A psychologically informed perspective can help us understand the hidden dynamics associated with individual motivation, leadership, collusive situations, social defenses, toxic organizational cultures, “neurotic” organizations (that is organizations tainted by the particular neurosis of its top executive), and the extent to which individual and organization can be prisoners of their past (Kets de Vries, 2006, p. 7).

Leaders, and leadership, and followers have been observed, studied, researched, and theorized about by many who try to explain leadership and followership in terms of organizational effectiveness and ineffectiveness. In particular corrupt, unethical, and immoral leadership that created social catastrophes such as wars, torture and ethnic cleansing were studied extensively during the 20th century. The literature is vast on these subjects. There is a never ending array of ideas, insights, suggestions, recommendations, and prescriptions that offer a glimpse of an aspect of leaders and those who follow. However, this accumulation of documentation, history and theorizing has not yielded in most instances better leader/follower and organizational outcomes. The reason for this explored here is that all of these efforts ultimately fail lying in a crumpled mass at the feet of the omnipresent and seemingly irresistible darker side of human nature.

This appreciation creates the necessity to inspect leader and follower dynamics using perspectives that provide insight into this darker side of human nature. Among the more promising of these approaches are psychodynamically informed research, theorizing, and organizational interventions. During the past 50 years this literature has gradually grown to provide those interested in understanding leaders and followers a multifaceted look at human nature both in terms of its promise and its many darker elements.

A recent book by Manfred Kets de Vries, The leader on the Couch, (2006) is used here as representative of this approach to understanding the role of human nature relative to leaders and their affects upon organizations and followers. Content from this book is complemented by the work of others to create insight into the darker side of human nature. This approach provides insight into a more effective and enlightened form of leadership that builds upon the more noble side of human nature. The underlying nature of good and bad, effective and toxic leaders is explored here with an appreciation that good or bad leadership may be most appropriately thought as the opposing end points on a range of behavior. This range of behavior is ultimately dynamic when it comes to any individual leader’s observable behavior. This appreciation makes the confounding point that seldom is any leader all good or all bad all of the time. However, to the observer it may seem so in society and the workplace. This is the result of emotion-laden out of awareness splitting and projection by individuals and groups that is often accompanied by transference onto the external object (the leader) and a corresponding internal self-generated object.

The Force that is Human Nature

My view of human nature much like Lucas’s conception of The Force in his Star Wars series is that human nature is the universal omnipresent “force” that binds people, groups and organizations together or conversely creates powerfully energized dynamics of opposition and harm to the common good. This sense of this force within our lives and relationships forms the bases of good, noble and caretaking energy or destructive outcomes that can destroy the human
spirit, individuals, groups, organizations and even nations (Allcorn, 2002). The force that is human nature therefore contains a dialectic tension (opposes and defines the opposite) between the dark side of human nature and its lighter side.

A Brief Inspection of the Darker Side

Kets de Vries (2006, p.7) early in his book notes that, “The identification of cognitive and affective distortions in an organization’s leaders and followers can help executives recognize the extent to which unconscious fantasies and out-of-awareness behavior affect decision-making and management practices in their organization.” He goes on to note that there are rationales (understandable explanations) behind every human act even if they appear to be irrational and that these explanations are often elusive because they are inextricably interwoven with unconscious needs and desires (Kets De Vries, 2006, p. 9). These almost inexplicable explanations are such because “...a great deal of mental life – thoughts, feelings, and motives – lies outside of conscious awareness. People aren’t always aware of what they’re doing – much less why they’re doing it” (Kets de Vries, 2006, p. 9). It is not my intention to provide an indepth discussion of the many important topics Kets de Vries discusses in his book. His discussion includes the narcissistic personality disorder and character disorders that such as dramatic, controlling, dependent, self-defeating detached and abrasive dispositions (Allcorn & Diamond, 1997; Kets De Vries, 2006,).

The two books referenced provide extensive and accessible discussions of individual leader pathologies in the workplace that can become deeply ingrained with the organization as a whole. Nor is it my intent to provide an extensive review of literature here that speaks to the exceptional levels of leader, individual, group and by extension organizational pathologies that one often finds in the workplace. It will have to suffice here to say bad, toxic and even malevolent leaders are a topic of much discussion due to the devastation their organizations create (Enron, WorldCom, Madoff’s fraudulent investment fund and many Wall Street banks and investment firms are examples). It is also the case regrettably bad, toxic and destructive leadership is common (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Goldeman 2009; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen2005).

THE LIGHTER SIDE

Kets de Vries (2006) after providing many insights into why leaders and leadership may well create interpersonal, group and organizational pathology, dysfunction and toxicity concludes his book by introducing the notion of authentizotic organizations. Leaders who largely responsible for creating the cultures of their organizations must, from Kets de Vries’ perspective, possess a number of key values that many would most likely agree are desirable and to be admired. They are briefly summarized as follows.

Leaders must rely much less on top-down unilateral command and control that is many times supported by compartmentalized organizational silos that pit one silo against the other (divide and conquer). (Kets de Vries, p. 375)

Leaders must strive to be authentic and present themselves as they are. They should embrace humility and be able to maintain personal integrity and trustworthiness in the face of continuous stress and change. In order to achieve these leaders must be aware of and trust their motives, feelings, and desires. They must recognize their strengths and weaknesses and via reflection understand their personality characteristics and emotional states.
Even more challenging Kets de Vries (2006) advocates leaders must know how their unconscious feelings (and the upbringing that caused those feelings) affect their behavior. This self-reflective ability permits leaders to face reality as it is, not as they wish it were and supports their assumption of personal responsibility for their actions. Achieving this permits leaders to limit “stagecraft” and gamesmanship and respond to people with sincerity and sensitivity. (Kets de Vries, 2006, p.375)

Other elements advocated are (Kets de Vries, 2006, p.376):

- Leaders must develop an honest assessment of the organization and its performance.
- Leaders must have emotional intelligence.
- Leaders must be able to speak to the unspoken in the hearts and minds of employees.
- Leaders must create congruence between the needs of employees and the organization.
- Leaders must help employees believe in themselves which promotes commitment, effort and creativity.
- Leaders must help employees grow and develop skills and sense of self.

Organizational values and culture are also important. Kets de Vries (2006, p. 377-8) suggests three meta-values are of critical importance in terms of creating a great place to work.

The first is to create a sense of community that includes:

- Developing trust, belonging and mutual respect that serve to create cohesiveness and mutuality.
- Pushing decision making down within the organization.
- Ensuring fair process is in place.
- Promoting transparency.
- Practicing distributed and shared leadership.

The second meta-value is creating a sense of enjoyment that includes developing an exciting, playful and adventurous workplace that promotes exploration, self-expression, imagination, play, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The third meta-value is creating a sense of meaning that includes transforming the organizational context to a higher calling that transcends one’s personal needs and self-interest in the service of achieving a greater good worth making a sacrifice to achieve.

These many points and perspective capture much of the essence Kets de Vries is trying to communicate about regarding the ideal and likely idealized conception of the optimal organizational attributes for the 21st century. To be surely noted is that these elements are not new to the literature. They are however nicely consolidated into a few brief pages at the end of his book.

I now turn to juxtaposition. Bad and toxic leaders and the accompanying dark organizational context they create with the ideals just discussed for creating an organizational context arising from uplifting and aspirational aspects of human nature.

THE TOXICITY OF THE DARKER SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE VERSUS THE LIGHTER SIDE
I begin this section by noting that it is informed by 50 years of work experience in jobs ranging from common labor to CEO and Vice Presidential positions in universities combined with 30 years of part and full-time management and organizational consulting experience. In these roles the many aspirational elements just discussed have been advocated and practiced. This juxtaposition and discussion is therefore grounded in both observation and facilitating roles as a consultant and the practice of the values in leadership roles.

Allow me to begin with my conclusion. Based on all of this experience and multiple efforts to implement and practice the enlightened values advocated above I conclude that the dark forces that are continually present in all organizations will win out by killing-off what is usually found to be a deviant subculture by eliminating the leader (Allcorn, 1991). Longer-term desired culture is also not sustainable even if the leader is able to persist within the organization as a result of eventually voluntarily giving up and withdrawing from the battle field, changing jobs or retiring. Restating, the desired context is challenging to create, most often not understood by others, frequently under attack at the boundary, and ultimately the larger dark organizational culture will win out. The expression bringing a knife to a gun fight seems to be the case. Allow me to elaborate.

A Note on the Imbalance between Toxic Behavior and Reasonable Fair Minded Behavior in the Workplace

Practicing the lighter side values of being open, inclusive, collaborative, transparent, respectful and trusting, based on experience, substantially increases one’s vulnerability to others who practice dark side behaviors such as withholding and manipulating information and resources, energized backstabbing that if done right is seldom discovered, and open interpersonal aggression in meetings and elsewhere. Transparency often translates into others having all the information you have whereas they do not similarly share the information they have. If you include these others in work and decision making they see no need to include you and your colleagues in what they are doing.

A second element to this imbalance is that avoiding acting out the behaviors just mentioned as well as others translates into unilateral disarmament. Others do not see you as highly competitive and filled with aggression and vindictiveness that is the foundation for striking back in the same manner which for the dark side is the only methods respected and accepted. For example the use of information at one’s disposal can be used to attack others behind their back by showing performance problems that may not in fact exist or marginally so. In time this becomes exceptionally corrosive especially when this “story” is listened by receptive others higher up in the organization. If one abstains from this under mining behavior those doing this behind your back have the playground to themselves. If you abstain from the same backstabbing behavior you have unilaterally disarmed. In my experience the dark side does its best work behind your back.

The Darker Side

The darker side of human nature generates highly energized propensities that contain many toxic elements that are actually seen by many as desirable in leadership roles. Leaders who say they are more than willing to go to war are seen as very different from those who view it as a last resort after diplomacy fails. It is also the case that many leaders are selected in the hope that they will provide top-down absolutely certain and unwavering direction and that their goals will be pursued with maximum force to achieve the desired outcome. You are with me or against me.
There is no middle ground (Hetherington and Weiler, 2009). Followers are expected to be loyal. They must tolerate the leader’s idiosyncrasies and occasional brutal behavior. The organization must be whipped into shape via downsizing, restructuring, and reengineering. Competitors must be crushed. Making the quarterly numbers is an absolute essential. Those who are not observed to be entirely devoted to making the numbers are ruthlessly weeded out although strangely those in the inner circle of the leader who may be the source of some of the operating problems are strangely immune to being held accountable. Efforts to call into question what is going on done so in a reasonable manner may well lead to transfer, demotion or termination.

An organizational context that is the polar opposite of the elements of the aspirational organization are common especially where fear of failure is present (Hetherington and Weiler, 2009). There is no lack of tough men and women in leadership roles who have neurotically based high-drive approach to managing and leading. Organizational members are not infrequently willing to give up most of their personal integrity and dignity if there is substantial fear either of organizational failure or being taken out by the leader (terminated). Management by intimidation readily yields submission by many and the departure of some not willing to submit and yield their personal integrity. These individuals select out further reinforcing the culture of dominance and submission as those who remain have voluntarily submitted losing personal integrity.

The darker side of human nature need not necessarily yield the above scenario. Individuals with charismatic qualities may be placed into leadership roles where they are not nearly so destructive to everyone and everything around them. They may for example be highly invested in promoting themselves and becoming a figure that is admired and even loved by others. Decisions are made or not made to protect this sought after image of the leader as caring, worthy of devotion, and admired. Tough decisions that will alienate others may be cast aside or delegated to someone willing to take the heat and who can be blamed and scapegoated if problems arise. Organizational resources may be reallocated to garner approval where funding, salaries and job titles are used as rewards for the people who “suck up” to the leader. Often organizational resources may be used to buy-off those within the organization who offer a threat and are resistant to being removed such as being linked to a board member or senior executive.

A somewhat similar outcome arises when the leader is not only not willing to make tough decisions and provide clear direction when the going gets tough. When a decision can no longer be avoided others are often pressed into the role (or volunteer) of making the tough calls on behalf of the leader who may as needed scapegoat the decision maker if something goes awry. Who authorized that? Otherwise all credit accrues to the leader.

The number of possible leadership and organizational scenarios are endless. And to be noted is that leaders, the context of leadership and organizations are ever changing. A toxic leader may one month pursue a destructive strategy that may include terminations. The next month the leader may become needy and uncertain requiring attention from others where the actions of the prior month have weighed heavily it seems on the now suffering leader as internal and external blow-back occurs. Organization members are exposed to an endless array of toxic motivations and actions by these types of dark side leaders.

So why wouldn’t boards, hiring committees and executives making hiring decisions want to hire individuals who offer the promise if not already have a track record consistent with the lighter side human nature? Is it not wiser to select leaders that aspire to achieve a common good and
organizational dynamics that inspire members to creativity and achievement in the pursuit of a higher mission or good?

The Lighter Side of Human Nature

The lighter side of human nature at work in organizations is always there but I suggest readily minimized and even extinguished by the darker forces at large in the workplace. It has been my experience that the many elements of the lighter side mentioned above do create a context were the energies of the many are liberated in the service of achieving outstanding work. Where the forces of the lighter side of human nature are at play work can be approached in an open, inclusive, collaborative, trusting and respectful way. Positive energy and motivations abound and a true since of sharing in a larger cause emerges. We are in this together.

However consistent with as the aforementioned conclusion to this article, as desirable as the lighter side dynamics are, they are often not understood as effective management by employees, managers and executives in the rest of the organization. This island of enlightened leadership and culture is perceived to deviate from the norm. The outcome is therefore a highly productive but misunderstood and therefore strange workplace culture that is ultimately rejected sometimes out of fear arising from not understanding it and at other times out of envy at its apparent success. The leader who does not use top-down unilateral control principles and exhibits high levels of competitiveness and aggression toward others is paradoxically thought of as a bad manager. As a result it may ultimately be at the minimum dismissed and not supported and more often actively questioned and attacked by others where usually the leader of this deviant subculture must be limited, maligned, backstabbed and many times disposed of by those who have no qualms about doing so (sometimes referred to as organizational bullies) (Allcorn, 1991).

We might then reasonably inquire further about this lack of understanding that fuels suspicion, fear and envy. In particular careful observation of the reactions of others will I believe ultimately yield an appreciation that the darker side has many elements of control and domination (my way or the highway and with me or against me) that are generally associated with acting powerfully and destroying, discrediting and limiting enemies. These actions are most often attributed to masculine values that are overvalued by boards and those making hiring decisions within a larger Darwin-like nature resident within enterprise development and economics. This is underscored by the following appreciation. “Employees respect a manager who can be both confident and empathic. Leaders from the old command-and-control world of management may view empathy, understanding, and compassion as showing vulnerability, also known as “poor management skills” (Coughlin, Wingard & Hollihan, p. 125).

And also to be noted is this.

“There are also societies where so-called masculine values, such as toughness, strength, conquest, and domination are given high social and economic priority, as in the emphasis on weapons and wars. So-called feminine values, such as caring, compassion, empathy, and nonviolence, are, along with women, relegated to a secondary, subservient sphere but from the “real world” of politics and economics. These four characteristics – strong-man rule, rigid male dominance, institutionalized violence, and devaluation of women and the “feminine” – are the core configuration of the domination world “(Coughlin, Wingard & Hollihan, p. 22-3).

This appreciation is further enhanced by Coughlin and Hollihan (2005, p 24). “Another part of this dominator heritages if the belief that a fear-based, institutionally insensitive, and all too often
abusive and dehumanizing leadership and management style is a requisite for social order and economic productivity. “

In contrast Coughlin and Hollihan (2005, p 24) also speak to contemporary literature on management and organizational development that advocates, like Kets de Vries, a new leadership and management style based on respect, accountability, and empowerment. Effective leaders are not cops or controllers whose commands must be unquestionably obeyed. Rather leaders should facilitate, inspire, and elicit from others their highest productivity and creativity.”

IN CONCLUSION – AGAIN

The conclusion offered above can be extended and accentuated. It is hard to fully appreciate how toxic the darker side of leadership, followership and organizational dynamics can be and often are. It is also sometimes hard to believe how very common they are in the workplace. In fact I have not yet found an organization largely dominated by the toxicity of the dark side.

Often found are top-down high control leaders who have split the organization into three subgroups. There are those that support (suck up) to her receiving perks, promotions, pay increases and better offices. There are those who compose the out group who have questioned what is going and some of the leader’s more toxic decisions and tactics. They often find themselves banished to a windowless basement - an organizational Siberia. There are then a large number of employees in the third group who by witnessing the dangerous nature of what is happening choose to hide out within the organization. They try to avoid being drawn into these toxic organizational dynamics by just doing their job and absorbing as near as possible without comment abuse and negative impacts on their work and performance that arise from the leader’s actions. They basically disappear into their organizational foxholes, head down hoping for the best.

It is also worth noting that this description is exactly what I have found numerous times as a consultant and executive many organizations large and small. It should sound familiar to the reader.

We are then left with a distressing workplace reality that is hard to acknowledge. It is one that I suggest here is commonplace, highly energized with dark side often neurotic energy and if questioned or challenged will predictably evoke vindictive responses that may escalate rapidly to win/lose outcomes. If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen where the leader is willing to continually turn up the heat.

There is then a moral and ethical quandary for those who would lead by the lighter side values and principles. Should you try with the almost certain knowledge you will be aggressed by many others about your management style and possible forced to leave? And what of those who work within the deviant subculture you have helped to create? They for a time do have the experience of an enlightened workplace. They may in fact have risen and shined as superstars. Your area or organization may have achieved great work while at the same time provoking threat and envy on the part of others. When the leader leaves who has nurtured this exciting and productive workplace culture the culture usually collapses sometimes as rapidly as the new leader being named. The disillusionment and disappointment is often palpable. Those who continue to try to embrace the culture are usually singled out as people who need to be brought back into line.
We are then left with the question of personal survival in the workplace. Are losses of self-esteem, personal achievement and self integrity the inevitable price one must pay to have a job?

REFERENCES


