

# Asymmetric Leadership: supporting a CEO's response to turbulence

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## ***Introduction***

Twentieth century approaches to enterprise assumed that leadership had to be exercised ultimately from a single position at the top of a hierarchy. A new challenge is emerging for leadership in the twenty-first century created by the need to respond to increasingly differentiated individual client demands (Zuboff and Maxmin, 2002). The asymmetric nature of these demands requires leadership to be exercised from the point of contact with the client, that is, from the *edge* of the enterprise (Alberts & Hayes, 2003). The term *asymmetric leadership* describes the nature of the leadership required to hold the client's demands as a central focus and to be able to identify, tolerate and ultimately address the anxieties that arise as a consequence of the necessity to engage with these asymmetric forms of demand in order to move the goals of the enterprise forward. Such leadership must be exercised by managers collaborating across niche hierarchies in order contain the significant disturbance created for the enterprise in its attempt to maintain a dynamic alignment with its external environment.

Environmental turbulence may make it necessary to put into question the current structures of governance and customary ways of delivering services in order to mobilize the resources of the enterprise to respond effectively to what the client wants to experience within their own particular context. The enterprise must struggle with the flux in governance structures, individual role definitions and ultimately, the challenge to the identity and purpose of the enterprise itself as it attempts to anticipate and respond to new forms of client demand.

The paper addresses the process by which these issues begin to be recognized by a religious movement that seeks to discover what is necessary to remain relevant to current and future generations so that it can renew its membership and sustain the financial viability to thrive as a distinct movement. The intervention with the leadership of this movement utilized a reflexive consulting team model developed by Boxer and Eigen (2005). The reflexive process attempts to engage with the issue of how to work with turbulence in order to embrace rapidly expanding client expectations by identifying how the system has been blocking or ignoring what transformations are necessary. Failure to acknowledge what is being ignored in the service of conserving the identity of the movement ultimately endangers the existence of the movement itself. However, the process of confronting turbulence stimulates *systemic annihilation anxiety* that reverberates throughout the movement. The learning system designed to support leadership efforts in this environment requires transformation of leadership style to include 'not knowing' as a primary value for collaborative discovery and future productivity.

## ***Systemic thinking applied to reflexive consultation***

A brief tracing of the trajectory of systemic thinking that underpins the particular reflexive model utilized here builds on the seminal work by Miller and Rice (1967), which addresses the ways in which task and sentient systems could be aligned as a

socio-technical system, emphasising the crucial importance played by the precise definition and control of boundaries. This approach applied open systems theory to the first-order organisation of the task system, emphasising the importance of not isolating any particular causes-and-effects from the circular chains of causality in which they were embedded (McCaughan & Palmer, 1994). Maturana & Varela (1980) observed that systems which were ‘open’ to their environments for the exchange of inputs and outputs at a first-order level could be closed at a second-order level through the way this exchange process is constrained by organization. The innovations of systemic family therapy took this insight a step further by questioning the nature of the second order closing. Family systems theorists observed that second-order ‘closing’ was itself symptomatic of a third-order level of organisation that determined how repetitive dysfunctional behaviours were formed within a system of meaning that governed family interaction patterns (see Hoffman, 1981 for the use of this insight in Family Therapy, and Campbell, Coldicott & Kinsella, 1994 for its application to enterprises). The work of the Milan group within this field was a particular example of an approach to intervening with family systems at the level of their third-order organisation in order to bring about change in symptomatic behaviours ‘stuck’ in some form of repetition. (Cronen & Pearce, 1985)

The model of reflexive consultation described by Boxer and Eigen (2005) draws on the field of systemic thinking by identifying the first and second order organisation of the socio-technical system as a *client system*, and referring to its third order organisation as the *sponsoring system*. The sponsoring system represents the influence of the ‘powers that be’, whose system of meaning is embodied by the stakeholders in the enterprise, and who command obedience tacitly by making certain transactions readily possible while blocking others that remain ignored by the current way of organizing. It is the influence of the tacit sponsoring system that is being identified and ultimately intervened on by the reflexive consulting team so that organizational transformation is possible. (see figure 1) . *Asymmetric leadership* is the name we give to the form of leadership required to enable the enterprise to adapt its third-order organization so that it can engage with turbulence and stay relevant to client demands. The key linking concept includes a means of identifying and utilizing the ensuing *systemic annihilation anxiety* that is stimulated in the transformation process. It is useful to examine the nature of systemic annihilation anxiety and its relationship to hierarchy as a defence, including the challenge of the *primary risk* to the enterprise of choosing the wrong primary task (Hirschhorn, 1997).

## **Defences against Systemic Annihilation Anxiety**

The function of hierarchy within an enterprise is to determine what is to be paid attention to and what is to be ignored, that is, the model implicit in how the enterprise engages in those tasks crucial to its continuing viability. Hierarchy is also acting as a means of containing individuals’ defences against their own personal anxiety. A person’s relationship to their role within a hierarchy provides them with a means of limiting personal anxiety (Menzies Lyth, 1988). The classic example is the nurse holding onto the professional notion of her role in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed by being personally open to the suffering of her patients. The double challenge presented by asymmetric forms of demand at once puts the hierarchical business model into question, while at the same time challenging the enterprise to develop new lateral models in response to new forms of demand. This exposes the enterprise to *primary risk*, “the risk of choosing the wrong primary task, that is, a task that ultimately cannot be managed” (Hirschhorn 1997, p3). If we consider the

hierarchy to be an ‘organisational object’ in its own right, rather than simply a construction of those working within it (Armstrong, 2004), then it is possible to speak of the hierarchy as a defence against primary risk. .

The nature of turbulent environments is such that what constitutes primary risk cannot be defined independently of the dynamics of the environment so that the efficacy of this organisational object as a defence is itself continuously being questioned. Individuals within the enterprise experience systemic anxiety as a consequence of the potential demise of the hierarchy of roles itself, and with it the support it provides for their identities. In these terms, the hierarchy itself gets conserved as a defence against the systemic anxiety associated with failing to manage its primary risk. Given that this primary risk is the danger that the identity of the enterprise itself will be annihilated, this raises the question of the kind of leadership needed to stay viable under these conditions.

### **Contrasting leadership styles**

Two styles of leadership are associated with enterprises in stable environments where business models are not in question. The first leadership style is represented by the approach “I am the way, follow me”, suggesting an identification with the person of the charismatic leader. The second style is represented by the approach “follow what I tell you because I know what you don’t yet know”. This is characteristic of hierarchical organizations where there are ‘unwritten rules’ and the organizational knowledge is built over years of careful progression upwards. The standards are defined by which roles are to be performed and one must always check upwards to find out ‘how things are done here’.

However, in circumstances where every situation presents its own unique challenge, what the leader knows can get in the way of recognizing what needs to become known. A third style of leadership therefore becomes necessary, one in which the leader takes the position that “while we are not able to know by using our existing ways to consider this problem, we can work to discover a new way if we learn from the nature of the situation itself”. Examples of this kind of leadership can be found among the best professionals, therapists, doctors, consultants, those who are prepared to address the particular condition as they are in the process of encountering the demand. This is *asymmetric leadership*, because its authority is not based on what is already known, but on their engagement with the situation itself.

The following sections offer a practical example of the way we have built upon these concepts to intervene with a client system that is confronting these issues as it struggles for its continued existence in the midst of a turbulent environmental condition that is threatening its existence into the future. We describe the client situation as it presented itself and the learning system we constructed within the religious movement to help move the transformational process forward.

### **Description of the Client System**

The client system was the central organisation of a federation of religious communities spanning the country, each one paying local subscriptions and electing a Chairman and Board of Governors, and each Board in turn appointing an ordained person to minister to the community’s needs. Nationally, the membership numbered many thousands, and the local communities appointed the central organisation to represent their collective interests, to provide shared services and to agree matters of common policy and direction. These services included such things as primary and

secondary education, youth work, fund raising, employment advice and external relations. The central organisation had the same structures of governance as existed for each of the communities, except that its income was derived both from its own fundraising activities as well as from a levy paid by the local organisations. And its Chairman and Board of Governors were elected by representatives of the local organisations, and not by the members themselves. In this context, it was not surprising that the CEO appointed to lead the movement was himself ordained. He had not only to articulate the larger vision of a religious movement that could recover its sense of vitality and expansion, but he also had to do it in a way that could encourage well-wishers to invest in that movement's future. To achieve this, he had to be identified unquestionably with the core mission of the movement

### **The presenting problem**

The difficulty facing the movement was one shared by many membership organisations: losing members while competing for time and attention, against a backcloth of changing expectations, shifting demographics and a generation gap. Not only was this gradual attrition of members affecting the balance and health of the communities, but it was also affecting their funding. Recent attempts to reverse this trend had not been as effective as hoped, and the central organisation had appointed a Chief Executive to bring about a renewal of the movement. His brief was to honour the strengths of the existing local organisations, to work in support of the renewal of the communities themselves, and to reach out to entirely new ways of attracting and working with new members. At the same time, the pressures on funding meant that the central organisation had to re-evaluate the services it was able to provide to the local organisations.

### **The challenge of the Case**

The challenge of the case was that, at the same time as retrenching and redefining the role of the central organisation, its leadership also had to reach out to the local organisations and engage with them in a different way as part of its mission to renew its relationship with both existing and prospective members. In this way the actual demands it faced were *asymmetric* to its usual way to recognize what its members expected from the religious movement.

This was a *double challenge* (Boxer, 2004), in which the meaning and purpose of the movement was being questioned at the same time as it sought to act meaningfully and purposefully. The double nature arose because the movement needed to change the way it related to a changing environment at the same time as it sought to re-define the value that could be gained by the services that were provided centrally to the communities. The slowing of growth provided the imperative to face this challenge. In effect, the movement could no longer assume that its model of how to relate to the 'world views' of its members and potential members was appropriate, because it could no longer assume that the members' world views were symmetrical with its knowledge of that world.

The reflexive consultation process enabled the CEO to take up a place from which to question the model within which he himself was working. In the original encounter with the CEO it had been agreed that an external consultant could certainly not know any better than he how to meet his double challenge. The consultation process would therefore have to be one that enabled the CEO himself to work out how to meet the challenge on behalf of the movement. The religious nature of the

movement's role in its members' lives made it easier to establish the need for a reflexive process that required an explicit and shared agenda for learning in which neither consultant nor the CEO could claim to 'know best'.(Boxer & Palmer, 1994).

### ***The learning system design: a reflexive consultation process***

The learning system that was designed to support the leadership efforts of the CEO of this religious movement combines psychodynamic, systemic and group relations concepts. The basic premise is that an interacting shadow consulting system can be induced to reproduce the dynamics of the larger membership system when it responds to and interacts with the CEO. If these dynamics are encouraged to emerge in the shadow consulting system and are carefully observed and reflected upon by its members with the facilitation of the outside consultant, then useful hypotheses can be formed that have the potential to surface unspoken obstacles to the achievement of the goals of the movement. The recognition of ignored dynamics that thwart change may guide the direction and focus of the leadership so that the genuine needs and specific demands of the members for whom the movement exists to serve may be addressed more effectively (Boxer & Eigen, 2004).

The design innovation in this particular learning system involved formulating an *internal shadow consultation group* from individuals currently working under contract to or within the client system. The roles of these individuals were taken from a 'diagonal' so that there were no direct hierarchical relationships within the group or between its members and the CEO. Thus four people were chosen by the CEO to work with him to represent the variety of views and influences within the movement about the nature of its work: a member of the Board of Governors for the central organisation, a consultant working with some of the local communities on their renewal, and two ordained persons, one from the central educational organisation and one ministering to the needs of the local ministers.

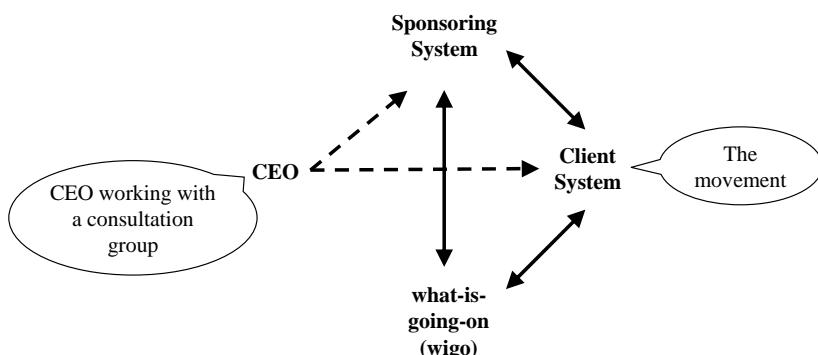
The task of the consultation group was to attend to its different ways of making sense of what the CEO was doing as he worked to transform the movement. This interactive process was directly facilitated by Boxer, with Eigen acting as his shadow consultant. The goal of this facilitation was to enable the group to notice what was being avoided or was difficult to surface in its own dynamics as it struggled with its task. In this way, the group confronted itself with the question of what it was unable to speak about among its own members. The assumptions about the primary risk of engaging with the wrong primary task were to be found in that which was being avoided, and surfaced obliquely in the mirrored obstacles to expression arising within the consultation group. By paying attention to the gaps in what was able to be expressed, the nature of the feared trauma primary risk was made present.

The theoretical model that underlies the structure of the process is briefly presented below to enable the 'map' used to guide the contract and method of facilitation to become more apparent. (see figure 1.)

## The theoretical map of the consultation

Three concepts underpin the theoretical model of organizational transformation that guide our approach and method of facilitation. The first two concepts are derived from systemic thinking, and include the effects of the socio-technical system which is embodied in the **client system**, and its third order **sponsoring system** with particular unspoken assumptions about what constitutes a primary risk.

The third concept links systemic thinking to psychoanalysis, and describes the nature of **what-is-going-on (wigo)** in relation to the enterprise on an unconscious level. Numerous accounts of what was happening in and to the movement emerged during the course of the work of the consultation group. These accounts often differed in their form and content which reflected the different interests and perspectives of their observers. The concept of *wigo* is a way of referring to a ‘beyond’ of those accounts that is never fully captured by the accounts themselves. (This ‘beyond’ is the Lacanian ‘Real’, to be distinguished from ‘reality’ which is how it appears to the client and sponsoring systems. See for example “Tuché and Automaton” in Lacan 1977). Thus, however hard members of the client system, who are represented in this case by the consultation group, worked at becoming conscious of what was going on in the movement, the assumption was that they would always be limited by the way the sponsoring system mediated their actions, and there would always be something of what was going on that remained unconscious or ‘beyond’ their knowledge of it.



**Figure 1: The CEO’s relationship to the enterprise**

The relationships between these dynamic forces which mediate the functioning of the system and give it its unique identity are represented by the three positions that are shown in Figure 1. The position of the CEO working in conjunction with the consultation group is indicated as a fourth position from which the nature of the client and sponsoring systems are being observed and articulated. No direct relationship to *wigo* is possible from the fourth position because *wigo* is always mediated by the dynamics of the other two positions.

The model enables us to address the double challenge inherent in the nature of organizational transformation in that it provides a way to direct attention to what forms of change have to take place:

- within the client system in relation to the demands arising from *wigo*, and
- within the sponsoring system itself in relation to what forms of demand from the external environment may or may not be recognised by the client system.

## The contract and its facilitation

The structure of the contract with the facilitator of this learning system involved: consultation to the dynamics between the internal consultation group and the CEO, which included responding to what was surfaced by the CEO as he worked within the movement; consultation to the exchanges that remained ‘private’ to the interactions between the consultation group members; and consultation to what was said by the consultation group to the CEO in the form of a group intervention. The reflexive contract required that *all* parties involved be prepared to question their own prior assumptions and to work with the discomfort of not knowing, external consultants and facilitators included. The dynamics that emerged between members of the shadow consultation team provided evidence from which to build hypotheses about what was going on in the larger movement (diagrammed in Figure 1 as the ‘client system’) as it engaged with the CEO’s efforts.

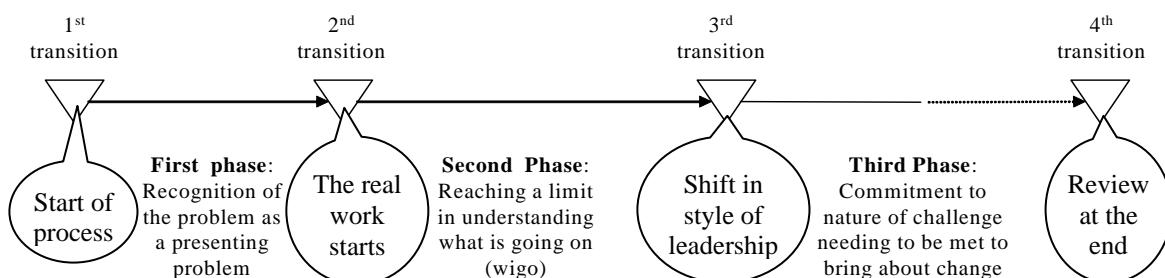
The process was based on monthly face to face meetings during a period of nine months; in addition, the consultation group met on its own, as well as with the CEO. The content of the meetings revolved around a journal kept by the CEO along with any other material he chose to circulate to the consultation group. These monthly meetings took place within the context of frequent weekly e-mail exchanges about *wigo* both within the group and between the group and the CEO. The discipline was that group members only commented on what was raised by the CEO in these exchanges, and the exchanges within the group related to what each considered significant in what was being raised by the CEO, and how their views on this differed from one another.

The model in Figure 1 allows us to propose that every communication carried with it its own sponsoring assumptions, and every communication about what was going on (*wigo*) pointed towards its own ‘beyond’ about which it could not speak. The facilitation process was about working ceaselessly to make as much of this accessible to the consultation group as was possible.

## Logical timing of the process

The process was divided into three logical phases such that the precise timing of the transitions between them depended on the emergent learning of the CEO and consultation group (These phases are based on the Lacanian concept of ‘logical time’ that appears in “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty” in Lacan 2006).

The process started from the presenting problem, with the transitions being characterised as follows:



**Figure 2: The timing of the three phases**

- The first phase *ended* when the CEO realised that the particular way in which he understood the presenting problem was a symptom of something more profoundly problematic that had not yet been clearly identified.
- The second phase went on until the CEO became aware that a particular limit had been reached in his current way of understanding what was going on; there was something fundamentally missing in his understanding.
- The third phase *started* when the CEO realised that the particular form of leadership needed to make the necessary changes required him to find new ways of enabling people to feel authorised to respond to the demands on the movement.

It can take time to integrate the realisation that emerges at the end of the second phase and therefore a gap was expected between the ending of the second phase and the beginning of the third. The process as a whole ended when the CEO was far enough into the third phase to be able to recognise what he had learned, a choice that the CEO had to make within the agreed overall timeframe. In order to understand the nature of the ‘something that was fundamentally missing’ it is necessary to look more closely at how the process unfolded.

### **The first phase**

The first phase revolved around the preparation for a meeting with key members of the communities, in which what was at stake was the CEO’s core document for how the transformation itself was to be achieved. This was formulated in terms of a number of projects addressing different aspects of the movement’s development, together with an account of the fundamental challenge the movement faced, namely to what end was it to be agreed that it was ultimately there for its members. The CEO had taken the membership challenge and broken it down into projects so that each could be run independently of the others, delegable as a whole task in itself. The questions remained: what was the ultimate purpose of the movement in the lives of the members and what was needed to coordinate across these projects to ensure that they all came together successfully?

The catch that emerged at the meeting with key members of the communities was that while the CEO had the responsibility to bring all the pieces together as a whole, it was not clear that he had the authority or funding to make the projects themselves happen. Nor was it clear to what extent there was a commitment among the membership for making the projects happen. This again raised the whole question of what forms of collaboration the members were prepared to engage in, and to what end. This was exactly the question that the CEO had been appointed to resolve. As one member of the consultation group put it:

“The challenge is, once you have arrived at the space which holds vision, how do you do the leadership bit which empowers/enables/demands of people to move forward with you. We have moved into the doing phase. A phase where we are going to be judged not on the clarity of our thinking and the exquisiteness of our metaphors, but on whether we do the job. This is your challenge of leadership right now. Not to get up on your horse and ride off ahead of the people, but to ensure that you have the right people with you to do the work, to share the load with you.”

The first phase ended at the point where it was realised that there was something fundamentally missing in the CEO’s way of understanding what would energise and drive the work of the movement.

“When we started, my fantasy was that a consultant could come in and sort out the issue of relationships between staff, lay leaders and ministers. We have been on a huge journey since then - trying to identify the real problem, trying to find a structure to move us forward. We have made a lot of progress in those areas but we now seem to be back at issues of ‘how do we all work together in order to realise the vision we have set within the structure we have created’... How do we all work together, relationally rather than instrumentally, to develop the ideas and their implementation?”

## The second phase

This realisation plunged the consultation group into the second phase, which felt much more open-ended and much messier. They had to struggle again with what was really going on, and what would be a sufficient basis for securing collaboration among the members. What had been realised were the limitations of the CEO’s authority, the other side of which was what would authorise what needed doing? The day-to-day activities of the communities had become split off from the questions of the movement:

“We are a Movement that has utterly separated the running of the local communities from the religious and the lay from ministers. All of this highlights that what I am suggesting is a real shock for both sides and it is probably so shocking that most people don’t realise it - particularly the ministers.”

The consultation group had to work hard during the second phase. Each individual surfaced their own critical perspective on the CEO’s journal of wigo, expressing it always in relation to the CEO’s position. *Thus while the CEO was listening to the needs of the movement, the consultation group was listening to the way the CEO listened.* Within the process itself, the distinction was held between ‘personal stuff’ and views that could be read as expressing something on behalf of the sponsoring system. It became possible to separate out distinctly different ways of looking at *wigo* by working at this distinction. This was reflected in the questions that emerged:

- What small and practical steps can we take so that we don’t get distracted, and the larger picture can be left to take care of itself?
- How are we to restore faith with the fundamentals of religious identity so that we can move forward?
- What is it about what is going on that makes us all feel so fragmented and makes us experience such difficulty in working with each other’s positions?
- What is it that we want from our ministers in all of this?
- How do we open up and extend learning beyond that of our ministers?

It became apparent that the group remained absolutely silent about the question of the demands of the members on the movement. By ‘demand’ is here meant some way in which a person experienced a need that they understood as being religious in nature, and that was capable of being satisfied in some way by the services offered by the movement. It was as if the nature of this demand was self-evident, while at the same time the consultation group appeared to have no way of speaking about it, even though this was the rationale for the movement itself. Again, a comment from a member of the consultation group:

“I have a hunch that one of the great injustices done to our ministers and via this injustice, now to our communities via their unfulfilled frustration and anger, is that the traditional roles were changed and new, unrealistic roles

were created. From clear expectations of ministers to be interpreters and teachers, our ministers were asked to be social workers, psychologists, community professionals, teachers, managers... I feel strongly that the way to begin dealing with this is to come clean about it and to stop pretending that we just need to tweak curricula or give secretarial support.”

The second phase ended somewhere around the point at which the CEO realised that the harder he tried, the less things seemed to move. ‘Trying harder’ was caricatured as kissing frogs in the hope that they would be transformed as a result. But the hard work of the consultation group was bringing them nowhere near the question of into what the frogs were supposed to be transforming.

### **The Third Phase**

The experience of working back-and-forth with differences in the second phase brought the CEO to the realisation that what was fundamentally missing was implicated in the way he was fulfilling his own role on behalf of the movement:

“There are issues of relationality that need working on... the realisation that I don't have to know all of the answers... how key people are empowered and given legitimacy... and my really giving other people space and responsibility so that they have a real stake in what is going on and I stop killing myself.”

The fact that the work had entered the third phase began to show itself at the end of a long session with the consultation group in which it recognized the extent to which its members did not speak to each other about their different understandings of what constituted the role of a minister, nor about the relationship between this role and the governance and structure of the movement itself. Expressed as a way of managing the primary risk, the feared trauma of disagreeing over the role of a minister led the group to be unable to address this issue. This silence deprived the movement of a way of understanding how it should respond to the differing needs of individuals ‘at the edge’.

In working on why this might be so, it was agreed that it was the individual’s personal struggle for meaning and purpose that lay at the root of the latent demands on the movement. But it was exactly this relationship that was defined as not being relevant to the work of the minister, precisely because it got in the way of his being able to hold the traditional role, and indeed could take forms that would be very challenging for the minister himself/herself. Here was the sponsoring system organising what could be spoken of and what needed to be ignored.

When the group fed this gap back to the CEO, it became evident that something had changed in the way it was understanding *wigo*. It had been difficult to identify what needed to surface within the group, and it was doubly difficult for the CEO to hold the group to address what it was trying so hard to ignore! Instead he was colluding with the group to hide from it in order to manage his own anxiety: if he did not know what the group did not know, what kind of leader was he?

In presenting this gap/lack in the group’s own ability to speak about what was going on, the CEO was enabled to contain the group in relation to its own not-knowing, and establish for himself a different relationship to the challenge he faced:

“So huge is the pressure on me that I struggle to get out from under. It is hard ... to stop behaving in the way that I currently deal with pressure by trying to deal on my own with everything that is in front of me, in order to share and work with others.”

Here was the transformation in his leadership style that was needed to take up the double challenge facing the movement

### **The next cycle of work**

The CEO had to separate out the delegation of management from the challenge of meeting the membership demands on the movement. This meant challenging the previously unquestioned assumption that everyone already knew what the ordained leadership needed to be doing. Once that question became mobilised, it pointed to other questions that in turn raised the levels of anxiety once again and led to a new cycle of work. The immediate practical result of this intervention was the establishment of a provisional leadership team to begin to build the internal connections between the different activities. The activities had typically not been linked, and certainly not linked to supporting the new direction for the movement. The next consultation cycle surfaced this need to separate out the leadership of the movement from the leadership of the service organisation supporting the movement. This in turn led to changes in governance structures beginning to be addressed, with a director being appointed to lead the central organization, and to the re-emergence of the theological question underlying the movement: what constituted ministry in support of individuals' search for meaning and purpose?

### ***Discussion: confronting environmental turbulence, primary risk, and anxiety in this client system***

To say that the environment is turbulent is to say that it has a life of its own: it does not conform to the expectations held by the movement and therefore behaves asymmetrically. Thus it could no longer be assumed that people would keep joining the communities and taking up its traditions as they entered into adulthood, married, formed families and got old. It was necessary to ask questions that had never been asked before about how the movement had to change to meet their needs. The turbulence was experienced as a kind of fragmenting and splintering across a myriad of activities responding to different individuals' and communities' needs that was both overwhelming and unaffordable.

The primary risk being managed was the avoidance of the trauma of loss of identification with the movement as it has been historically defined. The place of the ordained person had been the guarantor of this historically defined role for the community. Therefore, to question this role was to question the very formation of the community itself. But the trauma of loss of identity and identification was gradually being overlaid with another potential trauma, the death of the community itself through the loss of active engagement from its present and future members. In effect the nature of the primary risk to the movement had changed. The defences against anxiety of its members locked in the first implicit assumption about primary risk in terms of the loss of individual identity. But this was being challenged by a present danger defining a new formulation of primary risk, namely the loss of active engagement with the community itself. The work of the consultation group made this contradiction apparent in a way that enabled them to 'own' it in their own working.

The structure of the process was effective in holding the systemic annihilation anxiety. The subsequent intervention with the provisional leadership team was also effective for as long as its identity remained provisional. The point of difficulty arose when the issues emerging from its work had to be acted upon. Here there was a hiatus and a pause as the 'old' and the 'new' views of what was needed had to square up to

each other, and decisions had to be made over how to resolve their differences, a process in which the passing of time itself was a powerful influence.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of ‘getting under the skin’ of the resistance to change in the movement, and giving the CEO purchase on the ‘real’ process of transformation. The fact that it has not been a quick result is perhaps not surprising, but there is no doubt that the transformation has a direction, momentum and depth to it that it would not otherwise have had.

## **Conclusion**

The need for enterprises to work directly in relation to the individual client’s experience is by no means restricted to religious movements. Apart from the obvious need of professional service organisations of all kinds to do this, even manufacturing businesses are discovering the value in supporting the experience of the end-user. Taking ‘power to the edge’ of the enterprise in this way requires exceptional levels of flexibility in the enterprise’s infrastructures that are very difficult to sustain. But the core difficulty is to lead asymmetrically, that is, in a way that can hold the client’s experience at the centre of the enterprise’s work.

Other applications of this reflexive consultation model have varied in the constituting of the consultation group, the position of the client and the nature of the enterprise, but the essential elements have remained the same, with the emergent logical timing of the phases being their common feature. The basic premise of the process is that an interacting shadow consulting team will parallel the dynamics of the larger system, and that if these dynamics are carefully observed and reflected upon by the team members they will allow useful hypotheses to emerge that reveal the unspoken obstacles that the enterprise is defending itself against knowing.

One of the difficulties with this method, when deployed within more overtly commercial forms of enterprise, is that greater attention has to be given to the particular infrastructure challenges inherent in responding to asymmetric forms of demand. Thus the technical nature of the work involved in the religious movement was much easier to grasp than, for example, in healthcare, even though the effects of the sponsoring system are no less great. Given this *caveat* and the challenges it presents for managing the agility of complex systems of systems, the reflexive method provides an effective way of enabling the CEO to develop a capability for such leadership, and to establishing the particular form it needs to take.

Much attention has been given to training leaders to cope with the emergent demands of this 21<sup>st</sup> Century period of rapid and turbulent change. The concepts and methodology of reflexive consultation provide an approach to leadership training, based on systemic and psychoanalytic understanding of the relationship to not-knowing. This understanding is not just deeply meaningful and personally gratifying, but pragmatically necessary to managing the level of change being demanded by increasingly asymmetric environments.

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