

THE SEARCH FOR GOLD IN THE SHADOW OF ORGANISATIONS?



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Introduction

This article is written for individuals who have a connection with organisations either as employer, employee, organisational consultant, voluntary worker or counsellor. Change is happening within organisations all the time but often the primary task of the organisation is a linear objective, such as the profit motive. Thus more creative opportunities to develop and support the growth of individuals as well as the organisation are lost or hidden in the shadows.

Today, with the structure of organisations being challenged more than ever, executives and employees are struggling to find a healthier work-life balance after years of living a work ethic mantra, 'more work hours equals higher productivity'. I believe acknowledging and working with the Shadow in organisations encourages the emergence of an innate evolution towards a deeper and richer working life that embraces more fully the 'whole person'.

My intention for the reader, in writing this article is to demonstrate that there are missed opportunities lost in the organisational shadow.

I believe there is an untapped resource that can reward the seeker, similar to an individual becoming more conscious of the elements of his or her own Shadow, and as a result realising talent, new skills and abilities, discovering a greater sense of self and therefore a broader place in the world.

As a consultant for organisations and a trained counsellor, I am aware that, as in my own life, I am capable of clearly communicating, what I sense isn't being expressed and finding on occasion that I get a negative or dismissive reaction. Sometimes the result can be painful or punishing and as a result of the experience I have set out in my recent research to uncover the broader context of the experience and broaden my understanding of how the shadow of an individual and organisation collude.

I have discovered over time that the root of these misunderstandings were unacknowledged issues within an organisation and or individual, which can be termed the Shadow of an Organisation. For example, in one company there appeared to be collusion

between the board of directors and certain employees, who avoided discussing the fact that one of our colleagues was an alcoholic. The Shadow in this industry sector was alcoholism. However this particular alcoholic was a highly skilled professional who found the stability and structure in employment and was using this structure to partly enable him to manage his addiction. Yet he was also providing the organisation with a valuable resource. If the colluders had made explicit what was happening, the conscious disclosure would have resulted in the termination of his contract of employment.

What is the Shadow of an individual?

For an individual, Jung defined the Shadow as the rejected and unaccepted aspects of the personality that are repressed whereas the persona is the social character developed by 'expectations and demands of society as well as the social aims and aspirations of the individual'.

Murray Stein in *Jung's map of the Soul* relates this to the deeper individual experience by asking the rhetorical question 'How can one be free, unique, and individual while also being accepted and liked by others and accommodating to their needs and wishes?' and infers from this that the corporate shadow is not fully unconscious but is known by at least some individuals who choose not to overtly express this. As in the case of the alcoholic.

For the individual these hidden elements seek expression and at the interface between the conscious / unconscious, anxiety arises. As a persona is created in a given situation such as the workplace the repressed elements can 'leak out' when situations encourage a response that is considered 'inappropriate'. It is here that we begin to get a sense of what an external observer such as a consultant can pick up on and see more clearly. However, voicing what is seen requires careful consideration.

By voicing the observed shadow there can be a resultant sense of shame by the recipient which, wipes out a sense of self worth; at its worst, if one loses face one might as well die.

Thus the cultural issues of an organisation will tend to create a collective shadow in the social microcosm comprising a number of individuals. This is a result of a collective sense of shame surrounding a specific shadow issue. On occasion, the group rather than they experiencing the feelings of shame themselves, may consider he/she who exposes this Shadow a troublemaker.

Identification of specific aspects of the Shadow at work

The restrictive structure that forms most organisations, suppresses individuality. Wendy Rose links the shadow with the culture of an organisation as 'the covert, the undisclosed, the undiscussable, and the unmentionable.'

In reviewing the aspect of the shadow in individual and organisation, Connie Zwieg and Steve Wolf in *Romancing the Shadow* identify the shadow into three areas. These are Sexuality, Money and Power. In identifying these specific headings we can begin to work more clearly with the potential issues. Also we establish areas for further enquiry that enable the organisation to develop more consciously and how a potential conflict can result from resisting explicit expression of the shadow as a defence against shame.

What is an Organisation?

To be able to be objective about this subject rather than working from just personal experience of organisation it is helpful to use Trevor Bentley's definition of Organisation as 'Groups of people in relationship bounded by a common purpose', which at face value appears simplistic but when applied to the variety of organisations uncovers the complexity that exists. The purpose of an organisation is to 'perform the current primary task' and is understood as the survival of the organisation.

Complexity arises because an organisation has many different identities; legal, social and physical. The common factor of organisations is that they are made up of people, each an individual. Thus 'if you change the people in an organisation you change the organisation, even though its legal or spatial identity

may remain exactly the same' (N Jackson and P Carter).

The Gestalt Model of Organisation

The Gestalt model of organisation describes two distinct systems that operate in relationship, and I refer below to the work of Trevor Bentley on this subject.

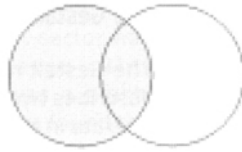
The Legitimate System is where the 'people operate in conformity with the established culture. They do things "the way that things are done around here."' It 'embodies the aims, purpose and values of the organisation', which is also the understanding of its leaders and authority figures and is espoused by them.

The Shadow System is where people often contradict the Legitimate System as they seek to differentiate and 'validate their own personal aims and values ... (and) where anarchy flourishes'.

The form of the Shadow System, which is self organising and less conscious, does not have conformity, is obscure and the boundaries not clear-cut as it 'changes and fluctuates according to individual needs and diversity is encouraged and welcomed'. It is not about the needs of the organisation but how they participate to serve their own needs and 'supports people in being who they are rather than how the organisation needs them to be'.

The two systems co-exist in the same organisation and overlap to

varying degrees resulting in different states of organisation an example of which is shown below.



Shadow System

Legitimate System

The Table below is created with reference to Trevor Bentley's work and identifies five types of relationship of the two systems and the impact that these relationships have on an organisation.

The effect of differing relationships between the Legitimate Organisation and the Shadow Organisation

| | LEGITIMATE/SHADOW CONFIGURATION | RESULT | |
|---|---|--|--|
| 1 | Shadow system eclipsed by legitimate system | People constrained by an autocratic and doctrinaire regime | |
| 2 | Legitimate system eclipsed by Shadow System | Anarchy reigns | |
| 3 | No overlap | Organisation is close to disintegration | |
| 4 | Significant overlap | Shadow system is supportive of the legitimate system | |
| 5 | Little overlap | Shadow system is challenging or pressing for change in the legitimate system | |

It can therefore be seen from this table that the relationship of the two systems is crucial to effective management and life of an organisation.

1. If the legitimate system and the primary objective dominate, individuals feel constricted and their persona limited. This leads to frustrated workforces who feel controlled by the management.
2. The primary objective is given little consideration where the Shadow eclipses the legitimate system. The purpose of work becomes something other than the purpose of the organisation.
3. Without overlap the workforce is no longer in relationship with the primary objective and operate with differing objectives to the legitimate system.
4. With significant overlap the organisation becomes cosy and self-satisfied. So much of the organisation is aligned little anxiety is created or expressed and does not look outside itself for the potential affect of change.
5. The converse is the organisation with little overlap where the workforce is in conflict with the primary objective yet still in relationship with it, resulting in struggle and disagreement and little clarity about how to harmonise objectives.

Exploring the shadow in the here and now within the temporary organisation of a Shadow Day Workshop.

As part of my research a day was organised which created a workshop for exploring in the 'here and now'. Ten participants came together, supported by two consultant facilitators, with myself as Director of the day. The Director supported the facilitators' process during the day and at break times with listening and reflection of their experience. It is important to note here that the format of the day was requested by a number of individuals who belonged to a larger network group.

The Primary Task for the day, as set out in the above heading is a method of experiencing the shadow. The brief for the facilitators was to reflect and paraphrase back to the group, the process as it happened. My role as Director was to bring the individuals together on the day at an arranged venue and state the Primary Task. After the initial hour I left the room and returned for the last hour to be part of the conclusion. We had 'set up' the Director and Facilitator as the legitimate system.

What became clear to me out of the day was the different shadows cast by each individual rather than a collective experience. However, the anxiety that was created clearly focused two types of projections, one that was individual

between the participants, the other towards the facilitators and Director set up by the structure created to hold the space, the Legitimate System.

Some of the more striking feedback was centred on the perception of power and control of the Director and for some this extended to considering whether I had wired up the room to eavesdrop on the group or used a hidden camera. It was also reported by one participant that conversations outside of the room, in the lunch and coffee breaks, centred on different issues unspoken in the room, such as sexuality.

From this can be seen the Gestalt model in operation. It reflected the explicit intention of the 'management' to hold the Legitimate System, while the Shadow System was expressed as projected fantasies of shadow behaviour by the organisers such as eavesdropping and participants' anarchic behaviour diverting the group away from the Primary Task, by challenging individuals and facilitators within the group about their behaviour.

In Bentley's model this represented only a slight overlap between the Legitimate and Shadow organisation. It was only some time afterwards that I realised that participants who had enrolled on the day were not the same participants that had

requested the experiential structure requested at the original meeting. Those who had made the request did not attend the day and the need of this group was different and not met by the structure of the workshop. It is therefore quite possible that the participants, as a group had a different primary objective, resulting in the small overlap of legitimate and shadow system and the primary objective was challenged.

The effect of the individual in relation to the Organisational Shadow

Drawing on the work of Trevor Bentley we can begin to see a pattern emerge in the relationship of the individual and organisation. His research indicates that when individuals are interviewed by themselves they 'project their self-image rather than the organisation's image'. Yet when they are interviewed in their team or work group they tend to contract their self-image and 'reflect a persona more in conformity with their colleagues' becoming 'more organisational role models'.

However the individual is seeking expression outside of the limited organisational persona, so that 'in most organisations people struggle to forge meaningful and effective relationships, whilst the

system and the culture in which they work seems to frustrate their efforts' The resultant anxiety has five common forms: stuckness, dissatisfaction with how things are, fear of failing, fearful of being unable to cope, conviction of an unknown but better way.

The release from this tension, frustration and anxiety is found within the Shadow system which 'supports people in being who they are rather than how the organisation needs them to be' Anxiety is released by expressing dissatisfaction in informal ways e.g. coffee breaks, office corridors and meetings outside of work.

While the Gestalt model indicates that in the changing environment where the shadow and legitimate system are in relationship, order can emerge as the members find their places in the system and 'stability returns, anxiety levels fall and productivity improves. What dysfunction was present is no longer apparent and a sense of harmony prevails. The organisation often moves onto a further level of growth and well-being'. In the workshop example it took several months for the participants and facilitators to communicate and understand why the day and aftermath was so turbulent, but over time the shadow system was expressed and the reason for the primary objective explained resulting in understanding why the organisation's needs were not met on the day.

I have facilitated this experience with organisations in a communications workshop after a percentage of the work force has been made redundant. Participants begin to find their new place in the organisation after the dialogue in the workshop dispels fear and provides a clear sense of place.

The individual and themes of communication within organisation which dispel anxiety

The work of Ralph Stacey in his book *Complex Responsive Processes* looks at the themes of communication between individuals and groups in organisation. These themes are the process of bodily interaction, which continually reproduce and potentially transform themselves as processes of interaction as symbols patterning themselves in themes of communicative action.

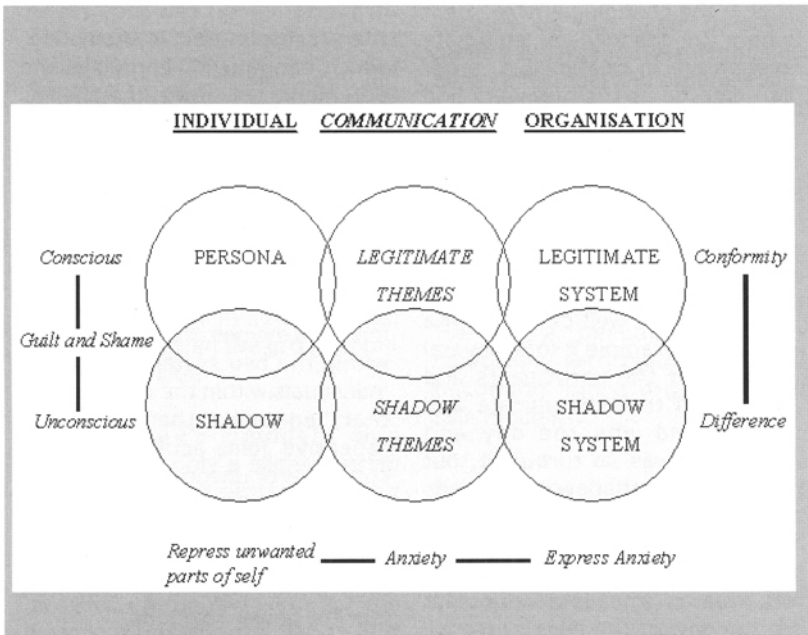
The terms Legitimate and Shadow Themes can be seen as being overlaid on to the Gestalt systems model as themes of communication within the two systems, between individuals within the organisation that 'legitimate themes enable repetitive joint action. Whether conscious or unconscious, shadow themes (always informal) are much more spontaneous and reflect unofficial ideologies, which may either sustain or threaten current power relations.'

The ability of an organisation to sustain itself is impacted by the exclusion of shadow relationships if we consider identity as legitimate and difference as the shadow and that the shadow relationships and activities are excluded. Shadow themes can take the form of gossip and as humour or parody 'usually only freely expressed in small trusted groups'. They 'are not illegitimate or illegal but nevertheless are felt, either consciously or unconsciously, inappropriate to conduct openly in public'

'create the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion through particular ways of talking'. Unconsciously the adherents are the 'in crowd' and 'those that do not or cannot, are excluded, as the 'out crowd'.' Changes in the communicative process and interaction shift the power relations and change this pattern. 'Such shifts generate intense anxiety and communicative interaction is recruited in some way to deal with this existential anxiety'.

The individual is 'enrolled' in these themes as a result of power relations as the processes of categorising individuals, which

The following diagram illustrates the components of relationship in organisation of both individual and organisation between what is Legitimate and what is Shadow.



What begins to emerge is that individuals conform to organisational culture as a result of the power dynamics, which include money and sexuality, (Connie Zweig and Steve Wolf's *Romancing the Shadow*), of organisational acceptability expressed through Legitimate Themes in the Legitimate System. However individual anxiety is expressed through shadow themes in the organisation and may leak into the Legitimate System.

These themes 'must all have arisen at some point in the past as changes from other configurations' and despite efforts to change they may remain the same or may spontaneously change as 'people in organisations interact with each other in the living present in ways that are patterned by informal-conscious/unconscious - shadow themes at the same time as that experience is patterned by the legitimate themes' (Ralph Stacey, *Complex Responsive Processes*).

Where the gold lies

However the anxiety of the individual, which enables the shadow, provides the environment for 'the freedom and creativity and truth and potential that lies in the corporate shadow' (David Firth *Corporate Fool*).

If we consider that the interface of the Shadow is where the unconscious process of the organisation is expressed and

suppressed then here is where the result of the creative process emerges. James Vargiu in *The Purposeful Imagination*, writes of the unconscious being where the creative process is completed before expression i.e. Vargui's third stage, after the earlier stages of information gathering and conscious process until stuckness.

So in some way the tension between the legitimate system and the shadow system is necessary for the creative process to occur and the organisation to remain vibrant. Here lies the gold and riches of growth and development of creativity rather than stagnation.

Conclusion

In an attempt to discover the link between the individual and the collective in writing this article, I have covered a vast area of knowledge, from the shadow and persona, systems theory of complex responsive processes in organisations and the Gestalt model of organisation and finally creativity.

At the core emerges the role of anxiety in the individual that pushes the undesirable into the unconscious, which is present in the individual and layered with the additional constraint of the organisation and its conscious framework. This aligns the individual towards a collective defensive position, which is the Shadow System, protecting each

of them from exposing the cracks in their individual personas at work, as the 'in crowd'.

The Shadow, therefore, does not have a role as such but a place in the organisational system. In fact it represents the unconscious ground on which we tread and the very air that we breath. Within this field is the narrow and more consciously defined field of awareness which we structure with logic and yet it is only an approximation in varying degrees to the complexity of human beings coming together as an organisation with purpose.

In working with the Shadow in organisations, just as with the individual, it is possible to identify the individual or organisation as a complex entity that exists in the larger world. The struggle to exist and function can be flawed by the unconscious agenda that is overridden by conscious structure and control existing within a power dynamic.

If we begin to embrace the 'whole person' at work and include more of each person in supporting the primary task or an organisation

perhaps we being to encourage a healthier way of working that addresses 'work-life' balance that allows a sense of fulfilment in every individuals life during working hours as well as in other parts of their lives.

Further Reading

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Connie Zweig and Steve Wolf *Romancing the Shadow* Ballantine Wellspring (1997)

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