Contextual Origins of Toxic Behaviour

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Abstract

Purpose

Whilst the psychological make-up and behavioural characteristics of executives remained the pivotal focus in this research that alone proved to be too narrow a perspective to account sufficiently for the range of dysfunctional episodes and patterns of behaviour observed. Further analysis identified two additional dimensions each of which was seen to profoundly affect executive behaviour. Firstly, the impact of the internal culture and context of the organisation and finally the impact of the wider external business and political context within which the organisations observed traded.

Based on an analysis of the data a Three-Legged framework is introduced which can be used to re-view and de-construct executive behaviour-in-context and to guard against future executive toxicity and organisational decline taking hold.

Findings

The research identified the three core dimensions, together with six underlying 'emergent themes', which can be used forensically to examine and guard against dysfunctional and counter-productive leadership. Firstly, the need to assess the psychological and behavioural suitability of a person for the executive responsibility. Secondly to consider how the internal culture and operational context of an organisation may facilitate or impede counter-productive leadership behaviour. Finally assess the possible impact of external environmental factors, and pressures, on executive behaviour within the organisation.

Keywords: Hubris, Executive Behaviour, Business Psychology, Organisation Culture; Leadership, Toxic Leadership, Human Resource Management

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Introduction

Almost half a century ago John Kenneth Galbraith observed how:

'Week by week it (the modern Corporation)
exercises a greater influence
on our livelihood and the way we live than universities,
politicians, the government or the unions. There is a
corporate myth that is carefully, assiduously propagated.

And there is reality. They bear little relation to
each other. The corporate myth is of a disciplined,
energetic, dedicated
but well-rewarded body of men
serving under a dynamic leader.

It is a major source of uncertainty and leaves men
wondering how and by
whom and to what end they are ruled.

One response to this uncertainty
will be obvious. It is to look through the myth at the reality
of the modern corporation' (1977:257).

Since Galbraith made this statement the extent, range, intensity and depth of the influence exerted by Corporate Business has intensified and spread through the processes of Globalisation and been accelerated by the digital workplace, the web and the use of social media networks. The influence exerted from those in positions of executive power and influence on the nature of working life, on the continuing stability of business organisations, and on maintaining the

integrity of global financial institutions has never been greater. *Such progressions elevate examining the behaviour of business executives in the workplace to one of the most important and significant fields for study in the 21ˢᵗ Century.*

Against this background the purpose of this paper is to look beyond the corporate myth noted above by examining the behaviour of several executives whose displays of dysfunctional behaviour diminished the operational capacity and reputation of their organisations.

The initial stimulus for this research was an interest in defining the psychological make-up of executives who were displaying dysfunctional behaviours. So the research on which this paper is based began as a search for potential 'markers' of latent leadership toxicity. It was based on a review of field-work studies in which the author had secured privileged access to observe the behaviour of top and senior executives across a range of organisations, and as they resolved challenging contextual situations. The tracking of executive behaviour is critically important as what they do and what they espouse sets the tone within their organizations. An executive's <u>actions</u> - in contrast to what they espouse - provide clues about their underlying psychological make-up and about their potential vulnerabilities which is where my research interests initially lay.

There are however many inherent difficulties in researching executive behaviour-in-context. For example there is no 'true' view of what has transpired because of reporting bias, internal 'political' considerations, the transitory nature of the interactions involved and 'false-memory' dynamics. The inherent emotionality and complexity of work-place interactions also cast doubt about the unbiased accuracy and authenticity of any one person's recollections about high-profile events. Perhaps the most significant difficulty lies in trying to deduce the effect of each participant's undisclosed - and perhaps unconscious - internal thoughts, fears, dynamics, predispositions, anxieties and motivations about a situation at any given time. Kets de Vries would describe such complexities as facets of a person's 'inner theatre' (1995; 2009a), others describe it as a person's personal 'drama' (Mangham, 1986), or refer to the unconscious processes of human interaction (Bion, 1961; Hirschhorn, 1992; Hirschhorn & Barnett, 1993; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). The difficulties of researching such matters remain and thus the perspectives presented in this paper necessarily offer data-based clues, rather than definitive pronouncements, about the phenomena experienced and observed.

The initial focus was in seeking to identify patterns of behaviour which could then be used as predictors of future

dysfunctional behaviour and then to align such *sub-clinical* 'markers', or 'indicators', with clinical descriptions of personality disorders. Such indicators could then be tested as *predictive markers* for toxicity in future studies. These hoped-for expectations were to be frustrated however and whilst the psychological make-up and behavioural characteristics of executives remained a central focus for the research it proved to be too narrow a focus to account sufficiently for the range of dysfunctional instances recorded across the case studies.

This disappointment however prompted a further review of the core data from which the importance of the internal organisational context & culture emerged as a major conditioning factor on an executive's behaviour. Just as 'form without function' could be said to have little meaning on its own, so a consideration of an executive's personality and make-up alone without reference to the settings in which they are placed results in a similarly incomplete picture.

A further interrogation of the research material then highlighted the significance of taking into account the *external* circumstances - impacting on the organization – and this emerged as the third, and final, dimension in the exploratory framework which this paper later introduces. This third dimension reinforced how the behaviour of executives was affected by external events, and business pressures, and accounted the remainder of the dysfunctional behaviours I had witnessed.

In combination these three strands – (i) the psychologically determined behaviour of the executive, (ii) the impact of the internal culture of the organisation on their behaviour and (iii) the impact exerted by *external* contextual environmental market pressures provided a basis through which to examine further and interpret the range of dysfunctional and counter-productive behaviour observed. In combination these three dimensions provided clues about the contextual origins of counter-productive and dysfunctional executive behaviour.

The complexities of Executive Leadership

From my experience the preparation for executive leadership is inadequate and fails to prepare leaders for the complexities and tensions of occupying positions of leadership and managerial responsibility. Critically there is a failure to position, and thus mandate for rigorous attention, the study of dysfunctional and toxic leadership as a fundamental cornerstone in the preparation for positions of executive leadership. It is interesting to speculate just why this might be so in the face of the continuing examples of leadership failures and of corporate criminal activity and fraud regularly reported in the media world-wide (Aasland et al, 2009; Babiak and

Hare, 2006; Brytting et al, 2011; Burke et al, 2013; Levi and Lord, 2017; Perri and Mieczkowska, 2015; PWC, 2020).

Indeed much of the literature about leadership and management continues to neglect, understate, pathologise or deny the dysfunctional, negative and 'bad' sides of leadership. This has resulted in a skewed and rather idealized representation of leaders as being inherently good, positive and highly principled. My casework – and continuing media reporting – would indicate such a view to be a profound and false representation of the malaise affecting executive leadership globally (Fox, and Burke, 2013; Kellerman, 2004; Langan-Fox et al, 2007; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Meindel, 1985; Roter, 2017; Tourish, 2013; Walton, 2013a, 2013b, 2015).

This seeming reticence to pay such matters sufficient attention – in conventional leadership and management development training - as preparation for undertaking executive responsibilities may well be a contributory factor in the continuing high incidence of dysfunctional behaviour and leadership failure at the executive level (Davies, 2005; Hogan, 2007). We should expect leaders to be both 'good' *and* 'bad', competent and incompetent, thoughtful and inconsiderate. In other words leaders and executives remain vulnerable and flawed irrespective of the range of qualifications, honours or exalted positions they may occupy. Such 'human' vulnerabilities bear little relation to many of the normative and somewhat idealised pronouncements of the leadership gurus, business academics, or the neat and tidy contents of most management textbooks about what it is that constitutes 'effective leadership'. We should therefore expect, plan for and anticipate and have in place measures to address toxic leadership when it emerges (Walton, 2005, 2007).

The Research Material

This qualitative research-based paper reflects on executive behaviour-in-context observed over protracted periods in twelve organisations. The results are presented around three 'core themes' and six 'emergent patterns' which in combination reflect the patterns of executive misbehaviour and dysfunction observed from these studies. This research considers the behaviour 'of those in whom we place our trust' and is based on case material from a number of different organisations including international marketing, financial services, health care organisations, and within the public sector.

The research outputs presented are derived from an analysis of field-notes, aide-memoires, position papers, Minutes of Meetings, 1:1 coaching sessions, Workbooks and Report Outs, psychometric profiles, group and personal conversations, emails, seminars and recollections of workshop dynamics.

Each case originated from my work as an organizational consultant and executive coach. In one of the cases I had been recruited as an organizational consultant; in the others I was involved because I was known either to those with whom I would work, or via a gatekeeper through whom initial contact had been made.

Life in the 'bubble' of the Organisation

Organizations change people just as much as people can change organizations. Bestowing roles with executive authority on individuals can both make as well as destroy them and enhance or diminish the organization involved. The study of 'people in organizations' is a complex, multi-faceted, deep and perplexing field. Organisations are bounded arenas of emotionality within which unexpected twists and turns in personal behaviour and group action will arise unexpectedly to confound the diligent and meticulous observer. The procedural, legalistic and bureaucratic 'face' presented by organizations however generally leads them to be perceived as static, anonymous entities. Yet the internal contexts that exist within organisations generate intense emotional reactions within and between their members in spite of the bland, formalised and institutional ways through which they are portrayed externally.

In 2004 'The Corporation: the pathological pursuit of profit and power' was published by Joel Bakan. He noted how organizations, as part of their legal responsibility and, as a duty of care, are compelled to prosper! This legal and institutional requirement, if matched by rampant self-interest and self-promotion of senior executives, would easily create the conditions for the exploitation of their position and privileges at the expense of others (Gerard and Robinson, 2016; Hamilton and Micklethwait, 2006; Micklethwaite and Diamond, 2017; McLean and Elkind, 2003; Newton, 2006) The substantial financial gains on offer and the hi-tech means available for mobilising grossly self-interested decision-making may well be responsible for making it increasingly difficult for executives to resist taking exploitive advantage of their positions when opportunities arise (Culbert and McDonough, 1980; Gudmundsson and Southey, 2011;).

Formal business organizations are not democratic organizations: they are hierarchical in nature and many affected by corporate decisions cannot expect to have a say in influencing the decisions taken or in assessing or questioning the appropriateness of judgements made. The 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' for example asserts that as organisations grow the need for coordinated and centralized decision-making

increases which will progressively become concentrated in the hands of a small executive elite. An elite group which - unless sufficiently monitored and constrained – can become a self-serving elite of senior executives perpetuating a hubristic, indulgent and dysfunctionally narcissistic organisational culture. (DuBrin, 2012; Duchon and Drake, 2008; Janis, 1982: Owen, 2007, 2018; Sadler-Smith, 2019).

It should not be forgotten that executives are expected to be *successful*. This however is a tall order since executives are unable to control all of the factors that will contribute to their success or failure. Consequently it should be anticipated - and this should come as no surprise - that executives will look for ways of reducing the inherent vulnerability, ambiguity and precariousness of their position. Under such pressure they can be expected to seek to secure as much order, predictability and control as possible. The drive for success may lead some executives to (a) define and re-define events to accord with their preconceptions, hidden-agendas, delusions or wishes, and to (b) discount discrepant or unwanted data which challenges their preferred view of the situation in which they find theirself.

A combination of intense organizational pressures to succeed when aligned with exaggerated self-belief can result in toxicity. Propelled by the lure of attaining the status of an all-consuming, successful leader the opportunity to rein in such excess is reduced and thus the likelihood of dysfunctional behaviour is increased unless defensive counter-measures are in place (see Figure 1)

Figure 1 Driving from Success towards Toxicity
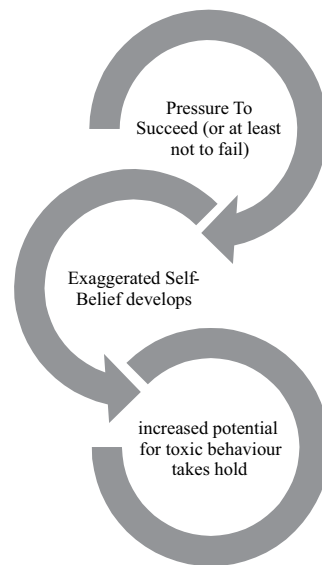
The volatility and emotional complexity of the interpersonal relations generated within organizations serves to reinforce the long-expressed contention of organizations as being '… institutions cradled in anxiety…' (Menzies, 1988). However, a continuing emphasis on the more *rational* aspects of organizations and not on an executive's behaviour contributes to a lack of attention being given to working *with* emotional workplace reactions as an important and continuing aspect of business life. A more balanced approach to examining executive behaviour would be to consider *how* (i) an individual executive's behavioural predispositions when combined with (ii) misuse of their organizational power can generate dysfunctional behaviour unless ethical counter-measures are in place.

In summary the study of executive behaviour-in-context, which this research highlights, is both necessary and necessarily a complex one if understandings about the how *constructive* behaviour can be promoted and *destructive* executive behaviour be constrained are to be advanced.

There remains however a fixation with 'the Cult of the Leader' in business publications, by the media, on the 'silver screen', and in the popular press (Bones, 2011). Executive success is expected irrespective of the situation a leader inherits on their appointment or the severity of future crises (including pandemics and major natural disasters). Persistent expectations of an executive's infallibility can render it difficult for senior executives to seek help without diminishing their

elevated and revered status. When compared to the emphasis given to a leader's personality and aura significant constraining factors - such as the external business conditions, predecessor performance, company reputation and standing, and competitor performance – can be relegated to a back seat (Boddy, 2021; Kets de Vries, 2001, 2009; Khurana, 2002).

Leader-as-personality *is* important but this research found that the origins of toxicity often arose from the *internal* and *external* contextual factors which mediated and conditioned an executive's degree of success and accomplishment.

A Three-Legged Interrogative Framework

What began as a search for psychological 'markers' that could be used as future indicators for toxic and dysfunctional leadership behaviour resulted in a broader three-legged framework which can be used to diagnose executive behaviour *and* assess the latent

potential for organisational toxicity to arise.

Each of the following dimensions, which emerged from the research, should be considered when examining the potential for dysfunctional executive behaviour:

(a) the psychological and behavioural characteristics of the executive(s),

(b) the organizational context – *i.e.* its culture and the emotional climate particularly during periods of internal structural instability and change, *and*

© external market and political conditions impacting on the reputation, standing and commercial integrity of the organization.

Figure 2 sets out the three main Dimensions (*i.e.* 'Legs') which emerged from the research as the principal explanations for the dysfunctional behaviours observed:

Figure 2: A Three-Legged Diagnostic Framework
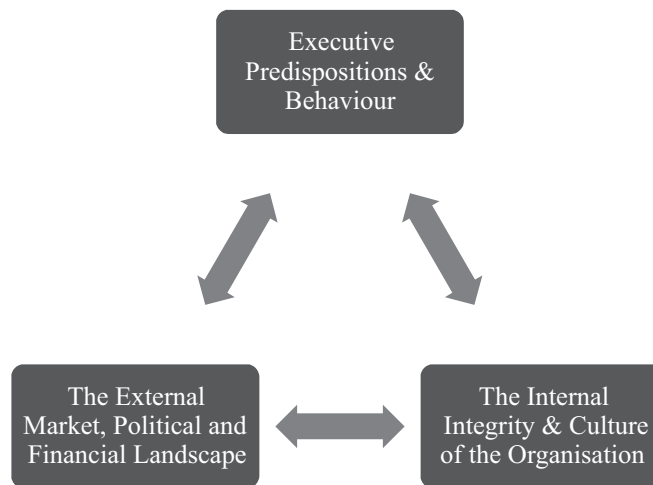
Subordinate to these three primary dimensions are six 'emergent themes' which provide more detail and focus.

There is no suggestion that the various leadership patterns which follow are inherently counter-productive or that they will necessarily result in the emergence of toxic and dysfunctional behaviour. Crucially however each of the three leadership patterns which follow did, in combination with internal organisational disruptions to the *status quo*, result in

toxicity in a number of the case studies on which this paper is based.

Dimension 1: Executive Predispositions & Behaviour

Emergent Theme 1: 'Take-Charge' Leadership'

Emergent Theme 2: 'Hail to the Chief'

Emergent Theme 3: 'Trust Me – I'm the Leader'

Dimension 2: The Internal Integrity & Culture of the Organisation

Emergent Theme 4: Internal Fragmentation, Shock & Disarray

Emergent Theme 5: Denial, Delusion & Complacency

Dimension 3: The External Market, Political and Financial Landscape

Emergent Theme 6: External Crisis

Each of these 'emergent themes' are now briefly outlined:

Dimension 1: Executive Predispositions & Behaviour

Within this 'Dimension' three distinct 'emergent themes' were discerned from the research material each of which reflected quite different patterns of an executive's behaviour.

Emergent Theme 1: 'Take-Charge' Leadership

This is a purposeful, down-to-earth and practical approach from the leader and will be implemented by a forceful articulation of what needs to be accomplished. The emphasis is on the Leader exercising a mandate to drive the business forward. Commitment, hard-work, diligence, and determination are likely to characterise such an executive style.

It is a 'heads down' and 'let's get on with it' approach that does not overly encourage collaboration, discussion or negotiation about what needs to be done. A logical-rational approach embedded within tightly-framed plans, policies, strategies specifying the targets needed to be achieved. These leaders may come to be seen as somewhat remote, unemotional, distant, hard driving and uncompromising.

Emergent Theme 2: 'Hail to the Chief'

This is a strong, 'high-profile' leadership style in which 'impression management' will be a significant feature of

the approach adopted. The very visible and overt positioning of the executive - as the 'Alpha Male or Female' - is deliberately designed to convey firm direction, self-belief and safe custodianship of the organisation (Guthey and Jackson, 2005; Kets de Vries, 2009) Much of this approach is to be seen as revolving around the publicised actions, friendly disposition and magnetic *persona* of the leader which can be somewhat seductive in manner. There is however no invitation to question, challenge, or debate – at least in public – the supreme positioning of the Chief (Kets de Vries, 2009; Zaleznik and Kets de Vries, 1985;)

High ego, hubristic tendencies, and dysfunctional narcissism are likely to characterise the public persona of such leaders (Maccoby, 2000, Sankowsky, 1995; Walton, 2011). These characteristics may have short-term appeal they could become problematic over time and especially so when such leaders show themselves to be vulnerable and/or when they fail to 'deliver the goods' they have so publicly promised (Bion, 1961).

Such leaders may seek, or even demand, regular pledges of support and become vindictive and rejecting of those unwilling to comply to such requests. (Janis, 1982; Owen, 2018; Post, 2004; Post and Douchette, 2019). These are 'high maintenance' leaders who crave attention, adulation and visibility. Challenge and criticism will not be well received and could be viewed as evidence of treachery and rebellion. Such detractors can expect retribution and potential exclusion. There is a danger of counter-productive leader dependency and the growth of divisive 'In' and 'Out' groups may develop and even be promoted.

The trappings of leadership, power and position will be desired and expected. Problems may arise from such an elevated sense of self because of ego-mania, delusion, loss of touch with business reality and a preoccupation with *image and style* over *substance and sensibility*. Tantrums can be anticipated in the absence of unconditional supplication. The primary potential for executive dysfunction here stems from the executive believing their own self-oriented publicity, narcissistic excess, denial of inconvenient feedback, hubris and a psychological dislocation with reality.

Emergent Theme 3: Trust Me – I'm the Leader

Here the orientation revolves around the presentation of the executive as the trusted 'safe pair of hands' and *the* experienced professional. Whilst more prepared to listen to the proposals of others than the 'Take-Charge' theme noted earlier, these leaders can be rather dismissive of poorly thought-out ideas or inadequate analysis. With high personal standards they will expect the same professionalism and dedication from those around them as they themselves display.

They will want to take the lead but possibly in a lower key than that described in the two behavioural patterns already outlined, although they may be just as difficult to influence. With this pattern the executive will expect to be allowed to exercise the lead without overtly having to prove personal competence or capability.

The potential for executive dysfunction in this category is likely to come from too much self-belief - and from intellectual arrogance - together with too little awareness of the practical limitations of their initiatives. They may be prone to resting on past laurels and for harking back to past competencies whilst discounting contemporary ideas and practices when that suits them. A lot is asked 'on trust' in their belief that their track record will be 'good enough' to see them through their current – though perhaps quite different – challenges.

In summary these three 'emergent themes' reflect patterns of behaviour seen from the senior executives in the cases reviewed. The common features could be seen follows:

1.   **Executive presents with high face validity:** offers grand and exciting plans for action in an assertive manner; remains somewhat alone whilst presenting an engaging, high-energy, impactful and positive aura.

2.   **Executive presents as very purposeful:** outcome focussed - likely to show displeasure with others over non-performance and non-compliance; shows a tendency to believe own publicity; may encourage sycophantic 'believers'; 'impression management' can overwhelm 'reality'

3.   **Executive shows an over-preparedness to be expedient to secure the outcomes/results wanted:** results will matter more than how they are achieved; willingly takes responsibility; some superficiality, 'style over substance' dangers in the drive to look good.

4.   **Polarisation of Critics & emboldenment of Supporters:** tendency to polarise colleagues into divisive groupings; will be resistant to receiving 'bad news'; potential for an internal 'blame culture' to develop

5.   **Leader Dependence:** this will be fostered, encouraged and rewarded; challenges and resistance to the Leader penalised; 'In' and 'Out' group fragmentation, likelihood of Groupthink dangers

Figure 3 below depicts how these factors and behavioural stances can feed off each other with the potential, unless monitored - for generating increasingly toxic leadership behaviours.

Figure 3 Circular Counter-productive Dynamics
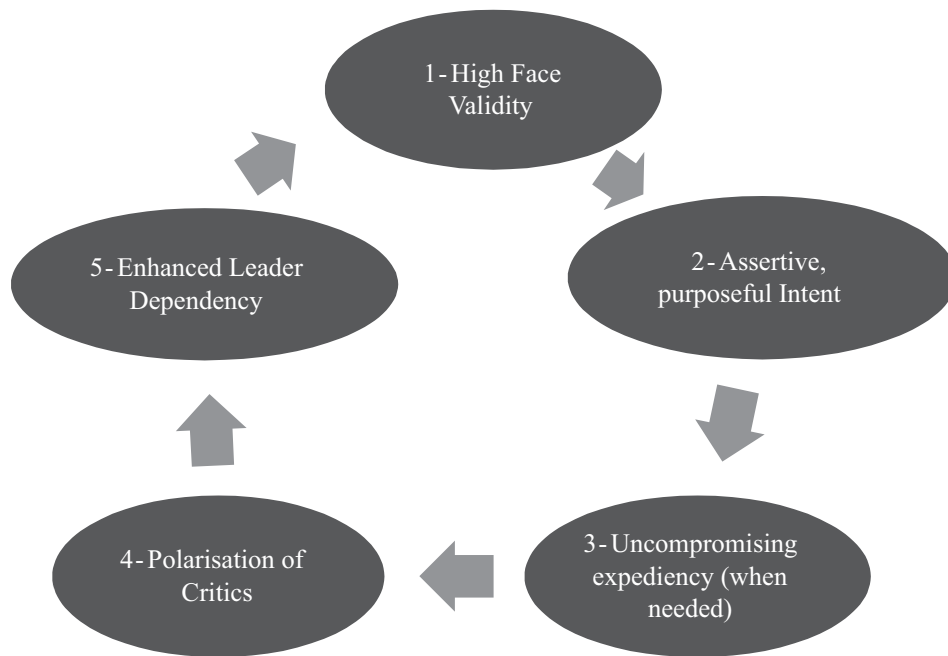
Unless an organisation has procedures and protocols which monitor – and possible *break* the circular pattern depicted above - the potential for self-serving, counter-productive, exploitative and narcissistic leadership is significantly increased.

Dimension 2: The Internal Integrity & Culture of the Organisation

There are just two 'emergent themes' in this 'Dimension'.

The internal culture of an organisation 'holds' in its grasp the history and the legacy of what has gone before and this will exert an almost unfathomable influence on the thinking and behaviour of its executives. The observation that 'Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast ' – attributed to Peter Drucker in 2006 - highlights the significant impact which an organisation's culture has on executive behaviour and this second dimension of the framework moves the focus from the person to the cultural settings(s) in which they work.

Interestingly organizational contexts can (inadvertently) generate and incubate conditions which may prompt and sustain unhelpful and dysfunctional behaviour. In so doing they potentially sow the seeds of their own demise! The importance of contextualising executive behaviour *and* organization dynamics *in situ*

is highlighted by the extensive literature on organization culture (Cloker & Goldsmith, 2000; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1985:2010) and on cross-cultural consulting (Hofstede, 1981; Trompenaars, 1993).

The research material included cases where the culture was so deeply embedded that substantive change was not acceptable; where executive behaviour became so erratic, unpredictable and penalistic that the organisation began to 'fall apart' and fragment into disarray. In another case the urgent need for change had been denied and diluted into insignificance because of the cash-rich, complacent, indulgent and self-congratulatory behaviour of its top executives. Levels of stounding denial and complacency which ultimately resulted in the demise of the organisation and the loss of substantial funds.

Emergent Theme 4: Internal Fragmentation, Shock & Disarray

A disruption of an organisation's *status quo* can create shock-waves and generate anxiety, confusion and uncertainty. When such disruption of the internal culture occurs the likelihood of consequent dysfunctional behaviour by senior executives is increased. When previously relied upon norms and mores – which moderate and condition executive behaviour - are

disrupted or displaced a state of internal 'cultural confusion' is created. A destabilization, and re-alignment, of the existing power structure can also follow such changes.

This can result in a transitory 'looser' - and less regulated - internal culture until a new order is established. Such a transitional 'state' provides an opportunity that may be exploited by executives which in turn can encourage a state of 'organizational lawlessness'. Such internal turbulence can follow a major re-organisation, an aggressive take-over, a significant change in the composition of the occupants of the top team, as well as dramatic changes in trading conditions etc. In such circumstances considerable internal confusion can follow and this may result in some loss of clarity of purpose, internal collaboration and cohesion is weakened, uncertainty about the intentions of the management grows, and heightened insecurity about the future can start to pervade the organisation as a whole.

The result can be (i) a dislocation of working relationships, (ii) structural fragmentation of departmental connections within the organisation and (iii) a splitting up of the earlier internal cohesion and common sense of purpose between departments until 'the new order' is formed.

Emergent Theme 5: Denial, Delusion & Complacency

Denial of existing and emergent problems is one way of responding to the pressure and anxiety generated when the internal integrity of the organisation is disrupted or questioned. The validity of the existing culture of the organisation can be scrutinised and even come under threat. Delusion and complacency are other responses to such uncertainty and confusion and both of these response patterns were observed during these research studies.

A tendency to defend against acknowledging matters perceived as threatening - but which nevertheless demand immediate attention - is not uncommon but if adopted by those in power can be catastrophic! Such an approach from a top or senior executive can lead to a state of internal complacency and generate dismay across the organization.

Such defensive postures are profoundly counter-productive - as was demonstrated in several of the cases researched - and such behaviour outlawed the opportunity for constructive debate and challenge. Those however who continued to highlight the need for action were side-lined, ignored or tagged as 'troublemakers'. A resultant climate of fudging, denial and complacency led to a feeling of 'why bother?' which then further exacerbated a feeling of internal disempowerment. Belief in the competence of the senior executives declined, organizational dislocation increased and a climate of 'corporate dismay' began to pervade the organisation.

Such 'head-in-the-sand' reactions can ensue when an executive neglects, dismisses or refuses to acknowledge the need for immediate attention to address emergent issues (Kahn, 2015). Such behaviour may reflect an inability to cope, an arrogance or a profound lack of awareness and comprehension about the severity of the issues that have arisen. Such dismissive reactions could also reflect an indulgent indifference and arrogant 'come what may' attitude.

These two 'emergent themes' illustrate how the internal climate and tone of an organization can influence which issues are addressed, dismissed, or neglected. Disintegration of the internal stability of the organization – as seen in some of the cases - resulted in heightened ambiguity, operational confusion, duplication of effort, a lack of continuity, and growing uncertainty about the future. In such challenging circumstances the executive role can come to be seen as increasingly meaningless and peripheral or, conversely, overly dominant. Reactions that can heighten anxiety in the executive and strengthen their need to maintain control, perhaps at any cost (Dotlich and Cairo, 2003; Furnham and Taylor, 2004: Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Lowman, 1993:2002; McCalley, 2002; Thomas and Hersen, 2004).

The research material also illustrated how corporate executives are not immune to the influence of factors external to their organisation on their subsequent behaviour in the workplace as described in what follows.

Dimension 3: The External Market, Political and Financial Landscape

There is just one 'emergent theme' here and in the context of this paper 'the external environment' refers to the wider business, political, and social context within which an organisation functions.

Changes in the external market and commercial conditions can provide both the opportunity *and* the excuse for latent executive dysfunctional predispositions to be released. Consequently, a consideration of executive behaviour and organizational behaviour is likely to be insufficiently grounded *unless* the external environment affecting that organization is taken into account when examining the contextual origins of toxic leadership.

Examples from the case material ranged from the effect of intense and continuing adverse media attention, increased pressure from financial institutions for results, shareholder and stakeholder demands, and the impact of unwanted Political, Governmental and Regulatory scrutiny and media attention.

Emergent Theme 6: External Crisis

Severe external pressures threatened to overwhelm two of the organizations studied which triggered exploitive behaviour from their top executives. Whilst each top executive presented themselves as a 'Saviour' or as the 'Protector' they exploited the crises to their advantage; both subsequently 'exited' the organisations concerned!

Executive behaviour & the Organisation's Culture – A Toxic Mix?

The initial motivation for this research was to identify sub-clinical markers which could then be used to test for an executive's latent leadership toxicity. What emerged however was a diagnostic framework that can used to assess the potential for toxicity by examining executive behaviour in relation to the organisation's culture *and* in relation to external pressures on that business.

Whilst the psychological and behavioural characteristics of executives remained at the heart of this research it had become apparent that an executive's overt behaviour is best understood by contextualising it both within the organisation in which they are working and in the response to external pressures impacting on the organisation.

It should be reinforced that executive leadership is primarily about the appropriate and ethical exercise of power and influence. Executives are expected to be successful and when under pressure may resort to dysfunctional and questionable patterns of behaviour in order to maintain their status and political influence (Garrard and Robinson, 2016; McClelland, 1967). However performance under pressure can lead an executive to misinterpret situations as representing a personal threat to their position of power and political authority and trigger defensive, toxic reactions.

The motivations which underpinned many of the executives examined in these studies revolved around behaviours intended to accumulate and protect their power, to maintain their status and control during periods of pressure, uncertainty and change. As McClelland and Burnham (1976:1995) note: 'Whatever else organizations may be …. they are political structures …' and few executives will wish to relinquish their high 'political' status passively.

When under excessive pressure, an executive's assessment of their position is likely to be far from the ordered, calm, logical-rational and scrupulously analytical process it is so often presented as being. Processes other than logical-rational ones are likely to take over and influence an executive's perceptions and consequent decision-making. Psychological processes such as selective perception (Dearborn & Simon, 1958), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957:1970), social conformity (Asch, 1952), Groupthink (Janis, 1972), social identity theory (Haslam et al, 2011) and irrational thinking patterns (Beck, 1976; Seligman, 1998) may well come into play and take hold. Such processes will influence what information, and which behaviours, executives focus upon *and* also shape the meanings they choose to ascribe to such data.

Perhaps it is as Thomas and Herson suggest (2004) that '…within many organizations there is a heightened and continuing level of strain, expectation, stress and vigour beyond that which is 'healthy' for most of us for too long

...'. If so how might executives be better prepared for such emotionally heightened conditions, and the toxic affects which such pressures have in shaping their behaviour (Kahn and Langlieb, 2003; Kets de Vries, 1995, 2009; Kilburg et al, 1986)?

This paper would reinforce (i) the need to embrace leadership toxicity as an every-day facet of business life and accordingly defend against its pervasiveness, and (ii) contextualise the behaviour of executives in the search for the origins of toxic behaviour in the workplace.

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