

Confronting and taming the organisational shadow

naming and claiming behind the scenes decisions ©

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The Shadow

It was the genius of C.J. Jung the Swiss Psychiatrist who spoke about the psychological shadow. The shadow lives in every human being and is essentially all the unowned aspects about ourselves that we either repress or suppress. Put simply, we suppress those things that are known to us that we don't like and want to keep hidden from others, and repress those aspects of the self that have not come into full self awareness. Either way the shadow can play a significant role in our lives that can cause havoc if we don't come into some relationship with it. It is a painful process since we often have ideals about who we are that we wish to display to others. An active shadow life will often expose and eventually undermine these projects of the ideal self we present to others. The tell-tale signs are numerous; they include those slight slips of the tongue, those irritable childish moods that last longer than expected or sudden outbursts of rage. All of these could point to some unowned aspect of the shadow self. The good news is that the shadow doesn't hold only the ugly aspects of the self but also the golden aspects of the self that we are too afraid to fully realise. Put simply, the trick to owning your own shadow is to know both the good and the bad aspects that are unowned (Johnson, 1994) and seek to honouring their need for recognition.

The Organisational Shadow

Jung also spoke of the collective unconscious. Like the unconscious of the individual, cultures and societies can possess an unconscious collectively. This includes the unowned or unintegrated aspects of the shadow collectively owned by the culture. Now could you imagine what all these shadows selves are like when they congregate collectively around the culture of an organisation? All of this unowned stuff meets somewhere in the parts of the organisation that are hidden or banished from examination – this is what is known as the organisational shadow (Egan, G. 1994).

The shadow culture always exists in organisations since parts of ourselves and our culture are not fully integrated into our awareness. All of the informal rules of power and control, or the desire to feel safe and secure or even secret need for affection and esteem of others goes banished into the dark corners of the organisational culture. You will never find the organisational shadow in glossy strategic documents or the policy and procedures manuals. You are even less likely to find the organisational shadow in the story the organisation tells about itself to the world. The uncanny thing about the organisational shadow is that most people know that it exists – and it looks something like the following. Do you know how the company actually operates that is not on the organisational chart? – do you know who to go to and how to approach them to get things done? – are you aware of the decisions that are made about the organisation even before the first meeting is had about making a decision? All of these are aspects of the organisational shadow.

Blame and Shame cultures

One of the most toxic emotions that any person can experience is the shame felt by the judgement of our peers. Human beings are exquisite social creatures and are very sensitive to the judgement of others especially our peers. Strong shadow play in organisations can amplify the blame and shame dynamic. This shadow play always looks for idiosyncratic attributions to problems. This means the organisation always looks at "who" made the mistake (character) rather than "how" the situation arose in the first place (condition). When organisations want to make people more accountable by attributing blame they often develop greater diffusion of responsibility. The equation looks something like this:

$$\uparrow \text{Accountability} + \uparrow \text{Blame} = \uparrow \text{Defused Responsibility}$$

Defused responsibility often follows blame cultures because no one wants to take the attribution of the scapegoating mechanism. Put simply, the scapegoating mechanism is a process not to solve problems but to restore order by proportioning blame and shame to the idiosyncrasies of an individual's character. In other words scapegoating is a highly complex ritual within cultures to restore order from chaos by attributing blame to an individual rather than the conditions that give rise to it. Like the picture below states, '*a good scapegoat is nearly as welcome as a solution to a problem*'.



So what makes scapegoating so welcomed? The first aspect of scapegoating is that it takes the focus off *me*. If someone else is being blamed or demonised then I can slip under the radar of being blamed and shamed myself. At any rate, psychological safety will dramatically reduce in a shaming organisation because speaking your truth can have dire consequence to your own safety and security. The second aspect of what makes scapegoating so welcomed is it also takes the focus off *us* and from examining the complex conditions that give rise to most mistakes in the first place. The hard graft of examining the complex conditions that often give rise to mistakes is relegated to a naive simplistic solution of someone's character flaws.

Moving to Name and Claim cultures

The more collaborative you make an organisational culture the more explicit the rules of how decisions are made become. Procedural transparency comes with collaborative maturity. In order for this to happen the hard work of what Jung called 'the withdrawal of projective identification' begins. In simpler terms we need to recognise that often the problem is not 'out there' in that individual (blame) but within the very culture and conditions we live in. We need to *name the shadow* and bring it gently into our awareness and the awareness of others within the organisation. This is easier said than done but it is the first step in creating a collaboratively mature organisations. James Hillman (1976) an archetypal psychologist argued that a symptom or problem is halved by giving it a name. The unowned aspects of how decisions are actually made in an organisation work best in the shadow unnamed. This is where power not performance is exercised. Collaboratively immature leaders do not prefer processes that are procedurally transparent because

most decisions are made in the shadows – informally – behind the scenes behind closed doors. So a Name and Claim culture has a different equation to a Blame and Shame culture

↑ Accountability + ↑ Claim = ↑ Collective Responsibility

A no blame culture must focus on the conditions that give rise to problems and their solutions and not causes which often look for character flaws in individuals – and which person amongst us is free of character flaws?

Scapegoating employs a kind of naive simplicity where simple attributions of the person's character explains a whole raft of problems within the organisation. While this does happen in organisations from time to time, it lets the organisational shadow off the hook to play its power games wreaking havoc over the principles and governance models agreed to reduce its effects. Claim cultures do not 'drive out scapegoats' as much as use 'principled simplicity'. Principled simplicity occurs when leaders and organisations are driven by virtue and not just value. It is not enough to 'be doing it right' but 'to do the right thing'. This takes courage and collaborative maturity where the leader focuses the organisation's scarce resources in naming and claiming to be a problem of the conditions within the organisation, and not blaming and shaming a person's character. Scapegoating and collaborating serve two very different needs in an organisation – the first is to restore order and the second is to solve problems. To ensure that collective responsibility increases, individuals are rewarded for their truth speaking. Without it, the shadow tells people within organisations to 'keep their mouth shut and their heads down'. Nearly any catastrophic failure in an organisation occurs when the shadow sends the message to everyone 'don't tell us what we need to know'. Ignorance is only bliss when and only when it is folly to be wise. Name and claim cultures are wise collaborative cultures because the shadow's influence on people and the organisation is tamed by naming its influence, withdrawing the scapegoating mechanism and focus on conditions and not causes that give rise to successful collaborative solutions.

References:

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