



7 Incompetent or immoral leadership?

Why many managers and change leaders get it wrong

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Introduction

The idea, if not to say *ideology* of managing organizational change is fairly established within orthodox management (Musson and Duberley, 2007). It is so deeply embedded in organizational realities as well as organization studies that Sorge and Witteloostuijn (2004) call it an ‘organizational change hype’. Managing change is predominantly portrayed in functional ways, as a technology which simply needs exact execution of ‘tried-and-tested’ blueprints. According to the ‘managerial standard model’, organizational change has to be planned, linear, top-down and management-driven.

Change management understood in such ways requires first and foremost *leadership*. When it is about organizations and organizational change, leadership and management (and, hence, leaders and managers) are regarded not only as key, but as a necessity. Moreover, managers and change leaders are portrayed as skilful and competent leaders who can change organizations, or parts of it, ‘at will’ (Kark and Van Dijk, 2007; Ilies *et al.*, 2006; Van Vugt, 2006; Gill, 2003). Whether transformational or transactional leadership (Masi and Cooke, 2000; Bass *et al.*, 1987; Burns, 1978), the idea of leadership is closely accompanied by rhetoric about the (necessary) skills and competences of *leaders* (Siebens, 2005). Leaders seemingly have, or at least are capable and willing to develop, all the positive leadership attributes and behaviours textbooks and proponents of orthodox leadership ideology suggest (Aronson, 2001; Masi and Cooke, 2000; Bass *et al.*, 1987; Burns, 1978).

When change goes wrong – which seems to be more the rule than the exception – possible reasons for it are usually confined to a few areas.

1. Very often, criticism focuses on *technical* aspects of the change programme, an insufficient execution of otherwise right concepts; for

- example, the change message was not properly communicated, necessary changes were not implemented swiftly or thoroughly enough, or managers were not decisive enough in their decisions (Gill, 2003; Greenwood and Hinnings, 1996).
2. Alternatively, or additionally, reasons for a failure of a change initiative are regularly located on the side of employees and lower management; for example, employees were allegedly not ready for change, middle managers did not fully support the strategic change initiative, and/or their individual or collective, open or hidden resistance to change created major obstacles (Shaukat, 2004; Eagle, 1999).
 3. When it is about individual social malpractices within organizations, the focus is mainly on *employees'* 'organizational misbehaviour' (Vardi and Weitz, 2004), 'workplace aggression' (Bryant and Cox, 2003), 'hostile workplace behaviour' (Keashly and Jagatic, 2003) or 'bad behaviour in organizations' (Griffin and Lopez, 2005).

In contrast, possible aspects of, and reasons for *poor* leadership are largely neglected. In most leadership, management and organization studies prevail overtly positive and undifferentiated, unrealistically flattering and naive pictures of leaders as well as simplistic concepts of leader–follower relationships and organizational change (Kark and Van Dijk, 2007; Illies *et al.*, 2006; Reicher *et al.*, 2005; Bono and Judge, 2004; Lord *et al.*, 1999). Criticism of change leaders is rare (Clegg and Walsh, 2004; Harvey, 2002). Very little work has been carried out concerning change leaders' and managers' possible poor performance, malfunction or organizational misbehaviour, their lack of skills and competences or lack of values and moral standards with regard to their actual attitudes and behaviour, decisions and actions within the organizational context (Furia, 2009; Bono and Judge, 2004; Keashly and Jagatic, 2003).

If such research of organizational misbehaviour of leaders and managers had been carried out, empirical evidence suggests that 'managerial abuse of employees' (Bassman and London, 1993), 'petty tyranny' (Ashforth, 1994), 'hierarchical abuse of power' (Vredenburg and Brender, 1998) and 'downward workplace mobbing' (Vandekerckhove and Commers, 2003) are much more widespread than usually recognized or acknowledged. They are quite common phenomena within organizations. According to Vandekerckhove and Commers (2003:42, summarizing several empirical studies) downward workplace mobbing makes up for 81 per cent of all workplace mobbing cases in the US, 63 per cent in the UK and 57 per cent in continental Europe.

Organizational misbehaviour and managerial abuse of power can be found regularly within hierarchical organizations – and the higher up, the greater; moral violence is especially structured around leadership and forms a central part of leader–follower relationships (Diamond and Allcorn, 2004:24). In this respect it would be of particular interest not only to get a better understanding of poor leadership as such (and its consequences) but also to find out more about the possible reasons for it. For example, poor individual leadership can be due to a lack of skills or to a lack of values. This chapter, therefore, will investigate some of the possible reasons for managers’ and leaders’ failures and shortcomings with regard to change leadership. It will focus on two aspects – *incompetence* and *immorality*.

4. With the help of socio-psychological approaches of organizational misbehaviour of leaders and managers it shall be discussed whether ‘managerial abuse of employees’ (Bassman and London, 1993) or ‘petty tyranny’ (Ashforth, 1994) might be a result of managerial incompetence.
5. The morality or immorality of actual leadership behaviour and its manifestations in ‘Machiavellianism’ (Rayburn and Rayburn, 1996), ‘hierarchical abuse of power’ (Vredenburg and Brender, 1998) or ‘organizational psychopaths’ (Boddy, 2006; Maibom, 2005) will be discussed largely with regard to the concept of (self-) interest (O’Brien and Crandall, 2005; Darke and Chaiken, 2005; Rutledge and Karim, 1999) and its stage of moral development (Kohlberg, 1976).

This research is part of theoretical and empirical enquiries into the mechanisms and consequences of organizational phenomena such as management and hierarchical relationships between superiors and subordinates. During a research project into managerial processes within a smaller department of a European higher-education institution, several incidents of organizational misbehaviour of (self-acclaimed) leaders occurred. A narrative approach has been applied in order to provide some ideas about the constituted individual identity of this type of manager or leader (Czarniawska, 1997; Boje, 1995). Some of these findings and insights are provided below in the portrait of a specific person, Zara. The name is a pseudonym, any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The name Zara has been chosen in reference to Nietzsche’s (1885/1990) *Also sprach Zarathustra* (‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’). In this uniquely experimental and esoteric book on philosophy and morality Nietzsche portrayed a ‘new’ or ‘different’ Zarathustra to the original Persian

prophet, one who turns traditional morality upside down. Zarathustra aims to become the *Übermensch* ('superhuman'). For this, his 'will to power' and ignorance of any ordinary morality is essential. Such anti-social behaviour of power-oriented egomaniacs might be seen as yet another example of the 'eternal recurrence of the always same' – another key idea of Nietzsche, although intended by him in a much more philosophical, or ideological, sense. The case will be put into context by referring to other case studies on organizational misbehaviour (Boddy, 2006; Vredenburg and Brender, 1998; Rayburn and Rayburn, 1996; Ashforth, 1994; Bassman and London, 1993).

This small case study of an aspirational change leader and organizational psychopath will be followed by two sections that analyse whether managers' and leaders' organizational misbehaviour can be explained better by references to their (in-) competence or (im-) morality. A discussion of why identification and possible punishment of managers' and leaders' organizational misbehaviour is not as easy as it might seem will also be provided (possible reasons are ideological cover-up, hypocrisy and impression management as the un-normal normality of contemporary organizations). This will be followed up by some conclusions and ideas for future research.

Zara – the case of an aspirational change leader and organizational psychopath

*Zara was a middle-aged academic, sort of lower management, but highly aspirational. When she got her first senior academic post she immediately began to do what she had been doing for many years previously; networking, pursuing her own objectives and constantly being on the lookout for opportunities to initiate something – anything, as long as it would help to raise her profile. She was particularly interested in initiating processes which would demonstrate her 'proactiveness', 'leadership' and 'business orientation', which would get her in contact with the 'right' people, would put her ideas and concerns onto the agenda of meetings and committees and would get her name into the internal newsletter. Zara was constantly busy with 'projects' and 'initiatives'. She had managed to learn 'management speak' and to give everything that she did a touch of 'strategic importance', 'transformational leadership' and 'demonstrated professionalism'. Within a comparatively short period of time she was involved in most major decision-making networks and processes and had become a power within the department no-one could ignore. Her 'will to power' made her a little *Übermensch* within the formal and informal hierarchies.*

Zara is a typical example of the kind of modern careerist that can be found in any larger organization. Saunders (2006:14) paints a very telling picture of this new breed of careerists within higher education institutions:

For those who are neither dedicated teachers nor keen researchers, it is as if Moses had parted the Red Sea. Managerialism has created for such academics the means whereby they might not merely survive but thrive. Their entire way of life consists of mission statements, position papers and reviews of one sort or another; committee meetings, interviews and corridor discussions; phone calls, e-mails and memoranda amongst themselves; interstate conferences with other departmental heads and deans; graduation, prize and other ceremonies. Alliances are formed, favours are asked, deals are made, debts are owed, careers are advanced.

Vickers and Kouzmin (2001:105) provide some more details about careerists' attitudes and inner state:

The modern careerist epitomizes the 'damaged' organizational actor, who appears to say and to act as is required through a process of adaptation which is beneficial for career advancement but disastrous for emotional health. This is evidenced by the apparent promulgation of 'automatons' – colourless, dull and unimaginative individuals characterizing the quintessential 'organization man' – an essentially calculating animal pursuing the necessities of organizational life.

Modern careerists' predominant attitudes and behaviour towards others are typical examples for managers' or leaders' 'organizational misbehaviour' (Vardi and Weitz, 2004), that is, 'acts which manifest disrespect for a subordinate's dignity or provide obstacles to a subordinate's performance or deserved rewards' (Vredenburg and Brender, 1998:1339). Organizational misbehaviour describes social actions such as deviance, aggression, antisocial behaviour, violence, abuse or incivility, without explicitly including legal dimensions or issues such as criminal negligence, discrimination, sexual harassment, theft or the like (Griffin and Lopez, 2005:989). Ashforth's description of the 'petty tyrant' (1994:756–757) is probably one of the best portraits of leaders and managers who are demonstrating such organizational misbehaviour:

Recurring elements appear to include: close supervision, distrust and suspicion, cold and impersonal interactions, severe and public criticism of others' character and behaviour, condescending and patronizing behaviour, emotional outbursts, coercion, and boastful behaviour; they suggest an individual who emphasizes authority and status differences, is rigid and inflexible, makes arbitrary decisions, takes credit for the efforts of others and blames them for mistakes, fails to consult with others or keep

them informed, discourages informal interaction among subordinates, obstructs their development, and deters initiative and dissent. Pervasive themes in these descriptions are a tendency to overcontrol others and to treat them in an arbitrary, uncaring, and punitive manner. These themes are quite consistent with common definitions of the term 'tyrant', such as that offered by Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary: 'a ruler who exercises absolute power oppressively or brutally'. The Qualifier 'petty' has been added to underscore the theme of arbitrariness and small-mindedness that runs through the various literatures.

Boddy (2006) called people with such mindsets 'organizational psychopaths'. According to him (p. 1462) organizational psychopaths 'are employees with no conscience . . . who are willing to lie and are able to present an extrovert . . . charming facade in order to gain managerial promotion via a ruthlessly opportunistic and manipulative approach to career advancement'.

Zara was very determined to pursue her projects and initiatives – and she didn't stop until she finally got what she wanted. In the pursuit of her personal agenda and career she was manipulative as well as ruthless; with colleagues higher up the hierarchical ladder or close allies she was easy-going and portrayed an image of herself as a 'collegial', 'task-oriented' and 'professional' doer. Many others, however, were regularly treated in a very different way. Zara tried to demonstrate 'authority'. Her way of doing this was to emphasize factual or to create artificial status differences. Her body language and attitudes signalled superiority as soon as other people were around. In conversations and meetings she was patronizing. Particular colleagues who were either less determined or less capable of playing political games were bullied by her. Several members of staff admitted in confidential conversations that they felt intimidated by her – male and female colleagues alike. At the same time, Zara was desperate to be seen by all as easy-going, very likeable and even to be fun with. She wanted to be feared and liked by people at the same time. Her attitudes and behaviour (or organizational misbehaviour) had reached an almost schizophrenic level. In that sense, Zara's role-play and personality traits are not so much an example of a 'one-dimensional' petty tyrant but of a multifaceted organizational psychopath.

Organizational psychopaths can be found comparatively more often in larger organizations because these provide more sources of power, prestige and other monetary and non-monetary incentives. Moreover, they provide more opportunities for people like Zara because of their hierarchical layers, complex procedures and processes and the more time available

to people who do not want to concentrate solely on work-related tasks. Whether ‘careerist’, ‘petty tyrant’ or ‘organizational psychopath’, cases like Zara raise the question what is behind such behaviour.

On the (in-) competence of managers and leaders

One possibility is that such misbehaviour is down to *individual incompetence*. Incompetence defines cases when someone doesn’t perform or achieve the goals he or she should be able to achieve and no other reasons are responsible for this failure but his or her individual physical, psychological, cognitive or social competences and capabilities. For example, in their large-scale survey on managerial abuse of employees, Bassman and London (1993) found psycho-pathological aspects and/or sociocultural aspects were the primary reasons for individual managers’ poor management and leadership attitudes towards others. According to them (p. 20) ‘underlying emotional disturbance’, ‘personality disorder characterized by the inability to control aggressive impulses’ or being ‘socialized into abusive relationships’ provided explanations for managers’ misbehaviour and abuse of subordinates.

Ashforth (1994) found that the acquisition and use of power in particular tends to corrupt the powerholder. He or she can develop ‘an exalted sense of self-worth’ while at the same time devaluing the worth of others. Over time, this leads to distorted images of oneself and others and corresponding attitudes and behaviours on the part of both the powerholder and his or her subordinates. For example, the greater the power differential and the stronger and more controlling the means of influence (e.g., rewards, coercion), the more inclined the manager is to attribute subordinates’ successes to managerial control rather than to the subordinates themselves, and the less inclined subordinates are to openly question the manager. Accordingly, the manager comes to believe that he or she can do no wrong, that he or she should not be bound by the same constraints as others, and that subordinates must be closely supervised. (Ashforth, 1994:763). When people with distorted personalities gain power via hierarchical positions, their insecurities and narcissism, and power-and control-orientation turn into managerial incompetence and permanent tendencies toward grandiosity (concerning themselves, their actions and ideas) and distrust (concerning others) (Maccoby, 2005:127–128). They compensate for their personal insecurity by over-controlling others, for their low self-esteem by demonstrating hyper-professionalism, for their shallowness by name-dropping and for their fears by attacking others.

Zara's greatest concerns orbited around her image and the impression she made on different people. On the one hand, she was very keen to constantly portray an image of herself as a proactive doer, competent academic leader and professional (project) manager. For this, she used the usual managerial language and strategy rhetoric. She desperately wanted to be seen as strong and energetic, convincing and successful. Zara even walked up and down the corridor faster and with larger steps than necessary in order to underline her busyness and determination. On the other hand, inside she felt deeply insecure. She had made her career largely with the help of more experienced and influential people. For the best part of her career her jobs had not been too demanding and she had been able to spend most of her time networking. Over the years she had learned the language of her profession but beyond the rhetoric her professional knowledge was shallow and underdeveloped. More crucially, she hadn't developed as a person. In this sense, most of her dominant behaviour was actually a way to compensate for her personal and professional insecurity and a deeply ingrained inferiority complex. One could argue that her bad manners and organizational misbehaviour were more the symptoms of a psychological disorder, and her poor office conduct was mostly the result of social and emotional incompetence.

However unpleasant and ridiculous, sad or occasionally even funny such behaviour might be, if individual managers' and leaders' incompetence is due to cognitive, psychological or social reasons (or an overall distorted and only partly developed personality) they can hardly be held responsible for their behaviour. What can be criticized is largely the managers' (or the organization's) insufficient attempts so far to close this 'competence gap', for example via personal training and skills development programmes or a psychological therapist.

'Interests' and the moral level of managers' and leaders' misbehaviour

However, most managers usually have sufficient experience and expertise and have received enough training and opportunities, which at least potentially enables them to carry out the tasks related to their position in professional ways. Hence, there must be many more relevant factors responsible for the widespread existence of managers' organizational misbehaviour than mere incompetence.

It is clear that managerial misbehaviour like Zara's is often not the odd 'coincidental result of circumstances', due to 'honest mistakes', 'errors of judgement' or down to a rarely admitted 'lack of skills and competences'. More often, these activities are carried out *consciously and systematically* over a longer period of time and in more or less sophisticated and intelligent ways (often with the help of powerful allies, wilful servants or skilful advisers). In this sense, organizational misbehaviour is of instrumental use for achieving personal goals. Rayburn and Rayburn (1996) called people who behave in such ways 'modern-day Machiavellians'. According to them, such an individual 'has an immoral reputation for dealing with others to accomplish his/her own objectives, and for manipulating others for his/her own purpose' (p. 1209). A 'modern-day Machiavellian employs aggressive, manipulative, exploiting, and devious moves to achieve personal or organization objectives.' (p. 1210). Rayburn and Rayburn found empirical evidence that Machiavellians are more likely to be ambitious individuals and that individuals of higher intelligence tend to indicate that they would behave less ethically. They called this 'Type A personality-orientation'. Such a behaviour is

A life-style or general orientation to life, characterized by a high degree of ambition. These individuals are constantly striving to attain material things or achievements in the shortest period of time. Type A individuals continually feel the need to prove themselves and often channel their ambitions into an area that is important to them at the moment. (p. 1212)

Ambitious people with a one-dimensional achievement-orientation are very keen to engage in organizational politics – they do it for a reason; their actions are calculated and their organizational (mis-) behaviour is deliberate. For example, when Vredenburg and Brender (1998) investigated managers' hierarchical abuse of power they talked about a '*decision to abuse power*' (p. 1337, italics added). A key element of their comprehensive model of the hierarchical abuse of power is powerholders' *motives*. Motives or intention arise from *interests* (or self-interest, O'Brien and Crandall, 2005; Darke and Chaiken, 2005; Rutledge and Karim, 1999). Interests, hence, could be a crucial explanation for managers' misbehaviour. It therefore might help to shed some further light on what could be the interests of organizational psychopaths, immoral managers or leaders in particular.

In a 'more' rational sense, managers' and leaders' prime interest might be towards gaining, keeping and increasing their position and power (and all that comes with it, that is, responsibilities and influence, privileges and prerogatives, material and immaterial resources). Because of their

career background and organizational socialization, managers and change leaders are very power conscious (Mast *et al.*, 2010:460 called it ‘power motivation’). They know that organizational developments can bring crucial changes, particularly to *their* areas of responsibility. At the same time, change initiatives, whether it is their formulation, communication or implementation, provide excellent opportunities for gaining, keeping or increasing one’s influence, power and control – or for losing it. Managers’ concerns and interests, therefore, orbit primarily around dominance and supremacy, status and prestige, privileges and prerogatives – whose access to resources will be enlarged or reduced, whose career will continue and whose will stall, who can stay and who has to go; when change happens there are strong personal and group interests at stake (Clegg and Walsh, 2004:230–231; Willmott, 1996:326; Zalesnik, 1989:152). Hence, managers’ and leaders’ first allegiance is often more to their own career than to the company (Willmott, 1997:1335) and they therefore have a very strong interest in keeping, if not increasing, what they have achieved for themselves so far.

In a ‘less’ rational sense, managers’ and (change) leaders’ interests towards power can be related to the more intangible aspects of power. For example, when they embark on a new project, change managers may have feelings of childlike excitement, a sense of their own importance and the impression that things would never move forward if they weren’t around to look after everything, and everyone – to get things done. Despite what many people say, there is a lot of psychological pleasure to be had from being a manager or leader. As Henry A. Kissinger (1974, quoted in Frank, 2001:629) once said, ‘Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac!’. Power can be very compromising – for male and female careerists alike.

Zara was a full-blown careerist. Literally everything she did was for a purpose, and behind her actions and initiatives were more and less rational interests. From the very first day of her appointment she focused on being or becoming formally responsible for certain areas. In a hierarchical organization formal responsibilities mean power and influence. Within a comparatively short period of time she indeed managed to be responsible for the development of key areas. Although not inheriting the highest position on the hierarchical ladder she had become the most powerful and influential member of her department. At the same time as increasing her own influence she was also quite successful in reducing other people’s areas of responsibility and in taking resources and influence away from them. Most of these developments

did not happen in the open as direct clashes, but via more indirect and subtle methods. Zara managed to initiate most of these processes within the formal and informal networks she was part of, or even master-minded. If she deemed it useful, she got issues on the official agenda of decision-making bodies and, in so doing, could achieve a factual allocation of resources in her favour via the official channels. With her new position, Zara now had all the opportunities to live the organizational life of a modern-day Machiavellian to the full. She became the managerial incarnation of the power-oriented political animal. Perhaps even more worryingly, she enjoyed it. She became convinced of the importance of her projects, of her managerial competence and of the necessity to get her initiatives through for the sake of the whole. She enjoyed moving things forward, finding allies, bending decisions her way and limiting the influence of others. It was this power game that she increasingly lived for; influencing and deciding issues for the sake of being influential and making decisions became her world.

Whether or not there are more or less ‘rational’ interests behind managers’ and leaders’ power orientation, the problem is that career-oriented psychopaths like Zara will do (almost) everything that is good *for them* and the pursuit of *their goals* – which includes conscious organizational misbehaviour (‘The end justifies the means!’). In this sense, when demonstrating organizational misbehaviour, such managers and change leaders remain at the pre-conventional level of Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, that is, stage 1 – ‘Obedience and punishment orientation’ (How can I avoid punishment?), or stage 2 – ‘Self-interest orientation’ (What’s in it for me?) (Krebs and Denton, 2005, Rahim *et al.*, 1999; Kohlberg, 1976). Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) called them artificial or ‘pseudo-transformational leaders’, Aronson 2001 (p. 253) called them ‘egotistic leaders’. Their conscious concerns and deliberate actions are primarily for personal gain (under the official rhetoric of serving the greater good and demonstrated etiquette of collegiality). They ‘care about their own personal power and status, often depending on conspiracies and excuses, and resorting to distortion of truth and manipulation of followers to their own ends.’ (Aronson, 2001:253). The carrying out of their business and managerial responsibilities, therefore, is ‘a failure of ethical leadership that derives from the pre-occupation with the self that drives individuals to seek wealth, fame and success regardless of moral considerations’. (Knights and O’Leary, 2006:126). Seen from such a moral development-perspective, most managers’ and change leaders’ poor leadership might be down to some incompetence, but it is largely a direct outcome of their immoral behaviour.

Hidden actions, ideological cover-up, hypocrisy and impression-management as the un-normal normality

The unacceptable behaviour of a leader or manager is fairly obvious to those close to them – subordinates, colleagues, team or project members; many of them experience it first hand on an almost daily basis and have to bear the consequences. But beyond those directly involved, leaders' and managers' organizational misbehaviour is often difficult to detect. There are several reasons for this.

By its very nature, most organizational misbehaviour (like many other negative social actions) is carried out secretly and kept hidden. Since power- and achievement-oriented managers regard such actions as part of their political manoeuvring within the organizational context, they have an even greater interest in doing so. Most managers' organizational misbehaviour happens behind closed doors, via phone calls, in informal face-to-face meetings without witnesses or in anonymous decision-making processes where it is hard to pin down who did what. Power-oriented actors usually have the experience and skills, as well as the resources and means, to pursue their immoral behaviour in secret – and it is part of their daily performance to keep it that way.

But there are more serious than mere 'technical' reasons for the difficulties in identifying leaders' immoral behaviour. On the one hand, the egoistic and intentional pursuit of one's own objectives by almost any means corresponds with the values and ideologies of individualism and individual success, market economy and careerism (provided it appears to happen within the rules). However, at the same time they are in some tension with other ideas and images of higher-ranked positions and leadership. Aspirational members of a social system are expected to work very hard and unselfishly 'for the sake of the whole'. This is also true for many managers and change leaders within organizations. According to Willmott (1996:326), the 'privileged yet dependent positioning of managers within the industrial structure induces them to represent their work – to other employees and owners – as impartial and uncompromised by self-interest or class-interest, motivated only by seemingly universal virtues of efficiency and effectiveness.' The most common rhetoric used by leaders is the claim that they are acting in the interests of the whole – whether this is 'the country', a people or an organization (Deem and Brehony, 2005:230; Pettigrew, 1973/2002:97; Burns, 1961:260). This is the (cynical) strategy of the privileged and careerists; they claim that it is the common interest they 'serve', that their partial interests are good for the whole.

It is certainly much more noble to think of oneself as developing skills toward the more efficient allocation and use of resources – implicitly for the greater good of society as a whole – than to think of oneself as engaged with other organizational participants in a political struggle over values [and] preferences.

(Pfeffer 1981, quoted in Willmott 1996:325).

In this sense it is in the very interest of managers and leaders who primarily pursue their own interests and agendas that their decisions and actions are *not* regarded as driven by (self-) interest. And most immoral managers and leaders are experienced enough and successful in pursuing their own egoistic interests for personal advancement or the fulfilment of egocentric needs while at the same time upholding the image of a ‘humble servant’ of the country, organization or any other ‘greater good’. Hence, most claims put forward by leaders or their supporters are an *ideological justification and cover-up* of individual and group interests.

This suggests that behind immoral behaviour – particularly that of people with elevated positions within social systems – consists in good part of *mendacity* and *hypocrisy*. Against better knowledge, immoral leaders and managers often provide a very one-sided interpretation of situations (*mendacity*) while at the same time regularly fail to practise what they preach (*hypocrisy*). For example, while change leaders put pressure on colleagues and subordinates in order to get their change agenda through in the way they deem to be necessary, at the same time they have no problem stressing ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’, ‘teamwork’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘collegiality’ as key elements of the new change initiative and will use a whole range of more or less cunning tactics to overcome resistance (Musson and Duberley, 2007; Ellis, 1998). Such contradictory, if not schizophrenic, rhetoric has become ‘part of the taken-for-granted managerial repertoire’ (Musson and Duberley, 2007:144). Of course, if asked these leaders would strongly deny such allegations. As Bolchover (2005:69) explained:

‘I hate politics’ is often the cry of those who seek to divert attention away from their own latest ruse. Telling all and sundry in the office that you hate politics is itself an obvious act of corporate politics. The label ‘political’ is a handicap to the corporate career, *being* political is a great help – one more example of workplace hypocrisy.

According to this understanding, unethical leadership is a conduct of office where the leader or other proponents of the proposed principles do not live up to their claims, that is, where moral integrity is missing.

In addition, organizational psychopaths are *very* successful at impression-management, particularly when it concerns their own image and the impressions others get about them. According to Boddy (2006:1461):

A key-defining characteristic of psychopaths is that they have no conscience . . . and are incapable of experiencing the feelings of others. Their other characteristics however . . . make them appear very hireable and worthy of promotion; they are smooth, adroit at manipulating conversations to subjects they want to talk about, willing to put others down, are accomplished liars, totally ruthless and opportunistic, calculating and without remorse. Their cold-heartedness and manipulateness are the traits that are least discernable by others.

Maibom (2005:237) portrayed them in a similar way:

Emotionally, they are significantly impaired, incapable of feeling guilt or empathy, their fear and pain responses are abnormal, and their other emotions are shallow compared to the normal population. They are manipulative, egocentric, and impulsive.

Since such an image would not help in most cases, power-oriented careerists/organizational psychopaths put a lot of effort into their public appearance. To increase their image and the positive opinion many people might have about them while at the same time pursuing their personal goals on the basis of their distorted personality and immoral convictions can be a very successful combination for the successful participation in the internal politics of organizations.

In this sense, the immoral behaviour of careerists and organizational psychopaths is quite a common problem and a deeply embedded part of the un-normal normality of contemporary organizations. Many managers and (change) leaders demonstrate organizational misbehaviour and behave immorally, for whatever reasons, on a regular basis. Most of our organizations are run by organizational psychopaths – mainly because (only) people with this type of personality, aspirations and interests are the ones who are keen and able to make careers, progress through the hierarchical ranks and get projects or other managerial responsibilities. Since power and other prerogatives increase with position in hierarchical organizations, organizational psychopaths are generally those higher up in an organization and/or those involved in organizational decision-making processes. As Boddy (2006:1462) explained:

They have a knack of getting employed and of climbing the organizational hierarchy because of their charm and networking skills. This implies that there are more of them at the top of organizations than there

are at the bottom. Organizational psychopaths have been argued to be more motivated and better equipped than other corporate managers to rise to high corporate positions.

And if their questionable practices become public, people are rarely very upset. Even the severe misbehaviour of a superior tends not to come as a surprise; it is perceived as quite common and typical. Observers, hence, are often of the opinion that, ‘This is the way things are!’, ‘This has always been the case!’ and ‘They do what they want, anyway!’ Most subordinates have been socialized and conditioned in different societal institutions and organizations over decades so they can hardly see the scope of the problem, let alone possible alternatives. In his excellent study of the ‘power elite’, Mills (1956:157) came to the conclusion that criticism of the powerful ‘does not arouse indignation on the part of anyone in a position voluntarily to do anything about them, and much less about the corporate system in which they are firmly anchored.’

‘Impression-management’ was key to Zara. On the one hand, she was constantly busy walking the corridor and ‘communicating’ – especially with people behind closed doors. At the same time, at meetings she stressed the importance of ‘open dialogue’ and ‘getting people more involved’. She bullied people deliberately and consciously, and had no problem praising the ‘collegial atmosphere’ at the department. In official documents she talked about ‘collaboration’ and ‘empowerment’, ‘equality’ and ‘support’ while nevertheless using a whole arsenal of socio-psychological intimidation and political intrigue to fight whoever did or might cross her. She talked eloquently about the need to ‘think strategically’, ‘provide leadership’, ‘proactively engage with students’ and further ‘develop’ the department and even the whole institution, and yet in reality all her concerns orbited around her own projects, the pursuit of her personal interests and the development of her career. Many people even believed what Zara said in public, since she was very compelling – or at least they could hardly say much against it since the rhetoric ticked all the political correctness boxes.

All in all, managers’ and leaders’ immoral behaviour is a widespread and regular phenomenon in organizations, but nonetheless difficult to detect – and to punish accordingly. This is so because of the diversionary tactics, such as hidden acting, ideological cover-up, mendacity and hypocrisy, or impression-management, carried out by achievement-oriented careerists and organizational psychopaths. But it is also because it is, or has become, the un-normal normality of organizations and society. Either way, it is further evidence of the fact that organizational misbehaviour carried out

by people like Zara is not just incompetence but also very conscious and calculated, therefore immoral, behaviour.

Conclusion

As indicated in the introduction, within leadership, management and organization studies so far, very little attention has been paid to the problems of managers' and leaders' (in-) competences and (im-) morality. While there is plenty of general advice available for managers who want to improve their *technical* management skills, their *social* competences and *moral* development (or their incompetent and immoral behaviour) are addressed far less.

The case of an aspirational change leader and organizational psychopath like Zara has demonstrated that the usual *Ten Golden Rules on How to Become a Good Manager* guidebooks available in airport bookshops do not sufficiently identify the problem of managers' organizational misbehaviour, let alone offer ways to cope with it. Part of the problem is that we need to increase our knowledge and understanding of the reasons behind such behaviour at an individual level, that is, whether this misbehaviour is due to a lack of competence or a lack of moral standards. (There are many more aspects to it than the individual and ethical considerations but these need to be tackled elsewhere.) The driving forces behind superiors' poor performance in particular are still far from clear. There can be *psychological factors*, such as the urge for power and dominance, a lack of self-control, impulsiveness, or emotional immaturity (Vredenburg and Brender, 1998:1342), suggesting that it is more the incompetence of the individual leader or manager. On the other hand, a calculative mind, egocentrism, limited concern for others, a tendency towards Machiavellianism and diversionary tactics imply that *ethical aspects* are more significant.

There was quite a mixed picture of Zara. On the one hand, she had some serious psychological issues. Much of her antisocial behaviour seemed to stem from attempts to cover deeply embedded feelings of insecurity and insufficiency in her professional knowledge, with powerful demonstrations of management-like attitudes and a pretentious form of leadership. In this sense, Zara could be hardly blamed. She was simply not up to the job because of a lack of social competences. However, there was also compelling evidence that all her political manoeuvring, bullying, cover-up and impression-management were deliberate. For her, such behaviour and actions were tools for achieving personal goals. There was intent,

conscious and calculative planning, as well as a careful execution. In this sense, Zara's organizational misbehaviour was not an example of (mainly) incompetent but of (primarily) immoral leadership – or what she thought leadership should be.

'Interests' and the *intent* to behave abusively indicate that there is a moral dimension to managers' and leaders' organizational misbehaviour, and it would help if we found out more about the factors that 'might motivate individuals to engage in deviant, aggressive, antisocial, and/or violent behaviors' (Griffin and Lopez, 2005:995). Moreover, 'interests' seem to provide one of the differential criteria between incompetent and immoral leadership or conduct of office. According to Vredenburg and Brender (1998:1340) 'The distinction between a legitimate, ineffective use and a non-legitimate, abusive use is a perceptual attribution of intent or motive.' In a more general sense, immoral behaviour (of leaders or managers) can be differentiated from incompetent behaviour by the extent that

- their organizational misbehaviour is intentional;
- serves primarily personal and/or group interests;
- is justified/covered-up by a prevailing ideology (e.g. of 'serving' the greater good);
- the individual leaders are mendacious and hypocritical.

This chapter has provided some theoretical reasons as well as empirical evidence for supporting the position that managers' and leaders' performance should be much more scrutinized in a variety of ways. It would help if leadership, management and organization studies dropped the overtly positive, unrealistic and flattering pictures of managers and (change) leaders and instead focused more on their actual attitudes and behaviours, decisions and social actions. In this sense, there is some tension between schools of thought that assert that 'leaders *cope with* problems of organizations and organizational change' (orthodox management and organization studies) and that 'leaders *are part of* the problems of organizations and organizational change' (critical management studies).

By concentrating on their organizational misbehaviour and poor leadership performance, as well as the reasons for this, we can enhance our understanding of the great relevance of personal traits as well as moral values. Although there are clear indications of the importance of the ethical dimensions of leadership and management, the problem of the morality or immorality of leaders' and managers' interests and behaviour, decisions and actions is still too little addressed.

At a theoretical level there is some need to further develop concepts and frameworks that can identify the immoral and mendacious behaviour of leaders and managers, careerists and psychopaths. So far, not only have general leadership, organization and management studies been somehow strangely silent about this, topic, even business ethics do not really address it. In this respect it would also help to make clearer the differences between immorality and other social and socio-psychological phenomena, such as incompetence, perhaps via concepts such as (conscious) interests, intent and deliberate social action. The calculative mind and intent (covered up by ideological rhetoric, mendacity and hypocrisy) could be used to distinguish between incompetence and immorality. In addition, to identify and address actions as (un-) ethical or (im-) moral is not enough; even organizational psychopaths follow and act according to particular ethics and moral convictions (such as Darwinism, Utilitarianism, Machiavellianism or the like). These, like other value systems, are based on explicit and implicit assumptions and it is these propositions, rationales, implications and consequences of value systems that have to be revealed and scrutinized, critically interrogated and discussed much more than has been done in the past.

The ethical and moral dimensions of management and leadership are perhaps even more crucial *at a practical level*. The ethical principles, moral values and moral integrity of leaders and managers in particular are key factors for the success or failure of management, leadership and organizational change; ‘it is the leader’s moral principles and integrity that give legitimacy and credibility to the vision and sustain it.’ (Mendonca, 2001:266). In this sense, researchers like Spangenberg and Theron (2005) demand ‘ethical leadership’. It is important to hold people accountable and responsible, particular when they enjoy privileges and prerogatives that come with their elevated positions. Many managers and (change) leaders have to have a thorough look at how they behave, how they treat others, and how conduct their office. As Mahatma Gandhi (quoted in Ait-ken, 2007:17) once said, ‘We must become the change we want to see in the world.’

This, finally, raises the issue of the institutional context and design of social systems in which moral or immoral behaviour takes place. Of course, poor management and leadership are not only a result of individual factors. For example, institutional settings such as hierarchical organization, societal values of strong individualism (if not egocentrism), careerism and calculative and competitive minds contribute significantly to the problem both at societal and organizational levels. Ashforth (1994:764) rightly explained that ‘no individual or situational factor alone

is generally sufficient to sustain ongoing organizational behaviour . . . including tyrannical behaviour. Rather, ongoing petty tyranny may be a function of certain configurations of individual and situational factors.’ By making the individual, situational and contextual factors of moral and immoral behaviour more explicit, by interrogating organizational realities more thoroughly and by developing theoretical frameworks that may address such issues comprehensively, organizations would be able to design and manage working conditions in general – and change initiatives in particular – in perhaps more decent, ethical and, therefore successful, ways. We might even be able to design new forms of organization and other forms of collaboration, which would further reduce the problem of incompetent and immoral management and leadership.

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