, the behaviour of the alpha gradually changes towards treating the omega ever more as a stranger. Beta/omega differences seem to be caused by differences intrinsic to the individuals. Cross-breeding experiments demonstrate that strong hereditary factors determine the likelihood of drifting into a compliant (beta) position or an outcast (omega) position. Differences between omegas and betas of the same population appear to originate, at least for the greater part, from genetic differences between the subordinate individuals.

Being an effective intelligence or policy officer is a potentially socially hazardous occupation, one that can sometimes require enormous personal courage. Robin Cooke, former British Foreign Minister, and Andrew Wilkie, intelligence officer from Australia's Office of National Assessments are examples of such courage. Both are 'omegas'; both resigned from their respective posts based on their lack of willingness to conform to the collective momentum of their colleagues. Imagine if you are a junior naval officer at watch at night on the helm of a huge ship, the course for which has been determined by the senior officers. If your careful calculations show that the ship is headed for a reef, you are faced with several choices. One of those is to immediately draw attention to the possible threat; the other is to do nothing, believing that the collective experience of the senior officers is superior to yours, and for you to raise the possible threat and be wrong could threaten your promotion.

Is it possible that an entire organization can be self-deceiving? Could it be that a collective entity really has little ability to root out the discrepancies between what it says and what it does? Is it possible that members of an organization conspire against their own articulated beliefs, espousing the benefits of creativity and independence of thought whilst maintaining the status quo and conforming to predictable routines and self-limiting traditions?

Why are people so conformist? A fear of rejection by the group will cause individuals to change their usual behaviour, only to revert to their real attitudes and behaviours when away from the perceived pressure of the group. Individual managers may privately disagree with the decision-making culture of the organization, while publicly accepting its impact on their public lives. Such compliant behaviour will also fulfil their need for acceptance, while minimizing conflict between themselves and senior management, who have the power to reward or punish accordingly, as they see fit. Non-compliance with the group norms is perceived to significantly reduce an individual's chances of promotion. Conformity is therefore a means to satisfy needs, such as the needs for approval, recognition, and perhaps power. Pleasing senior management, it is perceived, can satisfy these needs.

An organization demanding conformity may be censoring its most intelligent members. People who have a tendency to conform tend to be intellectually less effective and demonstrate a higher incidence of authoritarian behaviours. The use of conformity in selection and promotion will inevitably ostracise and remove those who have the ability to steer the collective decision-making process away from its well-established patterns.

Groups that are heterogeneous in terms of personality profile usually perform more effectively than groups that are homogeneous in this respect ... groups with a variety of

opinions, abilities, skills, and perspectives are more effective. The benefits of employing such heterogeneous groups may be completely lost, however, if everyone succumbs to the pressures of the organization's normative influence. Creativity has been proven to be important in organizational success, and yet the concept of creativity threatens a deeply-grounded belief in rational approaches.

Such organizations ignore or reject unpalatable intelligence about the market and their competitors (they have become blind and deaf to external cues and sometimes are incapable of seeing the damage they inflict upon themselves as well) thereby losing their capacity for informed competitive responsiveness to external threats. Interpersonal problems are prominent and this is often evidenced through recurring industrial disputes. Additional levels of stress, often self-inflicted through painful restructuring programmes, exacerbate the symptoms with panic attacks, increased anxiety and collective depressive disorders. Within the organization, the preoccupation with 'self' is justified and given an aura of legitimacy with accompanying explanations that the firm is using 'rational' management approaches by concentrating on 'efficiency', 'co-ordinated effort', 'improved control', 'strategic planning' and 'waste reduction'. Meanwhile market share and morale plummet.

The rational and logical approach to thought and procedural systems may have removed democracy's single greatest strength – the ability to act in an unconventional manner. We may also have lost our ability to accept or tolerate unconventional behaviour. Society, and its organizations, may have become a prisoner of conventional solutions. This is the antithesis of current prescriptions for success, which use terms such as create, exploring alternatives, right-brain thinking, whole-brain thinking, intuition, reflecting, examining, challenging assumptions, divergent thinking, and so forth.

Despite an organization urging its members to be creative, often the rhetoric is not supported and rigid systems and procedures guard against the emergence of anything even vaguely resembling non-conformist behaviours. This non-support is manifest in promotion policies, allocation of resources, and the complexity of decision-processes.

Deeply rooted traditions, a risk-averse culture, and complex managerial hierarchies stifle acts of creativity among managerial ranks. Anything that does not fit the prevailing paradigm is in danger of being questioned, ridiculed, and ultimately rejected. The prevailing culture becomes inwardly focused, often only providing lip-service to the needs of the market and the customer.

Whilst there is a great deal of unabashed talk about the increasing need for creativity amongst managers, it is argued that for many organizations, its articulated desirability is only an expression of contemporary and fashionable idealism.

Our collective successes (and sometimes our collective failures) may often be best understood by seeing the individual as choosing his or her responses only within the often-powerful constraints imposed by the broader social and institutional contexts of action.

Organizational creativity could be defined as having the freedom and the ability to question new information against old rules and assumptions and then to revise these rules and assumptions when the former no longer work.

Creativity is useful for introducing novel ideas, new solutions to recurring problems, and better ways of coping with or initiating change. Unfortunately many managers thrive in a system created to perpetuate standard operating procedures, efficiency, and rigidity of both thought and action. Conservative managers will minimize risk-taking, thereby ensuring that no failures occur, but they also fail to introduce innovations or establish processes for the systematic pursuit of innovation.

While the message of creativity is zealously communicated to employees at every opportunity, reward and promotion systems, and managerial behaviours implicitly reinforce strategies of predictability, rigid conformity, and strict adherence to norms inspired and moulded by tradition. Safety and security can only be found in predictably conformist behaviour.

By producing cultural sheep, society facilitates co-operation rather than a predominance of non-conforming individualists. Co-operation and selflessness within a group produces greater success for the group than selfishness, but if the individual within the group can gain a greater benefit by being selfish, the individual's interests will generally come first. Groups or organizations will therefore expend a great deal of energy in perpetuating 'groupishness' as opposed to individualism. Evolutionary psychology studies offer an alternate explanation.

Human beings have roamed the planet for over 100,000 years. For almost all of that time, the environment in which they roamed was relatively predictable and stable. Survival, though difficult, largely depended upon following the wisdom of elders which became embedded in traditions and spiritual practices. Those who broke with tradition threatened, not only their own safety, but that of their peers. So, non-conformists were strongly chastised or even banished. Anthropological studies of apes probably also have application to humans. Primates know how to organize themselves hierarchically or co-operatively. When resources are centrally located, such as in a fruit-laden tree, primates organize themselves hierarchically. When resources are widely scattered and scarce, they organize themselves co-operatively. There is a gender component to this. Males have a preference for organizing hierarchically; females have a preference for organizing co-operatively; and females have a preference for males that organize hierarchically (since that enables them to identify the alpha male, with whom they might mate). Numerous species of animals survive through the herding instinct, looking and acting in a similar manner, making it difficult for predators to isolate or capture one individual from the larger moving herd or group. Some aspects of organizational behaviour can be compared with the herding behaviour of animals, with people conforming to the standards and behaviours of the majority and the successful in order to survive and prosper, and to provide protection against being singled out as 'different'.

Conformity declares agreement with the norm, recognition of the group and its membership, an unwillingness to be isolated. While literature trumpeting the virtues of creativity continues to accumulate, it is suggested that inertia, resistance, and the high need for conformity within organizational structures will maintain an implicit culture which is intolerant of individuality or real creative behaviour. The seeds of creativity continue to be verbally sown throughout the organization but in practice remains dormant, choked off by the well-trained conformists who flourish, controlling all of the organization's energy in order to cultivate personal career ambitions, perpetuating the status quo in order to do so.

Homophily [of like mind] is the degree to which two or more individuals who interact are similar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, education, social status and the like. When

people have choices as to with whom they might interact, there is a strong tendency to select someone similar. In fact, more effective and rewarding communication occurs when two or more individuals are homophilous. However, when two individuals are highly similar in their perspective and their experience, there is no new information to exchange.

Heterophily [of different minds] is the degree to which two or more individuals who interact are dissimilar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, education, social status and the like. When people have choices as to with whom they might interact, there is a strong tendency not to select someone who is too different.

One of the distinctive problems for diffusion of innovations [and policy ideas] relates to the tension between homophily and heterophily. Those that are too alike have little to share with each other; those that are too different will have difficulty communicating with each other.

In conclusion

This draft is an eclectic collection of ideas from journal articles and books pertaining to innovation within organizations. The role of policy is to constantly provide its masters with quality information that will enable that organization to optimize its position in its environmental context. It is because that context is dynamic that the role of policy is never ending. It is a role that requires 'imagination', creativity and courage.

Executives require rigorous independent advice from their policy bodies, and they say so. Yet the recognition and reward systems in place coupled with people unconscious gravitation to roles of their preference suggest those executives may not get, or even want, what they say they seek. The literature on authority relationships suggest that those in the upper echelons of management will operate under a dependent mental model of authority. Policy bodies need to be on guard that they are not homophilous, staffed by people who are also operating under a dependent mental model of authority. Over time there is a tendency that this is exactly what will occur. The omegas will leave, the betas will thrive and systemic failure is inevitable.

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29th July 2004.

Note: This paper began as a private reflection, whilst I was completing a doctorate at the University of Queensland. It is a loose amalgam of the published ideas of many authors – books, journals, etc – I was reading at that time. Unfortunately, I failed to record the references. Hence, many ideas in this paper came from external sources.