

Change And The Role Of Intimidation Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Change in an organization is not a coherent, compact process – depending on situations, psychosocial backgrounds, perception of the process by different groups of individual, but can have an asynchronous course, sometimes conflicting, with breakdowns which can have unexpected side effects, such as blocking initiatives, distortion of the correct perception of events, action paralysis, etc. Tensions and insecurities may give rise to different maladaptive behaviors. In the following are highlighted certain characteristics of the reactions of leaders in the organizational systems to the actions of some subordinated reformers as a series of intimidation rituals. Each successive "control ritual" represents an escalation of the authority's efforts to discourage an individual (and those who might support) to continue on promoting the reform.

Keywords: control, intimidation, reformer, organization, change

Middle Management's Mechanisms Of Control

The rituals of intimidation satisfy the two primary concerns of authorities confronted by a subordinate who proves not only able to specify the requests of a significant number of members within the organization, but also capable of proposing solutions to solve them. The first concern of the authority is of course, to control the reformer in such manner so that he fails to recruit endorsers. The other concern is to exercise control in the direction where they shall be absolved from any wrong action on the said issue. The concerned individual must be controlled so that neither they shall continue on actually being a spokesman, or to become a martyr. When the superiors face a subordinate reformer, they seek his silence or disappearance, whichever would be easier to obtain. "The authorities" must also carefully keep their reasonable management image and would prefer the reformer to willingly leave than to be officially removed.

To illustrate that, this presentation will describe the rituals of intimidation used in different organizations by the authorities in order to suppress protests when they rather prefer to **intimidate** reformers than to channel the organization's resources towards the structural and personal changes needed to turn a "nonconformist enclave" into a cohesive and effective group. It also suggests that an organization goes on major changes in integrating and accommodating a group of dissidents only when the intimidation rituals did not resulted in calming the individual who constitute "the spearhead" of the reformist movement.

In the ensuing debate, we will be concerned primarily with the reformer who emerges from the bottom of the organization's hierarchy and challenges, disturbs the middle management. The reformer threatens the middle management in three distinct ways. The first threat is due to the veracity of his allegations about the inadequacy of specific actions of the middle level members, as also due to suggestions to correct these actions. If the reformer is correct, the middle management will be afraid that their superiors will punish them when they discover

the truth. The second threat comes from the teachings of the challenge represented by such a reformer, from his demand to act, which will reveal the strength or the weakness of the involvement, commitment of the middle management within the organization. Third, the reformer's challenge may indicate to senior management that the middle management are not able to maintain order in their own jurisdiction. To protect their own interests, the middle level bureaucrats feel that their only defense against reformers subordinates is intimidation.

Intimidation rituals involve two stages: **Indirect Intimidation** which involves two steps, *nullification* and *isolation*; and **Direct Intimidation** which also entails two steps, *defamation* and *expulsion*.

Stage I : Indirect Intimidation

Step 1: Nullification

When the reformer first contacts on his immediate supervisor, he will ensure him that the allegations or suggestions brought are worthless, the result of misunderstanding or misperception of the subordinate. In this stage, superiors hope that the reformer will be so impressed and even frightened of authority, that he will understand from the direct message that his initiative is based on error. If, however, the reformer insists, his superiors will often agree to conduct an "investigation". The result of such investigation should convince the reformer that the accusations are groundless, the possibilities of increasing the efficiency or revising the organizational goals have been properly estimated by the competent authorities.

Bureaucratic justification of these responses usually focuses on the reason that the methods used in dealing with these "wacky" and "enthusiasts" of the system discourage them from disturbing the calm, the functional routine of the organization with their weird ideas or their personal quarrels. Also, middle management uses these rituals of nullification to dominate a potentially explosive situation (for them or for other members of the organization), quickly and without much fuss, in order to prevent unfavorable publicity, to maintain the state of organization in a convenient ignorance, and to prevent the development of an understanding and concerning audience for the reformer's ideas. The explicit message is the following: "*You do not know what you mean, but thank you anyway for addressing to us. We will inquire into the reported issue*". The members of middle hierarchy will then proceed in covering any truth existing in the reformer's arguments that bothers and worries them.

The strength of the nullification ritual to stop the protest derives from an element inherent to bureaucracies: the always attractive opportunity to escape (to dodge) from the personal responsibility for any of the actions. Thus, if people try to change, somewhat, they generally do not continue beyond the first ritual, this being a process conducted to cancel the reformer's will and to allow his superiors to reaffirm the correctness of the collective wisdom of the organization, while erasing the consequences of their wrong actions. Nullification provides exactly to the so-called reformer the possibility to waive, remaining grateful for his personal increased comfort given. This evasion of responsibility allows the reformer and the authorities to compromise to the effect of admitting that the organization is not the best in the world, but it is still one that improves itself.

The repeated compliancy to the nullification ritual ("banging your head against the wall" phenomenon) expects to convince any sane organizational member that a reformist presence or voice are undesirable. It is expected that he takes the hint and ceases to bother his superiors with his misguided opinions. Gestures of generosity from the middle management are not

unusual if the individual decides to leave the organization, and such concern is usually supported by helping the reformer to find elsewhere an appropriate job

Step 2: Isolation

If the reformer persists in his efforts the middle management will separate him from others peers, subordinates, and superiors, thereby softening the impact of his ideas in the organization and making extremely difficult any support in the favour of his position.

Middle management leaders argue that this procedure represents the exercise of its institutional rights working in the favour of the organization's protection. This attempt to isolate the reformer can also be seen as a show of force, as a way to secure their own superiors (if these caught their attention), their subordinates, and probably himself that he can keep order in his own jurisdiction.

Attempts of isolating the reformer include closing his communication channels, restricting the freedom of movement, and reducing the resources allotted by the organization's budget. If all these do not neutralize the reformer, he will be transferred to the less visible position within the organization. In this ritual, the bureaucratic message is: *"If you insist on talking about things that you do not understand, then I must stop you from annoying other people with your nonsense"*.

The systematic refusal to respond to the reformer's criticism and suggestions represents another particular form of isolation. This lack of response is intended to convince the reformer of the worthlessness of his position; and if he forces his right to be heard, the action will be used to create a sense of helplessness due to which the reformer reacts excessively in order to elicit an answer from his superiors. This overreaction can then be used to argue reformer's psychological imperfections.

At the moment of organizational isolation, most people start to see the path they have started as a mistake. When an individual learns that now is the moment to silently repair his path, usually takes a step back entering the group and silently starting to participate in the life of the organization. When he realizes the deadlock of his career within the organization, he can decide to leave it so "gracefully" as possible, although can quietly live with his own ideas. Middle managers often end up by offering the reformer the assistance in finding a new job, with the assurance that *"we only want what is good for you"*.

Most forms of isolation are intended to convince the reformer of the futility of attempts to initiate changes since their own superiors instructed him to take care of himself. The reformer practically guarantees his own defeat if he responds to a systematic lack of organizational response by confronting his superiors by violating the policy and laws. The temptation to dramatically confront the lack of reaction of the administration and often using self-defense methods mostly originates in the intense frustration induced by the reformer's belief that the systematic lack of response violates his fundamental right of freedom of expression and entails the induction that the reformer himself is inefficient (Turner, 1973).

The lack of response at what the reformer believes is the crucial result for both himself and the organization can be frustrating enough to cause it to act, anyway reckless, in relation to clarify the situation. From the administration's point of view it can be regarded as *"making the rebels to express freely"*, *"give them enough rope to hang themselves"*, or, more formally, as a deviant-heretical change (Harshbarger, 1973).

Stage II : Direct Intimidation

Step 3: Defamation

If the reformer refuses to remain silent, and instead rallies support for his position, the middle management leader will start to impugn the reformer's character and purposes. *When legitimate methods fail – middle management may resort to some illegitimate or non-legitimate methods* (Leeds, 1964, p.126). With the aim to intimidate not only the reformer, but also anyone who might listen or believe him, the middle management leader will often distort the events, or he will even fabricate events to justify his attitude, and, why not, his behavior.

Defamation aims to separate the reformer from other potential sympathizers by attributing his expectations of reform to some questionable purposes, which reside in pathology, or in a crass incompetence. These three pretexts to attack intend to blackmail the reformer to submit and to turn the commiserative supporters in a confuse crowd or into an angry herd who feels resentful for being misled by the reformer. The reformer finds himself facing accusations which only him and his accusers know are either false, or irrelevant to the value of his reform initiatives. The reformer finds himself „caught in the middle”. His superiors will use their offices and their positions of trust and responsibility to create the impression, in the mind of other member of the organization, that their accusations of incompetence, personal interest, and pathology are true. If the reformer continues in front of these accusations, he risks on being seen as power-grabbing or irrational. If he gets intimidated he allows superiors to win by surrender (giving up the fight).

One strategy of superiors is to accuse the reformer that he acts as a result of his Oedipal conflicts. Such a depersonalization of the reform efforts of a subordinate (especially of a young subordinate) allows his superior to present himself as a good „father” who has to face a quarrelsome „son”, and blocks any examination of his conduct which could reveal a challenge from his behalf. In this way, the bureaucrat hopes to persuade others in the organization to respond to the reformer as to a sick person who needs treatment or a child who needs to be cared for – situation which allows him to take the role of „decent father” in relation to other subordinates and with the reformer, if and when the last one capitulates and admits his need of help and guidance.

Defamation rituals are practiced by superiors to move the attention on themselves towards the reformer. Superiors hope that by accumulating sufficient doubt about the reformer's reasons, intentions, and personality, enough people in the organization will think that „*where there is smoke, there must be fire*”. The message of this ritual is: „*Do not listen to him (do not listen to his message) because you can not trust such a person*”

Like the rituals of nullification and isolation, the ritual of defamation is both a goal itself, and also a preliminary of the final ritual of expulsion. Superiors hope that, by threatening to destroy the reformer's reputation and character, he will retreat in silence and passivity or he will leave the organization. If, however, the reformer continues his efforts, superiors will prepare the ground for his expulsion.

If the defamation ritual is undertaken, its target is, of course, the reformer, and not simply a nonconformist or a deviant person. His superiors would not need to engage in public intimidation strategies if there were no substance to his challenge. Clearly, the validity of the reform initiatives that leads superiors to try to destroy the reformer's credibility. If this destruction of the reformer's credibility with his peers, subordinates, and top management is

effectively conducted, others in the organization will desert the cause and he can easily be removed as an undesirable member of the intact organizational team.

Step 4: Expulsion

When neither nullification, isolation, nor defamation can not reassure the reformer or can not force him to „voluntarily withdraw” from the organization, the middle management seeks to obtain an official decision for his dismissal. If succeeded, there can be achieved three objectives. Obviously, by expelling the reformer, his superiors will deprive him of any real or potential adherents, and will weaken any opposition to their authority. An official dismissal serves as a warning for other potential reformers that middle management has the power and the authority to eliminate those who create trouble (disorder). Finally, the act of expulsion – a verdict of unsuitability – supports the assessment that the reformer is an immoral or irrational person.

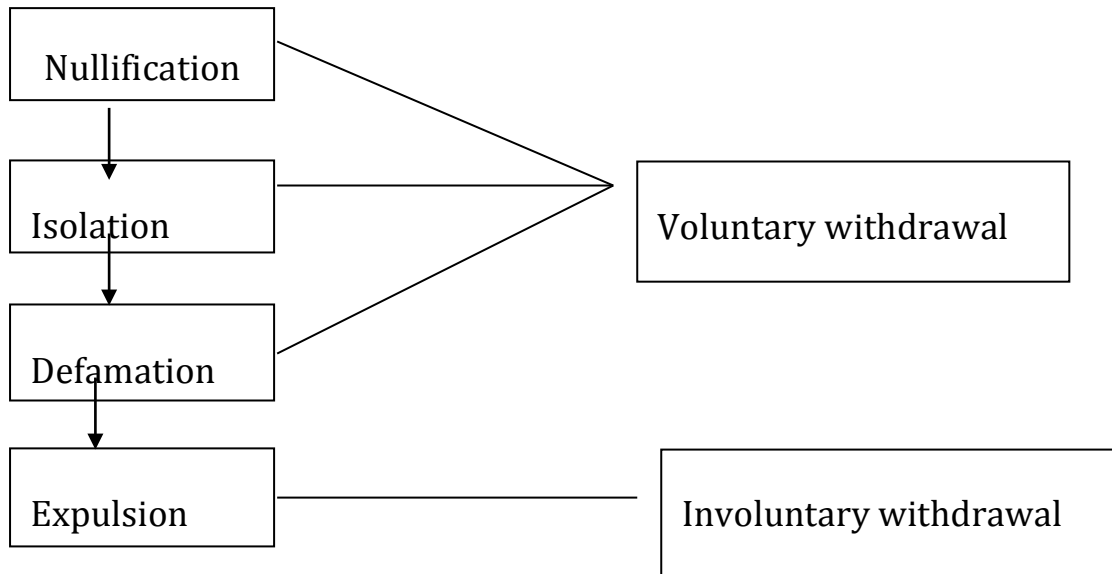
Obviously, middle management would prefer that the reformer bale out voluntarily. Managers wish to avoid public and formal procedures which often accompany an official request to dismiss of an employee, because the accuser (the superior) can be analyzed as carefully as the accused, if the accused person wants to seize the favorable opportunity that is offered. The expulsion ritual involves the formal submission of evidence, the keeping of records, the establishment of an independent investigative body unit, the right to cross-examination, which all function to threaten the image of managers as reasonable, honest and hard-working servants of the organization. Formal dismissal proceedings are often shunned by middle management since it implies the fact that the organization failed, and that they, in particular, have shown themselves unable to maintain order.

Ritual Cycle: Absorbs And Destroys

Indirect intimidation is trying to absorb the reformer’s accusations and suggestions, first by depriving him of effectiveness or validity, and then by treating him as being an „invisible person”. It also tries to absorb the protest through the psychological and physiological exhaustion of the reformer so that he begins to doubt his own experience of reality, his own ability to perform the tasks incumbent and his own meaning. Authorities hope that the reformer will come to believe that the task he assumed is humanly impossible, and that the fatigue and confusion felt are the result of his inability to accept human nature for as it is. In short, they hope that the reformer will feel so inadequate that he will be satisfied by further engaging in the organization, in any conditions.

Direct intimidation is trying to destroy protest by destroying the reformer’s **character** (defamation), or if necessary, his **position** within the organization (expulsion). Direct intimidation represents the active attempt of the middle manager to destroy the reformer as a legitimate source of complaints and suggestions and to terrorize, if necessary, other members of the organization. Defamation rituals create a „bad” person, allowing once again the „good” organization to keep its rank and to benefit from the healing properties of solidarity when the reformer is cast out of the system. In this sense, the ritual destruction of the person necessarily precedes the destruction of his position within the organization. In sum, Figure 1 portrays the specific cycles of intimidation rituals. Cycle 1 is the most preferred by all organizations while Cycle 4 is the least preferred. Cycle 2 is preferred to Cycle 3.

Intimidation Rituals Cycles:



The Reformer's Image

Throughout this presentation, the individual subjected to the rituals of intimidation has been referred to as the reformer, a generic term for any organizational member who resorts to expression rather to avoidance when faced with what **he** regards as a situation of organizational deterioration or imperfection.

Expression is defined as: „any attempt at all to change, rather than escape from, an objectionable situations, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion”.

Therefore, in the sense in which it is being used here, „reformer” includes the various meanings contained in different names, but it is not intended to include the various meanings inherent in the term „organizational change agent”. Thus „reformer” refers to any member who acts, in any way and for any reason, to alter the structure and functioning of the organization, when he has not been formally delegated authority to institute change.

Why intimidation works

From this definition we can see that it is the organization which has the power to define the „reformer” as such, and attaches the stigma to many well-meaning individuals who does not seem themselves in a protest-role. It is often the case that a potential reformer initially thinks of himself only as a hard-working and loyal member of the organization who is simply trying to make things „better”, who wishes to be „understood” by busy but well-meaning superiors. However, by the time superiors begin the ritual of defamation, most individuals usually realize that, at least in the eyes of their superiors, they represent a threat to the established order.

The inside reformer is vulnerable to all the intimidation rituals that one particular organization has at its disposal. The outside reformer is, usually, vulnerable only to the rituals of nullification, isolation (in the form of systematic lack of response), and defamation, unless the organization he is challenging is able to pressure the parent organization into doing the intimidation for it.

Authorities in formal organizations are rarely directly challenged by subordinates, most individuals do not presume to express judgement of their organizational superiors. Belief in the wisdom and power of the people at the top serves to keep most individuals silent about their complaints concerning the „status – quo” –ul and their ideas (if they have any) for enhancing organizational effectiveness. Subordinates do not generally demand, as part of their organizational contractual arrangements, the power to hold their superiors accountable for actions in direct and continuous ways. So intimidation rituals are held to be a last resort reserved for organizational members who resist, for whatever reasons, the usual mechanisms of social control.

Reformer as „bad element”

In fact, the protest absorbing and protest destroying power derives, in large measure, from their infrequent use by organization. Conversely, if more members were willing to turn their various insatisfactions into reformist activities, intimidation rituals would lose much of their power.

To understand the effectiveness of organizational intimidation one must examine the reasons why peers and subordinates usually fail to support the reformer, withdraw support, or even actively resist his efforts. Their passive or active resistance may indicate a powerful desire or struggle for an organization’s scarce resources (material benefits or status, power or prestige- or even dependency). It may also indicate that they perceive themselves as cast in a unfavorable light by the reformer’s enthusiasm and heightened activities in pursuing present or changed organizational objectives. Members of the organization may secretly believe that the reformer’s efforts will be successful, and fear its implication for their position in the organization. If the reformer is successful in convincing top management to investigate the organizational „brain”, many may fear that close analysis of the performance of the parts will find them wanting. On the other hand, if the reformer manages to seize the reins of power, peers and subordinates may fear that they do not meet his zeal in pursuing new as well as old organizational goals he will turn them out of their present positions.

It frequently seems that practically everyone except the reformer has a personal stake in preserving the complicate fantasy of the organization, even though conditions in the organization are in fact unsatisfying to all but a few elite members. Bion has described a similar situation in a therapy group where members engage in a variety of neurotic attempts to resist and discourage changing the structure and functioning of the group that is obviously less than fully satisfying. It seems likely, then, that subordinates in an organization actively or passively resist a peer’s reform initiatives because the pain of the status quo is less intense than their fear of the unknown.

In general, the reformer finds himself initially with little or no support because there is an implicit acceptance of the bureaucratic order in our society and because most people find it difficult and improper to question the actions of authority. Most organizational members do not support the reformer at all, or they leave him at the first opportunity because they believe we will lose in his struggle with institutional authority, and they want to be on the winning side. Moreover, most people accept nondemocratic organizational conditions on the basis of the argument of tacit consent and refuse or withdraw support for the reformer, saying that he is free to go someplace else if he does not like his position.

Peers and subordinates may also resist the reformer because they suspect that he is committing the unforgivable sin of extreme arrogance (pride). They may come to believe that in taking upon himself the task to judge the organization and its leaders, he is acting in a self-

righteous manner. Those who wish to leave the reformer on this ground often use as supporting data the reformer's persistent efforts in facing the rituals of defamation.

Since the reformer's departure is usually associated with an immediate reduction or elimination of an open conflict, which, in turn relieves tension in the organization, members can wrap themselves in the organizational blanket and tell themselves that he was the source of the problem the whole time. When the emotional tensions diminish most members therefore experience a heightened commitment to the organization and return to their job with a renewed vigor. For those organizational members who continue to have doubts about the reformer's guilt, the fear of retaliation against „sympathizers” usually dampens their enthusiasm for the reformer's cause.

CONCLUSIONS

It is not possible to do more than to raise the issue of whether one should attempt to change organizations from within. Large formal organizations are going to exist for a long time, and their members are going to have to find ways to make them more democratic, because there really is no place for them anymore.

The serious reformer should be prepared to take advantage of organization's crises. He must learn how to recognize, expose, and make concrete those administratively designed arrangements that do not satisfactorily resolve critical issues. For it is a time of crisis that an organization is open to solutions to the basic problem of survival. Organizational members will be eager to adopt new structure that promise to relieve the uncertainty and anxiety generated by a crisis. If the organization has become internally weak, if it contains corruption and indolence at various levels, if the organization is beset by energy-consuming external pressures, if the organizational elite lack the resources or the will to initiate changes essential for organizational survival, then the organization might well be ready for successful reform from within. Such an organization might not be able to successfully manage the intimidation rituals.

Internal organizational reform is a difficult process because of the reform seen as constructive revolution and that by deluding ourselves as to ease of restructuring human society. The reformer's life is not an easy one. But neither need he feel doomed from the start by the inevitability of the success of intimidation rituals mobilized against him.

Any structural change immediately affects the culture and personality of each individual. If the organizational structure is based on position hierarchy, ignoring competences and initiatives, then surges up a specific institutional "culture", favoring adaptive behaviors such as: superiors flattering, blocking communication channels, stopping values, etc. Roles in such a system are formally prescribed, everything is ritualized and the impersonalization of human relations can only lead to conservatism, inertia, stiffness, following a pattern, resistance to change, frustration.

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