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CLINICAL REFLECTIONS**

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N° 88 / 39

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Director of Publication:

Charles WYPLOSZ, Associate Dean
for Research and Development

Printed at INSEAD,
Fontainebleau, France

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ABSTRACT

Starting with a literary example, the nature of 'mirroring' is reviewed in the context of human development and linked to leader-follower interaction patterns. It is argued that mirroring is needed for establishing and maintaining the boundaries of the self. Depending on the nature and quality of the developmental interface distortive mirroring patterns may come to the fore. Using a case example, it will be demonstrated how, particularly in situations of crisis, leaders can easily turn into mirrors reflecting what we wish to see. This can create an illusory form of reality and in the process endangers the organization.

I shall tell you the secret of secrets. Mirrors are the doors by which death comes and goes. Don't tell this to anyone. Just watch yourself all your life in a mirror and you will see death at work like bees in a glass hive ...

Jean Cocteau - Orpheus

In Being There (1972), Jerzy Kosinski describes in a highly satirical way the process whereby people see what they want to see -- how they use others to mirror themselves and reflect their own desires. The hero of the novel (which was eventually made into a movie starring Peter Sellers) is a totally illiterate, basically mentally retarded individual who has never left the safety and security of a walled garden. His only knowledge of the outside world has come through continuous mindless watching of TV programs. His understanding of the events around him is very limited. He only knows that his name is Chance, that he is an orphan, and that he is a gardener.

One day, his patron, the 'old man,' dies and Chance is suddenly forced to venture out into the real world. Until now the old man has protected him and prevented him from being sent to a home for the mentally handicapped by giving him something to do and providing his house as shelter.

Leaving the house for the first time, he is hit by a limousine. Since he is slightly hurt and doesn't know where to go, the owner of the car, a woman, takes him to her house. It doesn't take very long for her to be impressed by his intelligence and insight. However, the only thing Chance does to deserve such admiration is merely to repeat what she says, a practice he had picked up from television. Of course, the fact that he comes across as presentable, since he has a stately, handsome appearance, does help.

The woman is not the only one who is impressed by the visitor -- so is her husband, a Mr. Rand, Chairman of the 'First American Financial Corporation.' When the latter asks Chance what is happening with his business -- after all, he must be a businessman, -- we hear the following:

"It is not easy, sir," he [Chance] said, "to obtain a suitable place, a garden, in which one can work without interference and grow with the seasons. There can't be too many opportunities left any more"

Mr. Rand leaned across the table to him. "Very well put, Mr. Gardener A gardener! Isn't that the perfect description of what a real business man is? A person who makes a flinty soil productive with the labor of his own hands, who waters it with the sweat of his own brow, and who creates a place of value for

his family and for the community. Yes Chauncey, what an excellent metaphor! A productive business man is indeed a laborer in his own vineyard!" (pp. 33-34).

The process of attributing great wisdom to Chance's statements continues. The President of the United States visits Mr. Rand and takes the opportunity to ask Chance what he thinks about the bad season on The Street. Chance responds:

In a garden, growth has its season. There is spring and summer, but there is also fall and winter. And then spring and summer again. As long as the roots are not severed, all is well and all will be well (p. 45).

The President's reaction to Chance's remark is to acclaim it; it is one of the most refreshing and optimistic statements about the general state of the economy he has heard in a long time. He is so impressed that he repeats Chance's 'metaphor' about the seasons when giving a speech to the annual meeting of 'The Financial Institute'.

From then on the process of attributing great wisdom to all of Chance's remarks and actions snowballs. Soon everybody is admiring his marvelous sense of confidence and vision. One thing leads to another and Chance finds himself one of the speakers on a TV talkshow. To start the discussion, the TV host mentions that

the President had compared the economy of the country to a garden:

"I know the garden very well," said Chance firmly. "I have worked in it all of my life. It's a good garden and a healthy one; its trees are healthy and so are its shrubs and flowers, as long as they are trimmed and watered in the right seasons. The garden needs a lot of care. I do agree with the President: everything in it will grow strong in due course. And there is still plenty of room in it for new trees and new flowers of all kinds" (p. 55).

He continues by saying:

In a garden, things grow ... but first, they must wither; trees have to lose their leaves in order to put forth new leaves, and to grow thicker and stronger and taller. Some trees die, but fresh saplings replace them. Gardens need a lot of care. But if you love your garden, you don't mind working in it, and waiting. Then in the proper season you will surely see it flourish (p. 56).

That really does it! The audience is ecstatic over the profoundness of Chance's remarks. Now everyone wants to know and meet him. When Chance laughs unexpectedly during a discussion, the ambassador of the USSR assumes that he knows Russian and is a 'man of letters.' When in response to questioning by journalists about

what kind of newspapers he reads the answer is 'none' (after all, Chance is illiterate), but that he watches TV instead, his answer is referred to as one of the most honest statements made by a public figure in a long time. When he tells a book publisher (who wants him to write a book) that he can't write, the remark is 'who can nowadays' and he is offered a ghost writer. When his opinion is wanted about the effects of industrial waste and DDT on the environment, he responds that ashes and powders are bad for the growth in a garden. The reply makes everyone marvel at Chance's ability to reduce such complex matters to the simplest of human terms. The President wants to know more about him; the Russian ambassador quotes him; Women's Wear Daily lists him as one of the best dressed businessmen in the nation; eight foreign powers have put him on their spying priorities list; all the major newspapers (domestic and foreign) want to do stories on him, as do the major networks; one university wants to confer a doctorate on him if he is willing to make the commencement speech. And to top it off, the leaders of one of the political parties see him as their only hope -- a man not objectionable to anyone, a person without background. They want Chance to run for high office.

In a 'real life' example, the president of a huge government-controlled conglomerate was giving a speech to a large international group of top executives. From a purely factual point of view, not much was said. The emperor didn't have on a lot of clothes. The individual in question kept rubbing his face,

closing his eyes, yawning regularly, and humming a little. After this demonstration of fatigue, contempt, or perhaps anxiety, he slowly got going, stating a few facts about his company in a rather boring fashion. Some of his more profound comments were: "I am a good bicycle rider, strong, resistant and stupid enough" or "I feel like a juke box, everyone puts coins in it." A few more enigmatic comments followed and that ended the speech. Afterwards, a majority of the audience marveled at the talk. A lively conversation ensued about the Machiavellian style of this executive, his insights into the political and economic life of his country, and his talent for inspiring the audience. While all that might have been true and this particular executive the most gifted one around, the facts concerning the presentation didn't warrant the praise. What this anecdote and the novel portray, however, is one disconcerting aspect of leadership: how the leader can become the mirror for our own attributions, be they realistic or distorted. We frequently use the leader to reflect what we want to see.

What did Chance Gardener and this particular executive really do to deserve all this praise? How could all this happen? What we observe is how the leader becomes the screen for our projections; we can also see the extent to which leaders will oblige. And, as has been brought home to us by many political leaders, for a while this process of make-believe may work. Most of us realize, however, that we can only live for so long in the land of Oz. To

be a leader is more than merely being a mirror or a blank screen. Essential elements of leadership are articulating a vision of the future, making choices (painful as they may be), network building, motivating, and reminding the constituency of reality (Kets de Vries, 1988). Simply mirroring the wishes of the constituency is not good enough.

Chance's adventure and the senior executive's speech thus are really moral tales illustrating the attributional aspects of leadership: the extent to which followers wish to see certain qualities in their leaders and consequently ascribe meaning to their actions or lack of action. This may be seen as the followers' effort to explain their perceptions and attain a feeling of control over their environment. Instead of following the usual route of attribution research in understanding how this process of ascribing causality works, (Calder, 1977; Pfeffer, 1977; Green & Mitchell, 1979; Phillips and Lord, 1981; Lord & Smith, 1983; Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985). I will follow a clinical route. To do so I will explore and review the nature of 'mirroring' in human development and link this process to leader-follower interaction. In order to highlight this particular way of operating, I will end the paper with an example of this process as observed in an organization. The example will also illustrate the dangers of losing oneself in reflections of the leader.

MAN AND MIRROR

The word mirror derives from the Latin mirari, which means not only to look at but also to wonder or to admire. Interestingly enough, mirari also refers to a mirage, an optical illusion, something illusory. Thus we notice etymologically how the mirror becomes an instrument of both truth and distortion, a screen for man's projections. In folklore, legends, myths, and literature, we can also observe a fascination with one's semblance in mirrors or one's shadowy reflections in a certain light. We also come across both good and bad mirror magic. Various anthropologists (Roheim, 1919; Frazer, 1947) have described a large number of mirror superstitions; they have emphasized, for example, the frequent connection between mirroring and death. Another regularly encountered belief associated with mirrors is that a person's reflection in water or mirror is the image of his or her soul. Thus, not surprisingly, in some cultures looking at a mirror is viewed as endangering the soul. As Elkisch writes:

Man's mirrored image first must have appeared to him as something graspable, real. But since actually it was unreal, namely, not made of stuff he could lay his hands on, he obviously felt he was faced with his soul. And this soul being externalized might leave him and that would mean death (1957, p.240).

Elkisch continues by comparing primitive man to the psychotic individual and says that the psychotic

... 'uses' the mirror in order to externalize, alias project, his impulses and conflicts (which in reality he denies). And since the act of projection means throwing on to someone or something outside what actually belongs inside, namely to oneself, such an act amounts to a loss of psychic content. Thus metaphorically speaking, one could say that through projection a person 'loses his soul' (p.240).

That this theme is very much alive can be seen in literature, where we encounter the tale of someone having no mirror image because of having sold his soul to the devil (i.e., Hoffmann, 1967). In many stories vampires have no reflection in a mirror. And, in addition to these descriptions of lost reflections, we can find many stories which describe how mirrors can distort. For example, in Alice through the Looking Glass, Alice arrives in a world turned upside down. In Oscar Wilde's novel The Picture of Dorian Gray, only the portrait reflects the real self of its owner with all his marks of degeneration. The novel describes how this portrait eventually transforms into the likeness of a satyr.

In Greek mythology we encounter the legendary mirror used by the Greek hero Perseus, which allowed him to face and kill the gorgon Medusa and avoid the stare that petrifies. And, of course,

probably the most famous story of mirroring is Ovid's version of the myth of Narcissus, who took illusion for reality by not wanting to recognize the reflection of himself in the surface of a pool. In this case the soothsayer Tiresias had predicted that Narcissus would only live to a ripe old age if he never knew himself. Unfortunately, Narcissus conceived such a passion for his own image that nothing could tear him away from it, and he died of languor looking at himself.

Somehow, symbolically, Narcissus becomes mankind's representation of idle hopes and disappointments, a memory of the unattainable -- these oceanic feelings of complete fusion with the environment -- originating in the earliest period of life. As Pines (1984) suggests, "Narcissus is a paradigm for the role of mirroring in the evolution of self-consciousness" (p. 33).

Through mirrors an individual projects himself into another dimension, overcoming personal inhibitions and creating his own ideals. For a poet like Rilke (1949), the mirror becomes both the enchanter, the magical seducer, and also the symbol of the terrifying unknown, given its capacity to reflect distortive images. The metaphor of the mirror implies multiple images and can lead to a fateful division between private and public self-awareness. What we like to see and what we fear to see may be worlds apart. Some people are never able to integrate these images. As Ferenczi (1921) said, the mirror is the moment of

truth between the forces of narcissistic omnipotence and reality.

The first sense of self -- that moment when the individual begins to consider him - or herself as a totality -- has its origin in the powerful experience of perceiving his or her own reflection in a mirror. Winnicott (1971) comments that, in dealing with this formative experience, the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face: " ...what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there" (pp. 111-112, sic).

According to Winnicott, the reflection of the self in the mother's face (and afterwards in the mirror) and the child's sensitivity to the all-too-changeable maternal visage as mirror will very much determine the kind of emotional development which takes place. This process explains why we continue to see reflected in others -- as part of ourselves -- our own fears, failures, and desires. Developmental maturity will determine the degree of realism in the reflective process. Here we should realize that the process of mirroring heralds the beginning of object relationships, i.e., relationship with others, and the creation of a sense of self or identity. Thus, "the mirror image can stand for some aspects of the self, or of the object (the prototype is the parent), or of the self as pictured in the parent's eyes" (Shengold, 1974, p.98).

Predictably, the nature and quality of the interchange with the mother's face as mirror will very much effect our ability to test reality. As Romanshyn (1982) writes in his study of psychological life as a reflection of reality, "mirroring is an essential and primary reality of human life. It originates well before the end of the first year of life and its presence is not eradicated by the appearance of rational adult conscious life" (p. 64).

One individual who strongly emphasized the significance to personality development of the discovery of one's image in the mirror was the French psychoanalyst Lacan. He introduced the concept of le stade du miroir, the mirror phase (1949). To him, the recognition by the infant of his or her own reflection in the mirror is an essential moment, a turning point in development. It is a point in time when the idea of the body as consisting of separate parts is overcome. An image is acquired of the body as a Gestalt. According to Lacan, the child anticipates on an imaginary level control over his or her body as a totality before he or she is actually physically able exercise that control. Lacan stresses the child's signs of triumphant jubilation at the discovery of this image:

...unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial ... he nevertheless overcomes in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstruction of his support and, fixing his attitude in a

slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image (1977, pp. 1-2).

Lacan thinks, however, that there is an unstable element which is corollary to the process of his recognition through the mirror. This form of identification is 'imaginaire' in that it possesses a fictional quality. It is of an intersubjective nature due to the fact that the self is originally another (the perceived and experienced image), but another who is also made the same. Within Lacan's conceptual framework, the world of the imaginary becomes a prelude to that of the verbal and the symbolic.

We can question the importance of the sudden self-recognition effect stressed by Lacan. Most likely, it is a more gradual experience. The child has to learn to recognize the mirror image as his or her own (Burlingham, 1952; Bortenhall & Fischer, 1978). Eventually, children will engage in mirror games of playing with their own image, going repetitively through the experience of disappearance and retrieval, retrieval and disappearance, which are magical ways of establishing the boundaries of the self. It is also worthwhile noting that experiments in social cognition show that children younger than one year of age do not know that they are looking at themselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Meltzoff, 1985).

Confirming evidence of the importance of the mirror phase can be

found in other sources as well as in the observation of primates by ethologists and experimental psychologists (Köhler, 1957; DeVore, 1965; Desmond, 1980; Fossey, 1983). A sequential process seems to exist in which at first the primate confuses the perceived image in the mirror with reality and tries to get a hold on it. This is followed by the discovery that there is such a thing as an image. Finally, the realization that the image is its own seems to break through. It is interesting to note that the recognition of one's own reflection necessitates a certain level of intellectual development. The capacity for self-recognition applies to the great apes (chimpanzees) but does not seem to be valid for monkeys (Gallup, 1970).

The term "mirroring" has increasingly become part of clinical vocabulary. This is very much due to the work of Heinz Kohut, who viewed mirror reactions as a therapeutic repetition of a normal phase in the development of the infant. This developmental phase, characterized according to him by the grandiose self, is a period where

the child attempts to save the originally all-embracing narcissism by concentrating perfection and power upon the self... and by turning away disdainfully from an outside to which all imperfections have been assigned (1971, p.160).

Like Winnicott, Kohut emphasizes the importance of the mother's

face as mirror by saying that, in the development of the grandiose self, what counts is "the gleam in the mother's eye, which mirrors the child's exhibitionistic display, and other forms of maternal participation in and response to the child's narcissistic exhibitionistic enjoyment" (1971, p. 116). In Merleau-Ponty's words, "Man is [a] mirror for man" (1964, p. 168).

The optimal mirroring situation appears to be the child's gazing into the fond and accepting eyes of the mother and the acceptance of a separate identity by a loving mother. Increased reality testing will occur through greater selectivity of these responses over time.

Mirroring thus becomes an attempt to maintain but also recover the boundaries of the self. Some support for this point of view can be found in the therapeutic encounter where mirror dreams in some instances seem to be triggered off by wishes for understanding and approval by the therapist who is trying to arrive at a new integration of the self. What we can observe is the patient's projected image of the self as how he or she would like it to be (Eisnitz, 1961; Eeigelson, 1975; Myers, 1976; Carlson, 1977).

Frequently mirror dreams also seem to take place at times of crisis, when there is an external danger, or when forbidden wishes come to the fore. Eisnitz (1961) argues that this is the time when "the threatening imago is magically mastered and then safely

reintrojected - a kind of identification with a protector" (p.473). This process creates some form of protection against anxiety and a reaffirmation of one's sense of identity. The mirror turns into a narcissistic protector. Carlson (1977) compares the mirror in these dreams to "the desperately sought 'gleam in the mother's eye' ... its reflective presence [indicating] an integrative capacity which is essential for the working through process and for the use of insight at especially stressful times" (p. 67).

This means of maintaining the boundaries of the self, of maintaining the primary identity, does not always work, however. As we know from myths, legends, and fairy tales, not all mirror dreams are reassuring. We have already alluded to others of a more terrifying nature where one comes face to face with distorted reflections of the self or, even worse, of no reflections at all. Medusa's face and Narcissus's fate are indicative of the other, more threatening side of mirroring.

According to Lichtenstein (1969,1977), the primary identity is always based on a mirroring experience. The mirror becomes the object in which outlines of the person's primary identity are reflected. In the process of human development, however, pure reflective mirroring has to be replaced by increasingly selective, situation-appropriate action and reaction patterns. Thus we can see the reflection of our own identity in the other and make the

discovery "of the other as a partner in a configuration of mutual interaction" (1964, p.55).

Accurate versus distorted mirroring will very much depend on the quality of the parent-child interaction process. The key factor becomes the reverberating, reciprocal mother-child interface, a process whereby the role of the observer and observed alternates. What is critical is what the infant sees and what the mother (often with the father's collusion) wants the infant to see. What regularly happens, however, is that the mirroring process is accompanied by parental injunctions not to recognize certain aspects of the parents (Pines, 1984; Coen & Bradlow, 1985). In spite of the developing child's great desire for visual affirmation of the integrity of the self in order to correct distorted perceptions, accurate visual perception and evaluation of the self may not be permitted. Consequently, a lingering desire to correct the reality distortions remains. The mirror becomes the screen where positive and negative, wished-for and undesirable aspects of one's personality become projected -- all attempts to validate the boundaries of the self. A disoriented self may be the legacy. To use the words of a patient, "I don't know who the hell I am so I look to other people to tell me. I am always looking into the mirror to see who I am - not how I look, but who I am. Do you understand the difference?" (Shulman, 1986, p.139).

In this context, Pine (1984) distinguishes between reflective and

non-reflective mirroring. In the former the person recognizes and accepts his or her own good or bad qualities. In the latter we are dealing with distortive or even destructive processes. Selective perception will occur and unrecognized aspects of the self in the other will be attacked.

Lichtenstein warns that people may not react to their individuality but to the social role they represent. This may intensify the process of distortion as we create an illusory state of reality. As we see what we want to see, the other's individuality is no longer respected. Hence:

The mirror and the act of mirroring introduce problems of the emergence of a primary identity, of identity confusion, of loss of identity, and of identity maintainance as well (Lichtenstein, 1964, p.52).

Mahler (1967, 1975) echos Lichtenstein's opinion about identity maintenance and stresses the importance of these phase-appropriate mirroring reactions in the child-mother interplay. Given the impact of these early formative experiences, we should not look at these mirroring reactions as merely trivia from childhood. The mirror's hold on people does not leave in adulthood. As Shengold points out:

The mirror's magic, good and bad, stems from its linkage with

the narcissistic period when identity and mind are formed through contact with the mother; the power of mirror magic is a continuation of parental and narcissistic omnipotence (1974, p. 114, sic).

We can observe how the process of mirroring -- be it reflective or distortive -- remains a means of reassurance, an attempt to maintain one's psychological equilibrium. Mirroring continues to be a form of magical manipulation and transformation of the self. It can be a defensive regressive process whereby the person uses the other as a mirror "both to cling to and to lose (through externalization upon the mirror) his identity" (Searles, 1965, p.648 sic). At times it can also be a form of theater whereby it becomes hard to differentiate between actor and audience. Thus, through the process of mirroring one can lose but also recapture the self. Moreover, the way the individual manages the mirroring process reflects very much his or her degree of maturity in emotional development. But in situations of crisis, with all their regressive potential, even individuals with a great capacity for reality testing may be swept away and engage in distortive mirroring.

What we can distill from these various observations about mirroring is that in the leader-follower interface a great potential for regressive distortion exists. and this occurs

particularly in certain situations. In states of crisis purely reflective mirroring may occur in which the respect for each other's individuality may get lost. Wishes replace facts. Consequently, an ambiance of make-believe becomes a reality. And it becomes obvious that leaders as transferential figures become ideal outlets for these distortive operations to become operative.

A CASE ILLUSTRATION

A good example of the mirroring process in action in an organizational setting would be the events which occurred at the Roldex Corporation (name disguised), a company in the electrical appliances field.

The Roldex Corporation was owned and operated by the Moore family. Its founding dated from the late forties when John Moore, an inventor who had suffered many setbacks, managed to get a business off the ground. His objective was to put one of his own inventions on the market. After a difficult beginning because of serious financial problems, a line of electrical appliances was developed. These appliances found a niche on the market, helping the company to finally take off. In order to increase working capital the company eventually went public, but the Moore family continued to keep de facto control.

Over time two of Moore's three children joined their father in the

business. First there was Peter, who looked after the production and operations side. The second son, Simon, was more interested in the marketing and sales area, where he spent an increasing amount of his time. Bernard, the third son, had worked a few summers in the company while he was going to college. Because of a lack of interest in his studies he had cut short his education. Independently wealthy due to a trust fund set up by his father, he spent most of his time on traveling and playing music.

Unexpectedly, John Moore died of a heart attack. Like many entrepreneurs, he had not created a clear line of succession. As was to be expected, the consequences of his death were dramatic and reverberated through the company. The sons were ill prepared to deal with their father's sudden demise given the dominating role he had played in their lives and his central position at Roldex. Their mother was not much of a support either, a fact which did not come as much of a surprise given the capricious, manipulative role she had played during their childhood.

For a while there was a considerable amount of anxiety among the key players in the company. Eventually, after much deliberation and hesitation, it was decided at a family council -- later formalized at a board meeting -- that Bernard would become the new president. The reason for this surprising choice was that Peter and Simon felt that their efforts were too necessary in their present jobs. Following their reasoning, they could ill afford to

take over the presidency due to insufficient back-up in the marketing/sales and production and operations areas. Since Bernard had no real expertise in any department, he was paradoxically deemed to be most suited to look after general management matters.

Although the choice was made with a certain amount of trepidation because of Bernard's checkered background, most executives in the company were of the opinion that a remarkable transformation had taken place in him soon after he took over. They acknowledged that it had taken him some time to really 'learn the ropes.' However, given his prior ignorance of the business, they felt he had grown into his new job very quickly. After an initial state of confusion, most of the executives were duly impressed by his accomplishments. Surprisingly, many of them attributed great wisdom to even the most banal inquiries made by Bernard. Commonly heard statements were: "he surely sensed how to get into that market or "without his intervention, we would still be arguing about the viability of that investment"!

But in spite of this positive attitude toward the change of leadership, all was not well at the Roldex Corporation. The firm was rapidly losing market share and slipping in profitability. In addition, there were a number of organizational problems the symptom of which was the loss of some key people. The situation worried Simon so much that he asked a consulting firm to do a

study of his department and see what he could do to improve the effectiveness of sales and marketing. Because of interdependencies with the other departments, the study snowballed into a full-fledged analysis of the functioning of the whole company. Simon himself, however, was not completely sure why profitability was slipping. Although he felt that Bernard in his new role as president was extremely effective, he had second thoughts about the appropriateness of their strategy.

A key question for the consulting firm became how much of Bernard's attributed business acumen was real and how much was a result of the "leader-as-mirror effect" as caused by the company's crisis situation. To what extent was the wisdom of Bernard's behavior and action imagined and a way of making sense out of a confusing situation, given all the other executives' own bewilderment and anxiety? To what extent had Bernard turned into another Chance Gardener?

Contrary to the opinion of the executives (after all, the consultants didn't share in the anxiety prevalent in the company), the consultants' assessment was that a creative organizational genius had not suddenly emerged. They felt that the company was run by a poorly trained individual who was remarkably ignorant about management practices. According to their investigation, the reason Roldex was still doing as well as it did was mainly the momentum existing due to the company's portfolio of innovative

products. The other contributing factor was the remarkable energy put into the company by a number of key executives which included Bernard's two brothers. The consultants felt, however, that continuation of the present situation -- and particularly the action or lack of action of the president -- would seriously endanger the future of the company. They found it extraordinary that the other executives were not coming to the same conclusion.

The consultants were puzzled to see how simplistic points of information furnished by the president would take on a new meaning in the eyes of his subordinates. To their great surprise, profound wisdom was ascribed to the few decisions the president made. They noted how much time was wasted at meetings interpreting some of Bernard's more enigmatic remarks (which in the opinion of the consultants showed his complete ignorance of the business and the industry). Strategy making was reactive and oscillated according to which executive had most recently gotten the ear of the president. What the consultants found most remarkable was that even Bernard's brothers joined in the revered assessment of him.

In contrast, the consultants who were not caught up in the regressive mirroring game, even forgetting the tendency of subordinates to idealize their leaders (Kets de Vries, 1988) saw an individual totally lost in his job. At times, Bernard even frankly admitted to them that he really did not know what to do and felt helpless, since he was ignorant about the industry and

the market. Where everyone else saw a pillar of strength, the consultants saw an anxious individual who alternated between reluctant action (bolstered by the positive mirroring of his subordinates) and an acute state of paralysis engendered by his ignorance about his job. Moreover, they noted that whatever action Bernard took was really of a "pseudo nature": it was actually a reflection of the ideas of some of his senior executives and advisors or, in a number of instances, was imagined since, in fact, nothing had really been done.

What also became clear was that, on the rare occasions when Bernard took some initiative himself, he was guided by a few simplistic principles he had picked up over time; they seemed to be mainly of a paranoiagenic nature (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985), based as they were on distrust and insecurity. For example, he would not share important financial information with his key executives. His explanation was that he was afraid of being asked for a raise if they saw how profitable the company was. In doing so, however, he hampered the making of informed marketing decisions since his executives had only vague ideas about profitability by product line. He would also embark on misplaced cost cutting to make short-term savings, guided by the notion that some people were trying to take advantage of him. However, such short term savings proved to be very costly in the long run. Furthermore, Bernard would procrastinate about major policy decisions. But, in spite of the inappropriateness of much

of what he did, many of his subordinates continued to attribute great wisdom to whatever he suggested.

The consultants realized, however, the positive effect Bernard had on the company. Being in the position he was, his presence had contributed to diminishing the anxiety prevalent after the death of the founder. That presence enabled the executive group to reaffirm a sense of control, if only illusory, over their environment; they were using Bernard to reflect what they wanted to see. And he would usually oblige by participating in the mirroring process. Unfortunately, it ended there. Not much action would follow.

The consultants also realized that, given the attraction of this distorted mirroring process, much effort would be needed to break the spell. Because of the 'mirroring game,' they came to the conclusion that things could go on for quite a while before any warning lights would appear. And by that time it might be too late: the company might be overtaken by corporate disaster.

The consultants discovered that, in spite of the paranoid disposition of the president, he was sufficiently in touch with reality to realize the seriousness of the situation. He was not so completely trapped in the mirroring game as to have become addicted to the admiration which tends to be a corollary of the process (Kets de Vries, 1988). He realized that, in spite of the

fantasies to the contrary on the part of his subordinates, he might not be the right person for the job.

After a certain amount of trust was established in his relationship with the consultants (a sine qua non for successful intervention), Bernard admitted to his confusion about the developments in the business. Moreover, he disclosed that he did not really feel that happy with having been put in the position of president. He was personally experiencing too much anxiety, always wondering what he was really doing there. As he acknowledged, his real interest was still in music. He admitted to being quite bewildered about all the things going on around him. As he said, he 'felt completely out of it' and at times 'unreal.' He saw himself as an actor in an play over which he had very little control. After a number of discussions with the consultants, he also became aware how, given his position in the company, he was stifling its progress.

The discussion culminated in a meeting with the other brothers, during which the consultants emphasized reality issues and clarified the gap between the real and the reflected. To illustrate the magnitude of the distortive processes, they particularly singled out the inconsistent, wavering nature of strategy making, alternating with a total lack of strategy. The objective of the consultants was to stop the regressive, distortive mirroring game. They took great pains, in making these

comments, to maintain a constructive, reality-based, supportive atmosphere, as any scapegoating would deter their efforts.

It goes without question that change did not occur overnight. There is no such thing as an instant fix in individual and organizational change. Gradually, however, the consultants' persistent interpretations which emphasized reality began to have an effect. The spell was broken, and Simon and Peter put increasing pressure on Bernard to take more of a leadership position. In the meantime, the consultants spent time with the president discussing his personal style and the effects of his action, or lack of action, on the company. Eventually, at a rather anticlimatic executive meeting, Bernard decided to resign in favour of his brother Simon and leave the business altogether, devoting his energy to something which really made him feel alive, that is composing and playing music.

CONCLUSION

Even from this brief case illustration we can see the consequences of the leader-as-mirror effect. We recognize the power of this reverberating process in that, even when there is an absence of real leadership, subordinates will deny that fact and hope that "magical" things will happen. The wish to believe, to make order out of chaos, is a very strong force. We have noticed how, in the leader-follower interface, we frequently prefer to see what we

want to see. We have observed how leaders can reactivate archaic processes from childhood and thus turn into mirrors, thereby helping to integrate our own perceptions and consolidate a shaky sense of identity, particularly in crisis situations. We also realize that playing that role has its positive side, as mirroring is the glue that binds many organizations making it their driving force. And we have also seen that many leaders do not mind that this happens. Some take advantage of it and use its momentum, often to good results. The narcissistic gratifications which accompany mirroring become here an additional source of satisfaction.

In our analysis, we should recognize that mirroring and idealizing patterns occur concurrently (Kets de Vries, 1988). The idealizing transference reaction -- the wish to admire the other, particularly authority figures -- can reinforce this distortive process. We also recognize the dangers which are the corollary of mirroring -- how it can distort perceptions.

We have cautioned against the dangers of distorted mirroring, having seen how this process can go on for a while until finally reality catches up with us. By that time, because of the delay effect, there can be catastrophic results. Hence the need in the leader-follower interface not to get stuck in pure narcissistic reflection but to discover the other as separate from the self in order to enable the existence of a truly mutual pattern of

interaction. This is not necessarily easy. It requires a healthy dose of self-insight and self-criticism and the ability to tolerate frank feedback from others. In doing so, individuals will be able to maintain their own sense of identity and consequently will not lose themselves in the reflections of the leader.

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