Editorial: Toxic Leaders & Leadership Toxicity— Special Issue

Concerns about the misbehaviour of executives and the misuse of their position and power have intensified in recent years to become matters of profound public concern because they affect the well-being of so many and can undermine the standing and reputation of the organisations concerned.

I was, therefore, delighted to be given the opportunity of generating this collection of articles which are centred on difficult and complex fields of study that I believe should be at the forefront of every executive's mind as they go about their work. The articles in this O & P special issue offer insights about some of the underlying dynamics which can facilitate or impede—and in some instances destroy—an executive's capacity to lead and an organisation's ability to function.

The articles include contributions about destructive patterns of leadership; on the dynamics of leader dysfunction; the destructive effect of envy at work and on how followers may unwittingly keep toxic leaders in power. How Followers 'lead' their bosses and how organisation's can render their leaders impotent are matters also covered. The issue introduces interesting, potent, challenging and controversial material intended to stimulate thoughtful debate and practical action.

After an introduction, three articles are presented each of which offer a different perspective on leadership toxicity (Benson & Hogan; Aasland, Skogstad & Einarsen; and Padilla & Mulvey). They are written from academic and practitioner perspectives and based on extensive field work and research. These three articles set the scene for the case material which follows. Each case starkly illustrates the profound impact which the underlying emotional dynamics at work can exert and which, therefore, merit thoughtful study and understanding by consultants, business leaders, trainers and academics. All in all a mix of material which I hope you will find enlightening, useful and enjoyable to consider.

In conclusion, this collection of articles suggests to me that we could—and indeed should—prepare our leaders rather better than we do to understand, intervene and manage the complex dynamic web of interactions involved in leading and managing departments and organisations which have been so well illuminated by these articles. We owe this to our leaders, to their followers and to all those affected by dysfunctional leadership practices.

I am delighted by this Issue which I hope will be well read, stimulate more research, generate debate and discussion and help spur interest in the fields of study described by these authors.

Dr Michael Walton, Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, 25th May 2008

Good, Bad, Indifferent, Mad? A Leadership Paradox

MICHAEL WALTON

This article considers (i) that too much attention continues to be placed on emphasising the 'good' sides of leadership and that more sustained attention now needs to be given to examining dysfunctional, disruptive, toxic, counter-productive and 'bad' leadership and (ii) that too much emphasis is placed on the Leader alone as the architect of success and too little on the Leader-Follower-Other Triad.
A broader, and less sanitised, approach to examining and preparing for leadership is proposed that integrates the good and the bad, the singular and the collective.

1. Examining Leaders' Behaviour-in-Action

This brief article suggests that a more equal focus on the 'good' *and* the 'bad' behaviour of leaders would be beneficial in the preparation for, and exercise of, business leadership as too little attention has been given to examining what those in positions of influence and authority in organisations do that is counter-productive, toxic and dysfunctional.

Such a balanced perspective will, however, require those within the 'leadership industry' to become better informed about the murkier sides of 'leadership' (and 'followership') and to present a less sanitised picture of what leaders and followers do in the workplace. Doing so would recognise more overtly the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of leaders and emphasise the complex dynamics of leadership. As Schön comments:

> In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest might be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose.

Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems and non rigorous inquiry?

(Schön,1987:3)

Thus, this paper advocates moving towards the swampy ground of dealing more openly with (i) the covert and unconscious motivations and motives of leaders' and followers' behaviour, and (ii) towards illuminating errant deeds and dispelling myths of heroic, charismatic, omnipotent and 'faultless' leadership (and followership for that matter, too!). Whilst this paper does not address the importance of the psychological probing of an executive's persona to assess if they are 'fit for leadership' it does propose that a person's psychological make-up be taken more fully into consideration before appointment to positions of leadership are made.

A sound first step would be to expand conventional leadership development studies to include a fuller examination of the darker sides of leadership—the dysfunctional, disreputable, disruptive, destructive and toxic behaviours we see leaders *et al* exhibiting in the workplace. To look, therefore, at the full range of behaviours exhibited by leaders and not just those that appeal, are cosmetically acceptable or are seen to be 'nice to have'; to move beyond *Stepford* Leadership.

Whilst a number of prominent writers have highlighted the criticality of attending to such matters—and made major contributions to this field of study (e.g., Conger, 1990; Hogan, 2007; Kets de Vries, 1989, 2001; Levinson, 1978; Maccoby, 2000, 2007; Zaleznik, 1970, among others)—examining a candidate's psychological suitability for leadership, in spite of the popularisation of psychometric testing, generally seems still to be an also ran when most appointment decisions are made.

2. Adopting a 'Left-of-the-Dial' perspective

It is perhaps a 'no-brainer' that the behaviour of those in positions of authority matters to all of us—whether we perceive such behaviour to be good or bad, exemplary or faulty, considered or reckless, selfish or selfless, thoughtful or indeed thoughtless—yet it appears strange how little emphasis gets placed on examining such behavioural variations in a systematic and integrated manner. Whilst heroic achievements, cataclysmic failures, ego-centric behaviour and fat-cat bonuses grab the headlines—and energise the leadership press—moves towards a more penetrative understanding and assessment of the psychological suitability for corporate leadership remain somewhat stunted. Even when corporate scandals surface they tend to prompt somewhat voyeuristic descriptive accounts of what went on rather than a more reasoned analysis of events. Whilst these accounts may make interesting reading they rarely facilitate rigorous learning.

Many of this journal's readers probably see themselves as 'leader watchers' with each of us attempting, though our own biases and predispositions, to de-code the motivations of the executive behaviour we see exhibited before us. The more we can know about *why* our leaders tend to behave as they do the more likely we are to be able to predict how they may behave under varying circumstances and pressures in the future. Such predictions are critically important in the selection for top and pivotal leadership positions and are best based on understanding the full range of 'good' and 'bad' behaviour we see from leaders.

Although a more nuanced view of 'leadership' is now taking hold, leaders are still generally presented as if they will be flawless—*and good for us*—although this surmised essential goodness has been increasingly exposed as a myth through the continuing, and

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world-wide, media reporting of instances of mis-management, betrayal of trust, ego driven/fuelled behaviour, nepotism, greed, destructive envy, fraudulent and power-crased behaviour, criminal behaviour and the blatant exploitation of positional and political power. It is salutary to speculate that the high profile cases reported are but the likely tip of an iceberg of a far larger number of less editorially attractive accounts of daily leadership misdemeanours and counter productive workplace behaviour within organisations.

However, through making the study of dys-functional and disruptive leader (and follower) behaviour more acceptable, and viewing such instances as a normal and to be expected aspect of business life, we may be able to (i) prepare better those destined for leadership positions, (ii) be more thoughtful in matching leaders to different types of leadership challenges and con-texts, and (iii) reduce the incidence of toxic leadership behaviour and number of dysfunc-tional followers.

So why might such a rosy-tinted view of leadership have prevailed for so long? It makes one wonder, if we are so smart, just what has been missed, neglected or denied in our studies on the behaviour of leaders (and their followers) in organisations. It may be that little has been missed but merely the concentration of atten-tion has been too focused on particularly favoured facets of leadership to the relative neglect of other, more complex, less attractive or palatable, features of the behaviour of leaders.

Perhaps business leaders, practitioners, trainers, consultants, academics alike have fallen into a trap of emphasising what we want to see from, and believe about, those in whom trust is placed. Pretending perhaps that any accompany-ing 'bad bits' are exceptions rather than being an ever present part of the overall picture which then would demand fuller attention and consideration.

Thus, it may be that collectively we have been prone to only look at those parts of the leadership tapestry that we prefer to see and that we have tended, and been encouraged, to push to the side the more discreditable excesses of leaders 'as if' they don't exist. If so perhaps we now need to consciously re-focus and broad-en our attention and, as it were, tune-in 'to the Left of the Dial' and attend more purposefully to the non-sanitised facets of leader behaviour and organisational dynamics that are lurking in the background to complement more conventional leadership training.

3. The Leader-Follower-Other (LFO) Triad

The second theme of this paper suggests that a leader's behaviour, toxic or otherwise, is the product of their relationships with those around them as much as it is a reflection of their per-sonal psychological predispositions. In other words, 'bad' leadership is unlikely to be generat-ed by the leader alone.

In defiance of much of the literature, effec-tive leadership does not rest solely on the personal style, pronouncements, enactments and posturings of the leader. Leaders do depend on the actions of their followers, and other sig-nificant players, for success. Yet much of the leadership hype continues to venerate and pro-mote 'the leader' as if all others are bystanders or servants waiting to blindly follow directions and orders from above. Consultants and practi-tioners know it is not as simple as this would suggest. Leaders, Followers and significant Others interact together symbiotically—but not necessarily with equal influence—as vital and active determinants of a leader's personal and organisational success.

Although the behaviour of leaders have, not unreasonably, received overwhelming attention, the behaviour of Followers is now receiving

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increasingly more focused study and the recognition they merit in occupying a critical role in both enabling and disabling the success of their leaders (Frost, 2003; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla *et al* 2005).

If, however, leaders continue to be viewed and presented by business schools, trainers, writers, leadership Gurus *et al* as corporate celebrity 'star players', the font of all wisdom, the giver of instructions and the progenitor of business success then such views contrast sharply with the realities of practical leadership—contrasts that may trigger in leaders and followers, seemingly irrational, disruptive, dysfunctional or toxic behaviour.

Day-to-day leadership behaviour is a collaborative and relational phenomenon and could be viewed as revolving around the three dynamic sources as shown in Figure 1:

Firstly —   the leader whose behaviour patterns will reflect that leaders's past practices, systems of beliefs, stylistic preferences and psychological make-up,

secondly— the Leader-Follower & Leader-Other interactions and dynamics,

and

thirdly—   the Leader's perceptions & interpretations of the behaviour they observe from Followers, Peers and Others interacting together – leaders will watch and notice what is going on around them and make interpretations about what they see and what they imagine is being said.

Figure 1 depicts the primary interactions between the Leader with their Followers and significant Others (such as peers, professional colleagues, specialists and consultants). It also draws attention to the interactions that arise between Followers-Others which the Leader will
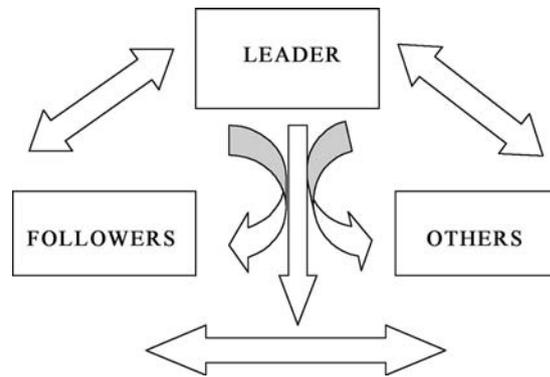
Figure 1: Key Leader Interactions (and Observations)

also be monitoring and keeping an eye on. The sense, and the importance, which the leader attaches to these third-party interactions will have an impact on the leader's subsequent direct interactions with Followers and significant Others. The main message is that the leader, far from being the main determinant of their own success, is dependent upon—and exposed by—the behaviour of those around them in relation to the contextual challenges they face moment-to-moment.

Such a view, however, is rather different from the conventional notion of the leader as the main player heroically showing the way and highlights not only (i) the interdependency of the position of being a leader but also just (ii) how the key to leader success does not solely in the gift/hands of the leader alone but also in the hands of those they lead. Yet much in the contemporary leadership literature, and in the face of the corporate calamities of Enron *et al* (McLean & Elkind, 2004), still remains oriented towards charisma, heroic, and esoteric patterns of leadership. This may, however, betray the urgent need to adopt a more realistic and practical appreciation of leadership behaviour-in-context that is necessarily flawed and comes complete with warts and all.

A more 'warts and all' approach to leadership prompts a number of questions. If, for instance, leaders are not flawless and if they display human failings and make 'mistakes' are they necessarily 'bad'? Do 'bad behaviours' make an

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otherwise 'good' Leader a bad or dysfunctional one? Can a 'good' leader also be a 'bad' leader at one and the same time? To what extent might a leader behave in ways which are both functional and dysfunctional, constructive and destructive, toxic and non-toxic, good and bad? In other words, it is interesting to consider how leaders may be viewed differently by different people at the very same time depending on the context, past history, the immediate tasks to be addressed, levels of trust—or distrust—previously established, personal agendas, expectations and the mix of personality differences involved.

If so, in our preparation for leadership, and in our assessment of a leader's performance, do we allow enough flexibility for a leader to be seen in these multiple ways or are we overly encouraged to adopt a more polarised position whereby leaders are, for example, good or bad, right or wrong, toxic or non-toxic?

4. Are we there yet?

To summarise, in this author's view, too much attention since the mid-50s has been placed on promoting a rather idealised, cosmeticised and sanitised picture of leaders and leadership. Such naivety has masked the inherent potential for the misuse of a leader's power and influence and diminished the significant impact which Followers have on the success or otherwise of their Leaders. Whilst recent years have seen the emergence of a more rounded and realistic consideration of leaders (and followers) and the behaviours they display it has been, with notable exceptions, *as if* only the 'good' side was preferred. Since 2001, however, such a romantic perspective has become 'dead in the water' following the unraveling of the corporate misdemeanors at Enron, *et al*. Consequently, leadership theory, practice, training and development should no longer be approached in the

naïve cosmeticised way it had generally been previously viewed and promoted pre-Enron.

Tuning-in 'to the Left of the Dial' is a way of describing the need to attend to undesirable leader behaviour—such as excessive emotional outbursts, penalistic and sadistic work place behaviour, envy and destructive rivalry, the misuse of power and privilege, excessive ego-centric manipulation, criminal activity, falsification of records, bribery and corruption—that in the past may have been glossed over, neglected, excused or presented as atypical leadership phenomena in the conventional preparation for leadership (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan, 2007). Preparation for leadership needs to examine such behaviours in addition to those on the 'good' and more acceptable leadership wavelengths.

Whilst leaders are not all good, and leadership is not always good for us, through adopting a more expansive perspective on leadership behaviour we may be more able to maximise the good and minimise the toxic, bad and mad.

As Zimbardo comments:

Consider the possibility that each of us has the potential, or mental templates, to be saint or sinner, altruistic or selfish, gentle or cruel, submissive or dominant, sane or mad, good or evil (2007:229).

As for us as individuals, so too for us as leaders and followers.

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Dealing with the Inevitability of Constraints: Toxic Sources?

MICHAEL WALTON

This article suggests that triggers for toxic behaviour may arise as a consequence of how leaders deal with the inevitability of workplace constraints and personal disappointments. A simple framework is introduced as one means of codifying possible leader reactions and describing the type of toxic behaviour that could follow.

Chained or unchained freedom?

A leadership role confers a wide range of rights and privileges; it accords power and status and allow freedoms of action to influence the course of events within an organisation. Such influence, status and power, however, is not without constraints and most leaders are not quite as 'free to lead' and pursue their own agendas as they may have anticipated or desired (Chapman & Long, 2008; Davies, 2008; Kane, 2008; Knight 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2008).

The relationship between a leader and their organisation is problematic (Walton, 2008). On the one hand they have been appointed to accomplish what their appointees have deter-

mined—to make things happen, give appropriate direction, take responsibility—and be custodians of their staff and the assets of the organisation. They are required to be responsible, responsive, considered and accountable in fulfilling their corporate role. At the same time each leader will have their own personal agenda, have a desire to be recognised and valued for what they do and, when the time comes, leave a legacy of success as evidence of their worth as a leader.

The compatibility of these two sets of agenda, the organisational and the personal, may be sufficiently congruent to allow the leader to 'feel at home' and do well come what may. But what if these agendas are potentially antagonistic? What if the organisational agenda threatens to

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overwhelm and submerge the personal one; what if the personal one is so driven that it subverts the organisation to its own ends? What if the leader feels so free and empowered that they feel they can do what they want and be as radical as they desire? What if the leader comes to feel imprisoned and captured, toothless and constrained? Such questions show how a leader could become vulnerable to being 'radicalised' by their ego and/or vulnerable to being 'radicalised' by the organisation—both scenarios representing bases for concern and capable of generating toxic behaviour.

The clashing of personal and organisational agenda at work is a feature of organisational life as leaders *et al* seek to progress their own needs whilst, at the same time, meeting the legitimate needs of those around them. Whilst this is not necessarily problematic, difficulties can arise however, both if a leader feels their initiatives to be unfairly or unreasonably blocked and, perversely perhaps, if they are given too full an endorsement to achieve their ambitions and told to 'just do what you think is necessary!'

How a leader responds to such situations could offer clues about the type of dysfunctional and toxic behaviour to which they may be prone and is the focus for this article.

Possible origins of 'radical/toxic' behaviour

The inherent psychological fragility of organisational life can easily be forgotten in the drive to meet targets, complete internal procedures, attend meetings, review stock reports and market trends, answer emails and attend to the needs of one's Blackberry (Walton, 2005). Yet beneath all the smoke, mirrors and distractions generated through daily organisational behaviour a leader's basic concerns about personal status, position, integrity and freedom remain. If it is felt these are being met so much to the

good; if not then trouble may be lurking just around the corner.

My working hypothesis here is that the more the leader feels able to accomplish their personal objectives—and through their preferred ways of working—the more they will be content to maintain the organisational *status quo*. Conversely, the less they feel this the more they may wish to find ways of changing, overtly or covertly, the *status quo* to suit their needs; to loosen the constraints under which they consider they are operating. Such changes may, however, prove to be toxic to those around them and to the organisation at large.

Leaders, in spite of their position, are not necessarily able to do as they wish without first influencing key institutional figures and influential followers who, however, may prefer things to remain as they are. In such instances, leaders could be said to be faced with two choices; either they can remain or they can decide to leave. It is with the actions and influencing strategy of those who remain—and who have to contend with the elation of 'getting their way' or the frustration of being told 'No'—which this article now concerns itself.

To have achieved a senior institutional position leaders have been successful and will, on appointment, have convinced their appointees of their suitability for leadership. Furthermore, they will have become accustomed in the past to having their demands met and in having their own way more often than not. When this pattern fails to continue—and at some point in a leader's career this will be the case—leaders may experience a dislocation between what has gone before and the current situation. If they have been 'constrained' this may cause a leader to question their capability and competence. Shock, dismay, surprise, confusion, anger and heightened ontological anxiety may follow prompting, in a variation of the fight-flight response, either (i) a retreat or (ii) a stiffening

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of resolve to push more firmly for what they want. Hitting up against the limitations of leadership could be experienced for some leaders as deeply unsettling and, depending on their psychological make-up, prompt covert as well as overt reactions intended to re-assert their influence and position.

On the other hand, a leader who comes to find that their ideas and proposals are accepted too readily may be prompted into making increasingly grandiose and narcissistic demands which may result in dysfunctional and toxic behaviour. So toxic behaviour may be induced through a leader feeling thwarted or blocked as well as through being lauded.

Such leadership reactions could destabilise their organisation in a similar manner to the behaviour of a 'free radical'. A 'Free Radical' is the term used to describe the behaviour of an unstable atom or molecule that seeks to stabilise itself in a manner which makes unstable a previously stable atom or molecule. This in turn is capable of setting off a change-reaction that becomes difficult to control and may damage a previously ordered, regulated and fully-functioning system. So here I am thinking about a leader who behaves as if they can do what they like (*i.e.* a 'loose cannon') or of a leader who feels deeply frustrated and blocked (*i.e.* an 'alienated subversive') and whose subsequent resentful behaviour covertly starts to undermine organisational stability.

Both types of 'leader free-radicals' will be disruptive and damaging but in different ways and for different reasons. Each would be capable of initiating a destabilising change chain-reaction. Meyerson (2001) coined the term 'tempered radicals' to describe those whose constructively challenging behaviour within an organisation remains just within the bounds of what is acceptable whilst retaining their personal integrity and authenticity in their drive for change. In this way they seek to move

things on but avoid adopting too radical an approach that could lead to their removal/expulsion from the systems they are in the process of changing.

The term '*free* radicals' can also be used to highlight, legitimise and sanction innovative, and potentially, 'radical' initiatives. In this way a leader with radical ideas can be acknowledged and recognised as such and given the opportunity to develop new ideas and ways of working in a bounded way which minimises the potentially de-stabilising impact of 'free radical' behaviour.

Tempered Freedom & Untempered Repression

Simply stated, my supposition is that when accomplished people are given too much or too little organisational 'freedom' the potential for toxic and dysfunctional behaviour is increased.

In Figure 1 below, (i) the degree of freedom of action an organisation allows its leaders is contrasted with (ii) the extent to which a leader adapts, or *tempers*, their behaviour to that organisation. This produces a simple framework for looking at a leader's behaviour in context. On the horizontal axis a leader's behaviour is described as 'freed' (*i.e.* relatively unconstrained by the *organisation*) or as 'captured' (*i.e.* where there is little scope for independent action, rule flexibility or decision-making discretion), whereas on the vertical axis the contrast is between 'tempered' (*i.e.* where the leader has adapted *their behaviour* to the organisation) or 'untempered' (*i.e.* where the leader has chosen not to adapt their behaviour to the settings in which they find their self).

Combining these dimensions results in four different conditions each of which suggests the feelings, and likely behaviour, of a leader in that quadrant—three of which may well incubate toxic leadership.
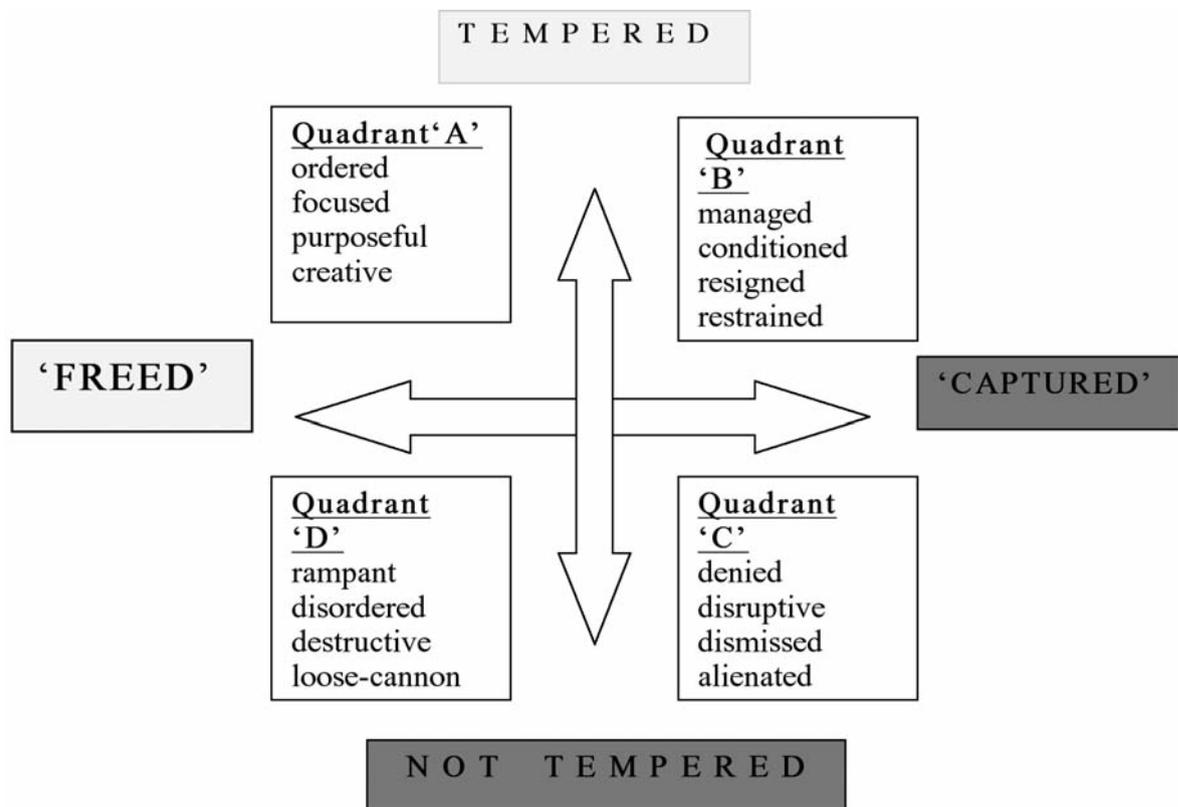
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Figure 1: Potential Responses to Constraints

Quadrant 'A': little toxic potential; change & achievement oriented leadership

Quadrant 'B': some toxic potential; steady state & *status quo* leadership

Quadrant 'C': high toxic potential; covert action, passive aggressive behaviour

Quadrant 'D': very high toxic potential; high profile, disruptive, dramatic

This simple framework can be used to speculate what might be at the heart of seemingly unhelpful or dysfunctional leader behaviour and generate discussion. It may just be that the leader has come to feel too cramped and unable to show what they can do, or indeed that they have been given too much rope and are in danger of loosing perspective and doing themselves irreparable/considerable harm and setting off dysfunctional and destructive change chain-reactions.

Each Quadrant describes different leader features, and each will have a different psycho-logical intensity and feel. For instance, in Quadrant 'A' the leader is more likely to demonstrate purposeful achievement oriented behaviour because they have been allowed to work creatively and freely, whereas in Quadrant 'D' the same creativeness—without sufficient boundary limitations—increases the likelihood that this leader will begin to behave more like a 'loose-cannon' and in a disordered, un- focused and rampant manner. In Quadrant 'A' the feel may be collaborative and 'safe'; in Quadrant 'D' it is more likely to feel unstable and downright dangerous.

As noted earlier when a leader's behaviour is untempered—in relation to the contexts within which they are working—potentially destructive behaviour may result. This is particularly so if they feel their contributions to be unreasonably or unfairly blocked. Danger also lurks when a leader's proposals are unreservedly sanctioned. However, the toxic potential in both

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scenarios is greatly reduced if the leader can position whatever responses they have received within organisational constraints & boundaries which they can see as legitimate and which they view as fair and reasonable.

Antioxidant Responses

This article suggests leader angst is partly generated by how a leader behaves when their proposals are denied and/or accepted wholeheartedly (*i.e.* how they characteristically respond to constraints). If valid it would seem prudent to find a simple way of describing and then unpicking such reactions to stimulate discussion about a leader's behaviour. Figure 1 offers a basic framework around which to hold such a discussion.

As leaders regularly have to come to terms with personal and professional disappointments, frustrations and constraints such a simple methodology would appear to be of value. Such an approach could become the equivalent of introducing an antioxidant agent to inhibit—perhaps terminate—'free radical' activity and begin to re-balance a situation that may have become toxic, more unpredictable and unstable.

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