

Welcome to the Inquirer, a fortnightly Newsletter highlighting insights and new ideas about organisational leadership. In these lean challenging times, moments for reflection are at a premium. The Inquirer offers bulletins to support your agile leadership and your development of agile organisations. Please do feel free to share this open source Newsletter with colleagues and to join our continuing Public Leadership Inquiry and conversation with leaders on www.publicleadershipinquiry.com

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We all know how the levels of stress and uncertainty currently facing leaders can engender negative responses. We can revert to type, become less able to adapt, focus on the negative and use its language, rely on the tried and tested, and limit our ability to learn and innovate.

If we look to the public sector, many leaders are simply not allowing this to happen, despite the huge demands bearing down on them. They exude confidence to their people and external stakeholders, focus single-mindedly on delivery and results, engage and communicate superbly with their people, and collaborate strongly with colleagues in other functions and organisations.

But there are also quite a number who, not surprisingly, are following the siren call of their default mechanism, choosing the lowest common denominator instead of making the bold decision, hunkering down in their own function rather than courageously collaborating with others, and preferring to think things through on their own instead of actively engaging their people and other stakeholders.

One useful frame for leaders to monitor and deal with this natural tension, both in themselves and their people, is the notion of the 'victim'.

Fred Kofman offers one such model in his book *Conscious Business; How to Build Value Through Values* - that of the 'victim' and the 'player.' As a 'victim', we tend to blame others for problems, sweep conflicts under the table, expect to get what we want without asking and complain if we do not get it, and not honour our commitments. As a 'player', we take full responsibility, look for creative solutions to disagreements, honour our commitments, find ways around constraints and express our emotions productively.

In a recent radical restructuring in a multinational organisation, the top leadership team adopted Kofman's lexicon of 'victim' and 'player' to help themselves and their people recognise and modify the choices they were making in leading and responding to the significant transformation that was underway. It is not difficult to spot the tendency towards 'players' and 'victims' in the early paragraphs of this bulletin.



Stephen Karpman, a well respected psychiatrist, provides another model in the shape of the 'drama triangle', defining three 'victim' like roles that we can choose to play in demanding circumstances:

- Persecutors ('It's all your fault') who set strict limits unnecessarily, blame excessively and adopt rigid authoritative stances.
- Rescuers ('Let me help you') who see themselves as 'helpers' and 'caretakers', need someone to rescue in order to feel vital and important, and often keep the 'rescued' in a position of dependency.
- Victims ('Poor me') who feel victimised, helpless and powerless, often look for a 'rescuer' to perpetuate their negative feelings, and adopt a 'dejected' stance.

Karpman argues that these roles are hard to avoid since we have been practising them for some time in our lives and that there is one role that we are most comfortable playing, with a back up that we can easily switch to. And he also argues that there are practical steps to take to break out of the 'drama triangle'.

When managing oneself, he suggests:

1. Building one's awareness about this pattern of playing different 'victim' roles and spotting the signals.
2. Adopting particular tactics for each of the roles:
 - Persecutor. 'Disengage! Step away from the situation, and let others sort it out.'
 - Rescuer. 'Take no action until requested, don't be tempted to jump in and just 'help out''
 - Victim. 'Begin problem solving. Understand that there are options to choose from.'
3. Taking a break from the victim role, starting a pattern by eliminating any kind of whining or complaining for the next week or so, and avoiding conversations with others who are complaining.

And when supporting our colleagues to spot and deal with the pattern, he argues for interventions that help them see the role they are playing (in the way the leaders of the above mentioned multinational organisation did), understand the individual needs and concerns that are driving them in this direction, and appreciatively draw attention to the positive and successful things they do or say.

PLi Comment: *Such is the pressure facing leaders today that the choices discussed here are very real. Resilient leaders are choosing to be 'players' and supporting their colleagues and people to act in the same vein. But, it is thoroughly tempting to play a 'victim' role, not least because one always tends to be 'right' in that mode ('Look what they are doing to us! What do you expect us to do?') and 'transgressors' such as the Coalition Government can be blamed for what they are doing. The cause of agility is well served by leaders consciously and deliberately attending to these choices, and supporting themselves and their people to take the 'player' role.*



Business NOT at all as usual: showing a lead on agility, a case study by Steve Turner

An example of leaders building an agile business can be found in the Department for Business Innovation and Change (BIS) where the wider leadership team in the Enterprise Directorate are taking control of their situation to lead systemic change in the structure and processes which they use every day.

Not only are they responding to structural change affecting the whole Department, but they are also involved in a process of applying for their own jobs. In this demanding context they have chosen not to keep their heads down, but to embrace the opportunity to do things differently. The Director has created a wider leadership team. He has taken staff survey data seriously and engaged the next level down to steer the agenda by respecting their knowledge of the business and their staff.

Over the course of a 3-month period and two away day events the Director has enabled high quality conversations about the way they organise themselves and do business. Impressively, the conversations are both strategic - looking ahead in the context of Departmental aims, and systemic - addressing all the component parts of their business to ensure that changes are coherent and sustainable. The areas that they have focused on are:

Understanding context and challenge – appreciating what the Department’s leaders are trying to achieve and allowing the experience of change and the feelings evoked to be surfaced and shared. This allows them to be confident in modelling appropriate behaviours with their people.

Task and Finish Groups – were established involving people at different levels to tackle staff survey issues in conjunction with asking transformational questions about creating a new operating model. They agreed innovative approaches including using a marketplace ‘gate’ to test new projects, open scoping of projects, allocation of resources, re-prioritising projects, learning from previous initiatives about setting objectives and developing their people to ‘pitch’ themselves in contributing to projects. They went beyond project working to develop a consultancy model of working across the Directorate.

Skills – the skills needed to operate the new project/consultancy model were identified and priorities agreed to develop necessary skills, especially around people appreciating their talents, using them flexibly and pitching them to join project teams.

Culture Change – the leadership team were very clear that structural change changes little, so they attended to building the culture needed to make the project/consultancy model work. They attended to balancing specialist and generalist skills to enable people to be flexible in responding to project priorities, helping staff to form a new psychological contract over their identity/where they belonged, central oversight of projects, using visual techniques, overtly using distinct phases in projects, quickly building effective project teams and careful use of the best people.



Leadership – personal and leadership team change commitments were made publicly. New arrangements for the wider leadership were made especially around the focus and content of communication, leadership meetings and taking control of the process of change.

PLi Comment: *at an Open Inquiry we held in April 2010 we explored the challenges facing leaders in anticipation of the new administration. We discussed resilience and learned that it is not about toughing out difficult situations - real psychological resilience means controlling the urge to hunker down and instead to adopt a mindset of being proactive and creative. The leaders in this case study have become players (see Julian Powe's article). Although this is a public sector example their approach and the lessons learned apply to any sector or context where leaders are striving to achieve an agile business; indeed, the Director was stimulated in this endeavour by a secondment to the retail sector. It is striking how closely the conclusions which the Enterprise Team have reached map on to the model of agility which PLi has developed (see website), especially negotiating a new psychological contract with people, thriving in a world which is less structured and predictable, not needing to make everything perfect, sustaining a sense of energy and buzz, and fostering organic interactions rather than formulaic process.*

Public Leadership Inquiry is a bold research and consulting enterprise devoted to understanding and strengthening leadership and organisational change.

At the heart of our work is a focus on helping organisations to become AGILE and LEAN - two critical features of success for modern organisations. We look to the real-world experiences of leaders and undertake research that delivers insights, “know how” and the strategies needed to be agile and lean. We bring particular value to complex organisational challenges, in fact the more complex they are, they more we can help.

PLi was co-founded by Sue Duncan, former Government Chief Social Researcher; Robin Ryde, author & former CEO of the National School of Government; Steve Turner, executive coach and board level leadership advisor; and Julian Powe, employee engagement expert and board level change management advisor.

