

*DRAFT PAPER: NOT FOR CIRCULATION WITHOUT AUTHOR PERMISSION*

**Crowding out the Space:**  
***The Weakness of a Strong Leader***

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## **Introduction**

Many have written extensively about the role of a strong leader in the success of his/her organization. Equally many have explored the dynamics surrounding weak leaders and the organizations that must excel in spite of them. This paper will explore the case where both are simultaneously true: the leader has exactly the vision, aggression, talent and skill that the external environment demands at that moment in time, but ironically the very strength and aggressive presence of the leader weakens his/her team and atrophies others' ability to lead and work interdependently on behalf of the organization's mission and goals. In this way, the leader has "crowded out" the space needed for the organization to learn and grow in order to rise to challenges in the external environment.

The premise of this paper is that strong leaders can "steal" talent, ambition and thinking power from others simply by acting singularly on their own instincts and knowledge while under-tending to others' ideas, strengths and the dialogue of a good team. While the ultimate "answer" arrived at through this leadership behavior may be helpful for the organization, the results of this way of leading are often developmentally damaging both for the organization and its members. Unless the leader can be exceptionally reflective about the impact of his or her behavior on others and make a decision to step back from areas where he or she might ordinarily lead, the leader and team never achieve Winnicott's notion of "good enough safety" (Winnicott 1965 and 1992) to allow for the creativity and independence of team members that is ultimately necessary for productive and successful work. In fact, the team and leader overly enact a smothering parent-child dynamic without sufficient "psychic space" for team members to become

autonomous. As a result, the organization is ill prepared to succeed in the long term and build the distributed talent and resilience necessary to powerfully advance their mission in a challenging external environment.

This paper will explore these dynamics through the lens of two consultancy cases. It will lay out the challenges present in the external environment and the leader's unique skill set for responding effectively, explore the dynamics of the team and the ways in which crowding out the space diminishes good thinking, growth and development, and finally, look at the dilemmas inherent in the consultants' role trying to help these organizations put the needed space back into the system to leverage the strength of the leader *and* unleash untapped talent in the top team in order to perform. It is important to say in this introduction that my experience of working with these leaders has tested my abilities as a consultant and at times given me great pause about the ability of any consultant to help a system create the space necessary to alter these often paralyzing dynamics. I therefore offer this analysis of the dynamic, case examples and a starting set of interventions to respond in the spirit of continued learning and thinking together about this vexing but worthy challenge.

### **A Framework: Three “Boundaries” that Heighten Leadership Attributes**

Over the last couple of years, I have worked with two client systems with a singularly strong and visionary leader at the helm:

“James” is the executive director of a large independent not for profit social service agency in a rapidly developing city in the United States. It gets funds from local governments in the region, from private contributions and from federal programs and from families able to pay on a sliding scale of fees. The agency delivers a range of family and child oriented services, such as mental health centers, well-baby clinics, primary medical care delivered by Nurse Practitioners and after school tutoring and athletic programs. James is particularly proud of the research unit he has developed which does quality research on service delivery, helping to inform the directors of the different

services as well as providing consultation to other agencies throughout the country. James is particularly skilled at making sure that these services are financially strong. He pays attention to costs and operations while also tracking funding and revenue sources. His agency was among the few that could provide the same level of service to both middle income as well as low-income clients. The former, experiencing the quality of the service never felt that the agency was stigmatized because it also served the needy. James' Board supports him, though they worry sometime about what some call his "cowboy style of management." At the time of my consultation James was planning to expand the regional reach of the agency partly by acquiring some free standing family service organizations and partly by establishing facilities in fast growing areas. But of course the finances of even the best social service agencies are always at risk, if the economy turns down, tax revenues fall, federal spending drops or donors face too many competing demands for their philanthropic dollar, expenses can quickly exceed revenues. There is not too much room for sloppy performance, or strategic miscalculations.

"Karl" in contrast to James works directly for local government as the head of a county based children and youth services agency on the West Coast of the United States. Prior to his role, he was a professor who published original research on services to low income families and had consulted in the past to the agency he now headed. He has a strong reputation among his academic peers throughout the country. He is also the first appointee in quite some time that is not from "inside" the government, and many are watching carefully with hope or skepticism to see if he can translate his academic expertise into results when faced with the challenges of a "real" system. Within the first month of his arrival, the agency is criticized publicly in the press for several case specific decisions made 10 years prior to his arrival. Over the course of his first 6 months, there are 3 family tragedies attributed to service or lack of service by his agency (the largest ever in that short period of time), the last of which is a particularly horrific story where it is clear the agency had some culpability. New details about egregious practice mistakes made by the agency in each of these cases come to light each day, bringing morale to an all time low and public scrutiny to an all time high.

In both cases, I have been drawn to the leader's talent, intellect, resilience and sophistication in response to some of the most challenging external pressures possible. In both cases, I have also been deeply troubled by the damaging impact their leadership style has had on their teams, and puzzled by the disconnect between what I perceive as raw talent in other leaders in the organization and productivity and quality of work on the team.

A key aspect of leadership is the way a leader exhibits his authority in key arenas and how he creates the context in which others can find theirs. (Hirchhorn, 1997). In making sense of these cases, I turned to three key relationship "boundaries" where these leaders exhibit their authority: the external

environment, their top team and the consultant. While each boundary represents the possibility of dynamic interaction leading to increased learning and reflection on the part of the leader and organization, when experienced in these two cases, each one represents a platform for just the opposite. The leader becomes increasingly singular in his authority and action, perceived as rigid in his point of view and ultimately overly personally identified with the actions of the organization, thus crowding out the space in which creative interaction can generate the authority of others that leads to a resilient organization and transcends the “myth of the individual leader” (Eisold 1997).

The following table provides a summary of these boundaries, the defining characteristics and the accompanying dynamics:

Boundary	Characteristics	Dynamics
External Environment	<p>Exceedingly high pressure in the external environment</p> <p>Advisory mechanisms (board or public authority) actively paying attention and worrying about performance</p> <p>Matters of life and death at stake (lives of children or patients)</p>	<p>Leader sees himself as protector of the organization against the outside world</p> <p>Leader cares passionately about legacy and impact, leading to a deep personalization of the external environment's perception of the organization and its performance</p> <p>High tolerance for managing in the midst of ambiguity in the external environment (staying in "divergent mode") to leave options open.</p> <p>Leader is overly cautious about engagement of outsiders (board or external partners), wanting to carefully pace and control sharing of information and open less opportunities for exposure or "vulnerability"</p>
The Team	<p>Fairly large top team with the "system in the room" – key boundaries across the organization represented</p> <p>Talented individuals with strong individual track records</p>	<p>Huge amount of energy trying to "mind read" the leader (vs. thinking on their own)</p> <p>Backchannel, leader-focused gossip is ubiquitous, often at the cost of productive, work focused interaction</p> <p>Peer to peer protection exhibited in team settings, rather than pushing or holding each other accountable. Result is often debate with the leader alone rather than productive team debate across multiple points of view.</p> <p>Differences in points of view often suppressed both in team settings and outside the team, leading to less inter-dependence (even when the work requires it) and more singular action under the radar screen of others</p> <p>Select "favorites" take risks on behalf of the group, speaking "truth to power" and/or putting issues into play about the effectiveness of the team and choices of the leader</p> <p>Targeted individuals figure out how to "work" the leader off line, getting cover and advice</p>
The Consultant	<p>Use of a close, trusted advisor over a fairly long period of time</p> <p>Primary task of consultant not project oriented, more broadly mandated to help the leader and team be effective</p>	<p>Massive amount of triangulation (consultants seen as able to influence the leader in ways internal team members feel unable to)</p> <p>Over-functioning of the consultant, often getting pulled in as a "player" instead of a "coach" (Bowen 1974)</p> <p>Periodic resentment of the consultant by other members of the team when he/she is perceived to be validated or appreciated in ways that internal team members are not.</p>

Bion was interested in a profound quotation from a letter of John Keats about Shakespeare that he often used as a model for leaders.

".....several things dove tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. " (Keats, 1970)

This suggests the power in a leadership role of keeping open the space, for others, without flight to some quick resolution that is more driven by the anxiety that the group cannot tolerate than a good enough response to the issue at hand. This is particularly true when the group is working on these big issues of consulting model or stance, help and reform, race, etc - versus when you are in more executive mode where speed is critical. On each of the critical boundaries in the table above, the leaders in my cases are particularly challenged to keep open the space for “negative capability,” and the results are anti-developmental for their teams and organizations. I explore each of these three relationship boundaries in more depth below, with a particular emphasis on the team and the consultant.

### **External Environment**

Both James and Karl are highly confident and competent leaders, with great belief in their convictions about what is right for the organization. Given the high-pressured environment that each faces, this is not surprising and perhaps even necessary. At the same time, this leads each to a potentially exaggerated picture of his indispensability, which can have damaging effects on the leader’s ability to imagine that the team could be capable without him. Similarly, each casts himself as the protector of the organization in a hostile environment,

leading to an overly rigid insulation from external partners sympathetic to the mission that could ultimately be allies to the leader. As a result, the boundary with key advisors is under explored:

Karl operates in a system of contractors and advocates, each with a key role in contributing to the service provided by his agency to communities. While intuitively these external partners should be allies in advancing the organization's mission and goals, Karl often experiences them as added pressure in an already hostile environment. In many of the agency's initiatives to change practice, he has been reluctant to engage his external partners in dialogue early, worried that they would undermine the direction he knows they need to go rather than provide a source of good thinking that might strengthen the ultimate solution. Ironically, he has said that he does believe that these partners have more flexibility and innovation capability than the government system, yet is often still reluctant to engage them. This suggests that his fear of giving up influence and/or his deeply held belief that he alone holds the answers, overtake his openness to outside ideas even when he trusts the source of them.

James carefully manages his board of directors, and has been criticized by several board chairs for holding them at a distance rather than enlisting them in good debate about direction and strategy. Nonetheless, his tendency is to script board meetings and plan thorough presentations by his leadership team, leaving less room to invite them into challenges and problem solving. He has expressed that his reluctance to engage them in this way is a fear of being boxed in by potentially impetuous reactions, not trusting them to be measured and thoughtful about the complexities of operational and strategic challenges.

In each of these cases, there is little distinction between the "hostile" external environment (competition, a difficult market place, the press or the community) and closer-in external partners. Each leader sees his role as protector and guardian, and in taking it up shuts out a potential source of input and shared leadership. This keeps them in the primary role of adjudicator and visionary, as if giving up any space at the top might lead to a loss of control when the environment is primed to see you fail. While choices about engaging external partners are not make or break for the organization's or leader's success, they are good indicators of the leader's primacy in the leadership space, and his perhaps unconscious belief that it is up to him and him alone to deliver the impact necessary for success.

## **Effect on the Team**

The most consequential element of the leadership style described in this paper is the effect that it has on the team. This is the key place where the absence of space in the organization has lasting and often detrimental impact. To be fair, the impact is co-created by the team and the leader, although it is often perceived to be largely about the style of the leader. “Crowding out” takes shape in a number of ways, each with its own manifestations:

1. The perceived space between the capability of the leader and the capability of the team grows bigger and emptier as they are caught in a viscous cycle: the leader is ahead of the team, others feel incompetent, under authorized or not listened to and they withdraw, the leader becomes increasingly convinced that most are not up to the job and therefore over functions, others withdraw further believing they will never get the authorization they need to be successful.

As he pushes for growth and regional reach, James is understandably concerned about the caliber of his senior staff. He has often expressed off line that he has little confidence in one of his directors who heads the primary care service and suggested that this individual does not have the ability to think and work strategically. Not surprisingly, James intimidates this staff member, and as a result, she prepares rigorously for meetings with him yet always feels that she misses the mark in their discussions. In team meetings where she presents, James has been known to refer to her contributions as “out there.” As her anxiety increases, her performance decreases. James increasingly signals his lack of confidence in this Director by taking decisions or tasks away from her and making decisions about her area based on counsel from others whom he trusts more. The Director of Primary Care becomes angrier and begins to express that despite her efforts, she’ll never get it right with James. At a critical juncture, James decides to demote her and brings in someone else to take over the role. Unfortunately, the lack of reflection about these interactions and the way they have built over time lead to both of them taking very different messages away from this decision. James believes he has made a necessary change in a key leader over a critical strategic area, while his director believes that she never had a chance to succeed. Others watch this interaction from the sidelines, and express off line that it sends a strong message to be careful and to make sure that you “stay in line” by figuring out exactly what James has in mind and making it happen.

2. There is little to no reflective space for learning and development of the team and organization, since the anxiety produced through group and individual interactions with the leader stunts the openness and productive vulnerability necessary for learning and growth.

One of the innovative practices that James has in place to engage the whole system in monitoring performance are semi annual reviews across key performance metrics, such as total costs, unit costs of delivery, client satisfaction, proposal writing, and fund raising. The stated intention of these reviews is to increase the speed of applying good strategic thinking. In other words, to review performance data together, pool multiple insights to explore possible hypothesis about why the system is performing or getting stuck and think together as a team about possible interventions that can move the needle in the next quarter. Directors with their top teams attend these reviews.

James has said several times that he hopes it will be an occasion for learning but as the reviews take shape, the tenor evolves in a more punitive way. Directors review data and often report a feeling of being “called out on the carpet” in front of their peers. The discussion is experienced as being purely a mechanism for accountability, rather than sense-making and joint strategizing. Adding to this dynamic, participants in the review lose natural internal boundaries in the meeting. They don’t sit in their service teams — and observers sense that sometimes a director hopes that someone else from their team might be called upon to explain a particular metric. The result is fragmenting. In response to this observed dynamic, we suggest several techniques for building “reflective space” into the format, including the use of mixed small groups to identify lessons learned and a structured process for consultation with peers rather than simply presentation. In response to these suggestions, James repeatedly says, “no small groups.”

3. The space disappears for productive exploration of differences within a team – in role, point of view, skill – since the dynamic becomes overly focused on one-on-one interactions between the leader and individuals, while others refrain from pushing one another in an instinct to protect each other from exposure. A norm develops that “I won’t raise any issue with a peer - if you don’t raise issues with me” – so the folks with perhaps the most comparable insight to an issue about a substantive issue is likely to hold back - leaving it to the more distant leader to drive the thinking.

I worked closely with “Sarah,” one of Karl’s directors, to help design and implement a radical new service delivery system intended to change many of the ineffective practices that led to recent crises. In order to be effective, she needs her peers to engage actively in the planning since a key aspect of changing practice is working more actively across the boundaries of the agency. She has trouble getting her peers attention and engagement, and the planning suffers as a result. One peer in particular has been challenging to engage, and it looks as if

her lack of participation will create a major set back. This same peer is facing pressure from Karl on one of her own initiatives. Sarah continues to resist confronting her peers, and decides to keep working around them rather than pushing for their involvement. When I ask her about this choice, she has two responses: they are under significant pressure on other fronts, and it might be easier if she can do her work under the radar screen anyway, since she doesn't really want to deal with the inevitable resistance.

In a related example, Karl is characterized by many on his team as "going off" in meetings when he gets triggered by an issue that he feels is not being handled well, while others sit back and refrain from engaging in the conversation. This has at least two effects: it amplifies the dynamic of Karl playing the "heavy" in substantive debates, and it makes exchange *between* his team members informational and transactional rather than opportunities for substantive debate, thinking together and pushing each other on important change agendas.

4. Team members collude in a process of projective identification with the leader by putting their own strengths into him or her – the leader becomes the sole strategist, authority and negotiator, resulting in team members being depleted in those dimensions. As they slip stream behind the leader's aggression, the space for their own ambition and authority is diminished and they become increasingly dependent on his/her's.

James hired an experienced regional strategy director with the sole intent of assessing where in the region the demand for the agency's services was likely to grow. When a critical question came up about acquiring one of two not for profits, each in a different locale in the region, the director who had assessed the two locales in great depth disagreed with James instinct about the agency to go with. James decided to go with his own choice, in spite of the fact that he had hired an expert to give him advice exactly in moments like these.

Karl has a reputation for being among the few high level executives in city government who acts like a front line manager. He is known to send off emails over the weekend inquiring about the micro details of a specific case that has come to his attention (in a system with thousands of cases), sending his team, their teams and their teams' teams scrambling to respond. On one hand, it is a hallmark of his passion for the work and his deep knowledge of the work. On the other hand, it is arguably a misuse of leadership resources, and monopolizes "urgent" attention of many, right down to the front line, as they drop everything to respond to his inquiry. He is also signaling that he doesn't trust those with the authority for managing these cases to do their jobs. And the fact that his direct reports – also leaders of the agency – respond reinforces that message.

Across all of these examples, the leader has been guided by his instinct about what the organization needs to succeed. And in the two cases of Karl and James, neither intends to de-skill their team in the process. They have even said that the process of thinking with an audience or interacting one on one with individuals helps them become more clear in their convictions about the best way forward

on any particular issue. Similarly, their team members often testify that the leader's instincts are spot on and his vision for the organization has brought the organization to where it is. Yet it is this same dynamic that threatens the team's and organization's development. Each of these examples has the effect of de-authorizing team members in explicit or unconscious ways. Successful development requires an ability to harness one's own authority from multiple levels in the hierarchy (Hirschhorn, Gilmore, O'Connor 1993) and the top leader must consciously and actively work to generate the authority of others (Eisold 1997). In the absence of explicit effort to give authority away so that others may experience both the risk and the responsibility of taking it, talented individuals and teams lose touch with their own skill and spend too much of their energy orienting their action around a powerful leader. Rather than thinking and pushing on their own, they try to guess what the leader would say, even in areas where they have more expertise.

In addition to the costs on development, the lack of space can lead to less high quality decision-making because the leader is insulated from divergent points of view that might add helpful insight or information. James Surowiecki writes about the "wisdom of crowds" and illustrates how collective information often leads to more accurate answers (Surowiecki, 2004). In organizations, top teams often represent important differences within a bounded system by virtue of the different roles and points of view team members hold.

When leaders (even inadvertently) "close the boundaries" to differences (Agazarian, 1997), they shut themselves off from the information that differences hold, reinforce current practices and behaviors and roles become encrusted

rather than functional. Ultimately, it is up to the leader to encourage and make the space for exploration of differences, “opening of transitional space, space to think...to move spontaneously in relation to each other.” (Aron 2005, p. 355) When team members hide for cover rather than engaging in good debate, these differences never get surfaced leading to the further reinforcement of a dynamic in which the top leader alone is capable of leading.

### **The Consultant**

The consultant faces several dilemmas about how to help the organization change these dynamics. How can you shape and deliver advice to the leader to change his behavior when the some of the same characteristics are those that are pushing the organization in the direction that the external environment demands? What are the techniques for re-invigorating the confidence and capability of their teams without “killing off” the primary leader? How can you create structures and processes that put “transitional space” into the organization – for reflection, learning and harnessing the power of differences – without over exposing members of the team in the transition? And how can the leader shrink the space between his/her own ability and that of the members of the team in order to *make* space for continuity and development that will ultimately make the organization successful in the long term?

### **Becoming Part of the Dynamic**

All of this becomes even more complicated given that the consulting relationship itself gets fished into the dynamic of the leader. This happens in several ways:

1. The team triangulates between the consultant and the leader in the hopes that the consultant can influence or “fix” the leader in ways they feel unable to.

In Karl’s organization, we forged productive working relationships with several people on his top team. Over the course of 2 years of work with them on targeted initiatives, we would periodically get a call from some subset of three or four team members who consistently took the most reflective risks on the team. We could predict the request even before it was made, which was always some version of “We’ve got some concerns about how the team is working together. We think it’s time for a retreat.” A design team would get identified and charged to work with us to design a retreat aimed at increasing the effectiveness of their team. CFAR’s practice firmly believes in retreats as a vehicle for advancing the primary task of the team (authorized and “pulled for” by the leader), not for team building as an end in itself. Yet these requests were always similar in that they led with a hope for a changed dynamic rather than a substantive outcome. Each time, we went through the dance of getting consultation from Karl and good enough authority on a piece of substantive work to ground the retreat, and worked to design a retreat that advanced the substantive work while building in structured, reflective practices that could open up the space for a different kind of team exchange. Many of these retreats were in fact productive in this way. Nonetheless, we were aware that for the team, we represented an ability to get the team and leader to open space in a way that they could not do on their own. The challenge then became how to play this role in a way that built the internal capacity to create the space while monitoring expectations that we would somehow be able to change or “fix” the leader in fundamental and lasting ways.

2. The consultant over functions by becoming a player in a parallel dynamic with the leader, rather than maintaining the boundary of a coaching role consulting *to* the dynamic (as written about by Bowen, 1974 and Gilmore, 1982).

Just recently, we planned a 2-day session with James to review our work with his organization over the last year, and think together about our role in the coming year. We were particularly filled up with the dynamic of his leadership and his team due to several recent critical incidents and the beginnings of an anxiety producing discussion about his interest in succession planning. We had worked hard to have the meeting off-site, knowing that the space of his office stimulated authority driven behavior and might obscure the openness of the discussion. We went to meet him at the appointed place for the meeting (a building across the street from his office, where he was just finishing another meeting), and as we approached the building, he came out onto the balcony and announced to us “I’ve moved our meeting back to my office. I don’t want to meet here.” He then turned to a colleague who had been part of the meeting he was leaving and said jokingly, “You need this space now don’t you? Let me give you a hint, the right answer is yes.” Just as a member of his team would be, we suddenly were faced with the choice about whether to push him to do what we believed was productive and had thoughtfully worked to arrange in advance, or to go along with his forceful way of advancing his own outcome. Caught off guard, and with some trepidation, we acquiesced, feeling angry about it rather than pushing in the moment to discuss the alternatives. Ultimately, the specific outcome was not critical to our work. Nonetheless, it was a micro but powerful example of what it feels like to be “done to” by James, backing down in the face

of his aggression and carrying away feelings about the incident that don't get expressed or worked in any way that creates new space.

In a similar example, we had designed a meeting with James' top team with a goal of engaging the team in a thoughtful discussion about political developments in the city and state that could affect their funding and prospects for growth. It was a great opportunity to open up the strategist space beyond James himself. We had designed a highly structured meeting with several opportunities for small group work (which we had run by James in advance, knowing his propensities). Five minutes before the meeting, he walked in and informed us "I've decided we're not going to do it your way. No small groups," thus hijacking the meeting design entirely. Needless to say, the meeting enacted a similar, James centered dynamic. We were left feeling under-valued and insulted, enacting a typical dynamic with his team.

3. Team members who feel under-valued resent the consultant because he/she is perceived to be valued and validated in ways that internal team members are not.

The director who was asked to step down in my earlier example had a growing resentment of the CFAR team, because she felt that we were "stealing" the strategic thinking space that she deeply wanted to fill. She saw us as invited in by James and even asked later whether we had a role in the decision to demote her. In fact the opposite had been true, but we became the object of considerable resentment and anger in part due to our relationship with James. In this case, we had a good enough relationship with the Director that we could have this discussion openly and draw learnings from the incident. With others, we suspected that they held aspects of this resentment but did not have the relationship in place to be able to work this dynamic in a way that could yield productive results. One negative result is that the potential misplacement of anger and resentment on us becomes one more excuse not to push back with the leader. "If only they (CFAR) would go away, he would take me in differently."

Across all of these examples, the consultant becomes part of the dynamic, which taken too far can damage their ability to consult to it. A certain degree of parallel process is inevitable and even helpful if the consultants can use their experience as the basis for working directly with the leader and team to increase scarce reflective space. I discovered, however, that this is easier said than done, and that the success of this approach depends on a reflective capacity and "hunger" on the part of the leader for doing something differently. In the following section, I explore a small number of interventions that have sometimes succeeded in

putting needed space back into the leader/team interaction in the face of challenging, strong leaders such as Karl and James.

### **Possible Interventions**

I began this paper with the premise that the dynamic of strong leaders who crowd out the space continues to perplex me and test my own insights and skills as a consultant. Similar to how their teams must feel, I have often felt that every success is just temporary and that the challenge of sustaining space that creates development for the organization and the team never disappears in these settings. It does not feel possible or even advisable to have a goal of changing the leader's character, both because it does not work and because their character has provided guidance and strength that has made the organization successful. Instead, I have found that the interventions that are worth pursuing are those that create space for the leader himself by focusing on behavior, practice and experimentation rather than character or style. While I unrealistically wish the conclusion of this paper suggested the perfect recipe for consulting to these challenging dynamics, instead, I offer some interventions that we have found to open up space for reflection. Drawing on Winnicott's notion of creating "good enough" space between a parent and child to foster independence and confidence in the child, each of the following interventions attempts to help team members find voice and channel their skills in new ways, opening space to enhance both their own sense of competence and the leader's experience of the team:

***1. Create deliberate reflective space through structured rituals during retreats and team meetings.***

Consultants can be powerful agents of productively unleashing insights team members have but are not saying. The challenge is to take this role in a way that builds the reflective capacity of the leader and the team rather than simply being triangulated in dysfunctional ways (CFAR 2006). One method we used with Karl's team was to write a working note to the team that we handed out at the beginning of a retreat lifting up some of the unhelpful dynamics we observed in their team discussion (not pushing each other, flat conversation, low risk taking, see CFAR, 2000). We then asked several members of the team to play an observer role during each substantive discussion (staffed with questions to pay attention to), and structured a mandatory reflective debrief at the end of the discussion kicked off by the observers. Observation was a rotating role, selected at random at the beginning of each discussion. This process was a forcing mechanism for the kind of discussion you want the team to have in the course of its every day work. By experimenting with it in a retreat setting, many were able to take risks that they did not usually take in the context of regular team interaction, and saw both that the leader welcomed the discussion and that they brought more of their insights and clinical skills to bear when deliberately charged to do so. At the end of this retreat, we were able to persuade them to add a few minutes of "mandatory debrief" to their standing team meetings to create ongoing space for reflection.

***2. Use the techniques of large group design to break the patterns of normal interaction.***

As we saw in both cases, strong leaders of this kind often feel more comfortable in a large group discussion because it keeps them central and in fact provides stimulus for their own process of coming to decisions. At the same time, it is this same dynamic that crowds out the space for good thinking, debate, expression of differences and developmental risk taking. Using alternative configurations for group discussions - e.g. shifting between pairs, triads and small groups – can create different boundaries in a discussion and lead to more engagement and thoughtful work (Gilmore and Bing, 2006). As we saw with James, it is not always easy to employ the techniques and tools of designed large group work, as the natural tendency is to resist it. Without exception, however, when we have been able to persuade a leader to go in this direction, the discussion yields more productive and engaged results. The consultant is in a unique position to push this method and often has the best chance of managing it skillfully. One way we have found to counter a leader's resistance is to use the small group time to work directly with him or her. This has two benefits: it takes the leader out of the small group and creates space for more distributed leadership, and also provides the leader with focused thinking time and consultation about some aspect of the subject under discussion.

***3. Link the need for different behavior to a higher-level goal of the leader – such as succession or legacy.***

Strong leaders care deeply about the success and longevity of the organization and mission that they serve. While this contributes to many of the leader-focused dynamics discussed in this paper, it also creates an opening for a consultant. Succession and legacy depend on the future success of other leaders and on an ability to institutionalize the skill and vision that is often held closely at the top. With James, we used his desire for succession as he looked towards his retirement over subsequent years and his deep commitment to sustaining the mission to open up space for thinking about the development of others.

At the beginning, this was not an easy conversation and in fact served as a source of despair as his lack of confidence in others became even clearer. By sticking with it (helped by a longstanding and close relationship of one of the consultants on our team), it took a surprising turn. Succession and legacy triggered feelings of vulnerability for part James as he got in touch with and expressed his fear about a potential lack of meaning and purposefulness when he no longer had the job of leading. This opened up reflective space about what he might do when he was not at the helm, and in turn created the space to think reflectively about the impact of his behavior on his team and their growth trajectory. Just imagining a time when he would not be at the center forced him to think in a different way about those who might be. Again, linking to legacy and succession does not turn the tides magically, but it does have the potential to build the reflective capacity of the leader, which we believe is a pre-requisite for opening space on one's team.

#### ***4. Help individual team members build their skill set of working with the leader's style.***

A common reaction of team members who are frustrated by a leader who crowds out the space is to retreat to their corners and nurture work under the radar screen to protect it from scrutiny and judgment. In my consulting work, team members have often wisely reflected that they are not able to change the leader. At the same time, there is often room for their own skill development in interacting with the leader more productively. It is easy to get pulled into a sympathizer role as a consultant, since the dynamics experienced by team members can be so painful to observe. At the same time, I have found that there are ways to be productively tough on team members and coach them to take risks in their interactions with leaders, put more of themselves into the discussion with teams, and perhaps most importantly, explicitly test their take-away perceptions after the fact when difficult incidents occur. Take the example of James' operations reviews. Many participants walk away feeling that they have been called out on the carpet, while James often feels it has been a productive conversation. Imagine the power of testing that reaction with James – who would authentically be surprised by some of the hallway chatter. Similarly, coaching a team member to prepare in different ways for their interactions with a leader – e.g. thinking about what they want and need out of a discussion, imagining the typical response given the style of the leader and thinking further about how to get beyond that initial response. Consultants can help team members engage rather than withdraw, and as long as there is good enough trust in the leader to

be open to a periodic push from team members, it is one way to break the vicious cycle of aggression and withdrawal between a leader and his team.

## **Conclusion**

In his article about “The Task of Leadership,” Eisold notes a trend in self-help leadership books that implicitly suggest that leaders must figure out on their own what to do (Eisold 1997). Like Eisold, students of systems and organizations know deeply that part of leadership is authorizing teams and multiple parts of the system to play their part in success. This paper has focused on strong leaders – with the vision and skill to author their own books on successful leadership – whose very strength can lead directly to weak systems and a lack of distributed authority and development. Richard Jeffries wrote that “nothing grows in the shadow of a great oak” (Jeffries 1884), and we see that to be true again and again in organizations as well as in nature. As consultants to these leaders, our challenge is to use our own experience of this dynamic to help put needed space into the organization for development and learning. It is not an uncomplicated challenge, but a worthy one. Ultimately, this space will contribute to a more powerful achievement of mission over time, even in the most challenging settings.

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