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Psychodynamic Approach

INTRODUCTION

As educators, we know there is more to a situation than what we may see on the surface. Take, for example, that lethargic student who won't engage with her teachers or other students or complete her homework and whose mind is always somewhere else. Is she just lazy? Or bored? Not likely. She's actually depressed because her parents are in the middle of a contentious divorce, and she can't sleep at night because of her anxiety. So her coping mechanism is to shut out the world, something she learned to do as a small child when her parents would get into heated arguments.

At its heart, leadership is about human behavior—what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. In the discipline of education, the answers to those *what*, *how*, and *why* questions are key to the reasons we are able to connect with some students and colleagues and not with others. Often the reasons are referred to as “baggage”: Every individual is guided by

deep-seated experiences and patterns that are first mapped out in early infancy, through one's experiences with early caregivers. These experiences and patterns go on to influence our interactions with others.

Kets de Vries and Cheak, who wrote the invited chapter on the psychodynamic approach in *Leadership Theory and Practice* (7th ed.), argue that this is the basis of the psychodynamic approach to leadership: examining the dynamics of human behavior, which are often the most difficult to understand. Whereas the behavioral approach (Chapter 4) examines how leaders act toward followers from the standpoint of task behaviors and relationship behaviors, the psychodynamic approach looks at *what* makes leaders and followers act in the ways they do. It looks at the underlying, often unconscious and irrational processes and dynamics that govern human behavior.

The psychodynamic approach to organizational study has evolved during the last 25 years and is rooted in psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic study of organizations. As the authors noted in their chapter (Kets de Vries & Cheak, 2016), of the many concepts that have emerged from the psychodynamic study of leadership, two—*focus on the inner theatre* and *focus on the leader-follower relationships*—provide perspectives for looking at the hidden dynamics and undercurrents of organizational behavior in order to decipher the motives for why people behave the way they do.

Focus on the Inner Theatre

One of the core concepts of the psychodynamic paradigm is the “inner theatre” (McDougall, 1985). It is the stage filled with people who have influenced, for better or worse, the experiences in our lives that contribute to the creation of response patterns that have a tendency to repeat themselves. Within the inner theatre, recurring relationship patterns develop over time, known as “core conflictual relationship themes” (CCRTs) (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1998), that we take into adulthood. In the context of the workplace, we act out these themes onto others and, rightly or wrongly, anticipate how others will react to us. We then react to their perceived reactions, and not to their actual reactions.

Unfortunately, these scripts drawn up in childhood on the basis of our CCRTs can become psychic prisons—ineffectual and even dysfunctional in adult situations.

Focus on the Leader-Follower Relationships

A study of leader-follower relationships necessarily addresses the psychology of groups. Psychiatrist Wilfred Bion (1959) identified three basic assumptions in groups—*dependency*, *fight-flight*, and *pairing*—that may result in deflecting people from the principal tasks to be performed.

Groups subject to the *dependency assumption* view that the leader or organization can and should offer protection and guidance. They perceive the leader as omnipotent and, as a result, readily give up their autonomy.

For groups subject to the *fight-flight assumption*, there is a tendency to split the world into camps of friend or foe. Fight reactions manifest themselves in aggression against the self, peers, or authority and include avoidance, absenteeism, and resignation.

People experiencing the *pairing assumption* believe that pairing up with a person or subgroup perceived as powerful will help a person cope with anxiety, alienation, and loneliness.

Kets de Vries (2005) argued that integrating a clinical or psychodynamic orientation in leadership development is key to developing reflective leaders. He maintains that to understand organizational life in all its complexities, leaders need to be “organizational detectives,” uncovering not only what drives their own behaviors but also the motivations and behaviors of others. Armed with this knowledge, leaders can truly understand the complexity of the systems in which we live and work. The psychodynamic approach provides us with better self-knowledge, and this knowledge can be used in communicating with followers in a way that allows us to shape, influence, and enhance our relationships.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies of leadership situations in educational settings ask you to employ a psychodynamic lens to decipher why leaders and followers behave the way they do. The first case looks at a new teacher trying to survive in a rather untraditional management environment. The second case examines the dynamics at work in a dysfunctional college group working on a class project.

At the end of each case, you will find two sets of questions that will help in analyzing the case. The first set can be answered using information provided in this chapter; the second set, Advanced Questions, provides an opportunity to analyze the case using ideas from the psychodynamic leadership perspective and is designed to coincide with the concepts discussed in Chapter 12 of *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (7th ed., pp. 296–327).

CASE 12.1

WE'RE ALL COMRADES HERE

The Midvale School formed in 1975 as a private, progressive school, founded on the principle of an equal voice for all. Staff, parents, and students all have a role in the operation of the school. A council of parents and teachers serves as the school's decision-making body with a focus on budget, facilities, and fund-raising. The head of the school holds the title of Coordinator. Midvale's current Coordinator is Frank. Frank has been with the school since it opened, first as a teacher and for the last 20 years as Coordinator. Frank and the teachers have an equal voice in the day-to-day decision making for the school and meet weekly to discuss curriculum and students and to make programming decisions. These weekly staff meetings are scheduled for an hour and a half, but often run two hours or longer. Any staff member may put an item on a meeting's agenda, and the teachers take turns putting the agendas together and running the meetings.

Marcel is Midvale's most recent hire. The young new teacher was an only child raised by his religious grandparents on an isolated farm in a rural part of the state. Marcel is used to an authoritarian structure—his grandparents made the key decisions in his life from where he went to school and what chores he did on the farm to how much time he was allowed to use technology. The schools Marcel attended were very small; his graduating class only had 50 students. That was one reason why teaching at Midvale School appealed to Marcel—he didn't enjoy his intern teaching experiences at large schools, preferring a smaller, more intimate environment.

One of Midvale's hiring practices is to give all new teachers a personality test at the beginning of the school year. It is administered by one of the school's parents who is a licensed psychologist. Marcel's

personality test reveals that he fits the profile of “Coach,” as do Frank and most of the other teachers at the school.

The discussions at the weekly meetings often stray from the agenda topics and end up focusing on processing the events and emotions of the past week. Frank checks in with each staff member to make sure that he or she feels comfortable with the discussion and the decisions being made. When difficult topics arise, in keeping with the “Coach” profile, each teacher is so concerned about not hurting the feelings of others that many important things go unsaid until after the meeting. As a result, information travels second- and third-hand through the staff, with the teachers with the strongest personalities ultimately making the final decisions.

New to the school, Marcel is often left out of these informal conversations and decisions, and is bewildered about how decisions get made at the school. When he brings an idea for a Reading Month program to Frank, the Coordinator tells Marcel to put the proposal on the agenda for the next staff meeting. At the meeting, the Reading Month proposal is discussed by the teachers, and Marcel is praised for his creativity, but no decision is made about whether or not to implement the program. A few days later, Marcel learns from Chris, one of the senior teachers, that the teachers don’t feel that it is a good year to start a new program. Marcel appeals the decision to Frank. Frank is sympathetic and listens to Marcel’s disappointment, but explains that because the decisions are made by the group, he cannot overturn it. Frank encourages Marcel to go back to the group and express his feelings and ask the group to reconsider his proposal. Marcel leaves Frank’s office confused and frustrated.

Questions

1. Whom would you identify as the leader in this situation?
2. How does the situation at Midvale reflect the “inner theatre” paradigm described by McDougall?

3. Of the three types of leader-follower relationships described by Wilfred Bion, what type of relationship does Marcel appear to be looking for?

Advanced Questions

4. What past experiences are influencing Marcel's behavior and thinking?
5. How should Marcel proceed to get his ideas integrated into the group?
6. Could group coaching be applied in this situation? Do you think the staff would be receptive? Discuss.

—Anne Lape, educator

CASE 12.2

“THEY ARE FREEZING ME OUT,
PROFESSOR JOHNSON”

Returning to her office after teaching a curriculum development class, Professor Jan Johnson finds a student from the class, Lanetta Norris, sitting outside her office door in tears. Jan is surprised to see Lanetta like this; Jan has had the student in other classes and would describe her as a “tough cookie” who rolls well with the punches.

Once inside the office, Lanetta asks Jan if there’s a way she can withdraw from the class without being given a failing grade and losing the tuition she paid for the course. Lanetta is doing well in her individual coursework, and the group she is in will present their curriculum development project in two weeks, so Jan is surprised by Lanetta’s request.

Lanetta, who is African American, has come to Laurel College, a small, private college in a rural Iowa town, from Detroit, where she lived in the inner city with her single mother and four siblings. Lanetta is on a partial scholarship at Laurel and works every night until 2 a.m. as a waitress at a truck stop. She is one of only a handful of minorities on the campus and is a very private person who doesn’t share her background with many people. Most of Laurel College’s students come from within the state and from a more privileged background than Lanetta’s.

Jan asks Lanetta if things are OK at home with her mom and brothers. Lanetta nods, saying things are as good as they ever are—her mom is still working three jobs and trying to keep up with her brothers. Jan then asks Lanetta if she is OK, wondering if the stress of her rigorous schedule is too much for her or if she is having financial problems. Lanetta says she’s doing fine, and keeping up with her schoolwork.

Jan now suspects the problem might be Lanetta's group. Today in class, she observed that, unlike the other groups, whose members all moved their chairs into tight circles, Lanetta's group of six students, four of whom are males, sat in a loosely arranged semicircle. Two of the members were texting on their phones, and the others were working on a laptop together. Lanetta was standing behind the laptop group watching them work. Jan was helping another group tease out a problem with their curriculum design and didn't have time to approach Lanetta's group to check on their status.

"How's the group going?" Jan asks casually. Lanetta's eyes widen, and then she breaks down. "Badly, really badly," she says between sobs. "They hate me for some reason. They have meetings without me and then email me about what was decided and what work they want me to do. They always set up meetings when I am working. And when I asked them to set a regular meeting schedule so I could take time off of work for the meetings, they couldn't agree on a time or day. When I turned in my part of the project, they redid it, saying the software program I was using wasn't compatible with their newer versions and they couldn't open the document. When we have group meetings in class, they just ignore me. If I make suggestions, I get this stony stare from some of them, and the others just look away.

"They are freezing me out, Professor Johnson."

That night Jan called one of the group's other members, Mitchell, and asked for a meeting. Mitchell is regarded as one of the department's better students and always ends up as the leader in group settings. When they meet the next day, Jan expresses her concern that his curriculum project group might not be functioning well, and Mitchell reacts with surprise.

"We're done with our project, Professor," he claims proudly. "We're just working on the PowerPoint slides. We have a great group and work together really well."

"What about Lanetta?" she asks.

He shrugs. "She hasn't been able to participate because of her work schedule, so we've just made do without her."

Jan then asks Mitchell why the group hasn't tried to accommodate Lanetta's work schedule so she can participate.

"Well, we feel like that's her choice," he says. "The other team members and I have all chosen to devote our time 100% to school and not to other distractions, like working or playing a sport. Lanetta works at a truck stop, so it's not like she has some career-building internship that she needs for her future. We feel like she needed to compromise, too, but she wouldn't.

"We tried to include her," he continues. "We gave her an assignment, but she didn't do it right. Part of the problem is she doesn't have a very good computer, and her software is several versions behind everyone else's. We suggested she use the computer lab at school, but again, she couldn't fit that into her schedule."

Questions

1. Whom would you identify as the leader in this situation?
2. What inner theatre dynamics are at work here in Lanetta's and the group's perspectives about each other?
3. Which of Bion's basic group assumptions are at work here? Defend your answer.

Advanced Questions

4. What role do you think that race, socioeconomic class, and gender play in the psychodynamics of this group? Explain your answer.
5. Even though there are two weeks left, do you think Jan should engage in group coaching? What could be gained?
6. Bion described social defense mechanisms, mirroring and idealizing, and identification with the aggressor. Which of these leader-follower relationships are at play in Lanetta's group? Explain your answer.

—Authors

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