

## **Daring to desire: ambition and competition in ‘altruistic’ organisations**

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## **Daring to desire: ambition and competition in ‘idealistic’ organisations**

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For many people working in ‘idealistic’ organisations, ambition, competition and power are ‘dirty words’ describing undesirable and destructive characteristics often denied in themselves and attributed to others whom they would not wish to be like. Our thesis is that this splitting and projection seriously inhibits the capacity for effective and creative leadership.

The paper starts by describing a sequence of three sessions in the second year of role consultation with Lina, a very successful departmental director in an international charity. Promotions had usually come without her actively seeking them, and she could not identify in herself any feeling of ambition. She believed the intense competition between the ambitious male leaders of the two largest departments was a major hindrance to the organisation’s becoming more influential in promoting human rights, and she put considerable energy into fostering internal cooperation by initiating cross-departmental projects.

In the first of the three sessions, Lina for the first time was able to be in touch with her own ambition. This led to an enormous leap forward in her capacity to think. By the time we next met three months later, she had formulated an insight into a key organisational dilemma which she had been struggling unsuccessfully to do for two years; it was as if clouds had rolled away revealing a previously hidden landscape. In the third session of the sequence, Lina was actively planning how to impact more effectively in the field of human rights. Not only was she thinking more strategically about the part her organisation could play, but she had started putting in place a plan for developing her own skills and experience so that in three to five years she would be in as strong a position as possible to compete for a more powerful job with greater scope for influence, whether as CEO of her current organisation or as a leader in another agency.

Organisations set up to serve others often attract people with compelling reparative strivings related to particularly strong anxieties about damaging others. Competition can feel murderous while ambition is equated with being self-serving. Altruistic organisations provide a social defence system where these drives can be denied and controlled. However, splitting off and projecting aspects of oneself is inevitably accompanied by loss of potency and inhibition of the capacity to think. Although this was not immediately evident in Lina's case, given her high performance, the increase in her ability to think and act strategically once she re-owned her previously split off ambition and competitive strivings made apparent how much of her real potential had previously not been available to her to use.

Role is often conceptualised as the area where person and organisation overlap. New work by the Grubb Institute proposes an alternative conceptual framework locating role in the area of overlap of three rather than two domains: 1) person/desire, 2) organisational system/purpose, and 3) context (the wider environment with its needs and resources). Initially Lina focused almost entirely on the second domain (system/purpose) which sufficed for her to be a successful departmental head. However, when she was able to own and link her desires both for herself and on behalf of the wider context, i.e. to discover the inter-penetration of all three domains, she found new freedom and potency. It became possible to re(dis)cover an energising sense of the 'why' of the organisation and herself in it.

The words 'compete' and 'competent' have the same Latin root, 'peto' (= 'seek'). Without desire there is no seeking, no competition, and no reaching for the stars. There is some evidence that the dynamics described in this paper are not confined to 'idealistic' organisations but are becoming increasingly prevalent among some of the 'best' people in our society, to the potential impoverishment of us all.

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