

Thoughtful Leadership

Lessons from Bion

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Abstract

In the competing discourses within organisations, primacy tends to be given to decisive, action orientated, knowing leadership in contrast to more reflective, patient, thoughtful leadership. This paper argues that there is an important place for 'thoughtful leadership' as one of the necessary responses to the challenge of liquid modernity and the danger of organisations going 'off task'. Thoughtful leaders are first of all concerned with keeping their organisation 'on task'. In pursuit of this, thoughtful leadership provides containment, is available for thought, and mobilises others in the organisation to be thoughtful. Throughout the paper lessons are drawn from the work of the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion on the development of the capacity for thought.

INTRODUCTION

The scope, scale and nature of current societal insecurities have led Baumann to coin the term 'liquid modernity' to describe a world where 'patterns and configurations are no longer "given", let alone "self-evident"' (Baumann, 2000, p. 7). And what is true at the societal level, is also true of organisations:

Organizations were, to be sure, never closed systems, but in more stable times with much slower rates of change, they were experienced as self-contained and self-perpetuating. By contrast, contemporary post-industrial organizations often have quite the opposite character. They are experienced as unstable, chaotic, turbulent, and often unmanageable. (Gould, 1993, pp. 49–50, cited in Gabriel, 1999, p. 282)

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These dynamics of chaos and instability can be a significant challenge for organisations. In particular, they can distract and confuse organisational members, so that the espoused task of the organisation can be replaced unwittingly by other 'work'. This 'other work' amounts to the dispersal of energy into activity generated out of habit, panic, denial, and avoidance. These 'dispersals' are all examples of losing the capacity to think or, if you like, of thoughtlessness. The role of the leader in such situations is to keep the organisation 'on task' (Dartington, 1998) and he or she must achieve this by ensuring that members of the organisation retain the capacity to think, even under pressure.

In this paper we argue that retaining and developing the capacity to think requires three things. First, in order to keep people 'on task', leaders need the ability to contain the pressures that cause dispersal into thoughtless activity. Second, leaders must be able to identify and work with the thoughts that will help to address the challenges of the moment. Here, we are referring not merely to the thinking of new thoughts but also to the ability to think possibly ordinary thoughts that are relevant to the situation at hand. Third, the leader needs to mobilise others in the organisation to think so that they may contribute fully to the organisational task: implementation is a shared activity, not something that the leader can do alone. Before these three dimensions of thoughtful leadership are considered, we discuss the challenging context of liquid modernity and some of the pressures that can mitigate against thoughtful leadership.

PRESSURES THAT MILITATE AGAINST THOUGHTFUL LEADERSHIP

Within the overall context of liquid modernity, the pressures are great for the wasteful dispersal of organisational resources. However, while leaders must give attention to guiding and supporting others to remain on task, leaders themselves are not immune. In fact, organisational leaders are peculiarly subject to the pressures imposed by the expectation of *performativity*, which dominates our culture at all levels; that is, 'efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 88). Key stakeholders, shareholders, management boards and politicians demand that organisations achieve increasing levels of performance on key measures. Indeed, changing political and economic pressures mean that what might once have been expected primarily, or even exclusively, of business enterprises is now also required of organisations in the public and not-for-profit sectors (Exworth and Halford, 1999; Pollock, 2004). These demands are often

stated simply and directly, as though their achievement is a straightforward matter. However, liquid modernity ensures that nothing is straightforward. Old answers (if there are any) may no longer be relevant; new answers have often not yet been developed.

As leaders look for answers, they will be mindful of the political context and the fact that their actions will be observed and judged. The search for answers is, however, constrained by the fact that the range of discourses competing for space and legitimacy in organisations is limited, with the active and the technical dominating over the reflective and the humane. Rewards go most easily to those who 'know' and are decisive, ready with 'answers'. Those who wish to take more time to consider the question take a different type of risk.

For example, in discussing with a senior manager in the UK civil service how to manage a culture change in an organisation with 25,000 staff, we stated that we did not have 'the answer' and added that we did not think that anyone knew how to do what he was asking. He looked surprised, even shocked, that such a statement could be made. 'That's no good to me,' he said. It became clear that the matter was urgent and he wanted to know what to do. More than this, it seemed, he needed to be seen to be doing something – ideally something 'positive', though merely to be seen to be acting appeared to be the first priority.

We are not suggesting that reflective inquiry is the best or only way to lead but we are drawing attention to the competing discourses within organisations, suggesting that primacy tends to be given to decisive, action orientated, knowing leadership in contrast to more reflective, patient, thoughtful leadership. As a consequence the latter can be devalued and marginalised as a practice. We are particularly aware of this because it affects us, both positively and negatively, in our work as researching consultants. In a sense the parameters of our work with organisational leaders seem to be set largely by the nature of their 'thoughtfulness'. While the example above set those parameters so tightly as to exclude patient, thoughtful reflection, others do base their leadership on just this characteristic (see Armstrong, 2005, p. 21).

For example, Harry was the chief executive of a reasonably large division (3,000 staff) and was known for his ability to relate to people at all levels throughout the organisation. Whenever he travelled to different parts of the business, often for meetings with members of his senior management team, he would also book in half a day to 'visit' – walking through the open-plan offices, stopping to talk to members of staff, listening to their issues and problems. This was easy for him because he enjoyed meeting people. However, this was also, in his view, some of the most valuable time that he spent in his leadership

role. Listening to staff throughout the organisation helped him to think about the detailed implications of the significant changes that the organisation had experienced in recent years. Through this process he would generate an agenda of items for his next meeting with his management team.

In contrast, following Harry's retirement, his successor, Bill, appeared to have little interest in listening to others in the organisation – not even to his management team. He arrived in his new post knowing the 'rules of the game' and what his new team needed to do differently. There was, in his view, little need for more thinking – the answers were already clear to anyone with ability. Unfortunately, also in his view, not one of the management team that Harry had left him possessed this ability. Within two years he moved on to his next promotion, leaving a fragmented and demotivated group of senior managers. This experience left many despondent that this was what it now took to 'get on' in the organisation.

These two managers are illustrative of our argument. Bill was clearly focused on answers but, somewhat paradoxically, appeared to show little desire to listen to new ideas. On the other hand, Harry gave persistent attention to the search for new thoughts, believing that he could not hope to know what he did not take the time to discover. Bill was also known for his clear focus on the task, while Harry was known for a more relational approach, engaging with and listening to people, working with and through others to get the task done.

Clearly, both of these men were thinking. What we wish to explore here are the implications for leaders of the differences between them. We do so by drawing some lessons from the work of Wilfred Bion and, in particular, upon those aspects of his writings that give explicit attention to the processes of thinking and development.

BION'S SEARCH FOR TRUTH

The Symingtons (1996) have suggested that Bion made only one assumption, that 'the mind grows through exposure to truth' (p. 3), or, as Bion put it, 'truth seems to be essential for psychic growth' (1962, p. 56; see also Grotstein, 2004). The value of his insight for organisational work is that real learning and change occur at the edge of knowledge, when we do not yet know the truth of the situation. Throughout Bion's writings we find the notion that clinging to the illusion of knowing can be a defence against the emotional experience of encountering truth at the edge of ignorance. (See French and Simpson, 2001, for a more developed discussion of this point.) Although being at the edge can be exciting and invigorating, the unsettling anxiety that also

accompanies the experience often frightens us off at the very moment when we might catch a glimpse of the truth and when something new might be learned.

It is, however, unfashionable to talk about 'the search for truth'. The postmodern deconstruction of 'grand narratives' problematised all essentialist notions of 'Truth': 'men are . . .', 'women are . . .', 'organisations are . . .', 'leadership is . . .'. What may have been lost, however, in the deconstruction of oppressive or controlling notions of 'truth', is the creativity and energy that can be mobilised by the search. There can be an unexpected broadening of imagination when one is somehow in touch with or touched by the truth of *this* moment and context, limited and provisional though it inevitably is. This does not have to be a search for some 'grand' truth: it is enough that it is relevant to the demands of the moment. Indeed, the pursuit of some generalised notion of truth can even be a way of denying or avoiding a present situation that is uncomfortable or confusing, whereas addressing the truth of this moment can be exactly what is needed to keep the organisation 'on task'.

We liken Bion's pursuit of truth to the leader's desire to keep the organisation 'on task', recognising that this sometimes requires the leader to work at the edge between knowledge and ignorance. For example, Nicholas found himself on a very steep learning curve when leading a multi-billion pound negotiation with senior Chinese and Russian officials. In the early months Nicholas was confronted in several ways by the inadequacy of his knowledge. At first it seemed to him that it was the Chinese and Russian members of the negotiation who were ignorant, negative and resistant. However, as Nicholas gradually learned to let go of his preconceptions he underwent a series of transformations in the way that he and his team took up their roles. He learned to suspend what he thought he knew and began to engage more effectively with the reality of the situation *as it was*, rather than *as he thought it should be*.

The differences that we noted above between Harry and Bill were also evident in this case in the contrast between Nicholas's response and that of a key member of his negotiating team. In other ways extremely competent, this individual was unable to make the same transformation in his style of interacting and approach to thinking. As a result he persistently allowed himself to be drawn into destructive confrontations and Nicholas had to remove him from the project. His technical 'knowing' was an obstacle to making progress, merely aggravating the complex political sensitivities of the situation.

This view of thoughtfulness emphasises the idea that effective leadership involves seeing moment by moment, day by day, what is

actually going on, in contrast with what was planned for or has worked in the past. In order to assess the impact of events, and to adapt as necessary, leaders may have to put their knowledge and familiar ways of thinking to one side, in order to allow their minds be changed by 'truth-in-the-moment' (French and Simpson, 1999). Thoughtful leadership may even require the capacity to downplay what at first sight appear to be more task-focused styles of thinking. The heart of the paradox is that it may only be by changing and re-visioning the organisation's reality as it evolves that a leader can preserve a focus on the task.

THE CAPACITY TO CONTAIN AND THE CAPACITY FOR THINKING

We have suggested above that liquid modernity presents leaders with a situation in which keeping organisational members 'on task' can be a significant challenge. The leader's desire to achieve the organisation's task is not enough on its own. In addition, thoughtful leaders need to be able to contain the tendency to disperse energy into inappropriate emotion and activity.

Bion's practice as an analyst suggests how such containment might be achieved. It is captured in his idea of 'patience' and his borrowing from Keats of the idea of 'negative capability' (Bion, 1970, p. 125; French, 2001; Simpson, French and Harvey, 2002). In order to engage with the anxiety inherent in the psychoanalytic encounter, he proposed a stance based on listening and waiting that allows thoughts to 'evolve', rather than a flight into activity and telling. He emphasised a detachment from results that was almost the diametric opposite of the urgent drive for results (or activity for its own sake), which was demonstrated by the senior manager in our first illustration above.

Clearly, translating such an attitude into the context of organisational leadership is problematic. In a society as orientated towards action, performance and results as ours, and driven by speed and growth, the idea of encouraging leaders to wait, listen and absorb smacks of being out of touch with the 'real world'. However, Bion's advocacy of this disposition was both thoroughly practical and firmly grounded on his understanding of the most basic foundations of human development. He identified the human capacity to contain emotion on behalf of self and other as the central mechanism in the evolution of thought, transforming chaotic, uncertain and disturbing experiences and emotions into something bearable and manageable.

Bion wrote of the infant's inherent 'capacity for toleration of frustration', which differs between individuals (see, for example, 1967,

p. 112). In everyday language, when we call a baby 'contented', we are pointing to a high level of this containing capacity. The root metaphor underlying the words 'content', 'contain' and 'capacity' is the same: that of 'holding'. 'Contented' babies are able to 'hold' or 'contain' minor discomforts for themselves, without complaining or appealing for help. On the other hand, we call fractious babies 'difficult', presumably because we have to do more of the work of containment on their behalf.

This notion of 'the contented baby', therefore, links everyday language and psychoanalytic theory: we are all born with our own 'capacity to contain frustration', a greater or lesser natural disposition for managing emotion within ourselves. The fate or evolution of this capacity is then determined in relationship with the infant's parents or carers; that is, in what Winnicott called the 'facilitating environment' (Winnicott, 1990). Nurture or its lack – through physical and emotional neglect, even abuse – determines whether a contented baby remains so or becomes 'difficult', and whether a 'difficult' baby settles and becomes 'content'. Thus, human development, including the development of the capacity to tolerate frustration, occurs in relationship. This idea is central to much of the post-Freudian evolution of psychoanalysis: 'the foundation for subsequent healthy development is not laid in the satisfaction of instincts but in the imparting to the infant that he is 'a person', valued and enjoyed as such by his mother' (Sutherland, 1980, p. 841).

Bion's work on the development of the 'capacity for thinking' follows from this notion of interpersonal containment. It is of particular relevance in understanding the development of thought in organisational contexts. He proposed that at the point where the infant's inner capacity to deal with the difficulties of life is inadequate, the mother is able, through her own capacity, to absorb his distress. By means of what Bion called the mother's 'capacity for reverie' (the equivalent of the analyst's 'patience'), she can take in and 'understand' his emotional states and, on the basis of this understanding, do for him whatever is needed. This may be quite practical, like feeding or changing. However, it may also be that he needs to be 'held', not just physically, but in her understanding or by her 'love'. It is as if the mother can 'think' her baby's thoughts for him – or, from the baby's perspective, one might say that he 'puts ideas into her mind', ideas he cannot yet think for himself.

This idea may be more familiar than it at first seems. Even as adults, for example, when something is too much for us, we say we 'can't take it in'. Bion's insight (following Melanie Klein) was that when a baby cannot 'take in' what is happening to him, he pushes it out instead,

relying on another, primarily his mother, to 'take in' to herself, via her reverie, his distress. By taking in his distress or his inability to know what is happening to him, she understands it for him and can transform this understanding into thought and action. It is this fundamental, interpersonal model for transforming thought that is so relevant to current organisational experience. It describes the relationship between the capacity for the containment of emotion and the transformation into thought and action that can result. In Bion's view, this relationship between emotion and thought is basic not only to the work of psychoanalysis but to all human activity. The ability to act – that is, to *move out* – is dependent on the ability to receive or to *take in*: 'there is a *relationship* between the ability (the capacity) to hold or to hold *in* and the ability to *do* something' (Hopkins, 1997, p. 488; original italics).

The point is well illustrated in a paper on leadership in the prison service (Abbott, 2000), which is reminiscent of Harry's 'listening' to his staff in the example given earlier. In this paper, Abbott emphasises the benefits to be gained from the Prison Governor 'walking the landings' of the prison and meeting people 'where they actually work'. In effect, he outlines the potential for creating a space where 'old thoughts' can become 'new thoughts' through the mobilisation of patience. Although his description does include some active verbs – for example, 'the opportunity *to do* casual management casework' – the overwhelming sense is of Abbot observing and listening, which in itself leads to transformation. He talks, for example, of 'the opportunity *to be seen*', and says,

Above all else it [walking the landings] provides the opportunity *to feel the institution* and having felt it *to work with and on the feeling*. The task is to *absorb the emotion* and thus allow people to take up their role free of negative emotion, which detracts from their performance. Often *just being there* will remove the emotion. Often *just listening* to the anger will move it. (Abbott, 2000, p. 4; all italics added)

In a similar sense, Armstrong emphasises the positive potential of receiving and working on emotion in this way:

it seems to me that emotion in organisations – including all the strategies of defence, denial, projection, and withdrawal – yield intelligence. And it is because they yield intelligence in this way that they may be worth our and our clients' close attention'. (Armstrong, 2005, p. 93)

Abbott's description makes it clear that the value and outcomes of exercising leadership in this way – that is, from paying close attention

to and containing emotions in the organisation – are not only to be measured in terms of practical actions. There may indeed be immediate work to be done and important information to be gained that will translate into new strategies or practices. However, ‘just being there’ and ‘just listening’ may be enough to do the work of thoughtful leadership. It is as if by mobilising his or her reverie, to use Bion’s term, the thoughtful leader can make a significant contribution to keeping organisational members ‘on task’.

LEADING AS BEING AVAILABLE FOR THOUGHT

In a situation that is adequately contained, the thoughtful leader is able to make another contribution to the pursuit of the organisational task: to represent or embody an important idea or thought. For example, a visionary leader is one who is able to effectively represent a new thought for the future. However, the relationship between leading and finding thoughts is not an obvious one. Some leaders do indeed have the ability to create, discover or develop the thought itself, but this is in no way a prerequisite for thoughtful leadership. It is even possible that the modern idealisation of originality – in the arts and sciences, in academia and in business – may in some ways be a societal side-track. In an organisational context it is the thought and its relevance that matters. Whether leaders conceive a thought themselves, or copy, borrow or buy it is a different question.

However, this notion of ‘thoughts’ depends on a definition that is wider than the everyday one – that is, of thought as a rational product of the human capacity for thinking as expressed in language. Thoughts can be unconsciously held as well as consciously expressed. A dream is a ‘thought’ – whether a night-time dream, a daydream or a vision. ‘Thoughts’ can also transcend the individual as manifestations of ‘social’ thinking – as myths, for example, as ‘social’ dreams (Lawrence, 2005), or as the kind of group, organisational or social dynamics that Bion called ‘assumptions’ (Bion, 1961).

Thus, a product is a thought ‘produced’; an organisational structure is the ‘realisation’ of a thought; a strategic plan is an evolved or evolving thought; the physical layout of offices or the shop floor, a hierarchy of roles and responsibilities, the headings on note paper and the signs at the entrance: all of these are thoughts made manifest. A vision statement is a ‘thought’, as is an organisation’s culture, which is a collective thought expressed in ways of behaving and relating, thinking and acting. It is worth noting, in passing, that such thoughts are not always a positive influence. For example, Willmott has described the manipulative way in which the idea of organisational culture can be

used as a 'thought' that will infiltrate and control employees 'from within', 'by managing what they think and feel, not just how they behave' (Willmott, 1993, p. 516).

In all of these senses, organisations are thoughts made visible. They can also become a 'forum' (meaning both 'market place' and 'political arena') for thoughts that are 'in the air', waiting to be found. Bion took this phenomenon to be a fundamental aspect of human interaction – that is, the existence of 'thoughts' in experience that are, as it were, searching for a thinker (Bion, 1967, p. 166). Infants, for example, experience hunger and satisfaction, pain and joy, before they know these phenomena as thoughts. In a similar way, patients find in therapy a context in which it can be possible to bring into thought emotions or experiences that may have been 'unthinkable' for years but have, none the less, been present and may have manifested themselves as dreams, for example, or in a variety of symptoms and patterns of behaviour and relationship (see Bollas, 1987). This is the basis of Bion's assertion that 'thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts' (1967, p. 111).

If thoughts truly can be 'around' in the emotional experience of individuals and groups, then finding new thoughts in organisations demands mechanisms for thinking that are adequate for discovering the as yet un-thought thoughts of the moment. Teams, focus groups, departments, new roles, away days, consultancy, partnerships – and leaders themselves – can be conceived of precisely as mechanisms 'called into existence to cope with thoughts'. The reason these different phenomena can, at times, achieve remarkable things is that for that moment they provide precisely the 'mechanism for thinking' that is necessary to crystallise a new idea – provided that those involved are prepared to actively pursue the truth at the edge of their existing knowledge.

This may be illustrated by the response of Jim Burke, CEO of Johnson and Johnson at the time of the infamous 'Tylenol crisis' in 1982 when several people died after poison had been inserted into Tylenol capsules. Burke chose to deal openly with the truth of the situation, most evidently when he immediately removed the product from the shelves. He did this against the wishes of the US Food and Drug Administration and the FBI, who were concerned that this action would alarm the public. Burke was prepared to make himself available for new thoughts, so desperately needed in this challenging situation. He said later, 'We put the public first. We never hid anything from them and were as honest as we knew how to be.' This included appearing on the *Donahue* television programme and on *60 Minutes*. The corporation had not worked in this manner before; these were

new thoughts working themselves out in a very public forum. 'Only one person here supported what I was doing,' recalled Burke. 'When I decided to go on *60 Minutes* the head of public relations told me it was the worst decision anyone in this corporation had ever made, and anyone who would risk the corporation that way was totally irresponsible, and he walked out and slammed the door.'

Burke drew on his training in market research and consumer marketing. He also worked his contacts in the media and described being guided by a 'philosophy of life'. In other words, as he moved to the edge of his knowledge, he did not turn his back on what he already knew. These things were essential in being able to contain the powerful pressures inherent in the situation, which could have led to the dispersal of his and the company's energies into inappropriate actions. This combination of *mobilising his knowledge* while *acknowledging that he did not have all the answers* generated a contained space within which Burke was available for thought and the corporation, the media and the public at large were able to create a new way to think about the problem. Nine weeks after the crisis began new tamper-resistant packaging was in production. Burke later suggested that such product development would normally take two years. The organisation could continue its task and Burke appeared on the front cover of *Fortune* magazine, lauded as an innovator (Bennis, 1998, pp. 151–154).

The fact that this case is widely cited as a model example of corporate responsibility and crisis management has led to a number of 'formulaic' responses to crises, largely based on sending the company CEO out to deal with public and media. However, the imprisoning in India of Union Carbide's CEO, Warren Anderson, following the Bhopal poisonings is just one example that illustrates the danger of assuming that Burke's actions constituted a replicable form of knowledge rather than, as we prefer, an example of a leader making himself available for new thoughts.

THOUGHTFUL LEADERSHIP MOBILISING OTHERS

Being available for thoughts, however, is not enough if the organisation is to pursue its task. The leader must also be able to convince others that these new thoughts can be managed and their power for change contained within the political context of the organisation. The leader must be able to mobilise support or, at the very least, limit the power and extent of opposition. Burke's skill as a leader and his considerable expertise in public relations were an essential component of his success. The situation was dangerous for the corporation, but ultimately Burke was able to carry enough people with him. Without this

ability, the implementation of new thoughts within an organisation is impossible.

If a new thought is experienced only as dangerous then the result can be the emergence of patterns of individual, group and organisational resistance that are familiar to anyone involved in change initiatives. Bion's greatest contribution outside psychoanalysis has been to identify some of these underlying patterns of unconscious resistance to the new. He called a group dominated by such dynamics a 'basic assumption group', whose 'complex forms of interpersonal defences' prevent them from working 'in an objective and consistent manner' (Hopper, 1997, p. 443). Instead, such groups disperse their energies and resources into activities that can be engaging and can indeed feel like 'work', but are essentially 'off task' (Bion, 1961).

For example, we once undertook an action research project with a chief executive and his senior management team who were undertaking a significant organisational change process. Seeking to create a more 'corporate' team at the most senior level, the chief executive replaced existing reporting lines based on divisional responsibilities with a flatter structure and introduced greater collective accountability. This new 'thought' provoked strong resistance within the management team itself. Existing power relations were threatened and political conflicts emerged as senior managers struggled to come to terms with the implications of this change.

In conversation with the chief executive we discovered that he had drafted a letter severely reprimanding his managers for this in-fighting and insisting in the strongest terms that they behave corporately. We advised that this could be counter-productive, because by doing so he was likely, among other things, to reproduce precisely the old pattern of top-down leadership that he wished to change. But he was insistent. The letter was sent. The presenting problem did disappear, only to continue in the form of non-action and subtle forms of sabotage. Eighteen months later the chief executive moved on to another organisation, still trying to push through his change programme.

This leader had a new thought, but he did not succeed in convincing his team that the resulting change could be managed in a productive manner. Merely having a thought is not thoughtful leadership. The complexities of inter-relating realities – new thoughts interacting with other thoughts – must also be considered if the organisation is to stay 'on task'. Here the chief executive was unable to achieve this within his own team. Burke's achievement is all the more striking because his leadership was taking place in the face of potentially damaging resistance not only within the organisation, but also from the media, governmental agencies and the public.

There is another element of Bion's theory of individual development that helps to shed light on the challenges thoughtful leaders face in attempting to mobilise others; that is, the way in which a *lack* of leadership ('no-leadership') may activate thoughtful leadership in others. Bion speculated that the very *need for thinking* arises from our experience of a *lack*, that is, of something experienced as missing. He suggested that as long as a baby's hunger is met by the comforting experience of the breast, he has no reason to form the *thought* of the breast. However, when the baby is hungry but not fed, he has the experience of 'no-breast'. That is, he experiences the 'presence of an absence', which clearly has an entirely different texture or 'psychical quality' (Bion, 1962, p. 34) to the 'presence of a presence'. Bion was led to ask,

Is a 'thought' the same as an absence of a thing? If there is no 'thing', is 'no thing' a thought and is it by virtue of the fact that there is a 'no thing' that one recognizes that 'it' must be thought? (Bion, 1962, p. 35)

Provided the experience of lack, of 'no thing', is not overwhelming, then two positive elements can emerge from the negative: both a specific thought and also an increased capacity for thinking. The success of this transformation depends on the dynamic between inner and outer, between the intra- and interpersonal dimensions we have highlighted here: that is, between the adequacy of the infant's own capacity to contain frustration and the parenting he has received up to that point. No baby can do this emotional work of thinking on his own, any more than he can feed himself. Thus, development involves a complex balance of intra- and interpersonal containment that continues – and shifts – throughout life. As Winnicott argued, maturity is to be found in *interdependence*, not in the 'illusion' of complete *independence* (Winnicott, 1963).

It is the specific impact on thinking of lack, or of 'no thing', that is so important for organisational life in general and for leadership in particular. Lack – of resources, time, confidence, and so on – is a constant feature of organisational life. Any change, however major or apparently trivial, inevitably stimulates in individuals, in groups and in organisations, a sense of 'no thing', of *uncertainty*, *not* knowing, *insecurity* – 'no breast', as it were. With adult organisational members, as with infants, the issue is whether this sense of lack can remain at a tolerable level, in which case it can be experienced as an opportunity for creativity or innovation, rather than as threatening or persecutory, and may be transformed into thought.

As consultants, we had an experience of the challenge inherent in this form of leadership, which seeks to mobilise others. We had been

asked to work with a group of eight middle managers, who had been given the responsibility of planning their organisation's annual management conference. This was a significant task that had previously been undertaken by senior managers. However, this year the chief executive decided to delegate it to this group of middle managers. They were to be provided with support – the availability of the chief executive himself for consultation, plus additional resources, including our services. The group was required to design and manage the two-day residential conference that would include all senior and middle managers – a total of over eighty participants.

At the first meeting the discussion was frenetic, with some proposing creative and thoughtful ideas while others quickly dismissed their suggestions as having already failed in the past. Those who had been energised soon became frustrated. Those who had been more critical became more confirmed in their cynicism. Alongside aggression, frustration and a growing sense of apathy, the level of anxiety within the group increased noticeably. We observed that the group was becoming stuck. However, it was not immediately clear how the group might find a more positive engagement with the task. We worked hard at resisting the desire to intervene, instead concentrating on taking in the experience of the group, thoughtfully reflecting on what we saw, heard and felt.

After listening carefully for twenty minutes, the insight grew that there was a common confusion about the task, most noticeable in their use of the terms 'conference' and 'workshop'. One of us intervened: 'It appears to us that you may not be clear about what is expected of you. A 'conference' is frequently characterised by the expectation that experts will provide answers. In contrast, the idea of a 'workshop' is generally used to describe participants working together to explore important issues and difficulties.' This stimulated a measured discussion. Eventually the group concluded that their 'conference' could not hope to provide answers for the organisation in its current state of turmoil and transformation, but this was indeed what they had assumed was their task. As a result, this impossible expectation was redefined and they sought to design a conference that provided participants with a range of opportunities to meet and to explore important issues together. This clarification of the task was later recalled by the group as a significant step forward in their work.

In this example, the chief executive sought to encourage others to take up the authority to lead by delegating leadership to the group. Experienced as a lack of leadership from senior management, this delegation of responsibility contributed significantly to the level of anxiety within the group. They were only able to find their authority

once this anxiety was well-enough contained, initially by the consultant intervention but more permanently by achieving clarity about an achievable task.

Sometimes, however, the results of the delegation of leadership responsibility are not so positive. Organisational members may experience and communicate, in subtle and not so subtle ways, their hatred of 'no thing' – of what they experience as 'no leadership'. In such situations, the leader must be able to cope with their reactions, if he or she is to avoid being pulled back into patterns of dependency that may, in the long term, be as disabling as they are comforting, or into punitive responses, such as the letter sent by the chief executive to his senior management team described in the earlier example.

Anyone who takes up a role that demands giving a lead, whether as teacher, trainer, consultant, manager, or leader, will be familiar with this dynamic. Faced by 'no thing' – for example, when one does not supply 'the answer' – students or clients can exert enormous pressure for someone else to find and supply a solution – a 'thought' – rather than moving into the space and thinking for themselves. The magnitude of the task of managing in the context of liquid modernity suggests that mobilising the capacity to think in organisations will be, at least in part, dependent upon the capacity of thoughtful leaders to develop new thoughtful leaders throughout the organisation.

THOUGHTFUL LEADERS, THOUGHTFUL ORGANISATIONS

In this paper, it has been our contention that thoughtful leaders are characterised by the recognition, conscious or unconscious, that leadership demands the ability to keep the organisation 'on task'. We suggested that this ability is comparable to Bion's 'search for truth', which he believed to be fundamental in the development of thought and mental capacity. Rather than a dogmatic, knowing search, Bion emphasised that this work takes place at the edge of knowledge, on the boundary between our knowing and our ignorance. This can be both an invigorating and a terrifying experience and presents a particular challenge to the leader: the challenge of countering dispersal into emotion and activity that take organisational members 'off task'.

In the face of this challenge, the thoughtful leader works to provide containment, which involves the creation of a relational and mental space that helps in the toleration of ambiguity, uncertainty and anxiety. Bion's method in this was summarised as listening, waiting and patience, leading us to liken the required leadership practice to Bion's description of the mother's capacity for reverie. This was most clearly

illustrated in Harry's 'visits' and in Abbot's 'walking the landings' of the prison.

An important contribution to containing the pressure to disperse – and hence to keeping the organisation on task – is the leader's capacity for being 'available' for thoughts, which may provide the answers to the 'what' of organisational change and development. However, the leader cannot do everything: the challenge of implementation requires the thoughtful leader also to mobilise others. This has two dimensions. First, the leader must mobilise support, or at least keep resistance and opposition at a manageable level. Second, the leader needs to mobilise others to become thoughtful themselves. In this regard, Bion's ideas on the experience of 'lack' as a stimulus for thinking were compared to the thoughtful delegation of the leadership of organisational tasks. We have suggested that such delegation creates the experience of a 'lack of leadership'. Provided, however, that the anxieties triggered by the experience of lack can be well enough contained, this apparent 'lack' can provide precisely the energy required to stimulate thoughtful leadership throughout the organisation.

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