# Reflexive Consultation: supporting a CEO's leadership of transformational change

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## *Abstract*

*New challenges for leadership in twenty-first century organisations are created by the emergent importance of asymmetric forms of client demand, with their corresponding requirement to take power to the edge of the organisation. Power at the edge challenges centralised leadership and stimulates systemic anxiety as leaders are forced to confront the current nature of demand and face transformational change.*

*How do leaders begin to understand the nature of the defences against this anxiety, and how do they manage the new forms of primary risk to which the organisation is being exposed? Meeting the challenge requires transformation in the organisation's response to systemic anxiety such that primary risk is allowed to become a central focus of attention. Reflexive consultation is a model used to support a CEO's leadership of transformational change by enabling him to identify and address these systemic anxieties.*

*The paper discusses the nature of the challenge to leadership in the 21st century organisation and how this challenge was addressed in a reflexive consultation process engaged in by the CEO of a religious organisation. The dynamics that emerge within the reflexive consultation process are described, and an account is given of how these dynamics are understood. The paper concludes by distinguishing the particular form of leadership being demanded of the CEO, and considering its application to organisations in other fields.*

## *Introduction*

Twentieth century approaches to organisation assumed that leadership power had to be held at the centre.  New challenges for leadership in twenty-first century organisations are created by the need to respond to individual client demands in ways which require the organisation to provide leadership power at its interface with the client, that is, at its edge. Power at the edge challenges centralised leadership and stimulates systemic anxiety as leaders are forced to confront the current nature of demand and face transformational change. Meeting the challenge requires transformation in the leadership's response to systemic anxiety such that primary risk is allowed to become a central focus of attention.  *Reflexive consultation* is a model used to support a CEO's leadership of transformational change by enabling him to identify and address these systemic anxieties.

In the case considered, the CEO of a religious organisation was faced with a lessening of people's involvement in the life of the organisation despite efforts to reverse this trend. This dilemma created a challenge to find new ways of relating to people's religious needs, particularly those who had no current relationship with the organisation. Key stakeholders recognised that a transformation in the way the organisation understood its role in people's lives was necessary, which led the CEO to consider what was required of him to lead this transformation.  In particular he needed to hold the organisation in relation to *what it did not know* in order that it could learn new ways of doing things.  What emerged was a very particular kind of leadership challenge that arises in seeking to take power to the edge of an organisation in order to meet individuals' needs.

## *The 21st Century Challenge to Leadership*

Taking *power to the edge* of an organisation (Alberts and Hayes, 2003) means giving the people closest to the client the power to organise the services around the demands of the client, instead of expecting the client to organise themselves around the services of the organisation.  With taking power to the edge goes the idea of *asymmetric demand*.  This is demand that is specific to the client's particular context and circumstances.  It contrasts with *symmetric demand*, where the assumption is that demand is defined by what the organisation does independently of the client's context. We see examples of asymmetric demand wherever there is a demand for professional services that are particular to a client's situation, healthcare being an obvious example.  But we also see it wherever a supplier tries to become part of the client's experience, such as in organising their travel.

20th Century approaches to organisation assumed that power had to be held at the centre, even if put there through a democratic process.  Hierarchy was designed to deconflict the component activities of the organisation and provided the means of maintaining the integrity of the whole in relation to its constituent parts.  Within this context, leadership was a matter of creating the conditions in which delegation could work effectively, and the *power at the centre* could act in the interests of the whole. Discipline was needed here, but so too was authenticity in the way the people within the organisation were able to take up their roles.

The emergent importance of asymmetric forms of demand, with their corresponding requirement to take power to the edge, is a 21st Century phenomenon which creates new challenges that require leadership to be 'distributed' (Huffington et

al, 2004). This raises a new set of questions: can anything be allowed to happen at the edges?; how do the organisation's infrastructures acquire sufficient agility to support the variety of demands being generated at the edge?; and how are the necessary degrees of collaboration and synchronisation of component activities to be secured across the organisation? Something more than discipline and authenticity is required.

These are challenges facing all forms of organisations in which the original formula for how the organisation works as a whole is no longer capturing the demand of the client. For example, a research institute found that the forms of research on which it had made its name were no longer effective in the new multi-disciplinary, cross-institutional environments; the research institute had not only to engage with new kinds of client, but also to challenge it's own assumptions about what constituted effective research. A computing services company formed from a number of semi-autonomous businesses found that clients' problems no longer corresponded to the forms of specialism offered by each of its businesses; the company, which had previously defined itself in terms of its effectiveness at making computing systems work, now had to question the ways in which it understood its clients' needs for computing systems in the first place. A UK-based sales channel for a US corporation within the defence sector found itself unable to address the market opportunities open to it using the repertoire of products and solutions available from the 'domestic' divisions in the US; the UK component found itself not only needing to develop new kinds of system, but also to question the ways in which it understood the defence sector's requirements for those systems in the first place. In each case a *double challenge* had to be confronted. It was not sufficient to establish new ways of addressing new forms of demand; it was necessary to question the existing ways in which demand itself could be understood (Boxer, 2004).

## Resistance to Learning

The consultant working within these organisations confronts a pattern of resistance: in each of the above cases, it was possible for the underlying activities to be re-configured to meet new forms of demand, however, the currently dominant approaches to how things should work resisted learning new ways. These approaches belonged to those members of the organisation, for whom there was too much about the present organisation of how things worked for the usual ways to be abandoned and not enough clarity about how things should be different for them to be changed. Resistance to learning was an entirely legitimate conservation of identity. Learning was resisted because any change in the form of the organisation would be putting into question aspects of the support that the member's roles provided to their own identities.

How could the CEO and the consultant work with this challenge? What different forms of understanding are needed to find an appropriate relationship between that which is being conserved and the new forms of client demands that the organisation needs to address?

## What is being Conserved?

The person's relationship to their role within a hierarchy provides a means of limiting that individual's personal anxiety. The individual can use a role as a defence against anxiety (Menzies Lyth, 1988). For example, the nurse holds onto the professional notion of her role in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed by being personally open to the suffering of her patients. From the point of view of the nurse, using role in this

way enables her to cope with the stresses and strains of the job, but from the point of view of the patient, it can result in feeling dismembered as a person if each specialist only relates to that part of the patient defined by his or her role.

The hierarchy itself provides the means of limiting that which is anticipated as being 'traumatic' for the organisation. The function of the hierarchy of roles set up by the organisation is to define what is to be paid attention to and what is to be ignored. This is the way the organisation prevents from happening that which it does not want to happen.  For example, in a hospital ward for supporting the rehabilitation of elderly patients, the focus is on the rehabilitation of the patient, but it is also on preventing the death of the patient.  It is possible to speak not only of the hierarchy's primary task of rehabilitation, but also, by implication, of the *primary risk* (Hirschhorn, 1997) that the hierarchy exists to prevent happening.

Primary risk was originally defined as "the risk of choosing the wrong primary task, that is, a task that ultimately cannot be managed" (ibid, p3). This unmanageable risk is the basis of an anticipated trauma for the hierarchy.  'Trauma' is something that is potentially capable of overwhelming the system that it impinges upon. This is the reason that the organisation is set up in such a way as to prevent the dreaded event from happening. Conceptualising the prevention of trauma as essential to the conservation of systemic identity, and with it individual role identity, enables a better understanding of the nature of what is being conserved in the resistance to new learning.

It is useful to consider the hierarchy as an 'organisational object' in its own right, rather than simply as a construction of those working within it (Armstrong, 2004).  In this way, it is possible to speak of the hierarchy's defences against being overwhelmed by the occurrence of any such trauma.  What is being conserved is secondarily individuals' defences against their own personal anxiety; primarily the organisation *itself* is being conserved as a defence against the systemic anxiety associated with failing to manage its primary risk.

Taking leadership power to the edge means changing the way in which this primary risk is managed by the organisation.  Risk can no longer remain implicit in the way power is held at the centre; it has to be explicitly identified. This is the challenge faced by the leadership in the process of organisational transformation.

## The Double Challenge

One way to explore the challenge inherent in transformational change is in terms of the struggle to understand and address the question of what primary risk the organisation acknowledges and what it has been willing to ignore in the service of preventing the trauma of being overwhelmed.  As the CEO seeks to lead a transformational change, he faces the double challenge of finding a way not only to intervene on the way the organisation functions in relation to the demands of its clients, but also on the very ways in which it is prepared to recognise what constitutes a relevant demand.

Crucial to this is an understanding of *power* not as a thing in itself, but as evidenced through behaviours that are obedient to a particular configuration of vested interests that determine what is and is not allowed to be considered relevant.  The model and methodology of reflexive consultation is designed as a means to approach these unspoken, intangible, and often unconscious issues.

## The Role of the Consultation group

The consultation group is there to support the CEO in addressing the double challenge needed for organisational transformation. The nature of the reflexive consultation process is that the facilitator participates in uncovering what he himself, the consultation group members and the CEO *do not yet know*. This requires that all parties put their prior assumptions aside and tolerate the discomfort of not knowing or attempting to control outcomes in order to discover what is not being acknowledged. The task of the facilitator is to guide the process by making use of the discoveries as the process unfolds. The consultative stance of the facilitator, who is leading this process, therefore has to reflect the leadership style required of the CEO.

This transformation requires a different style of leadership from the CEO to bring power to the edge of his organisation in order to meet the asymmetric demands on it and enable learning at the edge. The leader's stance has to assume that knowledge of what the client is demanding and how it might be satisfied is there to be understood and responded to; the leader's task is to help the organisation to learn what is being demanded of it. This involves engaging in three key activities: (i) to hold the context in such a way that issues are not too overwhelming; (ii) to legitimise the asking of questions which articulate what is being demanded; and (iii) to ensure that there are the means available to respond to the demands being articulated (Boxer, 1994).

## *The Reflexive Consultation Model*

In the reflexive consultation model, the task systems that constitute what an organisation does are considered to be the *client system*. The particular way in which this client system is organised in relation to primary risk is designated by its relationship to its *sponsoring system*. It is this sponsoring system that has built into it assumptions about what is or is not relevant to the way the organisation works. It is necessary to separate out the idea of a sponsoring system as a particular way of relating to primary risk in order to gain access to that which the organisation seeks to prevent happening.
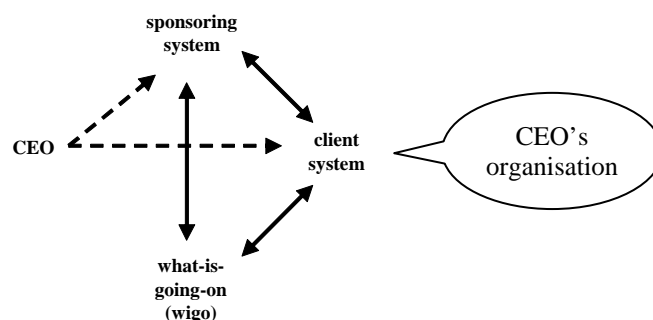


The diagram above represents the circular relationship between the CEO's organisation (his client system), the configuration of vested interests governing the way this client system is organised (the sponsoring system) and *what-is-going-on* (wigo). The *CEO's position* in the model indicates that he is able to speak about the nature of the client and sponsoring systems, but not directly about wigo. What is going on is not yet known and is an expression of the CEO's understanding of these other two systems.

Thus transformational change in relation to wigo faces the CEO with a double challenge. He must understand how change has to take place in the client system and

simultaneously, in the sponsoring system's relationship to the client system. Organisational transformation requires change not only in relation to demand, but also in relation to the vested interests served by the organisation as a whole. This raises new questions about how the sponsoring system may or may not allow a new relationship to demand to be recognised. Reflexive consultation is a process for working out what has to be let go of by the sponsoring system in order that better ways can be found by the client system of satisfying the demands on the organisation. It is not unlike the dilemma of the monkey with his hand stuck in the cookie jar; the monkey had to let go of the cookie in order to consider other ways of satisfying its hunger. The reflexive consultation process achieves this by attending to the mirroring within its own parallel consultation group process of different parts of the sponsoring system and the relationships between the sponsoring and the client systems.

## *The Reflexive Consultation Methodology*

Traditionally, systemic shadow consultancy provides consultants with the opportunity to consider how they are mirroring in their own personal behaviour the same processes that are going on within the client organisation. When provided to a team of consultants working within an organisation (a client consulting team), this mirroring extends to the dynamics between the members of the client consulting team (Hawkins, 1998). This mirroring takes place because of the particular valencies the consultants have for the various positions held by individuals or sub-systems within the client system. The aim of shadow consulting is to enable the consultants to separate out their personal responses from those that relate to the challenges facing the client system itself, since not to do so becomes extremely damaging to the consulting process. To this extent, shadow consulting focuses on the total transference situation within which the consulting process is unfolding (Roth, 2004).
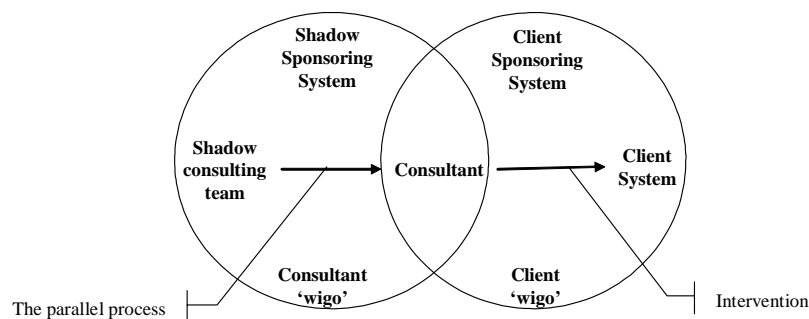


The process designed to address the needs of this organisation utilises concepts from systemic shadow consultancy as described by Hawkins (1998), and the reflexive supervision model described by Boxer and Eigen (2003). It makes use of the mirroring by the shadow consulting group in the same way, so that the CEO in the focal role is helped to separate out his personal responses in a way that can address the total transference situation. However, the reflexive process goes further in the way in which it makes use of the dynamics within the shadow consulting group. Thus, while the CEO mirrors the client system, the shadow consulting group mirrors the sponsoring system in the different ways in which it gives meaning to what the CEO is doing.

In this reflexive model, the CEO took up the place of the consultant to his own organisation as 'client system', and the consultation group was formed from individuals currently working directly for or within the client system (but taken from a diagonal so that there were no immediate line relationships between them). The

facilitator's task was to manage the relationship between the consultation group and the CEO, while the co-author acted as shadow consultant to the facilitator. Great attention had to be paid to role boundaries as they shifted according to task. This included responding to what was surfaced by the CEO, what exchanges remained within the consultation group, and what was said by the consultation group to the CEO.
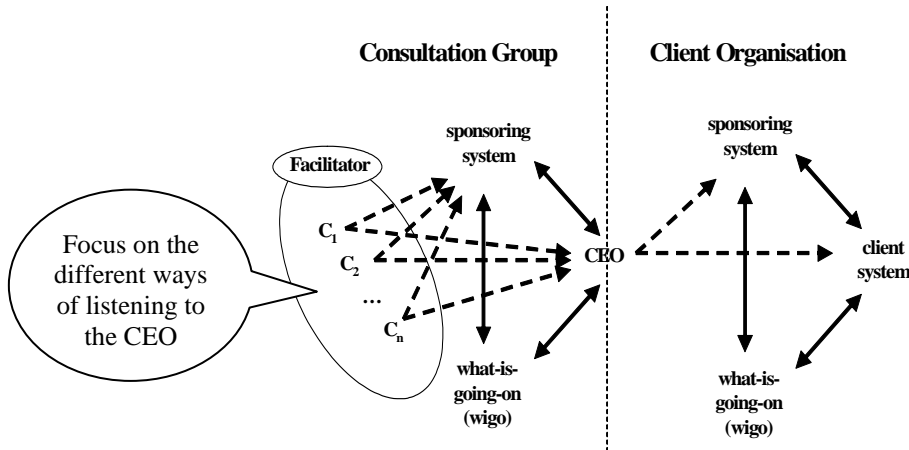


The task of the consultation group becomes one of attending to its different ways of giving meaning to what the CEO is doing. This interactive process enables the group to identify what has been avoided or is difficult to surface in its own dynamics as it struggles to carry out this task. In this way, the group confronts itself with the question of what it is unable to speak about among its own members. The primary risk is to be found in relation to that which is being avoided and surfaces in the mirrored difficulties to find expression within the consultation group. The primary risk that emerges identifies the other axis of the double challenge faced by the CEO.

## *The Challenge of the Case*

A religious community forms a membership organisation, funded by the subscriptions of its members. It elects a Chairman and Board of Governors; and the Board appoints an ordained person to minister to the community's needs. Given that there are a number of these membership organisations, and they have common requirements for services, they agree to club together to form a central organisation that can share the costs of providing those services. These services include such things as primary and secondary education, youth work, fund raising and so on. The central organisation is given the same structures of governance as exist for each of the communities, except that its income is derived indirectly from the members it ultimately serves, and its Chairman and Board of Governors are appointed by the local organisations.

The movement is now defined collectively by the local and central organisations, and is mature, although its membership is no longer increasing in the way that it had in the past. Furthermore, recent attempts to reverse this trend have not been as effective as had been hoped. Following generations appear to have different needs of local communities, and a much greater emphasis on finding their own more personal ways of addressing their religious needs. This is not to say that they do not continue to make use of the existing local and central organisations where it suits them, but their commitment to the movement as a whole is not the same.

Into this situation the central organisation appoints a Chief Executive to bring about a renewal of the movement. His brief is to honour the strengths of the existing

local organisations while at the same time reaching out to entirely new ways of working with new members. From the start, the challenge of the case is defined by the CEO as being one of supporting his leadership of this transformational change.

The slowing of growth presented the movement with its need to change. The CEO has to maximise the value that can be derived from the existing services being provided by the central organisation, and also to address the underlying challenge of growth. In this context, it is not surprising that the CEO appointed to lead the movement is himself ordained. He had not only to articulate the larger vision of a movement that could recover its sense of vitality and expansion, but also had to do it in a way that could encourage well-wishers to invest in that movement's future. He had to be identified unquestionably with the core mission of the movement.

## Setting up the contract

In the original encounter by the facilitator with the CEO, it was agreed that an external consultant could certainly not know any better than he how to meet this challenge, and that it would be necessary to facilitate a process that would enable the CEO to work out how to meet it for himself. It was perhaps easier to establish the need for this kind of process in this case because of the religious nature of the movement's aims, involving as it did an explicit and shared agenda for learning in which neither consultant nor client could claim to 'know best'.(Boxer & Palmer, 1994)

The learning system was designed to involve individuals chosen by the CEO to reflect different key influences within the movement. One person was a member of the Board of Governors for the central organisation, another was a consultant working with some of the local communities on their renewal, and two were ordained persons, one from the central educational organisation and one ministering to the needs of the local ministers. It was immediately apparent that there was a strong sense within this 'reflexive consultation group' of sharing the CEO's sense of mission.

The agreement was to meet monthly for a period of about nine months, with the consultation group meeting 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 circulated to the consultation group. These monthly meetings took place within a context of frequent weekly email exchanges about *what was going* on both within the group and between the group and the CEO. The discipline was that group members would only comment on what was raised by the CEO in these exchanges, and that the exchanges within the group only addressed the differences in how they commented on what was being raised by the CEO.

## The unfolding process

The whole process was divided into three phases, the transitions between these taking place as a consequence of the emergent learning of the CEO. These transitions were characterised as follows:

- The first phase would *end* when the CEO realised the particular way in which he understood the presenting problem was just that – a symptom of something more profoundly problematic that had not yet been clearly identified.

> "The objective was to engage in a consultative process so that we can begin to implement a new structure and a new way of working… but absolutely central to my understanding is that we do not exist 'to do God's will' in a

closed world of our own. Why have I ignored our relationship with the rest of humanity and God? How on earth do I put such a crucial dimension back into the work?"

(This emerged in contrast with the initial definition of the problem, which had been that there was a need for new projects and structures that would lead to an enlarged membership.)
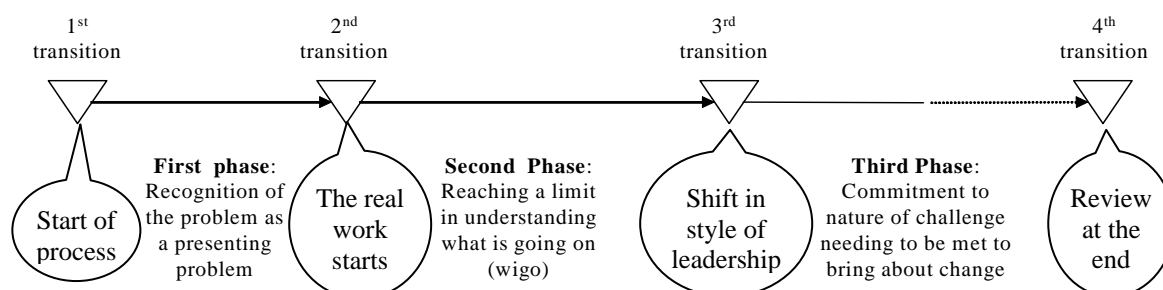


- The second phase would end when the CEO became aware that a particular limit has been reached in being able to enlarge the membership given his current way of understanding what was going on. – a realisation that there was something fundamentally missing in his understanding.

> "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?"

(This emerged as the realisation that there was something fundamentally missing in the way of understanding what would energise and drive the work of the organisation.)

- The third phase would *start* when the CEO realised that the particular form of leadership that was required of him, in order to make it possible to bring about the transformation demanded, would require him to find new ways of enabling people within the movement to feel authorised to respond to the demands on the organisation.

> "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."

Thus the CEO realised that the something that was fundamentally missing was implicated in the way he fulfilled his own role. He began to recognise that the primary risk concealed by what was missing might enable him to understand the leadership challenge in a fundamentally different way.

It could take time to assimilate this realisation and therefore, there could be a gap between the ending of the second phase and the beginning of the third. This cycle of the process would then end 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  envelope of 9 months.  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.

## Significant moments along the way

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. During the course of this preparation a number of issues surfaced within the process, not least of which was the question of what exactly was being mandated.

> "I have started a snowball rolling but now it must gather up other people's input and ideas and must be pushed forward by the buy-in and ownership and passion of a growing number of people. I want to come out of the meeting with a framework of agreements, two project teams and a time table. All of this is in the document, which focuses on personal religious identity as the unifying feature and the starting point for the work, and envisions what the world may look like if we are successful in engaging people in this."

The CEO had taken the fundamental 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 role of the movement was then to provide coordination across these projects to ensure that they all came together successfully.  The catch that emerged at the meeting 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 existed a commitment amongst the membership for making the projects happen.  This again raised the whole question of what forms of collaboration the membership were prepared to engage in, and to what end – 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."

It was this realisation that heralded the start of the second phase, which felt much more open-ended and much messier.  What was really going on, and what would be a sufficient basis for securing collaboration amongst the members?  What had emerged was a question of the limitations of the CEO's authority, the other side of which was what in that case would authorise what needed doing?  The day-to-day activities were split 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. Back to the lack of meaning manifesting through concerns about religious identity."

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:

"I suppose my question now has to do with the extent to which we, the insiders, shoulder all of the blame and the extent to which it is important that people explore their anger, take responsibility for themselves, but see that it isn't too late. Am I back to kissing frogs…?"

Striking was the part played by the consultation group in all of this. Each individual surfaced their own critical perspective on the CEO's account of what was going on, expressing it always in relation to the CEO's position. Thus while we could say that the CEO was listening to the organisation, the consultation group was listening to the way the CEO listened. Within the process itself, it was important to hold the distinction between 'personal stuff' and views that could be read as expressing something on behalf of the sponsoring system. But by working at this distinction, it became possible to divine distinctly different ways of looking at what was going on. Some of these points of view could be characterised as follows:

- 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?

What was striking was that the group remained so silent about the question of demands on the movement. A 'demand' meant some way in which a person experienced a need that they understood as being religious in nature, and capable of being satisfied in some way by the services offered by a religious organisation. It was as if the nature of this demand was self-evident, so that it appeared as if the consultation group had no way of speaking about them, even though the movement was intended to be a response to them. 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 third phase began to show itself at the end of a long session with the consultation group. We had begun by reminding ourselves that the purpose of our work together was to find what was lacking/what were the gaps in our understanding as a consultation group. By finding that which we all found ourselves either not able to speak of, or only able to speak of with great difficulty, we helped the CEO to identify the challenge of his leadership. What emerged during the course of this

meeting was the extent to which we spoke to each other neither about our different understandings of what was constitutive of the role of a minister, nor about the relationship between this and our assumptions about the governance and structure of the movement.  The facilitator commented:

> "What was so striking to me about the consultation group's session together was the way we became aware of lacunae amongst ourselves not only in the inter-relationships between the formations of ministers and educators, of communities and of ministry itself; but also in the relation of the leadership task to the place of structure, transparency, responsibility, accountability and legitimacy."

Why should this be so?  Our hypothesis was that it was the personal relationship between felt need and the individual's personal understanding of meaning and purpose that lay at the root of the latent demands on the movement, but it was exactly this relationship that was organised by the existing structures of power and was defined as not being relevant to the work of the minister, precisely because it got in the way of his being able to fulfil his role for others as a minister – indeed could take forms that would be traumatic for the work as a minister.

When we were then joined by the CEO and fed our lacunae back to him, it became evident that something had happened. It was difficult to say what it was that we had had difficulty addressing amongst ourselves.  And it was difficult for him to accept the challenge of holding us in relation to our ignorance in a constructive way, rather than helping us hide from it through offering us cover in his anxiety that he should know what we did not.  But in working at presenting this gap/lack in our own ability to speak about what was going on, the CEO was enabled to hold us in relation to our own not-knowing, establishing for himself in so doing 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."

## *The wider applicability of this approach*

The hierarchy of roles defined by power-at-the-centre is organised in relation to an understanding of demand that does not vary from context to context – symmetric demand. Thus patients become clients for the services that the hospital is offering just as do members of a community for religious services. We outlined how this power-at-the-centre could also be described as managing a primary risk – the prevention of what was anticipated as being traumatic for the organisation. In the following list are some other examples of primary risks, and in each case a characterisation of what is being defended against:

| Organisation | That which is anticipated as being traumatic |
| --- | --- |
| Research Institute | We must not take positions that are based on truths that are unscientific (defence against wild analysis). |
| European Computing Services Company | We must not offer solutions that are not based on the capabilities of our company (defence against fragmentation). |
| UK-based sales channel for a US corporation | We must not offer solutions that are not based on the capabilities of our parent company (defence against their losing control). |

| | |
|---|---|
| Rehabilitation Ward for the Elderly | We must not allow patients to die here (defence against failing to fulfil our purpose as an organisation). |
| NHS Orthotics Clinical Service | There must be a limit to how much we can do for any one patient (defence against extent of actual suffering). |
| Mental Health Services Charity | We must not let the clinician's own issues get in the way of how they work with their clients (defence against the unbearable nature of clients' needs) |
| Religious movement | The minister must not allow his or her personal problems to get in the way of doing the job (defence against being overwhelmed by others' needs). |

With power-at-the-centre, the client's 'deal' with the supplier is that the client's anxieties and avoidance of trauma should be displaced onto the supplier, who will then manage it on their behalf.  But as this begins not to work well enough for the client, so the client's demand becomes increasingly asymmetric. Thus in taking power-to-the-edge, the relation to the client's demand is being changed to one that responds directly to the particular context in which a demand arises – to that which is asymmetric about the demand.

This requires that the supplier's relation to the primary risk *qua* anticipation of trauma has to be transformed from one of preventing trauma in general to one that can work to prevent it in a way that is particular to the client's particular demand, by being able to acknowledge explicitly the particular form the client's anticipation of trauma takes.  This leads the organisation to have an explicit relationship to its own primary risk so that it can be managed on the client's behalf rather than just in its own way.  An example of this would be the way the patient expects to know what are the risks he or she faces in opting for a particular form of treatment, instead of just leaving it to the doctor.  In the examples above, this difference in the relationship to primary risk can be characterised as follows:

| Organisation | That which has to be managed on behalf of the client |
|---|---|
| Research Institute | How is truth constituted in the particular case? |
| European Computing Services Company | How do we team our capabilities with those of sister companies to meet new business challenges of clients? |
| UK-based sales channel for a US corporation | How do we build capabilities that meet the demands of our client and leverage our parent company's capabilities? |
| Rehabilitation Ward for the Elderly | How does the family deal with the approaching death of one of its members? |
| NHS Orthotics Clinical Service | How do we do as much as possible for any one patient now in order to prevent suffering later? |
| Mental Health Services Charity | How does the client come to face/bear taking responsibility for working with their own issues? |
| Religious movement | How does the individual congregant work with their personal sense of meaning and purpose? |

With power-at-the-centre, the leadership is identified with implementing the strategy which is also the means of preventing the relation to the anticipated trauma. But when power is taken to the edge, this relation to the anticipated trauma has to be transformed under the leader's leadership to one which is explicit, and can be related explicitly to the particular needs of the client relationship.  This means changing the way anxiety is worked with within the organisation.  Reflexive Consultation is the means of bringing this transformation about in the way the leader understands this

challenge: the resultant form of leadership being one which starts with the leader being able to bear this anxiety in how he or she leads, thereby being able to enable the organisation to bear its systemic anxiety.

# Conclusion

A religious organisation is interesting precisely because the expectation is that it will relate to the particular demands of the individual. And certainly it is easier to work on questions of meaning and purpose within a religious tradition. But as the examples show, the need for organisations to work directly in relation to the individual client's experience, engaging with asymmetric forms of demand, is by no means restricted to religious organisations. Apart from the obvious need of professional service organisations of all kinds to do this, even manufacturing businesses are discovering that it is ultimately the experience of the end-user that they are supporting, and going 'downstream' in support of this demand can be good business.

Taking 'power to the edge' of the organisation in this way, however, requires levels of agility in the organisation's infrastructures that are very difficult to sustain. Central to this difficulty are the forms of leadership that can hold the client's experience at the centre of the organisation's work. The reflexive consultation worked because the CEO, in taking up the focal role of articulating the client system's understanding of what was going on, liberated the consultation group to concentrate on its different ways of listening to his listening to the client system. In this way, the consultation group could surface different aspects of the sponsoring system, which ultimately led to what it was that it was not able to or had difficulty in speaking of. And it was this that led to the sponsoring system's particular relation to primary risk.

Of course to be deployed within more overtly commercial forms of organisation, there would have to be not only a commitment to the forms of learning required by this type of leadership, but also a clear recognition of the particular challenges inherent in responding to asymmetric forms of demand, with their attendant requirement to take power to the edge of the organisation. But given such a recognition of the challenge to leadership, it provides an effective way of enabling the CEO to develop a capability for such leadership, and to establish the particular form it needs to take within his or her organisation.

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## Glossary

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| **Asymmetric demand** | that which is asked for that is specific to the client's particular circumstances and context-of-use. This may include tacit or latent demand that the client is not yet able to articulate. |
| **CEO's position in the reflexive model** | is the position from which truths may be spoken about the *client and sponsoring systems*. The CEO is in the position of consultant to his own organisation, from which he has no direct position to speak of *wigo*. When he is describing *wigo*, he is speaking from another position, namely, as a member of the *client or sponsoring system.* |
| **Client system** | is a complex set of interacting task systems that the CEO determines to include as the domain of his organisation. This includes the task systems that constitute what an organisation does and those task systems with which the organisation interacts. |
| **Double challenge** | the challenge to intervene on the way the *client system* functions in relation to demand and simultaneously, to intervene on the very ways in which the *sponsoring system* is prepared to recognise what constitutes a relevant demand. |
| **Power** | understood not as a thing in itself, but as an effect of obedience. It is evidenced through behaviours obedient to a particular configuration of vested interests, or ways of understanding how things should be, which determine what is or is not allowed to be considered relevant. The *sponsoring system* in the *reflexive* |

| | *consultation model* represents that which produces the effects of obedience within the organisation. |
|---|---|
| **Power at the centre** | the hierarchical organisation of component activities through which the organisation's integrity as a single whole is maintained. |
| **Power to the edge** | the effect of having people who directly experience the client demands able to organise the response appropriate to the particular nature of the demand. The assumption is that the organisation faces many such forms of demand. |
| **Primary Risk** | the possibility that the organisation may choose a primary task that ultimately cannot be managed. The fear is that choosing the wrong primary task will have consequences anticipated as being traumatic for the organisation. |
| **Reflexive consultation** | a process facilitated by an external consultant specifically designed to enable a CEO to understand and articulate what particular form the *double challenge* takes within an organisation. The aim is to support the CEO's leadership of the transformation needed to meet this challenge. |
| **Sponsoring system** | the effects of a particular configuration of vested interests or 'powers that be' that determine what is taken as common sense, what tasks are made easy to accomplish and what gets ignored by the organisation. No evidence is needed to support this ideology as it taken as 'the way things are done'. *Reflexive consultation* enables access to a critical perspective on the frame of reference being evoked by the *sponsoring system,* that is, by the particular way in which a *client system* is organised in relation to *primary risk.* |
| **Symmetric demand** | demand defined from the point of view of the supplier, that is, what the organisation does a priori. The supplier defines demand by what it is able to provide rather than by attending to the nature of the client's demand per se. |
| **What-is-going-on (wigo)** | a way of referring to that which resists being fully known by the *client and sponsoring systems*; its full nature is always mediated by the positions from which it is being observed and described. The relationship to *wigo* changes as something is attended to that was previously ignored. The attitude of the *sponsoring system* is reflected in the way in which the *client system* is able to relate to *wigo.* |