

### ***Organisational Dystopia & Cultures of Power and Domination:***

It is a reasonable proposition to accept that the notion of a Utopian Organisation (or any sort of Utopia), is extremely unlikely to exist. Concurrently it can be stated with reasonable certainty that Dystopian Organisation's (DO's), do exist. The context for such circumstances is relative, situations are neither entirely perfect nor completely disastrous.

The path to dystopia is like a cancer that metastasizes and spreads throughout the body until the whole system is corrupted. Context, people and circumstances converge over time. Generally those in charge are the custodians of aberrant organisational behaviour. In its extreme form the DO is typified by ideological political movements. Corporate or bureaucratic dystopia whilst not as harmful as the political version nevertheless can cause substantial long-term damage to individuals and groups. DO's are myopic to their circumstances and tend to spiral out of control as they focus on the maintenance of power and control.

DO's don't manifest overnight, like any sociopath, their abnormal behaviour is a combination of heritage and the environment in which they function. The DO will continue to function as a reputable entity for as long as it can, mimicking sincere behaviour. The DO will present itself as doing well, without any appreciation, or understanding of the impact on staff or clients.

Typically DO's have a somewhat chaotic devolution that eventually reaches a tipping point where there is a loss of cohesion and purpose. Like weeds taking over native forest, all the goodness is gradually overcome until it is too late and health and diversity are crushed. Those in charge of such organisations do not appreciate dissent so like any repressive regime they keep the population of staff and workers under a jackboot of dogma. Or they rid themselves of those who would question their values. DO's are also likely to be a function of the interplay between those in power and the culture they instil. Management is invested in its own power and distorted self-belief. Commonly it is a culture of fear and domination that aims to ensure compliance and apathy. In the tradition of Goebbelsian propaganda exemplified in the form of; 'everything is fine and rosy', and the use of similar glib statements; disseminated by internal communications, the aim is to keep the employees docile. The pathology of such organisations and the hierarchy who run them demonstrate an absence of human perspective and connection. Ensclosed in their ivory tower they consider themselves above reproach. Especially they will disregard, banish or punish those who speak out against them. Decisions are made in secret and the hierarchy are as conspiratorial as any schoolyard clique. Subterfuge is the order of the day. Their own pathology makes them wary of the motivations of other people so they conduct themselves as neophytes of Machiavelli. Group management is characterised by manipulation and brinkmanship. Whilst enforcing strict guidelines for their minions they are generally somewhat

frivolous in their use of the benefits of power. When challenged they will usually be defensive of their decision making and fail to see that anyone else should have a different perspective. Expensive, ego massaging jabber fests, where they tell one another what a good job they are doing are a prime example. Alternatively a healthy organisation encourages the creation of stable work groups and worker participation in decision making with sensitive communication and expressive supervision. Importantly they have non-bureaucratic structures which function by the setting of meaningful objectives rather than a hierarchy of authority.

Often information is communicated by filtering it down through layers of management until the eventual recipients have absolutely no idea how it was determined or what it means. Then there is the farcical implementation of consultation where management provide a sanitised version of their decisions and employees are invited to provide feedback. Without details, because the information is usually so vague as to preclude that possibility, employees are at a disadvantage in trying to formulate meaningful questions. Any persistent questioning for specific details is seen as divisive and militant. Alternatively information may come down from on high as an edict that is couched in rhetoric and spin. For example; information regarding potential job losses is often delivered with all the sensitivity of a Saltwater Crocodile feasting on a tourist. Unless details are leaked or they are compelled by some greater jurisdiction then the basis for communication will not be divulged. Communications departments are complicit in this process and their success and future viability as individuals and as a group is predicated on how well they get everyone to sing the same tune, no matter how off-key. Their goal is to present an image of goodness and light to ensure all concerned conform.

An obvious characteristic of the DO is the virtual absence of a moral or ethical imperative underpinning their activities. Staff in particular; despite assurances to the contrary are treated as economic units of production. The ideology of economic rationalism that has become pervasive throughout society and corporate bureaucracy is discordant with ethical behaviour. External clients are little more dairy shed cows producing milk revenue. Competitiveness is now disguised as collaboration. 'Innovation' like the 'knowledge economy' is the latest fashionable empty piece of propaganda. In ignoring the imperative of being sincere in their dealings with others, management latch onto any meaningless catch phrase or idea that sounds impressive. Substantial meaning is discarded in favour of the latest 'on-trend' verbiage. As we speak so we behave, and an organisational culture that is its own arbiter of standards will have difficulty maintaining better practice. The proliferation of 'self-important disorder syndrome' amongst management will preclude any chance of ethical dialogue or behaviour.

Of course not everyone in the DO hierarchy has a malevolent pathology. Some in their desire for self-preservation are simply sycophantic in their behaviour. Nevertheless their impotence in the face of

the malignant power that surrounds them means they are complicit in the abuse. Sadly they lack the ethical strength to consider the impact of behaviour and decisions on other staff. Obsequious pandering is the means to survival and the illusion of security. Often it is predicated on building a mythology of anecdotal stories of achievement. Compliance with the prevailing paradigm is an essential to keep your job or get promoted. Like our primate relatives grooming and other forms of supplicant behaviour are a means to ensure safety and status. Conversely anyone who doesn't comply with the status quo is isolated and then expelled from the group. The disruptive thinking of a social conscience is not something countenanced in the DO.

It is axiomatic that there is usually no realistic measurement or evidence based process to confirm the quality of management let alone the assumption of leadership. Unfortunately the distinction between confidence and ability is rarely understood. When you have a management culture imbued with such a mix you have an organisation that has real and deep seated problems.

When it comes to new management cognitive dissonance is maintained by hiring clones of the existing hierarchy. The same process applies to promotion. In any organisation this may or may not be a good thing but, in the DO it will have disastrous results leading to a stagnation of thinking and pathological behaviour. This mirror image approach to management replacement and renewal affirms that there will be little diversity in management. In the meantime the DO will divest itself of good and productive people.

As the organisation descends deeper into entropy the management will seek to exert even greater control over the remaining workforce. This is done to preserve their power and the image of being righteous and the delusion of success. A recent article in the Melbourne Age discussed the results of a survey of staff perceptions toward the management of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection. The majority of staff expressed dismay at the; 'command and control' nature of senior management. Other organisations have similar staff perceptions and problems.

There would be few organisations that better exemplify the DO than CSIRO. Many of the characteristics mentioned above have become welded into the cultural fabric of the organisation. Strangely the Board has remained silent over the desultory state of staff morale. Perhaps they are more concerned about their ongoing tenure than having a meaningful say in the future of the organisation. You have to wonder about the sincerity and ethics of an organisation that awards a staff member a corporate citizenship award and then hands them their redundancy papers within hours. The impact of this and other forms of abuse that continue throughout the organisation is likely to be immeasurable whilst simultaneously kept secret.

Priorities seem to be random and whimsical at best. Consider that despite its organisational expertise management killed the tree that was supposedly descended from Isaac Newton's famous apple tree. The financial cost is of course not discussed as it is a matter of management privacy. Yet they keep it upright with braces even as it ossifies. The semiotics seem to be lost on the management who walk past it every day apparently oblivious to its condition. Apparently the committee that organised this debacle never saw fit to have any seeds retained, which says a lot about their management planning. Management also wax lyrical about their involvement in the development of a 'nightmare machine' (although there are many machines in the world that could probably claim that title). The stated purpose is to frighten people, so as to gain an understanding of the interplay between artificial intelligence and human responses. In contrast it is notable that CSIRO management have taken no interest in their own rigid and non-reflexive interaction with staff. It seems that old chestnut has been overlooked; 'natural stupidity will always overcome artificial intelligence'. It begs the question as to how long CSIRO can last as an organisation with such an oppressive management regime. But make no mistake the management will make sure they are well looked after financially. After-all senior management have continued to receive their annual bonuses for the last three years while employees have not received a paltry pay rise. It could be considered that this is another one of those moral problems, but the management have a strong sense of entitlement supported by contracts in their favour unlike the Staff Enterprise Agreement. Sadly for many staff in disparate professions CSIRO is no longer an employer of choice.