

***Myth Busters – who you gonna call? Consulting to group myth and the risks associated with exploring the illusions***

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***ABSTRACT:***

Some client work more than others serves to reaffirm and highlight the unique and differentiating advantages of having at our disposal a substantive body of thinking and theory to help make sense and meaning of what might otherwise be crazy-making in organisations and organisational consulting. In our undertaking to consult to a medium sized, privately-owned company, some core concepts like ‘projective identification’, ‘parallel process’, ‘psychotic defences against anxiety’ and ‘group myth’ came manifestly to life. However, surfacing and naming what proved to be a collusive illusion about the nature and structure of the organisation may have spelt the end of the consulting project.

This presentation of a consulting case example seeks to engage in an exploration of the risks and adventure associated with ‘myth busting’. In particular, our presentation seeks to explore one of the symposium’s sub-themes of: When in consulting to organizations do we find that we are calling into question a group myth and therefore undermining how people make meaning? What makes an interpretation, whether expressed in a diagnostic report, a working note or a verbal statement, meaningful?

Deeper exploration of the case reveals a theme of ambivalent motivations amongst the owners of the organisation as to their roles as ‘owners’ and ‘workers’ within the company. The feelings of ambivalence were defended against, and manifest in dynamics of splitting and intense interpersonal conflicts amongst many of the staff, including some of the owners. The initiation by the consultants of bringing together the leadership roles that most evinced the splits, resulted in an act of aggression by the owners that we came to understand as an act of retribution towards a former CEO. Thus the meaning of the ambivalent motivations for the role of organisational leader became clear.

**Key words: Ambivalence, Vengeance, Group myth, Motivations, Organisational consultancy**

## Introduction

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One of the themes of this symposium captured our imagination because of the way it spoke directly to our current experience of consulting to an organisation:

**When in consulting to organisations do we find that we are calling into question a group myth and therefore undermining how people make meaning? What makes an interpretation, whether expressed in a diagnostic report, a working note or a verbal statement, meaningful?**

Our hope and intention is to engage you in an exploration of what we call the ‘risks and adventure’ associated with ‘myth busting’ when consulting to organisations. Through the presentation of a consulting case example, we highlight the application of psychoanalytic and systems psychodynamic theories in seeking to make sense of extraordinary events and behaviour within an organisation. In particular, we are curious to extend our understanding of the function of ambivalence as it was manifest first in the management of the organisation and second, as it became manifest in the consultants. Further, the functions (or lack thereof) of unconscious guilt and shame, seem to offer something substantive in coming to understand the dynamics within the organisation and also, the dynamics between the client and the consultants.

The case is intriguing and full of Shakespearian drama and hidden plots. We are also interested in how this exploration might extend our understanding of consulting practice and the theory that contains it. As consultants, we are always vulnerable to be ‘drawn in’ and ‘used’ by clients in ways that are often not discernable at the outset, but may become apparent en route. The discovery of how one is being used or what one is left holding provides key data about the dynamics in the organisation. When, in an organisation, (as was the case with this one) the psychotic anxiety is not contained and is being ‘acted out’ in violent and destructive dynamics, there is every chance, that the consultants will discover ahead of the clients, the illusion or hidden assumptions that organisational members have been operating under. We believe that it is this capability to discern the hidden dimension that differentiates a systems psychodynamic approach from more mainstream consulting. However, there is a formidable challenge in making this insight available to clients in ways that are:

- Unencumbered by the consultant’s moral judgement (especially where damage is or has been done);
- Able to be heard and able to be thought about by the client;
- Sufficiently containing of feelings of shame and guilt so that a shift to reparation and development can be made.

In this presentation we will:

- Provide an overview of the theoretical framework for our consulting practice;
- Introduce the case example and some critical incidents;
- Explore the application of psychoanalytic theories to our analysis of the case and
- Consider the implications for consulting practice.

We would then like to open up a discussion about these last two points in particular.

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