

# The Splitting of Leadership and Management as a Social Defense<sup>1</sup>

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary organizations are undergoing an unprecedented level of change and turmoil. New technologies, fresh competitive challenges, and a changing world economic order pressure managers to adapt and innovate, resulting in the now commonplace mergers and acquisitions, cutbacks and downsizing efforts, strategic alliances, and spin-offs which, in turn, all amplify complexity dramatically. The popular press, management specialists, and organization theorists all speak to the need for organizations to innovate deeply (e.g. Kanter, 1983; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Lawrence and Dyer, 1983; Tushman, et. al., 1987) and to the requirements of leading such enterprises (Bennis and Nanus, 1984; Leavitt, 1986). Visionary, creative leadership has become essential in contemporary organizations.

In systems terms, organizations must now operate in environments which are characterized by greatly increased complexity. Dense interdependence and unpredictable connections which arise from accelerating but unpredictable social, technical, and economic changes, create "turbulent" conditions (Emery and Trist, 1965). In response, organizations must learn and change continuously under these troubling conditions (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Michael, 1973; Morgan, 1988).

Yet just as individuals experience difficulties in adapting to novel conditions and often resist or sabotage their own development so do organizations. In this paper we wish to highlight and explore a particular maladaptive response to these demands for change and innovation that we have observed across a variety of settings. This response consists of the splitting of leadership and management both in concept and in practice. We interpret this splitting as a social defense, drawing conceptually on the pioneering work of the Tavistock Institute. The defense arises as an effort to diminish, evade or trivialize the profound changes required to revitalize our institutions and the difficult and painful anxieties stirred up by such a transition. We do not question the need for innovative leadership which is responsive to emerging economic conditions; rather we are concerned with a dysfunctional reaction to these pressures.

The social defense we wish to examine has two variants: either a cult of management tools and techniques, or alternatively a cult of the charismatic leader. Idealization of one aspect of the executive process and denigration of the other prevents integration of a vision and the machinery for achieving it that is necessary for effective innovation. We view the elevating of management without leadership as allowing us to not to think about substantive directions that would be disturbing (Miller and Gwynne, 1972). Conversely, the lionization of leadership and denigration of management serves to neutralize the potentially disturbing ideas of genuine leadership by keeping it separated from management, which in the best sense of the term, represents the means for realizing the new ideas.

## **THE STARTING POINT OF EXECUTIVE ACTION**

Effective management requires the linking together of the strategic vision and the organizational machinery, inevitably requiring an inward and outward focus simultaneously (Rice, 1965; Miller and Rice, 1967). At the boundary between any unit and its wider organizational context, or alternatively, at the boundary between the enterprise and its wider environment, a leader integrates the unit's mission or strategic orientation with the tools and means for accomplishing it. It is specifically a function of leadership to weave the two - to articulate an appropriate mission which the resources of the unit can realistically achieve and to deploy its resources efficiently in the service of its primary task or tasks (Barnard, 1938; Selznik, 1957). Thus the leader or manager - and at this point the terms can be used interchangeably - must have both an external and internal view, a strategic and operational perspective, simultaneously. In other words, enterprise leadership relates means and ends.

As the complexity in both the inner and outer environments grows, we see the emergence of a widespread ideology in which this essential linking function - the integration of "leadership" and "management" - is disavowed. We view this ideology as a social defense, a concept to which we turn in the next section.

## **THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL DEFENSES**

The idea of social defenses grows out of the British object relations tradition of inquiry into psychodynamic processes. Early researchers at the Tavistock Institute examined the way in which participation in task systems stimulates painful anxieties and thus leads to the establishment of equally powerful defensive systems in the organization. Jaques (1955) showed that, in addition to functional reasons for various social arrangements (efficiency, creativity, affiliation), one of the primary cohesive elements binding individuals into institutionalized human association is that of defense against painful anxieties.

His example of the first mate on shipboard illustrates the idea nicely. The ambivalent feelings sailors feel for their captain at sea - particularly the negative side of their responses - engenders great anxiety due to their extreme dependence on the captain. The first mate becomes a displaced target, or receptacle, for these unwanted feelings toward the captain, and typically comes to be regarded as far more insensitive and mean spirited than is the case. Through this the sailors establish and maintain, unconsciously, a collective defensive system in which they are protected from painful disturbances in the relationship with the captain.

The term "social defense" was first used by Menzies (1961) in connection with her nursing study in which she describes how the "needs of members to use organizations in the struggle against anxiety leads to development of socially structured defense mechanisms." Her research illustrates how various features of the organization, such as structures, policies, operational procedures, beliefs, etc., can be used to reinforce the individual psychological defensive needs of members as well as to further task accomplishment.

The Menzies (1961) study concerns the powerful anxieties stimulated in the course of fulfilling the nursing role. There the anxiety arose from intimate contact of nurses with the difficult issues of life, death and sickness. To prevent painful anxieties arising from identification with the patients, practices and policies arose more to help nurses evade such anxieties than to cure or care for patients. For example, rotation and charting practices diminished nurses' awareness of or responsibility for patients as whole people, and instead became "the leg in room 2" or a set of tasks unrelated to the overall care of a person. By fragmenting patients, the nurse did not have to deal with patients as whole persons which evoked painful empathies, repulsions, or erotic impulses. Similarly, excessive diffusion of delegated responsibility and authority served the same ends.

The particular modes of defense institutionalized in the nursing service led to less effective task performance, and as a result served as a secondary source of doubt and anxiety for the nurses. While effective in helping nurses relieve their anxieties, the particular collective strategies employed were done so at considerable cost to patient care, the education of student nurses, and the quality of staff nurses' work lives.

The concept of social defense links the individual and collective levels of activity. It is both psychological and social at the same time and provides a way of seeing the reciprocal interaction of the two. Disturbing intrapsychic conflicts and anxieties, which are often elicited in the course of taking up a role or joining an enterprise, are defended against as members engage in psychological splitting, denial and projective identification. All these processes lead to an externalizing of elements of the conflictual situation. Social defenses exist when members establish or maintain situations which mirror, in the external world, their own internal psychic defenses against anxiety. While individuals alone operate defenses, they do so in ways<sup>2</sup> which reify their unconscious strategies to contain anxiety and doubt. Thus "objective" features of organizational life symbolize, and are imbued with, psychological aspects of members. Over time, the social defense system is built up as members enter into unconscious agreements to diminish task-related anxiety in such a fashion.

In turn, social defenses have a great impact on individual members of organizations. The ways of managing anxiety which are institutionalized in the social defense system become part of its customary ways of thinking and doing things. Because individuals adapt to their organization, new members will adopt these ways of coping with work and with their own anxieties. Unfortunately they often impair the functioning of organizations at the same time because they enable members to turn away from the realities they face, no matter how distressing.

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<sup>2</sup> see P. Heimann. "Certain Functions of Introjection and Projection in Earliest Infancy," in Developments in Psycho-Analysis. London: Hogarth Press, 1952.

In another example, Miller and Gwynne (1972) explore form of social defense - on the level of primary task definition itself in A Life Apart, a study which examines agencies that house and care for severely handicapped people. Having the extremely painful task of "mediating between social death and physical death," the staff of these organizations came to interpret their mission in a way which would help defend themselves against this pain. The institutions adopted a protective ideology - either that all their charges can develop fully or that all require being completely cared for - which defensively simplified their complex realities. Consequently, staff members did not have to make troubling and painful judgements on an individual basis.

In this paper we wish to consider another type of social defense which shapes the way in which leaders and managers come to understand their work. In particular, we are interested in how certain pervasive social themes and emergent trends in the wider society are imported into organizations in such a way as to serve as social defenses.

What distinguishes the social defense we discuss here is that it is an ideology which is unrelated to the specific tasks or technologies of an enterprise but instead to the crosscutting demands arising from a rapidly changing environment. Thus many organizations, of quite different character and purpose, share this frightening reality in common. As discussed above, we have observed an emergent pattern of social defenses appearing across many types of organizations which can be categorized into two sorts: managerialism and the cult of heroic leadership.

Before turning to these two ideologies in more detail, we wish to explicate the link among social defenses, ideologies, and culture. Following Schein (1985), culture can be defined as "a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration..." (p. 9). Culture, in this sense, accounts for a wide range of features of organizational life including: methods of production; attitudes toward control and supervision; beliefs about organizational learning and change; the customs, habits, and ideologies of managerial practice; and even the way objectives are understood.

In his discussion of how culture forms, Schein speaks of two modes of learning: positive problem solving and pain and anxiety reduction. The latter, he argues, accounts for the emergence of various features of an organization's culture - "rituals, patterns of thinking or feeling, beliefs, and tacit assumptions...that were learned originally as ways of avoiding painful situations are...We can think of parts of a group's culture as being 'social defense mechanisms'." (p. 178) Thus an ideology, referring to the ideas, values, and attitudes characteristic of a group or a community (Plamenatz, 1971), can serve as a social defense by providing a way of coping with a painful, anxiety provoking situations. We now turn to the roots of the managerial ideology which we argue is being used as a social defense.

## **THE SPLITTING OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

Early writers on organizations used the terms leader and manager interchangeably (Barnard, 1938; Selznik, 1957; Rice, 1963). Selznik's (1957) seminal book was titled Leadership in Administration, clearly linking leadership with the bureaucratic machinery to accomplish purposes. In the early 1970s, Zalesnik (1974) began to differentiate among psychological types of leaders, first conceptualizing two types of leaders: calling one consensus and the others charismatic. Later (1977), he reframed the distinction as between leaders and managers, and speculated as to whether the dominant business culture was overproducing the latter. Zalesnik's (1987) intellectual distinction tapped a wave of pent up resentment against the rational - bureaucratic managerial class that Galbraith (1967) had discussed in the New Industrial State. It appeared during a resurgence of interest in entrepreneurial activity which was seen as the visionary function of bringing new businesses and new industries into being.

The distinction has been taken up and elaborated in many subsequent texts, both scholarly and popular, that examine types of leaders and analyze the challenges our organizations face. Burn's (1978) distinction between "transformational" and "transactional" leaders parallels Leavitt's (1986) between the "pathfinder" and the "implementor." Bennis and Nanus (1985) pithily captured the distinction with a frequently quoted sentence: "Leaders do the right things; managers do things right." (p. 33) This distinction has been worked with, developed, and applied in numerous scholarly works (see e.g. Tichy and DeVanna, 1984; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; O'Toole, 1985).

In this emergent framework, leadership refers to the articulation of mission, direction setting, vision, strategic thinking; management becomes the administrative functions of achieving the goals, administering policies and procedures and monitoring and controlling. The distinction, which harkens back to Weber's (1947) original discussions of the differences between policy-making and administrative action, is increasingly used by scholars to discuss a perceived emergent need for the visionary, mission-setting, inspiring leader in the face of contemporary conditions.

Yet scholarly discussions value both sides of the coin - while the "leader-like" approaches are viewed as ascending in importance, the implementor or manager is treated in this literature with respect and seen as a vital function.

As one approaches the world of practice and more popular writing, however, a psychological splitting<sup>3</sup> (in contrast to conceptual differentiation in the academic literature) occurs in which

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<sup>3</sup> Splitting, in a psychological sense, refers to a defense that is used by people to cope with doubts, conflicting feelings, and anxiety. It is a defense which enables the individual to separate the negative and positive feelings toward something, thereby reducing the complex and contradictory feelings associated with it. This is an intrapsychic maneuver commonly used to evade painfully ambivalent feelings people typically have toward important people, events, or objects.

one side of the equation is extolled and the other demeaned. Either the technique or the heroic leader (or the inspirational approach) becomes the savior, rather than acknowledging the critical importance of both "leadership" and "management" in tandem for robust change and development. So in comparison to Selznik's (1957) leadership in administration, the dominant leadership literature has come to oppose leadership and administration.

We are not suggesting that the functions represented by "leadership" or "management" in the current parlance need be fulfilled by the same individual to avoid this debilitating split. The classic differentiation between the CEO and COO may well be highly functional, and as complexity and uncertainty increase, more specialization may be called for. Yet the specialization and differentiation must always be counterbalanced by mechanisms of integration. Among top level teams this requires the mutual respect and authorization of each other to do his or her part of the work in the context of a shared mission.

In contrast to a productive differentiation or specialization, when one aspect of the executive function is held in contempt or denigrated, then a dysfunctional split has resulted. Under these conditions, the necessary re-integration is impaired and the critical linking function of the executive is blocked.

Thus the current distinction between leadership and management often results in a split that constitutes an attack on the critical function of leadership to link means and ends. This unconsciously produces what Kanter (1983) refers to as a debilitating "segmentalist" culture that inhibits innovation and adaptation to emerging novel circumstances. In separating leadership from management, and in idealizing one while devaluing the other, we suggest that there is an implicit attack on the essential link between ideas and the machinery necessary to realize those ideas, thus pointing to the way in which these ideologies are used as a social defense to avoid the deep changes being called for by current and emerging conditions.

## **THE DEFENSIVE IDEOLOGIES**

The first of the two forms of this social defense we term managerialism. Managerialism results when the same methods and techniques that have been used to accomplish the social purposes of organizations (e.g. management) have been elevated to ends in themselves (e.g. Boguslaw, 1965). Managerialism thus refers to a stance toward management which divorces the techniques of management from any appreciation of, integration with, or accountability for, the larger mission and purposes of the organization. In this form, management per se is lionized and the leadership function of strategic thinking and direction setting devalued.

The second manifestation of this splitting is the lionization of the heroic leader - called heroism here. In contrast to managerialism, this social defense denigrates so-called management. The maverick, charismatic heroes of business (who are being celebrated in the popular and

academic press) embody this trend in a kind of contemporary mythology. Here we are presented with the hope for saviors who through force of vision and personality will overcome the inertia and bureaucratic morass of industrial organization and lead American society back to its world dominance and renew our spirit of progress (Reich, 1985). From this vantage point, the administrative work and analytic methods are regarded not as the savior, as in managerialism, but as the source of malaise and inertia.

The splitting of leadership and management in this psychological sense is dynamically conservative (Schon, 1971) in both its forms. Heroism serves to contain potentially disturbing, creative ideas by encapsulating them, and effectively keeping them uncoupled from management, which, in the best sense of the term, represents the means for realizing the new ideas. Conversely, managerialism emasculates the power of tools and techniques because they are not effectively harnessed to the purposes and ideas of leadership. Thus in both ideologies the essential link between new or visionary ideas and the organizational apparatus required to realize them is broken. Our premise is that the driving motivation for unconscious adoption of these neutralizing social defenses is to avoid the doubts, uncertainties, and disturbing anxieties which are stimulated in the course of confronting the adaptive requirements of the emergent organizational environments. In Bion's (1961) terms, both ideologies represent Basic Assumption Dependency functioning in which the group evades anxieties stemming from confrontation with its tasks by creating a magical investment of hope and expectation in some omnipotent object. By pinning its hopes on persons, methods, or a text's imagined powers instead of sophisticated attention to its primary task or mission, the group relieves itself of painful awareness of its challenges and responsibilities.

## **MANAGERIALISM: THE MAGIC OF TECHNIQUE**

To be sure, American business organizations and schools of management have developed an impressive array of tools, ideas, and strategies that we would describe here broadly as constituting the content of management science. For example, Chandler (1962) via a careful historical analysis of the structural changes in major American industries developed the proposition that changes in strategy drive changes in organizational structure. These ideas have driven empirical studies to test whether organizations that match structure and strategy out perform those that do not. At a different conceptual level, there are extensive writings on many aspects of organization behavior - goal setting, supervision, performance appraisal, that have been studied in the context of their contributions to organizational effectiveness. Similarly, the vast body of sophisticated quantitative tools and methods aimed at enhancing decision-making has been developed in management science. When these ideas and tools are pursued as ends in themselves and divorced from the purposes of organization they become a technocratic ideology that we term managerialism. The essence of managerialism is when a tool or technique of management is treated as a magical solution, and members invest their hope in the technique or approach as if it, by itself, will help resolve complex, conflictual



situations.

Our argument centers around the emergence of a type of social defense which takes the form of a managerial ideology, cutting across all different types of settings. The explosive growth of business schools in the last two decades, and the ever increasing emphasis on the analytic tools and techniques they teach speak to the hope invested in these methods of decision-making in the private sector. The overt popularity of the MBA serves as testimony to the confidence placed in the analytic approaches of business schools.

The case material that we wish to discuss initially concerns the non-for-profit and governmental sectors and derives from our experience at an applied research center in a prestigious business school that was approached by outside groups for assistance with critical problems or for executive development programs. In reviewing a series of encounters with such varied fields as corrections, arts organizations, social service agencies and health care institutions, recurrent themes appear in the attributions of numerous different outside groups onto the business school. In all cases involving these non profit institutions, we noted considerable distortion in their initial requests by imagining some magic that might lie within the business school. In each instance this hopefulness was accompanied by an underestimation of the substantive leadership required for the revitalization or development they were seeking. Of necessity, this leadership could only be found in their own world - often requiring the working through of deep conflicts over issues of direction and purpose.

We argue that management was split off from leadership as a social defense to avoid the novel and complex challenges they were facing. Most of these organizations during the mid 70's and early 80's were facing transformative environmental shocks: The Reagan revolution in funding social services, the shift towards prospective payment in health care, the emergence of a get tough stance in corrections that resulted in massive overcrowding. They all were facing difficulties that called into questions time honored assumptions about mission and performance. Fleeing from deeper questions of purpose within their domains, many turned to the private sector with the belief that business can do "it" better (police, fire, social services, day care, postal service, finance the national debt, and so on). The language of business and business schools - marketing, strategic planning, "bottom line," and "product lines," - came to be used by executives of non-business organizations to frame problems technically without confronting serious issues of mission and purpose that are at the heart of their contemporary difficulties.

Let us look at two cases in which representatives of the corrections and health care systems sought out a prestigious business school to help with the development of the field. In both cases, the overt request was for executive development in the respective systems. Yet in both instances we observed there were irrational, grandiose hopes that the joining might lead to some new resolution. There were features of the encounters that make sense only in the context of an unstated belief that the business school contains the magic tools that will cure the

ills of the field. When these encounters are examined more closely, their defensive aspects become clearer.

In the area of corrections, for example, a major national organization approached the business school about running an executive development program for top leaders in corrections. A program was developed that focussed almost exclusively on managerial processes - planning, organizing, controlling, financing - with little direct attention to the substantive issues facing the field. Despite the presence of the one of the top criminology departments in the country, there was no linking of the tools that were presumed to lie within the business school with the critical thinking that the criminology department might bring to the substantive and philosophical directions the field was facing.

The social defense of managerialism allowed the sponsors, the participants (senior managers in state and local correctional agencies), and the providers (faculty and staff of the business school) to be in contact with one another, yet avoid the difficult issues of purpose and mission that were and are central to the development of the field. The guiding hope of the efforts was that these fields could be transformed through the learning of managerial techniques alone. Efforts to link these discussions with the substantive questions of the field and with consideration of mission and purpose were resisted. Managerialism, then, was used to neutralize potentially divisive conflicts over deep values, such as the efficacy of rehabilitation and the death penalty. It also allowed participants to not confront differences between their espoused values and actual practices (Argyris and Schon, 1975).

Consider another example of the triumph of tools/techniques over mission and purpose. A major health care products company wished to develop an exclusive development program for top nursing officials in major teaching hospitals. Having long regarded their links to health care professionals as an integral part of corporate strategy, they believed that in an increasingly competitive market place improving executive capability might lead to a greater savings for hospitals than cutting costs on supplies. They approached the elite business school to develop a program for top nursing executives. The program has now been held for several years and is widely regarded as a major success. Yet if we look closely at this program in its early years in light of the argument of this paper, a number of interesting features appear.

Despite the presence of a leading nursing school, the program initially did not involve the nursing school in a substantive way. This suggests that the "answers" to the dilemmas that the nursing profession are facing and that are swirling around the hospitals were not felt to lie in the leading professional school but rather in a business school and the techniques it had to offer.

There was little discussion of the substantive issues facing the nursing profession. The lectures were on planning, organizing, managing people, working relationships, marketing, finance - like a mini MBA program. On the few occasions in which there was a presenter with substantive

credentials in nursing or health care, the participants often attacked the presenter and were angered and upset. Our hypothesis is that the presenters who dealt with ideas close to home shattered the fantasy that the acquisition of these magical business tools and techniques would be decisive when they return transformed by the experience. Alternatively, working with materials "too close to home" created anxiety about the intractability of the substantive challenges they face.

The projections from the outside were remarkable and again attested to the lionization of the business school. One participant described her surprise that her colleagues on the top management team at her hospital reacted as if three weeks at the prestigious business school were going to be a more powerful educational experience than her two year Masters in Nursing program.

The grandiose expectations surfaced when, in the middle of the three weeks, participants from prior years came back for a three day alumni event that mixed the groups. The reactions from the present group to the alumni were striking. The current participants experienced the alumni as invading, breaking up their group, looking tired, talking cynically, "very reality oriented and depressing". One participant commented on her disappointment: "I expected them to be mentors, but they were just like me." Another noted "I expected them to be bright and creative, yet they are not yet nursing leaders." In fantasy, participants hoped that acquiring the powerful tools of a business school would make them leaders, without confronting the difficult substantive issues in nursing.

These programs and others like them contain a powerful societal belief that management and the world of business contain the answers in responding to our problems. But this splitting of the substantive concerns from the managerial issues was a defense against confronting the painful dilemmas that would come from linking the two together. It operates in three ways.

1. By splitting techniques and tools from the substantive issues confronting the field in question, one neutralizes the powerful, often disturbing ideas from linking with the machinery of implementation, from provoking the group to work through difficult dilemmas and move towards authentic development. One consequence of this is to suppress some important conflicts and preserve group harmony at the expense of learning about differences and their impact on management practice.
2. By fleeing into the magical world of idealized techniques, one avoids having to confront painful, often political and conflictual issues that lie within the substantive realm.
3. The denigration and attack on leadership has elements of what Bion (1961) terms Basic Assumption Pairing. In these situations in which a prestigious business school or consultant and an organization or domain in distress join together and create a pairing dynamic in which the event is suffused with the hope that the union of these two will magically produce the new resolution, that one can somehow get to leadership

programmatically, that leadership is decomposable into a set of tools and techniques.<sup>3</sup>

The harmonious spirit that characterized the mood of the group of participants was achievable only by avoiding working on issues close to home that would provoke disagreements among the participants. They are unlikely to disagree over marketing concepts and even if they did, these are sufficiently removed from their daily worlds so as not to be threatening to the group's cohesiveness. Yet we believe that in both the corrections and health care cases, the programs drew back from the anxiety provoking, difference confronting discussions that would have resulted from linking the managerial competencies with the issues of mission and purpose which is the crux of executive action and development.

### **HEROISM: THE SEARCH FOR HEROIC LEADERSHIP**

In contrast to the magical investment in business school techniques to free executives from the complexities inherent in their work, the alternative manifestation of the splitting of leadership and management is the search for, and creation of, the heroic leader. This is the opposite of managerialism, namely the emphasis on inspirational leadership and the importance of values, purposes, culture and the concomitant devaluing of administrative and bureaucratic processes.

Here we have the leader or executive as savior. But the current manifestation of this Basic Assumption Dependency, in Bion's (1961) terms, has a particular flavor which is deeply contemptuous of organization itself. These charismatic heroes are distinguished for cutting red tape, overcoming turgid bureaucracies, ignoring formal processes and relying on intuition and instinct rather than analysis or abstraction. In short, the mythology around these heroes sees the bureaucracy or organization itself as impeding success and accomplishment of the mission. And it is these independent, tough-minded men who won't let the risk-averse, business school manager keep them down. Reich (1985) has written insightfully about the pattern across many of the new texts that celebrate what he terms the "cowboy capitalists" - loners, contemptuous of "bureaucracy, formal process and intellectual abstraction" who shake up our sluggish institutions. Yet in the end, he argues, in keeping with our stance here, that the actual results of their work has been less noteworthy and that our celebration of these leaders may be distracting us "from deeper questions about the organization of our economic system."

The popular press abounds with such stories which can often be found on the best seller list.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Note that this is always in the future - when the participants return, when they really master the techniques. Much of the disappointment that follows such events reveals the unrealistic hopes that were invested in them.

<sup>4</sup>These books include: In Search of Excellence by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman Jr. (Harper & Row, 1981); Iacocca: An Autobiography by Lee Iacocca with William Novak (Bantam Books, 1984);

Likewise, there has been a resurgence in the academic presses which are also looking to the personality traits of leaders as the crucial explanatory variable.<sup>5</sup> While the personality characteristics of leaders are clearly a central factor (Kernberg, 1980), the lionization of the strong-willed leader in so much of the popular press and management literature obscures the far more complex realities of how organizations change or innovate (Reich, 1985).

One feature of heroism is to attribute to specific individuals the leadership which in reality is distributed more complexely in a system. As Reich (1985) writes "people prefer to idolize Iacocca than take in a more complex story" involving a team of highly talented people. When something like the Challenger disaster occurs we suddenly realize with painful clarity the interdependencies and links between the persons on whom we project heroic properties and the management and administration that serves them.

Along with the celebration of the new business hero is the devaluing of the administrative apparatus, of the means of accomplishing purposes. For example, in In Search of Excellence (1982), there is implied contempt for many of the standard features of well run organizations and denigration of staff units which, when deployed appropriately, can add significant value to an organization. The effect of idealizing the entrepreneur and creative leader has been to attribute the negative and frustrating aspects of organizational life onto the administrative and managerial realms.

The leader, as portrayed by these various accounts, is someone with a driving vision, a clear sense of purpose and mission which instills a guiding direction in the organization, mobilizes activity, and inspires committment to that end. While the business heroes being so extolled were obviously deeply involved with the substantive issues in their respective areas, the burgeoning leadership literature pays little attention to engagement with the specific content of a field, preferring to focus on general principles of leadership and excellence.

The phenomenal popularity of In Search of Excellence (1982) illustrates an interesting twist on the managerial ideology of heroism. To be sure, the devaluing of the administrative apparatus was apparent in its spoofing of the MBA degree and the analytical tools and technical approach it represents while at the same time praising a new visionary, inspirational type of leadership. Certain key phrases and code words entered business jargon (such as: MBWA - "management by walking around", or using "Excellence" as a strategic theme) and the notion of "excellence"

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Managing by Harold Geneen (Doubleday, 1984); Geneen by Robert Shoenberg (Warner Books, 1986); Trump: The Art of the Deal by Donald Trump (Random House, 1987); Iacocca: The Unauthorized Biongraphy by Peter Wyder (Morrow, 1987); Accidental Millionaire: The Rise and Fall of Steve Jobs at Apple Computer by Leo Botero (Random House, 1987); and Iacocca by David Abodahen (MacMillan, 1986).

<sup>5</sup>See CEO: Corporate Leadership in Action by Harry Levinson and Stuart Rosenthal (Basic Books, 1986).

became an emotional rallying point for many organizations and efforts. Paradoxically, however, these ideas were transformed into a set of techniques, tools, and recipes akin to the very things Peters and Waterman (1982) ostensibly set out to debunk.

## **MANAGERIALISM IN HEROIC GUISE**

As a tacit form of managerialism then, visionary leadership has been boiled down to a set of techniques. General statements about excellence and pre-eminence blur the mission definitions of one organization from another and supplant genuine leadership, direction setting, or an authentic reorientation toward new visions. By transmuting ideas of visionary leadership into a set of techniques and tools, the approach is transformed back into managerialism. One suspects that the meaning of MBWA (managing by walking around) extolled in In Search of Excellence is fundamentally different when used as part of a recipe for excellence from its origins in Hewlett-Packard where it was part of a real relationship between the leaders and scientists.

So while the visionary and innovative leadership may be the fashion, and for good reason, the ideology of managerialism reasserts itself in this guise. Efforts to celebrate the struggle with purpose and mission in making organizations adapt to modern conditions have been taken up in a way that does exactly the opposite - appeals to abstract qualities and obscures attention to the complex issues of mission and direction under turbulent conditions.

An aspect of this social defense is that in efforts to emulate the heroic leaders so extolled in popular mythology, executives embrace these general techniques, shorn of content and context of a particular organization. Thus the effort is to attain inspiration without linking direction to the bureaucracy. This is often accompanied by a fantasy that, having inspired the troops with appeals to "excellence," the managers will come alive and overcome their inertia. The image of the leader who guides the organization via direction setting and alignment, manipulating symbols alone and culture may represent an ill founded hope that organizations that can cohere without the exercise of authority. Such simplifying images can work against an appreciation by those in executive roles of the extent to which genuine leadership involves taking risk, grappling with uncertainties, containing contradictory information, and taking action under ambiguous conditions (Trist, 1976).

The "passion for excellence," as a general objective, has been taken up as an easy way to be a leader without dealing with the difficult specific issues that the particular organization is facing. So often we have seen mission statements developed around the newly popular ideas of excellence, service to customers - which then become a flight from the difficult issues that working closer to the primary task might evoke. Often these inspirational ideas are used to obfuscate understanding of difficult situations. For example, in one company "Organizing for Excellence" was the banner under which 20% of the employees were cut. Managers spoke of

"rationalizing" certain manufacturing units, which translated into eliminating them.

Employed as a set of general, abstract inspirational principles by executives, heroism puts executives at risk. Let us look at a case of new leaders at two levels of the research and development arm of a major Fortune 500 industrial organization attempting to set a strategic direction. The president of a major technical support and research division, early in his tenure, began to discuss with his top staff a direction statement for the organization and guiding principles in the areas of people, technology, partnership, with customers, and so on. He was beginning to shape these themes when budget cuts from higher up in the corporation forced him to restructure and make some deep cuts, particularly in the research group, which was halved from 200 to 100 despite his best efforts to protect this group. At this time a new leader was also brought in to head the research division. After dealing with the downsizing during his first three months, he began a similar process within the research division to work on the unit's mission and guiding directions.

At a workshop attended by the top staff of the research group, they discussed their mission, and developed a set of directions around which there was high consensus. As an observer of this process, one of the authors was struck by a moment when the work shifted from being developmental and clarifying, to being flight from work. The group had a shared sense of the major directions yet began to shift into an extremely focussed discussion about words and phrases. The work on the mission became anti-task when people began to focus on the text and its wording in such a way that contained the magical belief that the document was self implementing - as if getting the words perfectly would animate the requisite behavior. The flight from the appropriate next steps of thinking about concrete actions and strategies stemmed from the emotional denial of the tremendous cut. Cognitively everyone knew that they had been halved in size, but they continued to imagine that they could do much of what was already begun as well as begin some new initiatives that were linked to the new strategic directions of the company. If they addressed specific tasks, they would inevitably come up against painful choices over what to do with limited time. Therefore, continued mission statement work actually became a defense against grappling with the realities of their current situation, providing a pseudo-leadership, severing goals discussions from the means of achieving them.

Similarly, at the next level up, the president of the technical and research arm had developed the mission statement for that level and planned to "launch" a new mission statement with video, buttons with a logo, and a fancy brochure. Many of the members of this organization who had participated in the development of the mission statement had felt that much of it was drawn from a similar statement that the same leader had developed in another organization. Despite his considerable talk about developing it collaboratively, many felt its main features were taken from his prior experiences.

Evidence that in the leader's mind the mission statement developed was loosely coupled to

local realities was his reaction to a question the consultant posed about a key point on the "people centered" section of the mission statement that stated "avoid serious injury to anyone". When asked, if he regarded the 100 people who had been laid off as "injured," amazingly, it appeared to be the first time that he had made the connection. He seemed quite taken aback and reflected thoughtfully on the harm the organization had done to these individuals. This slippage of the defense of embracing mission development as a way of avoiding the painful realities of the situation suggests its dominant defensive function.

In looking at the search for heroic leadership as a social defense, we are referring to the ways in which many organizations are taking in the ideas about leaders and managers, not necessarily about the meanings and intentions of the original authors. For example, Peters and Waterman in In Search of Excellence (1982) talk about vision and values, but also stresses the attention to details and follow through, arguing for the necessary linkage between the vision and the controls to make it happen. Yet in the way the ideas are taken in by many organizations, they are often severed, with some organizations taking in techniques, eg MBWA, close to the customer, and others taking in the broad leadership themes of excellence.

#### **WHAT IS BEING DEFENDED AGAINST?**

To the extent that these managerial ideologies are used by members of organizations as social defenses to reinforce and supplement individual-level defenses against anxieties, then the question must be raised as to the specific nature of these anxieties. While we have pointed several times to the painful difficulties involved in the profound innovations required to adapt to the emergent social fields in which organizations must now operate, the strength of our ideas will ultimately depend on the deeper understanding of the unconscious dimension of responses to these challenges and the anxieties they elicit. Here we identify a set of anxiety laden issues cutting across many organizational sectors which can begin to address the question of what is specific about this contemporary situation and why this particular set of issues might well evoke a distinctive set of primitive, painful doubts and anxieties.

Not only is more change required, but it is occurring at an accelerating rate (Ackoff, 1974). Under any conditions change is difficult and upsetting. Facing the unknown and uncertain future is in itself anxiety producing (Menzies, 1970). Furthermore, any organizational change threatens to disturb extant social defense systems, rendering members vulnerable to painful feelings from which they were being protected (Jaques, 1955). Change inevitably involves loss and mourning (Marris, 1975), evoking both angry and depressive responses in organizations (Trist, 1980).

In the shift from industrial to post-industrial forms of organization, demands are being made on organizations to innovate in profound ways, and in ways which penetrate deeply into members' ways of thinking and relating. Beginning with Burns and Stalker's (1961) distinction between



the organic and mechanistic approaches to organizing, many writers have identified, categorized, and listed the emerging properties necessary for organizations if they are to thrive in modern times. Many of the adjustments called for can be understood to require type II learning, involving changes in the calibration of the system, its values, orientations, assumptions, and basic frameworks (Argyris & Schon, 1978). To name a few of those which, can be hypothesized, are likely to be experienced as a threat to comfortable ways of being and stimulate severe anxiety:

1. In moving from a more placid to a more turbulent operating environment, organizations must cope with far greater complexity. Following Ashby (1956), the complexity internal to a system must match the complexity in its environment. Thus, members must contend with heightened complexity within as well as without, must live with and sustain the need for active, on-going adaptation, and must sustain the capacity for continuous organizational flexibility. The cult of the hero serves as a nostalgic, defense against realizing the need to acknowledge the more complex, often painful ways in which leadership will be exercised.
2. The current emphasis on competition and service point to an increasing emphasis on close, individualized and responsive relationships to customers across the enterprise boundary. Customer contacts which are less buffered by standardized procedure and routine makes a far greater demand on organization members. It is far easier to champion the customer abstractly from high-up in an organization than concretely in a service encounter with a difficult, aggressive consumer.
3. As environments become more complex and turbulent (Emery & Trist, 1965) strategies must be more cooperative and collaborative as opposed to competitive. Paradoxically, collaborative relationships can be more anxiety producing than competitive ones. Just-in-time inventory systems, for example, make the company dependent on supplies outside of its direct control. Other examples include an emerging emphasis on labor-management cooperation and more self-management, public-private cooperation in community economic development. All call for major re-orientations in the mindsets with which managers approach their work, acknowledging one's interdependence.
4. An increasing number of stakeholders are making a greater number of demands on organizations and those who manage them. The goals and purposes of a wide variety of enterprises is called into question as groups claim legitimate interests with respect to the resources used by particular organizations. As one labor leader commented, "twenty years ago I needed two concepts in my head - labor and management. Now when I make a decision I feel like I have 100 people in my head."
5. In connection with these changes, many of the former aspects of organizational life which met certain basic security and dependency needs are being removed (Miller, 1986; NY Times, 1987). Along with such turbulent conditions and seemingly constant reorganization efforts, many executives at high levels no longer enjoy the same level of job security as was previously customary (NY Times, 1987).
6. While an increasing number of people occupy professional roles, the rules governing professional life and behavior are undergoing profound transformation. The historic

norm of professional autonomy and practice orientation of technical rationality are giving way to vastly different professional roles in which professionals are increasingly embedded in their organizations and must increasingly struggle with value-laden issues underlying their technical expertise. (Schon, 1983).

These features of the emerging post-industrial world are undoubtedly de-stabilizing expectations, creating massive uncertainty about the future, and calling into question former patterns of family, work, and community life. Given what we know about the conditions under which anxiety is stimulated (e.g. Menzies, 1970; Hirschhorn; 1988), it is hard to imagine how current demands for innovation being made on our organizations and the concurrent demands for change and re-orientation made on their members could fail to elicit deep, primitive, and painful anxieties.

This situation can be expected to yield, in many instances, an increase in the degree and potency of basic assumption (Bion, 1961) functioning within these systems as the intense and volatile pressures will often overwhelm established ways of dealing with and modifying work-based anxieties (Krantz, 1985). Predictably, social defenses geared to these pressures are likely to emerge. Because the social forces we are considering here are on the level of the widest social ecology (Trist, 1975), it is not surprising that the social defenses erected to manage the associated anxieties will select from themes in the wider society rather than being differentiated by particular organizations or sectors. Managerialism, as a defense, enables people to evade those anxieties by creating an experience of technical mastery in a delimited area. Heroism, in contrast, binds anxiety with the comforting image of the person or idea that will magically deliver the organization to the future without its having to grapple with the real complexities and differences that surround it.

## **CONCLUSION**

The challenges facing organizations to adapt and thrive in the turbulent environments of post-industrial society are daunting, and the potential stumbling blocks and barriers equally formidable. In this essay we have been concerned with one such barrier - the emergence of a paired set of social defenses, appearing as managerial ideologies.

In both instances, we hypothesize that this domain-based defensive process represents a response which organizations are now having to make - in common - to the features of post-industrial society. In particular, the accelerating rate of social and technological change, far denser interdependences which yield uncontrollable environment turbulence, and the conflicting demands being made on institutions by diverse groups are posing painful realities in managing enterprises which we suggest are being evaded by the enactment of these two defensive stances.

The effect is one of surface innovation, but at a deeper level creating the conditions for maintaining the status quo at a time in which this systemic inertia is becoming increasingly maladaptive. We propose that this splitting stems from the anxieties inherent in attempting to lead/manage complex organizations in today's changing world, and comes to serve as a social defense against confronting many of these painful realities. Rice (1962) has argued that unless a leader has the competence to make a contribution to the primary task, he or she is ultimately confined to an administrative role. Conversely, unless leaders have access to the administrative apparatus, their visions can not be realized.

While there is no rule that says leadership must be provided by a single individual who embodies all traits - leadership is often provided by a team in tandem - it is our hypothesis that the overall leadership of any enterprise, whether it is an organization or a unit of one must combine both the leadership and managerial aspects to be effective. Even when the roles of leader and manager are held separately, they both need to be respected and need to be integrated. The splitting of them, or dramatic ascendancy of one over the other creates a dangerous situation and puts the organization at risk, though this may not be immediately felt. Yet on a different level, we suggest this splitting is inherently conservative. That by splitting apart leadership and management one is separating the new idea from the means to realize it. We suspect that an unconscious aspect of the split is the encapsulation and containment of the creative innovative ideas.

In sum, the splitting apart of leadership and management, with the concomitant idealization of one and denigration of the other leads to two distinct manifestations. One is managerialism, the magical investment in technique and method. The other is heroic leadership, the magical hope for a savior from fossilized organization. We believe both represent a societal level defense against the anxieties inherent in realizing the need for a deep restructuring of contemporary organizations in the face of emerging post-industrial society and in confronting the different world in which we live.

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