Psychoanalytic Theory and Organisational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

A distinguishing mark of the psychoanalytic thinking fuelled by Freud and his followers is its assumption of an individual and social dimension of unconscious life. This unconscious part is the place or mental territory where painful and dangerous ideas and desires are deposited through repression and other defensive mechanisms. Though typically a psychological field of study many have wondered how Freud’s psychoanalytic can be applied to the field of management. While some effort has been made in the past to understand the role of the unconscious as a source of imagination and creativity in scientific, economic, political and artistic spheres, the outturn has been conflicting among different researchers. In this review, we argue that psychoanalytic helps to renew a spirit of true leadership that does not simply dedicate themselves to process, roles, structures, and indirect communication but instead embrace people, emotions, ideas directly.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic Thinking, Freud, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Though typically a psychological field of study many have wondered how Freud’s psychoanalytic can be applied to the field of management. While some effort has been made in the past to understand the role of the unconscious as a source of imagination and creativity in scientific, economic, political and artistic spheres, the outturn has been conflicting among different researchers (Freud, 2015). This notwithstanding, the observations from the world of work and organizations shows that unconscious stimulus is a regular feature of daily organizational behaviors. While unconscious ideas, desires and emotions are largely associated with sensuality and sexuality, they significantly stimulate other factors that are seen organizations such as envy, ambition, failure, fear, rejection etc. Sometimes, these unconscious tendencies abstract to consciousness in an abstruse or distorted way that requires interpretation (Marcuse, 2015). For example in many instances, employees unconscious representation such as fantasies manifest themselves as wishes and desires as though they are already achieved. These fantasies help to understand individual behavior including the dreams of consumers and employees, the ambition of leaders, the emergence of entrepreneurs in the organization etc. These must be harnessed, guided, optimized and professionalized for organizational use to attain the four fold objective of survival, growth, profitability and social responsibility (Funder, 2015). The role of the unconscious, a key feature in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory in organizational leadership is one area that has been least explored and is discussed in this paper.

Freud’s Personal Experiences of Psychoanalytics and Leadership

According to Elliott (2015) a distinguishing mark of the psychoanalytic thinking fueled by Freud and his followers is its assumption of an individual and social dimension of unconscious life. This unconscious part is the place or mental territory where painful and dangerous ideas and desires are deposited through repression and other defensive mechanisms (Elliott, 2015). This makes the psychoanalytic or unconscious the repository and sources of all forms of resistance especially to ideas and emotions deemed a threat to the functioning of the mind (Orange, et al, 2015). The story of Freud himself epitomizes the extent to which psychoanalytic helps to understand leadership and management which are necessary in giving meaning
to emotions of employees. Freud’s own history exemplifies how the relationship between leaders and their followers can give the follower the tendency to idealize and identify with the leader and vice versa which are necessary in today’s organizations (Barratt, 2015).

As the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud took the issue of leadership very seriously among his cohort and disciples. Theoretically and practically, Freud tried to successfully and mostly unsuccessfully steer his movement away from mysticism, schism, dilettantism and quackery (Sharf, 2015). This leadership style inspired high commitment, unquestionable loyalty of his followers and often degenerated into deification. However, behind this lay the unconscious though of the authority of Freud which invariably led to bitter disputes that saw the alienation of and subsequent departure of perceived apostates and critics (e.g. most creative and original disciples such as Jung, Otto Rank, Alfred Adler, Sándor Ferenczi, Karen Horney) (Schore, 2015). Freud never saw these thoughts as a scientific or philosophical difference that needed to be resolved through rational discourse (Jung, 2015). On the contrary, he views such disagreements with his brand of psychoanalysis as simply rebellion against the father of psychoanalysis by supporters some of whom had begun questioning his infallibility. As revealed by Seligman & Reichenberg (2015) this is not only a historical fact but also lays a foundation regarding the essence of the unconscious in the stability of leadership, commitment and organization harmony. The internal insurgencies in the psychoanalytic fraternity over which Freud himself superintended provides a template of the role of psychoanalytic approaches to leadership on early life experiences and how the relationship between leaders (superiors) and followers (subordinates) can unfold. As opined by Smail (2015), the type of relationship that exists between a leader (superiors) and a follower (subordinates) can emit greater sense of emotional experiences that can unleash formidable fantasies. In other words, a leader (manager) has the capacity to easily evoke significant loyalty and devotion if he or she assumes a parental position in the unconscious life of his follower. However, like the Freud and his apostates, these feelings can later turn into resentment and disappointment if the leader does not live up to the lofty expectation of the follower.

Relationship between Freud’s Group Theory and Organization Leadership

It is also observed by Sherif (2015) that Freud’s theory of group functioning highlights the importance of leaders, characteristics of leaders, differences between leaders and managers and types of leaders. Freud sees groups without leaders as transient and ephemeral arrangements with symbolic or invisible leadership. It is the leader who holds the group together using the position he holds in the unconscious life of the members (Wolfenstein, 2015). Freud uses the church and the army as examples by arguing that the members of these groups have an intense emotional experience ‘and tie’ to the leader and each other. This is why whenever the leader falls in battle (as Christ on the cross and a commander at the battle field), the unconscious dynamics breaks up and the members forsake the very relatedness that unites them (De Board, 2014). They lose their minds, flee in fear and forsake their goal. Another important issue of shared emotion between members of a group and their leader is the shared idealization of and identification with the leader. Through identification of the leaders, each of the group members identifies with each other who also identifies with the leader as themselves and this is what gives a group a definition of a shared unconscious experience (Volkan, 2014). The leader helps each of the members of the group to put one and the same objective in place of their individual ego. In this way the leader gives the group and identity, by bringing together people with special bond of love in which emotional attachment replaces sexual elements or where sexual energy-libido sublimes into social ties since overt sexual activity or attraction can affect group cohesion (Rutan, Jet al., 2014). Through the leader the individuals in the group are made to surrender their prospect of direct sexual gratification, uniqueness, individuality and independence in exchange for belonging, love, relationship, group power, protection, order and authority (Nitsun, 2014). The Freudian group is dominated by his conception of an omnipotent leader who embodies the qualities of the feared father of the mythical primal horde, whose will is never questioned and whose power is absolute.

The Manager and Leader Dichotomy

In his seminal work on understanding psychoanalytic and its relationship with the emotional qualities of the leader, the renowned psychoanalyst and leadership Professor Abraham Zaleznik a thin line between managers and leaders in his award winning essay on the differences between managers and leaders. Zaleznik (see Roueche, et al, 2014) notes that managers are generally preoccupied with order, control and rationality whereas leaders tolerate order

but are concerned about ideas, and goals. In essence Zaleznik sought to argue that leaders relate to their fellows in a more personal and direct ways while managers prefer an impersonal bureaucratic ways and avoid direct contact (Critchley, 2014).

Leaders in the opinion of Zaleznik’s relate anticipating the importance of empathy which is a significant emotional intelligence dimension that managers lack. The leaders as opposed to managers are not simply interested in paying attention to others but developing a capacity to absorb emotional signal and harness them to become meaningful in their relationship. The work of Zaleznik’s has inspired other mainstream theorists such as Bennis and Nanus (1985), Kotter (1995) to proffer more endearing features of leaders (leadership) and managers (management) leading up to four broad areas of distinction (Tubert-Oklander, 2014).

Firstly the attitude of managers and leaders towards change and order are entirely different. A leader has a restless spirit, does not leave well enough alone and has a greater sense of urgency to initiate change on a large scale. However a manager is more driven by the desire and order and regularity hence opts for incremental change and marginal advancements. Because of their mind sent, Caruth (2014) explains that managers and leaders differ when it comes to attitude toward waste and efficiency. The manager sees efficiency as one of the main objectives and tries to reduce waste and do a number of things slightly better.

On the other hand the leader gives space to uncertainty and disorder and waste and often sees change as a result of paying a price. This to the leader, waste of materials time and other resources is synonymous to waste of human life. According to Zaleznik’s, leaders are usually driven by a broad and general vision of the future hence do not spend time looking at details and making careful plans for contingencies.

The so called important details are disregarded if they believe they can derail the attainment of the overall objective (Ewen, 2014). However, managers are very keen on knowing the details and in order to eliminate any uncertainty. Thus in the mind of Zaleznik and Burns (see Rouche, et al, 2014) leaders therefore are managers of emotion but does not dissipate or manipulate.

On the contrary leaders manage emotions by highlighting a convivial interaction with the follower in order to form a deeper emotional bond. The leader does not simply work with emotions or evoke emotions but have their figure on the emotions of their followers, reads the emotions of their followers, massage their emotional pulse to identify boredom, anger, frustration, hope, and other emotions (Howard & Irving, 2014). Leaders manage these emotions in order to channel them to desirable targets and objectives. In this way “anger is then not dissipated in different directions and towards different targets, but gets focused on a particular object who becomes ‘the enemy’ (Markovic, 2014). Similarly, hope is focused on a collective task which assumes the quality of a ‘mission’, and so forth. By understanding the unconscious, the leader is able to use the emotions of his or her followers to drive action through motivation and inspiration to do the things which they may have appeared futile, excessive, immoral or irrational.

It is in this sense that leaders can be said to ‘drive’ their followers to them. This same knowledge of the unconscious and emotions of the employe allows the leader to intensify and channel employee’s useful emotions; contain or neutralize the potentially dangerous ones. This means that knowledge of the unconscious allows the leader to act as a toxic sponge that absorbs any negative emotions and prevent a spill over to other employees and activities in the organization (Wallick, 2014). Similarly the knowledge of the unconscious of employees allows the leader to provide safety valves or channels increasingly dangerous emotions of employees that can be expressed legitimately. A typical example is by acknowledging emotions such as fear or apprehension and accepting other stories or jokes that defuse dangerous emotions (Birasnav, 2014).

It is in this light that Zaleznik (1989) argues that since the end of the Second World War. most American businesses have put their faith in nurturing managers who put their faith in numbers, elaborate formal structures and managing people as resources in a managerial mystique that is inconsistent with contemporary organizational management. On the contrary, psychoanalytic leadership sees employees as ends in themselves and not as means to achieving the ends of the other (Ewen, 2014). Psychoanalytic helps to renew a spirit of true leadership that cannot does dedicate themselves to process, roles, structures, and indirect communication but instead embrace people, emotions, ideas directly (Zaleznik, 1989, p. 2).

Conclusions
The above notion formed the basis of the seminal work of the American political theorist James Macgregor Burns (1978) who advocated for the type of organizational and national leadership that is imbedded in highly sophisticated moral leadership and not mere power-wielding and technique. This
type of type of psychoanalytic led organizational leadership where leaders and followers develop a relationship of power, mutual needs, aspiration and values. Thus the leader must first and foremost seek to bring to consciousness the followers’ sense of their own needs, values, and purposes. The leader must engage spiritually and emotionally with the followers in order to draw to their conscious mind the unconscious desires that can stimulate collective, purposeful action. This can elicit greater enthusiasm, sense of elation that where both leaders and followers fall in reciprocal love and discovering which innate leader charisma cannot do.

List of References