

**"THE ORGANISATIONAL FOOL:
BALANCING A LEADER'S HUBRIS"**

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N° 89 / 37

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Director of Publication:

Charles WYPLOSZ, Associate Dean
for Research and Development

Printed at INSEAD,
Fontainebleau, France

THE ORGANIZATIONAL FOOL:
BALANCING A LEADER'S HUBRIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of the sage-fool as means of creating a countervailing power against the regressive forces inherent in leadership -- in other words, to reinforce the leader's capacity for reality testing. First, some of the salient characteristics of the role are reviewed, taking a historical perspective. It is subsequently demonstrated how the fool, in playing the role of mediator between leader and followers, brings to the surface certain conflictual themes and thereby allows both parties to deal with the issues at hand. In this context, the role of humor and joking relationships are examined. Finally, two case examples of the fool in an organizational setting are presented.

So now for my whole house a staunchless spring of
griefs
Is opened; and my son in youthful recklessness,
Not knowing the god's ways, has been the cause of all.
He hoped to stem that holy stream, the Bosphorus,
And bind the Hellespont with fetters like a slave;
He would wrest Nature, turn sea into land, manacle
A strait with iron, to make a highway for his troops.
He in his mortal folly thought to overpower
Immortal gods, even Poseidon. Was not this some madness
that possessed him?

Aeschylus - The Persians

These were the words of the ghost of Darius, father of Xerxes, King of Persia, lamenting in Aeschylus's play the crushing defeat of the Persians at Salamis. When Xerxes' initial attempt to have his army cross two boat bridges over the Hellespont failed because of a storm, he had had the sea whipped as punishment. But, as Aeschylus narrates in his play The Persians, the heavenly powers had long before decided that the Persians could only attain fame on land. This being the case, Xerxes' transgression against the gods -- an act of hubris -- came to a bad end. On September 29, 479 B.C., a naval battle which Xerxes had initiated against the Greeks turned into massive defeat. Mardonius, his brother-in-law and general, was left with his army

in Thessaly without a supply line. At a subsequent battle Mardonius was killed, leading to the withdrawal of his army of occupation.

Not all situations of hubris have such dramatic consequences -- they do not all turn into a cosmic confrontation with the gods. Hubris has, however, been a recurring theme in leadership, the obvious reason being that with power often come excessive pride and arrogance. Many leaders take for granted that they can transgress the rules for common mortals. But how does one go about pointing out the symptoms of hubris? How can a leader be prevented from getting trapped and seeing only what he or she wants to see? How can we fight hubris? How can we create a countervailing power against the regressive forces inherent in leadership? And how will this work in an organizational setting?

Focusing on the sage-fool as the antidote for hubris, I will first review some of the role's salient characteristics from a historical perspective. I will subsequently show how the fool, in playing the role of mediator between leader and followers, disseminates "deep" communication, i.e. is going beyond the direct observable, and consciously or unconsciously is seeking out the basic significance of events. (Geertz, 1973, 1983, Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987). This brings into awareness what are at certain points in time conflictual themes for the persons concerned; as such it becomes an effective outlet for emotional catharsis. Inevitably, the role of humor and joking relationships will be part of the discussion. Finally, I will look at the role of the fool in an organizational setting.

THE DANGER OF HUBRIS

We can look at hubris as a predictable offshoot of unbridled narcissism. Narcissism, a key force behind the desire for leadership and power, frequently becomes more pronounced when that very position of leadership and power is attained. We see then, as Freud (1921) astutely noted, a leader who "love[s] no one else, ... of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident and independent" (pp. 123-124). Such a leader, who may easily retreat into a world of his own, can be quite myopic in his opinions, not given to soliciting or accepting advice from others. In many instances a leader creates his own reality, blind to the possible negative consequences.

What aggravates the situation is that the relationship between leader and followers is not always necessarily of a rational nature: irrational behavior patterns frequently come to the fore. At times a kind of mutual regression occurs and we can observe behavior which is inappropriate under the circumstances. Certain transference patterns seem to be at the heart of such regression. What is meant by this is the ubiquitous behavior pattern consisting in transferring onto figures of authority feelings derived from the past. (Given their position of power, leaders in particular enhance the creation of these "false connections" (Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895) within which we can observe a confusion between past and present.) The person in the present becomes the recipient of a whole array of reactions -- situations, fantasies, and conflicts of infantile life, the

reliving of thoughts, feelings and behavior (Freud, 1912; Langs, 1976; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Luborsky et al, 1985) -- originally associated with significant figures from the past. Old attitudes toward authority re-emerge and can suddenly be seen in a much clearer light. The basis for all of this is the need to cope with feelings of helplessness, very much part of an infant's experience.

A universal part of this intra- and interpersonal theater is the reactivation of mirroring and idealizing transference patterns (Kohut, 1968, 1971, 1977). Mirroring, once "the gleam in the mother's eye" when she is positively reacting to the child's narcissistic displays, becomes reactivated in situations of leadership. All leaders reflect this behavior pattern. In extreme situations leaders will even suffer from "mirror hunger," needing constant reassurance and applause from their followers, (their hall of mirrors as it were), in order to maintain their psychic equilibrium.

On the opposite side of the spectrum are idealizing reactions. Followers try to cope with feelings of helplessness left over from infancy by vicariously enhancing their position of power through the idealization of their leaders. They would like somehow to merge with and be part of the leaders, who become the imagined possessors of all the magical qualities the followers would like to have themselves.

In studying leaders and followers we can observe how mirroring and idealizing reactions turn into a mutually reinforcing

process, and vice versa. And the reactivation of transference patterns may have a positive motivational outcome, albeit temporarily, in that it creates group cohesion and group direction. However, in the long run the regressive pull may become too powerful and its negative side will come to the fore. This process can become particularly destructive when an individual leader's capacity for reality testing is not very strong to start with and he or she lacks a secure sense of self. Such a leader will be unable to take sufficient distance, not properly realizing what he is doing, and he may take action harmful to others. Paranoid behavior and scapegoating activities are frequently the result.

The ability to face reality without getting caught up in primitive defensive processes, ending up in a situation of folie à deux, or suffering from hubris, can be difficult. It is a rare individual who can keep his head when others are losing theirs and falling victim to "group think" (Janis & Mann, 1977), who can take distance and stand up to these pressures and realize what is really going on. As is true in a therapeutic situation, help is needed to recognize the distortions of reality. Someone is needed to point out the symptoms of hubris.

Historically, the person who took such a role vis-à-vis the king, was the fool. Of course, I am not thinking of the fool as a person who is stupid, unwise or shows a lack of judgement, but of the fool in the more transformational role of truthsayer. If such a role is assumed, the destiny of the leader and the fool become intricately bound. The fool becomes the person who

through various means reminds the leader of the transience of power. He becomes the guardian of reality and, in a paradoxical way, prevents the pursuit of foolish action.

An early illustration of a somewhat institutionalized way of reminding the powerholder of the transience of his position are the rituals which would surround the triumphant entry of a Roman conqueror into the capital. Clowns and satyrs would jump around his chariot and shout abuse at him. The slave who held the crown of Jupiter Capitolinus above the victor's head would whisper over and over that he should remember that he was only mortal (Willeford, 1969).

The role of the fool is acknowledged in many early writings. For example, Machiavelli was very aware of this need. In his handbook for rulers, The Prince, he pointed out that:

Courts are always full of flatterers; men take such pleasure in their own concerns, and are so easily deceived about them, that this plague of flattery is hard to escape... For there is no way to protect yourself from flattery except by letting men know that you will not be offended by hearing the truth. But when anyone can tell you the truth, you will not have much respect. Hence, a prudent prince should adopt a third course, bringing wise men into his council and giving them alone free license to speak the truth -- and only on points where the prince asks for it, not on others (1977, p.67).

The philosopher, Erasmus, came to a similar conclusion. In his Praise of Folly he tried to infer why a fool could be the favorite of kings. He gives the following reason:

Wise men have nothing but misery to offer their prince, they are confident in their learning and sometimes aren't afraid to speak harsh truths which will grate on his delicate ear, whereas clowns can provide the very thing a prince is looking for, jokes, laughter, merriment and fun. And, let me tell you, fools have another gift which is not to be despised. They're the only ones who speak frankly and tell the truth, and what is more praiseworthy than truth?

... for all their good fortune princes seem to me to be particularly unfortunate in having no one tell them the truth and being obliged to have flatterers for friends. It might be said that the ears of princes shun the truth, and that they steer clear of wise men for the simple reason that they fear there may be someone outspoken enough to risk saying what is true rather than pleasant to hear. The fact is, kings do dislike the truth, but the outcome of this is extraordinary for my fools. They can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure; indeed, the words which would cost a wise man his life are surprisingly enjoyable when uttered by a clown (1971, pp. 118-119).

THE ROLE OF THE FOOL

As a social type fools are widely known. We have all encountered them and at times may have played the role ourselves. Moreover, we have also become familiar with fools from anthropology, myth, folklore, literature and drama under many different names such as trickster, jester, buffoon, comic, Harlequin or Pierrot.

Anthropologists, in particular, have paid a considerable amount of attention to the role of the ritual fool. Elaborate descriptions of this social type can be found in their studies of African, Asian, Oceanic, North American, Mesoamerican and South American tricksters (Steward, 1931; Bunzel, 1932; Charles, 1945; Radin, 1956; Makarius, 1969, 1970, 1973). The trickster is portrayed as a person with magical powers. He is both underdog and culture hero, a mirror to man, who provides order out of chaos by connecting the unexplainable to the familiar. He is a person with uncanny powers of insight and prophecy. Jung (1969) describes the trickster as "a primitive 'cosmic' being of divine-animal nature, on the one hand superior to man because of his superhuman qualities, and on the other hand inferior to him because of his unreason and unconsciousness" (p. 144). When we compare the role of this mythic creature in different cultures we see how the trickster turns into a symbol of the human condition, parodying human drives, needs and weaknesses, combining cunning with stupidity, and being simultaneously funny and scary.

As Willeford (1969) indicates, "...most of the people we recognize as fools experience the world and act within it in ways that indicate a fundamental abnormality, real or pretended, of

psychic functioning" (p.23). The misadventures of these characters provide the spectator with insight into all that is human through the transformation of wit into wisdom.

That the fool is very much a culture hero, can be seen when we take as example one of Europe's most famous professional buffoons, the antihero, Till Eulenspiegel, said to have actually lived in the fourteenth century (Oppenheimer, 1972). His name is the giveaway, as it literally means, "owl mirror," a metaphor for "wise reflection." As portrayed in his many adventures, Eulenspiegel would mirror the foolishness of men, educating them by making fun of all their cherished values.

Anthropological research suggests how the trickster becomes a figure onto which we can project our own foibles, ideals and fears. Again, we can see how these people play an important social role. Welsford even goes so far as to call the fool an educator, "...for he draws out the latent folly in his audience" (1935, p. 28). By setting a negative example, he or she emphasizes that which is valued and what course of action is the most appropriate.

The Zuni Indian tribe clowns (Koyemci) perhaps best exemplify the display of such behavior (Bunzel, 1932; Charles, 1945). These people are not only clowns but also part of the priestly class that rules the village. In their ritual celebrations we see how the grotesque, obscene antics of these sacred clown-priests offer an opportunity for catharsis of otherwise repressed fears and anxieties.

Apart from the fool's ethnographic distribution, the role has been institutionalized in the professions of clown, buffoon or court jester (Swain, 1932; Welsford, 1935; Klapp, 1972; Lever, 1983). The fool's cap and scepter become the symbols of his institutionalized role.

The jester is privileged in that, under the guise of madness or stupidity (thus appearing harmless), the otherwise unspeakable can be spoken. In order to get the message across, clumsiness, exaggeration, absent-mindedness, concealment, pantomime and botched acts are used (Bergson, 1928). Kris (1938) calls the jester a living caricature. He or she becomes the vehicle to express what under other circumstances would be considered destructive social information.

A famous illustration of a person playing such a role is the fool in Shakespeare's King Lear. Although seemingly half-witted, only he had both the wisdom and the courage to recognize and tell the truth. This sage-fool quickly saw through the various hidden agendas and apprehended the foolishness of the king's action in giving away his kingdom. The blindness of Lear becomes a metaphor of his unwillingness to see. The court jester became the privileged critic -- a paradoxical figure both depreciated and appreciated. He is the disinterested truthsayer who speaks frankly about how things really are. Humor is used to cushion the otherwise unspeakable, in this case, to have the king perceive his self-deception about the true nature of two of his daughters.

What both Erasmus and Shakespeare indicate is that the power of the king needs the folly of the fool. They are like twins who keep each other in psychic equilibrium. The king-fool duality shows the Janus-faced nature of power. The proverb "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" has more than one meaning. The sage-fool is often the only one who can stop the king from going down the road of hubris. Equally important, the sage-fool or, as he or she is sometimes called, morosophe (Lever, 1983) can play an important role in preventing leadership pathology. By showing the folly of certain decisions made because of impaired "vision," the king's action retains a reality base.

RITUALS OF REBELLION: THE USE OF HUMOR

Humor deals with conflicted imagery in a gentle way, thus preventing the sudden explosion of tension. It can be a formidable weapon against those who under other circumstances would refuse to recognize and accept the true nature of things. It helps in fostering a sense of proportion about the life situation in which we find ourselves and serves as a brake on taking ourselves too seriously. By doing so, humor becomes the instrument with which to unlock a rigid view of life, bringing a new perspective. Humor becomes instrumental in fostering insight (necessitating a capacity for self-observation) and as such becomes a vehicle for change. In its unmasking function -- releasing unconscious material -- it can become a sort of safety valve, controlling leadership's potentially destructive outcomes.

Humor is often a good way of highlighting signs of hubris. It is also a covert way of approaching taboo topics. Humor can be used to change a strained situation into a pleasant one. Shared laughter contributes to group cohesiveness and enhances an atmosphere of cordiality. As the psychiatrist Vaillant once said, "...humor is one of the truly elegant defenses in the human repertoire. Few would deny that the capacity for humor, like hope, is one of mankind's most potent antidotes for the woes of Pandora's box" (1977, p. 116).

Thus, fool, using humor, can do the unthinkable, trespassing on otherwise forbidden territory and satirizing leaders and followers. Through his actions he provides a vicarious outlet for the most basic antisocial feelings. By creating absurd situations, the fool is verbalizing the fears and anxieties of others. The gratification of unconscious wishes through him brings a sense of relief. The self-depreciating quality that goes with his transgression of taboos makes it less threatening and more easily accepted. To hold the fool fully responsible for his actions is difficult to do, as fools seem to have some protective immunity. When something is said in jest it doesn't carry the same weight as it does in ordinary communication. Consequently, greater risks can be taken in getting a difficult message across.

Their behavior and actions suggest that fools know, consciously or unconsciously, the power of the one-down position. They realize that humorous self-depreciation may make others feel better. Fool's antics make it possible for us to unload our

feelings of inferiority onto them. By so doing, we may feel virtuous compared to such misfits.

Of course, in taking on this role like the mock king of old (a person of low position given for a short period some of the king's authority), the fool runs the risk of turning into a scapegoat representing an evil or malignant force which has to be expelled. Danger has always been an occupational hazard for the fool.

The anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown has commented on the contradictory nature of humor:

The joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism. The behavior is such that in any other social context it would express and arouse hostility, but it is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously. There is a pretence of hostility and a real friendliness. To put it another way, - the relationship is one of permitted disrespect (1952, p. 90).

We can remark that Radcliffe-Brown sees joking relationships as a form of permitted disrespect, a way of managing potential conflicts in society. Freud (1905) came to a similar conclusion. He noticed that people used humor as a socially acceptable way of releasing anxiety-provoking wishes of an aggressive and sexual nature. In particular, humor allows for the expression of aggressive and vengeful feelings that otherwise would not be

tolerated (Levine, 1961). But laughter can mask many other emotions, such as sadness, despair, fear, regret, triumph and hate, as well.

Freud also mentioned that "humor is not resigned; it is rebellious" (1927, p.103). In many instances, joking behavior is used as a way of getting back at figures of authority. The fool turns into an anarchist, using humor to make the breaking of rules and regulations less objectionable (Goffman, 1967). However, his is rebellion of a more tame, covert nature, a form of non-violent resistance (Bergler, 1937). But in this way, humor also becomes a safety valve (paradoxically, given its rebellious origin), an instrument of social control and regulation. (Levine, 1961; Berlyne, 1964). In spite of their ridicule of the established order, fools are actually engaged in setting outer limits to what is permitted. The break from day-to-day conventionality remains only temporary. As Pollio and Edgerly (1976) indicate in their research on humor, "...in this role of moralist-in-reverse the fool acts as a control mechanism stressing what he violates by emphasizing what is beyond him. To call a non-fool, fool, is to put social pressure on that individual to conform to a social value" (p. 216).

Preoccupations In Clowning

To understand what motivates clowns or jesters to attempt to capture the audience's attention, it is important to uncover some of their own preoccupations. In their study of professional comedians and clowns using projective and other tests, Fisher and Fisher (1981) discovered a number of recurring themes in their inner world. According to the study, true comics "...deny that things are as bad or threatening as they seem"; they are "...preoccupied with issues of good and bad, virtue and evil"; they are "...fascinated by size ...particularly sensitive to smallness"; and they "...are sensitive to the dimension of up-down" (p. 35). Comics associate these patterns with a specific childhood situation where, from an early age onward, they had to learn to take care of themselves, having come to the realization that there was little emotional support to be expected from their parents. Fisher and Fisher suggested that, by being ridiculous, they conveyed the message of having been treated in a ridiculous way.

The main dilemma for many future clowns or jesters seems to have been that they were not supposed to be children but were prematurely pushed into the role of adults, although inhabiting the body of children. This lack of congruency between one's own capacity and the expectations of others may have led to preoccupations of feeling small, powerless and unworthy. Such concerns are difficult to deal with and hard to accept. Hence, comedians choose a life strategy of denying that which is

unpleasant. Here, humor will fill multiple roles. (Fry & Allen, 1975). It is a form of defense, a way of disguising anger about the absurdity of the situation. It is also a way of blunting feelings of sadness and, by attracting attention, of proving to the audience that they are not as inadequate or bad as they may seem. Thus, we can observe the extent to which comics are in the business of equalization. And, when they are through with their antics, all differences between good and bad, small and big, adult and child, or up and down are blurred and everyone ends up at the same level.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL FOOL

In organizational life there are many ways to create checks and balances as a form of protection against the abuse of power. Aspects of the organizational infra- and supra- structures can be used as levers. We can take as an example certain rules and regulations which often serve a boundary function. In addition, given the role of the organization's many stakeholders, power can be distributed among a number of constituencies.

But, in spite of these more structural ways to guard against the perils of power, the bottom line is that most organizations are not true democracies. Many important organizational processes are decided on by only a few in secret. Hence, to prevent the abuse of power in organizations and shield against the loss of reality-based decision making, help will sometimes be needed. Here I am thinking of that courageous individual who is willing

to challenge the leader and help him or her see things from another perspective free from the distortions of sycophancy.

Just as the sage-fool or truth teller was playing with fire when giving unpleasant news to the king, it is a risky occupation to try to demonstrate the vicissitudes of the human condition in organizations and bring things into perspective by articulating the hidden agendas through dramatization or even exaggeration and humor (Malone, 1980). As in equivalent situations, bringing unconscious material to the surface in organization can at times be explosive.

From early on, Freud (1910) struggled with this issue in his paper on "'Wild' Psychoanalysis." He felt that informing an other of unconscious material would only work and not lead to intensification of conflict if two conditions were filled:

First, the patient must, through preparation, himself have reached the neighbourhood of what he has repressed, and secondly, he must have formed a sufficient attachment (transference) to the physician for his emotional relationships to him to make a fresh flight impossible.

Only when these conditions have been fulfilled is it possible to recognize and to master the resistances which have led to repression and the ignorance.

Psychoanalytic intervention, therefore, absolutely requires a fairly long period of contact with the

patient. Attempts to 'rush' him at first consultation, by brusquely telling him the secrets which have been discovered by the physician, are technically objectionable (p. 226).

What Freud is really trying to tell us is that, in order to ease the surfacing of emotionally charged material, a working alliance must first be established between the two parties in question. To accomplish this a certain amount of trust is needed. Freud clarified the delicacy of the task of the one taking the role of the messenger in building this kind of relationship. The doses of insight have to be well timed and carefully measured (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). In playing the role of truthsayer, the sage-fool must realize that there are limits to the amount of conflict-ridden information the leader can accept at any one given time. Fortunately, humor can play an important role in relieving tension when the truthsayer is trying to make a point about a sensitive issue: humor becomes the lubricant facilitating the digestion of such information. It short-circuits resistances and improves the readiness of the party toward whom the communication is directed to hear what must be done to keep the organization on track.

A good example of the role of the sage-fool in a certain form of organizational life can be found in literature. The Czech author Jaroslav Hasek, in one of the greatest masterpieces of satirical writing, The Good Soldier Svejk, describes the misadventures of his seemingly idiotic hero. In doing so he makes fun of the decaying Austro-Hungarian empire and its war

machine. In a certain way Svejek stands for all of us when trapped in the cogs of bureaucracy. His idiocy is really a subterfuge for wisdom and wit. He is a careful observer of humanity and his penetrating commentary makes others realize the absurdity of their actions. Svejek is an excellent example of the sage-fool. Using double-talk and the literal execution of orders, he demonstrates the foolishness of many rules and regulations. Through his behavior and actions he forces us to rethink the rationale behind our conduct. He brings figures of authority down to size, having an uncanny ability to deal with any superior. He becomes the perfect antidote to hubris.

We can ask ourselves if there is a place for a person like Svejek in a business organization and, if so, what would his staying power be, career-wise? Of course, all this depends on the amount of conflicted material others are able to handle at any point in time. However, sage-fools can be found in organizations and they can be very effective in influencing the behavior and action of senior management.

The role of the sage-fool in organizational life can be taken either by a person internal to the organization or one external to it. In general, it is more difficult for an insider to take on the role, as the risks tend to be greater. Just as the king's fool had to be careful not to transgress too far and forfeit his life, the truthsayer in organizational life plays a role which is also not without risks. Dealing with highly sensitive material, and saying how things really are, can be a dangerous activities for career advancement. Whistle-blowing, in other words standing

up to figures of authority in an organization (for example, objecting to unethical or illegal practices), usually comes to a bad end for the individual who initiates that process.

In organizations, the role of the sage-fool is frequently taken on by a consultant. It is one among many other roles a consultant has to assume. This does not mean that in the normal course of events the consultant is asked specifically to take on the role. Often both parties aren't even aware that he or she is doing so nor how important the role is in keeping the organization firmly tied to reality. Occasionally, however, senior executives realize how essential a "corporate jester" can be. A recent article in the International Herald Tribune (Buchanan, 1988) described how a number of French companies are using consultants for the specific purpose of staging short, satirical sketches in order to get difficult messages across. This activity is not limited to France -- similar role playing can be observed in many other settings. In general, however, it appears that such messages are directed to middle management more often than to the president.

Quite frequently consultants realize that the real problem in an organization is very different from what was originally defined as the problem. Between what clients say they want and what they really want there can be a huge gap. In many instances, clients find it easier to talk about the symptoms and the role of others in creating these symptoms than about their own contribution to the problem. Often there is great reluctance to raise and confront the real issues. Going beyond the symptoms and bringing

some of the contributing factors out into the open (with the consultant in the role of the fool as catalyst) can be extremely important for reasons of clarification and for fostering insight (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984).

This does not mean, however, that someone internal to the organization cannot take on this role. At times we see how a trusted senior executive will play the part. Some organizations may even have institutionalized the role. Internal consultants, some kind of ombudsman (following the Scandinavian tradition), or a senior executive without a specific portfolio may fit here. And, given certain skills of dramatization, even a less senior manager may occasionally become the spokesman. Some organizations may prefer to have someone at a less elevated level -- a Mr. Everyman, alias Svejik -- playing this role.

In general, however, it is easier for an outsider to assume such a difficult role. The consequences of falling into "wild analysis" tend to be less draconian. If such is the case, the worst that can happen when the feedback becomes too disturbing is a prematurely terminated consultancy relationship. As a matter of fact, the role of the external adviser and that of the fool seem to be made for each other. By playing dumb and asking naive questions, the consultant can further the understanding of a particular organizational problem and take on the role of the agent for change. Here humor can be of great use, particularly when testing options and making recommendations.

Let us take an example: in one company in the automotive supply business, the role of the sage-fool was played by the vice-president for manufacturing and operations. This individual, a self-made man who had risen through the production route, was intimately familiar with the internal processes of the organization. He was extremely effective in his job and highly respected because of his pragmatism. Given his background and the fact that the company was very marketing-driven, he had risen as far as he could. That didn't seem to bother him, however, as he obviously liked the position he was in. Since he didn't pose a direct threat to any of the other senior executives -- power games were the least of his concerns -- his counsel was eagerly sought. Although the company had a director of human resources, the VP for manufacturing and operations informally played a very important role in that area.

When the CEO retired and a successor was appointed from within the conglomerate of which the organization was a part, the VP began to assume an even more prominent role for a number of reasons. In the first place, the new CEO was not very knowledgeable about the company nor about the industry, having worked previously in a very different sector. Secondly, he seemed to be quite abrasive in dealing with his subordinates. When things were not exactly to his liking he was quick to cut them off or silence them completely with sarcastic remarks. What had added to the tense situation in the company was the dismissal of two old timers after a heated executive meeting. The executives were increasingly at a loss as to how to deal with the new arrival. Given his mercurial temperament, they

were reluctant to argue with him even in situations where they felt he was making decisions which were not in the best interest of the corporation.

In order to cope with the prevailing state of anxiety and refocus the company's strategy, the vice-president for manufacturing and operations began to play an increasingly visible role at executive meetings. In a humorous way he was able to calm the emotions but also make sure to tell the CEO what he felt would be the right course for the company, thereby reflecting the not-publicly-expressed consensus of the group.

His self-effacing but humorous style had a calming effect on the CEO, who, it seemed, had partially been acting the way he had, because of his own anxiety about how to tackle his new job. Under the influence of the vice-president, the executive meetings were transformed into more of a give-and-take. Having important issues portrayed in an exaggerated, humorous manner allowed them to be viewed with a more balanced perspective. Gradually, the other executives became sufficiently courageous to express their own opinions freely. What kept things going was that when aspects of the CEO's abrasive style re-emerged the VP would be very quick to neutralize the situation.

In another organization, an external consultant took on a similar role. Originally, this particular consultant had been brought in to rationalize the work flow in the design department. His suggestion that this process be organized in a different way in

combination with the establishment of some kind of "skunk work" -
- in this instance, a design project group located somewhere else
having an arms length relationship to the main organization --
proved to be highly effective and created a burst of activity
throughout the organization. Because of its success, the
consultant was asked to help design and implement a new
performance appraisal system. The CEO, normally a rather aloof
individual, difficult to approach very much appreciated the work
of the consultant and began to take him into his confidence.
Since the CEO was not completely satisfied with the way the
executive meetings operated, he asked the consultant to sit in on
some of the sessions and recommend ways to improve the quality of
decision making. The consultant quickly realized that the CEO's
awkwardness was responsible for the rather painful discussions
and stifled the free flow of information and creative ideas.
Some form of action was needed to make the sessions more
productive. He decided to ask for pseudo naive clarifications of
the different issues at hand and to use humor. His regular
attendance at the meetings proved to be extremely useful. His
interventions helped in breaking the ice, while at the same time
putting across important points. Gradually, all the executives
loosened up and the discussions became much more of a give and
take where people would listen to each other and build on each
other's ideas.

CONCLUSION

These examples of internal/external organizational sage-fools illustrate how such people can take on a complementary role. When the sage-fool becomes the counterweight of the person in power, a kind of executive role constellation is formed (Hodgson, Levinson & Zalesnik, 1965) which often proves to be highly effective as a safety device in preventing organizational pathology. Through humor, the "fool" and the "king" engage in a form of "deep" play dealing with fundamental issues of human nature such as control, rivalry, passivity and activity. Working through what can be destructive fantasies creates a soothing effect which can eventually redirect the organization toward reality issues.

In the study of organizations, it is unfortunate that our attention is usually focussed on leaders and seldom drawn to the various roles of subordinates. Here we have tried to illustrate, however, that there is an intricate link between the roles of the two: leaders need fools and vice versa. We should not forget that in spite of the rationality which supposedly pervades organizations the truth of the matter is often quite different. There is a fine line between the forces of reality and those of wishful thinking. When boundaries fade, the consequences can be quite devastating as far as effective organizational functioning is concerned. And that is where sage-fools can play a preventive

role. Given their importance, students of organizations would do well to pay more attention to this phenomenon.

George Bernard Shaw once said that "...every despot must have one disloyal subject to keep him sane." That is what the sage-fool is all about. He or she plays an essential role in keeping an organization on track, maintaining its ties to reality, and most important of all, fighting the forces of hubris.

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