WHAT'S PLAYING IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL THEATER?
COLLUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN MANAGEMENT

by

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Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure concepts derived from couple therapy to better understand collusive relationships in organizations. As we examine these dysfunctional workplace relationships—these interpersonal "gridlocks"—ideas about projective identification will be introduced as a way of understanding them. Four main types of collusive superior-subordinate interaction patterns are identified—the narcissistic, the sadomasochistic, the paranoid, and the controlling—and the consequences of each such dyad in organizations are explored. In conclusion, the paper presents a number of recommendations on how to recognize the presence of such collusive arrangements and suggests preventive steps that can be taken.

KEY WORDS: Superior-subordinate relationship; leader; projective identification; narcissistic collusion; sadomasochistic collusion; paranoid collusion; controlling collusion; pseudomutuality; folie à deux; transference; identification with the aggressor.
On August 24, 1994, Jeffrey Katzenberg, head of Walt Disney Studios, resigned. His acrimonious departure came as a shock after his eighteen year collaborative relationship with Michael Eisner, the chairman of Disney. Katzenberg’s defection sent ripples through the entertainment industry and became front page news. Most industry analysts saw Katzenberg’s exit as a major loss to the company. He was perceived as the architect of a whole series of highly successful animated films (including the fabulously profitable Lion King), which were the primary engine for Disney’s growth. Katzenberg’s departure endangered a smooth succession process, following the accidental death of company president Frank Welch (particularly in light of the fact that Eisner had recently had a quadruple coronary bypass operation). In addition, Katzenberg soon became a partner in a new company called “DreamWorks SKG,” creating a potentially serious competitor for Disney (Huy, 1995).

Ten years earlier in 1984, after leaving Paramount together, Eisner and Katzenberg had taken over a moribund Disney which had relatively disappointing revenues of $1.4 billion. By 1993, Disney’s revenues had reached the level of $8.5 billion. Pretax profits
of the film studio (which was Katzenberg’s responsibility) had risen from $2 million in 1984 to about $800 million in 1994. No film studio had reported greater profits over the previous decade. Clearly the Eisner-Katzenberg break-up was not a question of finance but rather human factors. What went wrong with the chemistry between the two men? What soured their eighteen-year collaboration? What really happened?

The story of the break-up has all the elements of a marriage gone bad. In this messy public divorce it became hard to know what was reality. Observers took sides and depending on their perspective assigned one man the villain’s role and the other the hero’s. Each protagonist was accused of being an abrasive megalomaniac by the other’s supporters. Some people felt that Katzenberg was claiming undeserved credit for Disney’s success, while others faulted Eisner for only tolerating yea-sayers and leading the company in a disastrous direction.

Going beyond fault-finding, the conjecture can be made that the manifest and latent demands of the relationship seemed to have gotten out of sync. The various descriptions of the “divorce” makes it sound like a tale of dependence and counterdependence, of autonomy and control, of narcissism and emotions. As long as both parties played their appropriate roles in the partnership a kind of equilibrium existed. But when Katzenberg tried to change that situation and began to assert himself, requesting the number two job in the organization (after Frank Welch’s death) Eisner’s hackles went up.

According to people familiar with the two protagonists, Eisner had always remained rather aloof toward his star performer. He was not quick to give credit for a job well done. Some described Eisner as having become more arrogant and tougher over the years. He apparently liked keeping Katzenberg in the one-down position, always searching for approval, playing the role of supplicant. On the other hand, Katzenberg was not exactly Mr Nice Guy. He had a reputation for playing hardball, but had started trying to change his image by presenting a more softened, conciliatory side at times (Grover, 1994).
When Katzenberg made it clear to Eisner that he wanted to be a more equal partner, the equilibrium seemed to be broken. Eisner was not prepared to give in to Katzenberg’s demands. A change in their working relationship was unacceptable to Eisner; he was unwilling to compromise. He felt Katzenberg had become too pushy. Whatever the “glue” had been between the two of them, it was no longer holding.

Unfortunately, neither parties had ever understand the real nature of this “glue.” In spite of the many years that they worked together, they seemed to have very little insight about their interpersonal chemistry. They were not very clear about their roles. Thus the “tragedy” ran its inevitable course. As Ken Auletta wrote in the New Yorker, “Katzenberg left a job that he loved and Disney lost a talented executive that it didn’t want to lose. Primal forces were at work, which could not be controlled by the mind” (p.69).

Who was to blame? Who was the major culprit? Could the outcome have been avoided? What can be said about the roles Eisner and Katzenberg played in this drama? What kind of psychodynamic forces were at play?

In a fundamental way, we are all actors. We are all on stage. We love playing theater, and what is more, we like to get others involved in our plays. Wherever we look around us, we can see various cameo performances: comedies, tragedies, romances— you name it! This is part and parcel of daily functioning in both private and organizational life (Goffman, 1959).

Within organizations, as in private life, great masterpieces are continuously being performed. Organizational leaders—Disney being a good example—are in the theater business. Play-acting is an important part of their job. It is a way of influencing their subordinates. Leaders have to inspire their followers, get them to share their vision of where the company should be going, and enlist their help in enacting the leaders’ ideas.
To accomplish those tasks, leaders find impression management essential. They need their subordinates to play along, to help them to get things done.

Spontaneous as all these forms of interaction between senior executives and their subordinates (or even colleagues) may appear, the truth of the matter is quite different. Some of the "plays" we witness at the office are not as spontaneous as they seem at first glance. Perceptive observers will soon notice that there is a certain regularity to some of these superior-subordinate encounters. Closer scrutiny reveals that the ways particular superiors and subordinates deal with each other may fall into specific set patterns—ways of interacting that tend to "harden" over time. Moreover, sometimes the participants in these organizational psychodramas become stuck in a vicious circle of repetitive behavior patterns—patterns that can contribute to various forms of organizational malfunctioning. That, of course, does not imply that there are no constructive interpersonal operational modes. In most office relationships, workers' ways of interacting with each other, occasionally stressful though they may be, lead to further maturation, creativity, peak experiences, transformation, and change; many relationships possess the qualities of intimacy and autonomy that set the stage for further development. But in some situations this is not the case.

The objective of this exploratory paper is to look at some of the collusive interaction patterns that can be found in organizations. To understand the origin of these sorts of patterns, I will make use of concepts taken from psychodynamically oriented couple therapy. In addition, the notion of projective identification will be introduced as a way of understanding these dysfunctional interpersonal relationships. Subsequently, I will identify the most frequent types of collusions and their consequences, taking different character types as points of departure (Reich, 1949; Shapiro, 1965; Storr, 1979; Millon, 1981; Kets de Vries and Perzow, 1991; McWilliams, 1994). Finally, I will make some observations about how to recognize and manage these dysfunctional behavior patterns.
Childhood and Adulthood: A Continuous Process

As we consider the various kinds of “theater” found in organizations, the first question that comes to mind is, How do corporate play-acting processes start? What is the origin for many of these performances?

Clinical investigation reveals that these interaction patterns do not spring up at random. They usually have an earlier source. As developmental studies have shown, childhood and adulthood are not two disconnected events; on the contrary, they form part of a continuum (Piaget, 1937; Erikson, 1963; Winnicott, 1975; Bowlby, 1969; Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975; Emde, 1983).

Becoming a person in one’s own right requires both the capacity to develop increasingly mature, mutually satisfying interpersonal relationships and the acquisition of a consolidated, well-differentiated sense of self and identity. In order for this two-part process to happen, our psychological health must be linked to congruous responses on the part of parents or other caretakers to our needs. In other words, parents and children must integrate their behavior in a finely tuned mutual exchange process. Parents have to provide a “good-enough” holding environment; they need to have the capacity to be a “container” of the child’s emotions, modifying and “detoxifying” intense affect (Winnicott, 1975; Bion, 1959).

The challenge of parents is to channel childish wishes into more realistic directions in a constructive, supportive way. If that challenge is met sensitively, the basis is formed for well-grounded ambition, directed activities, and a secure sense of self-esteem and self-
confidence. Any imbalance, however, between our demands as a child and the support and protective nurturing received from our parents may be felt as a psychological injury. It appears that normal development implies age-appropriate frustration without traumatization.

A consistent quality of care, nurturance, and support is not always present, however. Although most parents do what they can, many are not able—or are not always able—to provide a "good-enough" holding environment; their containing function may be deficient. Parental failure due to excessive criticism, control, disapproval, or rejection can lead to unresolved conflicts that may be carried from our childhood into adulthood and there be experienced as vulnerabilities, insecurities, or fears (Winnicott, 1975).

If we take the trouble to reconstruct our own personal history, we are likely to discover the extent to which our adult relationships are determined by the way our parents and other important adult figures either did or did not express their affectionate or aggressive feelings; how our earliest painful and pleasurable experiences were dealt with (Freud, 1916; Erikson, 1963; Kohut, 1974, 1977). The theater pieces that we act out in adulthood frequently turn out to be unwitting repetitions of behavior patterns we have been familiar with since childhood. However, due to conflictual experiences, these ways of relating have remained unresolved. And conflicts that are not properly metabolized may lead to problems with living; they may contribute to various form of anxiety.

I am not, however, referring here to simple causal relationships. Although childhood experiences can have a dramatic impact, resulting subsequently in problematic patterns of interaction, they are modified by other events occurring over the person's life span. But whatever modifications take place later in the life cycle, a habitual, preferred way of interaction will eventually come to the fore and typify the individual—character patterns that influence moods, perceptions, thoughts, and actions (Luborsky, 1984,
In one way or another (though this is often not a conscious process), we try to clear up the unfinished business of childhood later in life. We want to overcome—even master and repair—the pain of issues that have remained unresolved. This belated need for mastery may express itself in a tendency to repeat, and these repetitions themselves can take on many different forms. As a matter of fact, a generational issue may even be at play here (Böszörményi-Nagy and Spark, 1984): it is possible to recognize in certain people recapitulations of the same kinds of problems that their parents were trying to master.

Interestingly enough, in dyadic encounters a division of roles may evolve whereby each partner of the dyad supplies a set of qualities, the sum of which creates a kind of joint personality. When reconstructing behavior patterns in adulthood, we can observe the extent to which certain ways of interaction have been determined by both partners' conscious and unconscious fantasies. Clinical investigation reveals that these fantasies often derive from our perceptions of the parental figures of childhood. And as mentioned earlier, closer investigation shows that these choices are often based on an unconscious striving to reenact conflict–fraught parent-child relationships. After all, the original pattern of parent-child interaction is the model for later forms of behavior (Lichtenstein, 1977).

Often the choice of partner by each member of a couple is based on the unconscious recognition in the other of parts of the self that one has to deal with for defensive or developmental reasons. An unconscious contract is made for this purpose (Pincus, 1960; Ruszczynski, 1993). If those reasons are developmental, for example, the other party may personify the representation in external reality of a longed-for ideal caretaker. Here the fantasy exists that the partner will foster undeveloped aspects of
oneself, allowing that self to become more integrated. If the early relationship with the primary caretaker was not good enough, the "incomplete" partner makes an attempt at reparation, an attempt to bring reality more in line with the longed-for expectations. No wonder that among couples we sometimes hear references made to "my better half" or "my other half."

In defensive situations one party sees the opportunity to project disavowed elements of the self onto the other; in other words, the other party becomes the receptacle of split-off parts of the self. This process of externalization of conflicts may make these nondesired elements more tolerable within oneself. Perceiving these nondesired characteristics in the other, however, may also serve as a red flag leading to attempts at control or attack. What we cannot stand in ourselves we may blame in the other. Whatever the underlying dynamics may be, a collusive, complementary meshing of the intrapsychic imagery is likely to be the result (Mittelmann, 1944; Whitaker, 1958; Ackerman, 1965; Bowen, 1978; Dicks, 1967; Kernberg, 1993; Ruszczynski, 1995).

The Role of Projective Identification

A critical role in the formation of dyads is played by projective identification. Projective identification is a very complex, subtle, almost mysterious process whereby a part of the self is expelled and "deposited" into someone else (Klein, 1942, 1948, 1955; Bion, 1959, 1970; Ogden, 1982; Meltzer, 1994). Ogden (1982, pp. 36-37) defines projective identification as a process that serves as:

1) a type of defense, by which one can distance oneself from an unwanted or internally endangered part of the self, while in fantasy keeping that aspect of the self alive in the recipient; 2) a mode of communication by which the projector makes himself understood by
exerting pressure on the recipient to experience a set of feelings similar to his own; 3) a type of object-relatedness in which the projector experiences the recipient as a receptacle for parts of the self but sufficiently undifferentiated to maintain the illusion of literally sharing the projector's feeling; 4) a pathway for psychological change by which feelings similar to those which the projector is struggling with are processed by the recipient, thus allowing the projector to identify with the recipient's handling of the engendered feelings.

When projective identification functions as a "primitive form of object relation," split-off parts of the self are transferred to another person. It becomes an interpersonal process, an intrusive, primitive form of communication whereby the initiator forces the receiver to experience a set of feelings similar to his or her own. It is an attempt to apprehend and influence another person's subjective world. Through this process of projective identification, both parties—whether consciously or unconsciously—are drawn together. By using this kind of subtle pressure, the initiator becomes understood by the other, who now experiences similar feelings. The person who does the projecting evokes in the recipient of the projection feelings appropriate to the ones projected. Furthermore, because of the intensity of this process, the other person may actually experience and start to behave in accordance with the projected fantasies. As a matter of fact, in certain situations the other person is used as a kind of "lavatory," becoming the recipient of undesired qualities (Rosenfeld, 1964). We should not, however, interpret this phenomenon in a purely negative way, because it also forms the basis for feelings of empathy, for intuition, for leaps of nonverbal synchronicity, for experiences of mystical union with another person, and for the ability to "read" another person's mind.

Thus in projective identification—in contrast to simple projection, where one's own wishes and feelings are attributed to another person because of intolerable inner
feelings or painful emotions—the projected psychic content is not gone after projection has occurred. That content is simultaneously projected and retained; indeed, the process of projective identification allows the projector to maintain some influence over it.

Transference patterns can also be correlated with this form of communication, because pressure is exerted to see the other as an important person from another period in time. Through this transfer of subjective experiences, a "new edition" or "reprint" of the person's emotional and cognitive reactions to past experiences is created, revised, and acted out in the present (Freud, 1905; Kets de Vries, 1995). A "false connection" occurs if subordinates, for example, perceive and respond to their boss not according to the reality of the situation but as if that boss were a significant figure from the past (such as a parent or other authoritative person).

On occasion, the intensity of the process leads to a form of mental contagion: both individuals in an office dyad become stuck in a rigid script of mutual projective identifications, an unconscious defensive process against shared anxieties. During the process, boundaries become unclear and separateness is lost. The parties subjected to these mutual projective identifications enter into a kind of collusive arrangement—that is, a resonation takes place in each person with the other person's affect-laden fantasies—whereby it becomes difficult to distinguish the characteristics of one person from those of the other.

**The Meshing of Fantasies**

These collusive arrangements begin with a sort of "courtship" during which the future partners assess each other's suitability for these projective processes. In organizational terms—that is, if we assume that the organization as a whole is one of the partners—
this courtship display is acted out during the selection and socialization process of new people into the organization. Training and development programs during which employee behavior is being shaped, as well as a person's initial entry into an organization, are important occasions for assessing the newcomer's preparedness to participate in the particular interaction patterns enacted by the key players in the organization—the actors who set the tone and define the corporate culture. During this time of courtship, both parties, through the process of projective identification, give off signals—conscious or unconscious—that are received by the other party. Each partner may recognize in the other disowned, denied, or projected parts of the self; each searches the other for an (unconscious) preparedness to participate in the prevailing “script.” Provisionally, the question is explored to what extent each of the players will be a good “receptacle” for the other's projective identification. The exact content of this script, however, is not openly articulated. The signs given are much more subtle. But these tentative feelers often constitute the beginning of a kind of secret alliance or collusion. These are times of exploration during which the person-organization fit is being determined. Newcomers who do not have the "right" personality makeup will eventually have no choice but to leave the organization.

The word *collusion* is used here to signify the way in which the players of these games become stuck in these mutual projective identifications that hamper future growth and development. *Collusion* in this context should be understood as an out-of-awareness, repetitive pattern of interaction between people, instigated and maintained in such a way as to manage and master anxiety about certain past conflictual experiences. The psychiatrist Jürg Willi defines the collusion principle as "the unconscious interplay of two partners who are looking for each other in the hope of coming to terms together with those conflicts and frustrations in their lives which they have not yet managed to resolve" (1982, preface).
These collusions, which can be seen as a neurotic form of collaboration, often take up an enormous amount of psychic energy. They occur when certain behavior patterns resonate between the partners in the play. Usually, one of the partners keeps the other bound to a set of complementary reactions. There is a great insistence to get from the other what the initiating partner feels is missing inside him- or herself. Thus, through the process of projective identification, the initiator uses the partner as a vehicle for those aspects of his or her own personality that the initiator would like to integrate within him- or herself. And in organizations—given the dynamics of power—employees who are not willing to "play" with the senior executive are not likely to last.

Such unhealthy collusions contrast sharply with more playful encounters that leave both parties a considerable amount of transitional space where new learning can take place and where new solutions to problems can be discovered (Winnicott, 1975). In the latter situations, the outcome is not predetermined; the players do not find themselves stuck in frozen positions; new permutations and combinations are possible. The partners are involved in a process of further growth and development.

Usually, the invitation to participate in collusive activities operates at three different levels of awareness. Most often the first level is the most verbalized one. At a person's entry into an organization, much effort is exerted by the organization to make the new employee aware of the unique features of the prevailing corporate culture: its preferred interpersonal style and way of relating to others. More specifically, an attempt is made to articulate the kind of partnership arrangement the person will be subjected to. This verbalization does not always mean that the receiver truly understands the message, of course. The process of projective identification is prone to distortion. There can be a substantial difference between one's understanding of such a message at a cognitive level and one's understanding at an emotional level. As a consequence, the new person does not always react as expected to the signals given.
At the next level of awareness, one of the parties is conscious (or at least subliminally so) of the "contract"—of what it means to be associated with the other—but has not articulated it for fear of a negative reaction. Some aspects of the expected role will come into question, such as who will be in power and control, what is going to be the degree of closeness versus distance, and who will play the more active and who will play the more passive role. Only gradually is the other party made aware of what "signing up" is all about.

The last level of the "contract" contains those aspects that are mostly completely outside conscious awareness. Occasionally, the themes in each party's inner theater that will dominate the relationship in the future will be close to the surface, giving the parties in question a fleeting sense of the prevailing themes; however, those will quickly be pushed aside. For example, the "contract" may concern unexpressed, almost ritualistic wishes centered around dependent, narcissistic, or sadistic needs. At this level, the many subtleties of the "script" specifying how the parties will relate to each other come to the fore. No longer is it a question of the generalities of the "play"; now an exact description of each person's role during the different acts is outlined. Here repetition plays a major role as disavowed, denied, or projected parts of the self based on unresolved childhood conflicts come to dominate the relationship.

Given the existence of these three levels of awareness, it will not come as a surprise that the partners who become actors in these dysfunctional "plays" may not initially be completely cognizant (in spite of the process of projective identification) of what they are getting into. Yet before long, the participants often find themselves stuck in a vicious circle, caught up in a game that seems interminable.

We may observe how a kind of "mental gridlock" occurs in collusive situations as dysfunctional interaction patterns follow the same themes and are played out according to specific rules. Certain acts tend to be repeated over and over again. The participants
seem to be trapped in a kind of "parasitic" bond symptomizing arrested development (McDougall, 1985). As mentioned before, a deconstruction of these repetitive theater pieces indicates that the involved parties are trying to get from each other what they lacked at an earlier, critical point in their development.

The cast of characters in these repetitive plays is carefully preselected. There appears to be a kind of "fatal attraction" between certain types of people, given their ability to complement each other in these performances. In such collusive situations, the players seem to be inextricably tied to one another. Although they may superficially act as polar opposites of each other, deep down they share a similar kind of conflict. One person finds an unconscious sounding board in the other. The roles people play in these games constantly oscillate. The more passive a position one of the parties takes, the more active the other party will be; thus if the initially passive party becomes more active, passivity will increase in the partner. It seems that an equilibrium has to be maintained, whatever the costs may be.

Soon the dysfunctional aspects of these kinds of interchanges become quite obvious. The players quickly become involved in formalized fighting rituals that take so much time and energy that there is very little left for constructive, creative work. There is no free interplay between the partners. They have become stuck in games without end.

The strikingly irrational quality to these interaction patterns is the giveaway that we are dealing with deep-seated, unresolved childhood experiences and conflicts. The players lack the ability to see their relationship objectively. They do not know how to restructure or get out of it. Resolution of these peculiar interpersonal scripts becomes particularly difficult because of the presence of irrational fears and conflicts that have deep-seated, transferential roots.
Given the fact that much of this sort of behavior is unconscious, we should not be surprised that the actors will vehemently deny that games are being played when asked about a relationship. Game-playing is a deeply suppressed part of their personality. But if we make the effort to delve a little bit deeper, we soon find out that there is a specific division of labor in these collusions. Such an exploration also reveals in each party an underlying wish that, with the help of the other, his or her own deep-rooted conflicts can be resolved.

The drama and the strain that these dysfunctional forms of interaction may cause can be substantial. Executives working under collusive conditions often end up suffering from various kinds of stress disorders. Worse, other executives may become contaminated by the collusive arrangements, leading to an enormous amount of tension in the organization. When it comes to looking for the culprit among the main parties in the plot, however, it is difficult to talk in terms of victim and victimizer; both “actors” are addressing unconscious needs. Victim/victimizer seems a valid distinction when such a relationship is looked at from the outside, but in fact—closer investigation reveals that both parties are attracted to the plot and get some form of enjoyment from it. After all, it takes two to tango.

**Methodology**

The kinds of collusive interpersonal relationships I am referring to are most clearly visible within marriages. Couple therapists such as Whitaker (1958), Ackerman (1958), Dicks (1967), Minuchin (1974), Strean (1985), Sharpe (1981, 1992), Sager (1977, 1991), Lachkar (1992), Ruszczynski (1993, 1995), and particularly Willi (1982, 1984) have written extensively on destructive collusive arrangements. I have discovered in my research on the relationship between personality, leadership style, organizational culture, organizational strategy, and organizational structure that some of their findings

Consequently, concepts from couple therapy will be applied in this article to the study of superior-subordinate relationships in organizations.

To understand the underlying scripts that determine these collusive arrangements, we have to find out what is happening in the “inner theater” of the executives involved. Because this inner theater organizes the way information is processed and acted upon in interpersonal situations, we have to be something of an organizational detective in our efforts to decipher “deep” structure (Geertz, 1973, 1983; Luborsky, Crits-Christoph, Minz, and Auerbach, 1988; Luborsky, 1990; Horowitz, 1991; Kets de Vries, 1991). In playing the role of organizational detective, we have to be alert to underlying themes, hidden agendas, meanings behind metaphors used, reasons for the selection of certain words, and deeper implications of certain behaviors and activities of the individual in question.

To be able to decipher these deeper motives—to tease out the emotional, cognitive, and experiential components of the inner scripts of executives—requires the capacity to “listen with the third ear.” This capacity in turn requires a certain level of emotional intelligence—that is, an awareness about our own feelings, the knowledge and skill to handle those feelings, and an appreciation of emotions in other people (empathy). It also implies the ability to recognize affective contagion (projective identification processes in action) and make sense out of these elusive, transferred, nonverbal signals. Moreover, it requires the capacity to deconstruct and find the deeper meaning in the complex relational processes that take place in any human encounter.

Because this paper is exploratory, the presentation of collusive arrangements is not exhaustive; I address only some of the more prominent arrangements. In this study, 200 senior executives operating mainly in the information technology, chemical, and
banking sectors provided most of the database. Since much has been said already about the behavior of lower-level employees, and since top executives wield enormous power in organizations, I felt it was important to study the relationships between top executives and their immediate subordinates. (Given the universality of personality patterns, however, most of these findings would also apply to relationships among lower-level employees.) Many of the participants in the study were presidents of their companies. Most of these executives had enrolled in a leadership seminar at INSEAD which had as its objective providing them with a better understanding of their leadership style and helping them develop their emotional intelligence. An additional source of data about collusive patterns was a number of action research projects in global companies interested in corporate transformation (mindset change among their executives being one of the desired outcomes). These interventions also gave opportunities for personal interviews. The interviews with individual participants from both of these sources were structured around a verbalization of each executive’s life history, major relationships, key events, and major organizational complaints.

Because of the nature of the INSEAD seminar and the time spent with the senior executives at this seminar (three periods of five days), it was possible (in contrast to more traditional interview formats) to engage in a deep analysis of each individual’s motives, drives, needs, wishes, and fantasies. Since participation in the leadership seminar was voluntary, most of the participants were highly motivated to engage in such a process of mutual inquiry. To control for countertransference reactions (an interviewer’s transferential biases), all interviews were held by two people to enable a reality check of what was happening during the process.

Most of these executives were the “hub” of a set of relationships. During the interview, attention was paid to the most prominent of these relationships. From the interviews, it appeared that the majority of the discussed relationships were collusion-free. In these relationships, each party’s individuality seemed to be preserved. A certain number of
additional relationships, however, were described by these executives as characterized by various degrees of enmeshment. These entanglements were then further explored in the interviews.

For each type of collusive arrangement seen in these executives—and discussed below—I will present some of the major themes in the "play" that tied both parties together. I will also make some comments about the characterological development of the executives who participated in these enmeshed relationships.

As you read about these various collusive patterns, remember that this list of dyadic relationships is not exhaustive. Other permutations are possible.

Types of Collusion

The Narcissistic Collusion

One of the more popular forms of "play" revealed through the interviews was the narcissistic collusion. Although there were many variations on the narcissistic theme, closer analysis revealed that the basic message remained the same. The person in the "one-down" position in the script would say, "I'm helpless. I can't function without your assistance. I can't do it on my own. You're the world to me. You're the one who knows the way. You're the only one on whom I can rely. I'll do anything for you. I'll follow you anywhere." Individuals with a great need for admiration and applause who preferred the more dominant position were only too happy to oblige and act as a counterpart to this subservient attitude. And their follow-me attitude—"All your worries are over when you stick with me"—was all too eagerly listened to by the subordinates in question.
The intensity, and thus the danger, of narcissistic collusion seems to depend on how well the principal "actors"—those in the dominant position—are able to manage their strong narcissistic disposition. We all need a solid dose of narcissism for our day-to-day functioning; an excess, however, can become troublesome (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985; Kets de Vries, 1995). Extreme narcissists are bound to create havoc around them. They are people preoccupied with wanting to be superior, experiencing a sense of uniqueness, exaggerating their talents, and engaging in boastful and pretentious behavior. They are strongly self-centered and self-referential, they tend to show an overriding need for attention and admiration, they are prone to grandiose fantasies, and they often possess vindictive characteristics.

Excessive narcissism can be interpreted as a compensatory strategy for early disappointment in relationships. The predominant feeling of these people is that a wrong has been done to them and that the world is therefore deeply indebted to them (Millon, 1981; Kohut, 1974, 1977; Kernberg, 1975, 1985; Masterson, 1981; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). They possess a great hunger for recognition and experience a chronic need for external affirmation to feel internally secure. A cohesive sense of self is absent, resulting in an imbalance in the psychic structure, incoherent behavior, and serious problems centered around self-esteem regulation. Extreme narcissists are always in search of an admiring audience to support their yearning for a grandiose self-image and to combat their feelings of helplessness and lack of self-worth.

Characteristic of these people is a history of parental overstimulation, understimulation, or nonintegrative, inconsistent intervention during the early period of development (Kohut, 1974; Miller, 1975; Kets de Vries, 1989). Some of them may have been (unconsciously) exploited by their caretakers for the maintenance of the caretakers' own self-esteem; they may have been forced to become narcissistic extensions of these caretakers, assisting them in their own search for admiration and
greatness. The strong concentration of such caretakers on appearances and outward signs of achievement, and their disregard for their children's own personal feelings, often leaves these people with a lack of an integrated sense of self; they remain confused about the life they are supposed to lead. They end up not feeling comfortable in their own skin; many never acquire a secure sense of inner value. The result is often an individual engaged in a lifelong compensatory struggle for self-assertion and self-expression.

When this kind of personality makeup predominates, it is not hard to predict the consequences as far as relationships with others are concerned. The outcome of this kind of dysfunctional upbringing is that the narcissist fails to see the people around him or her as individuals in their own right, with demands of their own. In fact, it appears that the relationship between the narcissist and his or her admirers is not a relationship at all in the true sense of the word. In the same way he or she was "used" by caretakers in the early years, the narcissistic individual considers other people as possessions. They fall into the same category as a car, a horse, or a house: they are used to show off; they are "things," taken for granted; their only function is to act as accessories in the narcissist's pursuit of grandiosity.

It goes without saying that such a collusion will work only if the personality makeup of the two players is complementary. A requirement for the excessive narcissist, then, is a self-effacing quality in the other party—a readiness to offer continual, unconditional admiration. All attention has to be directed toward the narcissist. Nobody else is allowed to share the spotlight. Others are around to act as a positive, reflective mirror. They have to provide a lot of action in order to make the narcissistic party feel "filled up" and able to overcome the inner emptiness he or she experiences. Those permitted to join in with the narcissist's play have to be prepared to remain in his or her shadow.
Often the person in the one-down position suffers from a sense of inferiority and feelings of low self-esteem similar to those of the narcissist; but because of his or her past developmental history, the submissive party is used to being depreciated. His or her dependency needs as a child may have been highly frustrated. He or she may have been brought up in a family where there was little love to go around. This background may have set the stage for a lifelong search for idealized figures to compensate for early emotional deprivations. Such individuals with a predisposition toward self-subjugation, sacrifice, and self-compromise are often actively looking for others they can idealize as a way of boosting their own deflated sense of self-esteem. These people make desperate efforts to counteract their internal anxieties and to feel more “safe” by attaching themselves to someone who is perceived as omnipotent and omniscient. Behind these primitive idealizations may be a “golden fantasy” of having all one’s needs met unconditionally (Smith, 1977). In an indirect way, these “ideal-hungry” personalities are trying to obtain narcissistic supplies by searching for others onto whom they can project their fantasies. Through idealization and identification, they obtain such supplies by proxy. Willi (1982) calls these people “complementary narcissists.” They are trying to appropriate an idealized self from the partner.

What we can observe in these narcissistic collusions is an interesting kind of complementarity between “mirror-hungry” and “ideal-hungry” people. As indicated, the origins of their conflicts may be similar—centered as these are around self-esteem regulation—but both parties have found, in adulthood, different ways of solving their problems: one through mirroring, the other through idealizing. Each party in the collusion gets from the other what he or she feels is lacking in him- or herself. In the process, however, critical functioning and reality testing get lost, the absence of which can have dire effects on the organizations these executives are running.

Apart from complementary narcissists—people who act as a mirror image for active narcissists—there exists another group of people likely to join into a collusive,
narcissistic arrangement. I am referring to individuals with a personality makeup that can best be described as dependent (Storr, 1979). Due to excessive parental protection as developing children, these individuals were prevented from properly going through the process of separation-individuation (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975; Storr, 1979). Thus they have never been allowed to become completely differentiated beings, to satisfy their own wishes, and to learn to fend for themselves. Frequently, contributing factors to such an outcome are revealed to have been overanxiousness in the mother, a tendency toward sickness in the child, and/or only-offspring status of the child (with the parents' concomitant excessive fear of losing him or her).

Other permutations are possible, but the end result in each case (mirror-hungry individuals as well as dependent individuals) is a personality structure characterized by excessive neediness and submissiveness. These individuals seem to lack self-confidence. They possess a negative cognitive scheme; they never feel good enough; they belittle their own achievements. They appear to be unable to function without the help of others. They have a very hard time doing things independently. Instead, they allow others to take responsibility for their lives. Consequently, these people quickly attach themselves to others who can give them direction; with such direction, they are able to function quite adequately. Their dependency needs even take them so far as to agree to things that they know are wrong. Their uncritical acceptance of the behavior and actions of the other party—unrealistic though these may be—is a price they are willing to pay for closeness. Evidently, more frightening than the prospect of doing something wrong is the thought of losing the support of, and being abandoned by, those people on whom they desperately rely for direction. Thus they willingly submit themselves to others at almost any price, often making extraordinary self-sacrifices in the process.

In organizational life, this narcissistic form of theater is particularly common in what I have described elsewhere as dramatic organizations (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984,
These organizations usually have a rather domineering, charismatic leader and tend to be run in a highly centralized manner. Given the nature of interpersonal and group dynamics in such companies, second-tier executives have very little influence on policy making. Contrarian thinking is absent; a climate of obedience prevails. The acts of the person in charge—irrational though these may be—are left unchallenged. These kinds of firms are very action-oriented—to the point of resorting to action for action's sake—and are often adventurous to the point of recklessness, encouraged by past experiences of success. Growth is rarely consistent or integrated. Such organizations are often too primitive for their diverse products and broad markets. Poor or overloaded information systems may fail to reveal underlying weaknesses. The play-to-win behavior of the people at the top, their lack of sufficient attention to external reality, and the possibility of entering a folie à deux (shared madness), with all its dysfunctional consequences, may seriously endanger these organizations. (See my later discussion of paranoid collusions for more on folie à deux.)

Ideal-hungry people often show another characteristic that may be severely disruptive to the functioning of an organization: they can be extremely possessive. How often have we encountered an assistant to the president who derives all his or her narcissistic supplies from being in the president's shadow? We can even observe some “assistant-to's” who take over all the mannerisms of their bosses, going so far as to start dressing like them. Then there is the proverbial “secretary-in-love-with-her-boss” (most secretaries do still tend to be female). She is the sort of person who pushes her own needs out of the picture, who is always available to do some extra work for her employer. Often there are no compromises for people like her—the narcissist's acolytes: the person in the spotlight becomes their one and all, the only thing that counts, that around which their world revolves.

In their intrapsychic world, the followers see their own happiness as completely dependent on the person they admire. Their boss is always the center of their attention.
and conversation. This intensive relationship may even turn into an addictive one. There is an unspoken wish to merge, to become one with the other person. The underlying fantasy seems to be one of total symbiosis, a longing for an earlier, happier time when there was a real or imagined perfect relationship with the primary caretaker.

This sort of possessiveness on the part of admirers, however, does not always go down well with the narcissistic target. It may be experienced by him or her as anxiety-provoking. Being idealized and idolized can be a very stifling experience. The admirers' wish to protect their boss from what they see as inappropriate influences, their self-cast role as guardian of the person admired, can be experienced as a straitjacket by the latter. Attempts to shape their idol according to what they consider to be appropriate and inappropriate behavior may (rightfully) be seen as an intrusion. Furthermore, to be put on a pedestal is often the precursor of being knocked off it. Living up to such exaggerated expectations is highly unrealistic for anyone. When the inevitable disappointment ensues, the idealized person generally becomes at least subliminally aware of the considerable amount of aggression that has been aroused in the admirer when the "idol" who promised so much failed to deliver.

An example of an attempt at this kind of manipulation is seen in the experiences of Sir John Harvey-Jones, the former chairman of I.C.I. He has described in his book *Making It Happen* (1988) how—when he became chairman—he needed to fight the collusive wish of others to change him and make him live according to certain idealized patterns. It took Harvey-Jones an enormous amount of effort to try to remain true to himself, to prevent this kind of dysfunctional attachment. Many leaders, however, do not have his capacity for self-inquiry. They fail to recognize what is happening to them, how they are being shaped. They do not comprehend the dangers of narcissistic patterns of interaction. Consequently, they are swept away by the seductive forces of narcissism. As the late U.S. politician Adlai Stevenson once allegedly said, "Flattery is all right as long as you don't inhale." Unfortunately, all too many people inhale far too much.
Yet some leaders on the receiving end of idealization are not flattered; feeling like prisoners of their admirers' glorified portrait, they become angry and act aggressively. Such reactions, unfortunately, are often to no avail. Whatever unpleasantness these leaders engage in makes little difference. The "victims" are quick to find excuses for their idol's unacceptable, abrasive behavior. In many instances, the person being abused by the frustrated leader seems willing to take anything, and what's more, even enjoys the state of martyrdom.

An interesting phenomenon in this process is something that has been described as the "identification-with-the-aggressor syndrome" (Freud, 1946). This is a special form of identification—which does not necessarily take place at a conscious level—whereby the individual, through impersonation of the "aggressor," assumes the latter's attributes and thus transforms him- or herself from threatened to threatening, pretending that he or she is not the helpless victim but the powerful actor in this drama. It is a defensive maneuver, a way of controlling the severe anxiety caused by the aggressor. The person in the one-down position hopes to acquire some of the power that the aggressor possesses. This wish—to obtain some of the dominant person's power—can explain why people remain in such destructive relationships in spite of the abrasive behavior of the aggressor.

This process of identification with the aggressor—the inducement to participate in a form of group-think—is often accompanied by certain rites of passage, the least subtle of which is the pressure to take part in violence directed toward the aggressor's designated enemies. The majority of the followers, torn between feelings of love and fear of their leader, will submit to the demands put upon them. They are presented with many handy scapegoats on which to enact group revenge when things do not go the way the leader wants—tangible entities onto whom they can project everything of which they are afraid themselves, everything that is perceived as evil or threatening to
the system. This kind of development can have terrifying results. In extreme cases, it can lead to the complete destruction of an organization, as demonstrated by the behavior of such executives as Robert Maxwell and John DeLorean.

The Sadomasochistic Collusion

The identification-with-the-aggressor syndrome leads us to another regularly encountered pattern in dyadic relationships in organizations: the sadomasochistic collusion (Ackerman, 1965; Sharpe, 1981). Deconstruction of the interviews showed the following basic script of the more masochistically inclined party in the collusion: "I'm worthless. I'm bad. I submit to you. I deserve to be punished for the error of my ways. My suffering is justified."

For abrasive executives, the world is a jungle. Given that worldview, they have to behave aggressively and frighten others into submission; to survive they have to be on the attack. To strike out, to retain the upper hand, to be in power and control—these take precedence over everything else. Fortunately for them, abrasive executives can usually find masochistically inclined people who are willing to put up with such an outlook. Here it should be mentioned that the roles of sadist and masochist are not necessarily definitive. Often we can find, behind a masochist’s facade of self-sacrifice, a strong sadistic component. For example, some workplace masochists get a lot of pleasure out of defaming their tormentors by telling others what awful things those tormentors have done to them.

Studying the early personal history of individuals with a sadistic disposition, we may find a very chaotic background with weak, depressed, masochistically inclined mothers and explosive, inconsistent, or even sadistic fathers. Substance abuse is quite common in these families. Frequent moves, various types of losses, and family breakups are not unusual. A true holding environment is missing. Under these circumstances, it is to be
expected that normal development will not take place. Hostility breeds more hostility and becomes the model for similar behavior later in life.

The lack of containment while growing up created a sense of helplessness in these people; they had to deal with what they at the time perceived as uncontrollable forces. To compensate for feelings of inferiority, sadistic individuals developed a compelling desire for dominance and power. To show signs of weakness or vulnerability becomes unacceptable. Authority figures are not looked upon as positive and benevolent but as tough, dangerous, and abusive. Paradoxically enough, while these people often reject authority figures when in a dependency position (fearful as they are of being maltreated), when in a position of authority themselves they tend to abuse their power.

Another possible background scenario resulting in sadistic behavior involves parents who signal to their children that they are special and therefore exempt from the normal rules of conduct that conventional society poses on people. They are entitled to do whatever pleases them. Anyone trying to set boundaries on their behavior (such as teachers or counselors) invites the wrath of the parents. The children take notice of that and, with permission granted, do whatever takes their fancy. Such childrearing practices often set the stage for antisocial, impulsive, and sadistic behavior.

Obviously, sadistically inclined people cannot act out their fantasies in a vacuum. They need others to participate. And, as life in organizations all too often shows, they have an uncanny ability to attract the kinds of people who are willing to be victimized.

The origin of a masochistic disposition, on the other hand, is based on the child's attachment needs (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Whatever the circumstances of growing up may be, there is always an intense wish on the part of the child to arrive at some form of interaction with the parents. Unfortunately, some parents are able to offer only painful, unfulfilling contacts. (Here we can find some similarities with the earlier
described dependent personalities who had highly frustrated dependency needs caused
by the lack of affection while growing up). If painful contact becomes the established
pattern between parent and child, the developing child will associate love and caring
with the reception of pain. Nevertheless, he or she will generally conclude that any
attention, even if accompanied by pain, is better than neglect. Eventually, attachment
through suffering becomes the chosen interpersonal style of these people. They seek
out situations that recreate early experiences of receiving love through pain; because
they perceive the gratification that come from being abused as outweighing the pain
that accompanies it, their emotional comfort will come from being in the role of the
victim. Martyrdom becomes the price of relating to others.

Critical, guilt-inducing caretakers may contribute to the development of a masochistic
style of relating to others. Role reversals whereby the child (age-inappropriately) is
made to feel responsible for the parents, as well as instances of abuse, may also be
conducive to masochism’s etiology. Deep, unconscious guilt feelings can be at the root
of this form of relating. Unresolved dependency issues and fears of being left alone also
appear to be major driving forces in the development of this interaction pattern.
Children brought up under these circumstances internalize the reproaching quality of
their parents toward them. The perception of being bad becomes a major theme in their
internal theater; eventually, they "take over" the role of the parents and become their
own worst critic. The guilt of not living up to the parents' expectations follows them
like an inseparable shadow. Throughout their lives they feel unworthy, guilty,
rejectable, deserving of punishment. As a result, a masochistic style becomes their way
of relating to others. Identification with the aggressor comes easily to them.

Masochistic behavior, however self-defeating it may seem, can provide an enormous
dose of "secondary gain" in the form of arousing the concern and interest of others
(Grossman, 1986; Kernberg, 1988; Glick and Meyers, 1988; Baumeister, 1989). These
people, seeing themselves as the victims of unfair suffering, get great satisfaction out
of the sympathy and pity others may express to them for the way they have been (or
are being) abused. Suffering gives them a sense of moral superiority. By behaving
masochistically and enduring pain and suffering, these individuals may also hope
(consciously or unconsciously) that some good will come out of it. In other words,
they see tolerating abuse as accomplishing some goal that justifies suffering or averts
an even more painful eventuality. These are the people who aspire to sainthood. With
all the drama they create, however, they can become quite a burden to those around
them.

Sadistically and masochistically inclined executives become a perfect match for each
other. In the interplay in this kind of collusion, self-esteem for each is maintained by
proving the other party wrong. The interactions between such people can become
extremely intense, with a compulsive quality. The nature of the interactions cannot be
changed: quarreling becomes a way of life, an extremely distorted way of expressing
affection. In the context of couples, a good example of such a situation of abuse can be
found in Edward Albee's play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? As we follow the
heated interchanges of that play, it seems that winning boosts self-esteem while losing
becomes a major disaster.

At times in organizations we encounter similar dramatic scenes. When these kinds of
sadomasochistic relationships become an overriding pattern in the organization, it is
not trust but fear that rules, affecting morale, stifling creativity, and hampering
learning. In the fear-ridden organization, the quality of decision making goes down and
the most capable executives leave. Eventually, the very future of the company is
endangered.

The Paranoid Collusion
The script for both parties involved in a paranoid collusion reads, "There's danger lurking out there. We can't really trust anybody. We have to be on our guard. Some menacing force is out to get us. We'd better stick together."

The interpersonal theater of executives with paranoid tendencies is dominated by the thought that the world is a very dangerous place. There is little room for trust. People affected by such perceptions feel that they have to be continually prepared for imminent danger (Shapiro, 1965; Meissner, 1978; Millon, 1981). They live in a chronic state of fear of bad surprises, and they take unnecessary precautions. Hypervigilant, they are constantly scanning the environment for confirmation of their suspicions. They are overly concerned about others' hidden motives and intentions, which leads to distorted perceptions, thoughts, and memories. They see plots to harass and humiliate them everywhere. They take everything very personally, and they are easily slighted. They are extremely litigious.

This paranoid way of thinking and behaving creates a sense of isolation, but it also compels those afflicted by it to seek the validation of their perception by others. There exists an extraordinary wish to pull others into their games. Unfortunately, such tendencies are easily supported by reality: after all, if one really looks for it, one can always find some confirmation of this kind of distorted view. People do unpleasant things to other people all the time. That this is the state of things only reinforces an already dysfunctional situation.

A major contributing factor in the etiology of paranoid thinking is the presence of a suspicious attitude among a person's principal caretakers. They instill into the belief system of the developing child the tenet that the outside world is very dangerous, that only family members can be trusted. They continually come up with "evidence"—contrived though it may be—to support this distorted point of view. As could be
expected, such childrearing practices do not enable the child to develop a basic sense of trust.

In other instances, people who show paranoid traits come from homes where criticism and ridicule ruled, creating an atmosphere of persecution that made it necessary for the developing child to be always on his or her guard. Individuals with this particular background have a tendency to lash out in order to divert the harm they think is approaching them, rather than wait passively for real or imagined dangers.

An essential element in the functioning of the paranoid personality is the attribution of one's perceived negative personality characteristics to others. This projective defense mechanism becomes a powerful tool in the repertoire of paranoid executives. As a matter of fact, these executives feel persecuted even by the despised image of themselves! In addition, these "delusions of persecution"—which serve to combat their sense of inner vulnerability—may be accompanied by "illusions of grandeur." The combination of such dysfunctional behavior patterns makes these people very hard to live with.

In the context of paranoid collusions, two interpersonal and group processes are also worth mentioning: folie à deux and pseudomutuality.

Folie à deux, or shared madness, implies the sharing of a delusional system by two (or more) individuals (Lasèque and Fabret, 1877; Gralnick, 1942; Rioux, 1963; Kets de Vries, 1978, 1989). People who are prone to folie à deux lack an integrated self-concept and thus have strong dependency needs. They are in desperate need of having others provide them with a structure for their lives. Colluding with an executive with paranoid features suits their own personality structure. They prefer colluding with someone perceived as powerful (who provides them with the direction) even when it leads to clearly dysfunctional organizational activities. They go to great lengths—even
so far as to sacrifice reality—to please the person to whom they feel attached. They uncritically accept the behavior of the dominant person—and adopt it themselves—in spite of its delusional content. They are willing to hang in persistently; it takes a lot before they are ready to quit. In the context of the paranoid collusion, a folie à deux situation is not uncommon.

The other form of paranoid delusion relevant here—pseudomutuality—is a concept introduced by Wynne and his associates (1958). In situations of pseudomutuality, the individuals involved do everything possible to block any evidence of noncomplementarity from open recognition. The parties experience an intense wish for mutual relatedness, a wish that excludes the tolerance of differences. The illusion underlying pseudomutuality—that everything is fine, that there exists no conflict among the various parties—is what keeps them together. The myth of harmony, sameness, oneness, and agreement must be maintained at all costs. The relationship has a doll’s house quality to it: these people are engaged in mutual projective identification resulting in a confused togetherness. There is a mix-up in boundaries; individuality and personal differentiation are unclear. Again, as in folie à deux, facts are ignored and history is rewritten. This method of dealing with reality—or rather not dealing with it—originates, as do all paranoid collusions, in the belief that the world is basically a dangerous place so it is best to stick together and not rock the boat.

Naturally, it is highly unrealistic to run an organization in such a way. When a leader of an organization is preoccupied with suspicion and distrust—when attitudes of folie à deux and pseudomutuality reign—his or her way of thinking and behaving may reverberate throughout the organization, with devastating effects (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960). If power is highly concentrated at the top, such behavior will color the whole organizational culture. If subordinates are going to survive in an organization run by a paranoid executive, they have no choice but to share their boss’s distorted way of looking at the world; otherwise, they will soon be rejected by him or her.
Some of the subordinates joining in this collusive drama may themselves have a paranoid outlook on life and thus adapt easily to a leader with paranoid tendencies. Others who are willing to play along with this game may have frustrated dependency needs and be willing to suspend reality as long as the position of closeness to their leader is maintained. Such distorted perceptions, however, tend to have a very negative effect on sound decision making, eventually affecting the company’s bottom line in a negative way.

Characteristic of the kind of organization created by people with a paranoid outlook are elaborate information systems and a strong emphasis on the power of information. Strategy making is usually reactive, conservative, overly analytical, and secretive. There is great uniformity in values and beliefs; a very narrow point of view reigns. Trust is not one of the qualities that characterizes this type of organization. On the contrary, conflict and distrust prevent effective communication and collaboration. Suspicion causes power to be centralized at the top, resulting in too little grass-roots adaptation (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984).

The Controlling Collusion

From the interviews, another relatively common type of collusion was identified—one that can best be described as controlling. Here the script adopted by the executive in the one-down position is as follows: "I’ll remain passive. I want you to take the active role. I want you to be in control and take a leadership position." Given the dominant partner’s need for power and control, it will come as no surprise that he or she is generally ready to oblige.

The origins of the development of a controlling personality, like those of the other personality types we have seen, can usually be found in a person’s early childhood. Starting with exact feeding times, unduly rigid toilet training, and very specific sleeping
hours, continuing with narrowly prescribed schedules for all aspects of functioning, the families of compulsive people are dominated by the theme of control. The parents of these people are unreasonably exacting, prematurely demanding, and/or condemnatory. Any spontaneous activity is strongly discouraged for fear that it may bring chaos and disorder. With this sort of background baggage, the control-driven individual derives self-esteem from meeting the harsh demands of the eventually internalized parents.

The predominant feature of the inner world of these compulsively inclined people is their extreme reluctance to find themselves at the mercy of events; they want to master and control everything and everyone around them. The people who flourish in controlling collusions have a personality pattern characterized by rigidity, perfectionism, punctuality, orderliness, meticulousness, and frugality. An inclination to hair-splitting discussions, an exaggerated sense of duty, and meticulous attention to detail are other prevalent traits. Often such individuals can be stubborn, obstinate, inhibited, and unrelievably tense. They lack adaptability, are overly conscientious, and love order and discipline (Reich, 1949; Shapiro, 1965; Salzman, 1980; Millon, 1981; Kets de Vries and Perzow, 1991). As members of an organization, they are preoccupied with factors such as hierarchy, conformity, status, and adherence to formal codes, elaborate information systems, and tightly prescribed procedures and rules.

We can distinguish several varieties of the controlling collusion. In one of them, both parties have a similar mindset: both are obsessed by the themes of dominance and submission. In this type of controlling collusion, one partner takes the dominant role while the other adopts a submissive position. The person in the one-up position expects total obedience. Any initiative or autonomous act on the part of the other is unwelcome. This is a world of master and servant, of superiority and inferiority, of suppression and subordination. The need for order is paramount, founded on both partners' underlying anxiety that chaos will follow otherwise, that things will fall apart
without strict authority and control. This type of controlling collusion is also animated by each partner's continuous fear that the other partner will try to reverse the situation. In fact, the partner in the assumed one-up position frequently possesses only the illusion of control. In reality, he or she is manipulated by the one-down partner, who is downplaying his or her own desire for control.

In the second type of controlling collusion, the one-down partner possesses a passive-aggressive character structure (Dean Parsons and Wicks, 1983; Millon, 1981; Kets de Vries, 1989). The behavior of such an individual is characterized by both passivity and aggressiveness. Passive-aggressive people seem to be ambivalent about everything and cannot make up their mind whether to be dependent or independent, active or passive. They give vent to their underlying aggression through indecisiveness, contradictory behavior, and conflicting attitudes. Afraid of showing disagreement openly, they express indirect resistance to control through such means as procrastination, dawdling, stubbornness, intentional inefficiency, and forgetfulness. An aura of compliance and cordiality often masks negative resistance. In passive-aggressive individuals, this kind of behavior is the common pattern for dealing with people in the position of control.

Passive-aggressive behavior patterns often originate in the fact that these people, as children, were unable to assess clearly what was expected of them. Dominated by their parents' frequently erratic and conflicting demands, they led a life characterized by a lack of consistency and clear indicators for appropriate conduct. As a result, they may have failed to learn what kind of behavior pays off. Another possible contributing factor is a perceived lack of control over decisions when growing up. Because of the domineering style of one or both parents, the option to say no was absent; children were not allowed to openly disagree. Their own wishes were never taken into consideration. Over time, saying yes but not doing what they were asked to do became their solution to this particular conundrum.
In the third type of controlling collusion, the domineering actor is partnered by someone with a dependent personality structure, someone who gladly submits to the controlling figure. This match is generally the most complementary one, causing the least amount of friction between the partners, since both play out a role that naturally suits their respective personality structures. This combination starkly contrasts with cases where the one-down partner is of a more compulsive type or possesses a passive-aggressive personality makeup. In collusions made up of these latter two combinations, the central action consists of a power struggle, fought by both partners in order to decide which one is to take on the leadership position and which one the submissive role. The drama focuses on which of the two is going to take charge. Endless power plays may be the result, not auguring a rosy future for the organization.

Many organizations offer great opportunities for people to act out the controlling collusion. This pattern of behavior can often be observed in government agencies and smokestack industries, where the bureaucracy runs amok (Mintzberg, 1979). These kinds of organizations tend to be exceedingly rigid, centralized, and administrative. Formalized controls are used as a way to check the potential abuse of power. Plans are often so explicit as to admit almost no flexibility. Strategy is narrowly focused and unadaptive. The consequences of an emphasis on bureaucracy tend to be predictably dysfunctional. Such rigidity in outlook is bound to have serious consequences in a world characterized by rapid change. A lack of speedy adaptability and an obsession with details can easily become the downfall for organizations run by people engaged in the theater of controlling collusions. (See Exhibit 1 for an overview of the different collusive interaction patterns presented in this paper.)
Breaking the Vicious Circle

In observing the four collusions discussed above, we have seen that a certain kind of group process is created whereby the behavior of one of the players very much determines the role that the other(s) will assume. Naturally, if the role assigned to an individual is not compatible with his or her character, it is to be expected that the person will quit, to search for a partner or an organizational setting more suited to his or her personality. Thus we are talking not just about a person-organization fit but also about a person-relational fit. If the kind of relationship pattern forced upon someone is not experienced as suitable, that person will most likely decide that it is better to go somewhere else.

It would be unwise to start with the assumption, as we observe relationships in the workplace, that there must be a collusion. As Bion (1959) observed, most working relationships are task-oriented and based on the rational approach of goal orientation and work sharing. The “basic assumptions,” the underlying forces that make people behave in specific ways, are not necessarily predominant; hidden agendas do not necessarily set the tone. In most interpersonal situations, the draining, stressful, adversarial processes that characterize collusive relationships and make them so exasperating are conspicuous by their absence. Our interpretation of the material gleaned from our interviews supports Bion’s view: most of the interaction patterns studied were not of a neurotic nature. In many of the relationships there appeared a considerable amount of transitional space; there was the kind of playful give-and-take that gives people ample space to grow and develop.

Nevertheless, the interviews revealed a fair number (in different degrees of intensity) of what can be labeled collusive relationships. Their existence is a cause for concern,
given the dysfunctional effects of collusive processes on other people in the organization. The destructive potential of corporate collusions makes it important to know how to recognize such processes. In addition, the question of prevention becomes relevant.

A Spanish proverb asserts that fish start to stink at the head. Given the power that leaders wield—and the fact that it is usually they who enlist others in their dysfunctional theater of the absurd—they are largely responsible for initiating these collusive activities. Thus, if we wish to make an attempt at prevention, diagnosis, or treatment, a good place to start is by assessing the quality of leadership in the organization. Recognizing dysfunctional behavior patterns in an organization’s leadership becomes an essential aspect of the diagnostic and preventive process.

The first question we should ask ourselves is whether the people at the top have the kind of personality makeup that renders them susceptible to collusive practices. If the individuals running the organization react in strange, irrational ways that may indicate specific personality disturbances, we should become alert for the danger that their conduct might pose for the organization. Symptomatic of potential trouble are such behavior patterns as abrasiveness, selfishness, overambitiousness, arrogance, excessive detachment, overemotionality, vindictiveness, suspiciousness, overcontrol, insensitivity, untrustworthiness, decision paralysis, and excessive detail orientation.

In addition to these troublesome behavior patterns, narcissism is disturbingly insidious. Earlier in this paper, I described some of the salient elements of narcissistic behavior. Other indicators of excessive narcissism worth mentioning are an executive’s preoccupation with being in the center of things, the need to take all the credit or be in the limelight, and an obsession with getting his or her name in the press. With this kind of narcissistic behavior comes a tendency toward one-upmanship over one’s peers. Subordinates who are prepared to buy into this game will confirm and encourage such
behavior. Through identification, they will be able to gratify their own needs for grandiosity, not recognizing the high price paid in the form of organizational ineffectiveness.

Another cause for concern is the way top executives react to mistakes. How do these individuals attribute blame? Are they likely to seek out scapegoats? Do they see conspiracies everywhere? If leaders have created the kind of corporate climate where others are always at fault, where they themselves never take the blame for mistakes, the organizational environment is far from healthy. These kinds of top executives can easily be recognized: they are the ones who shoot the messengers bringing bad news. In addition, they show a strong tendency to split others in the working environment into two groups: those who are with them and those who are against them. Because such leaders can react violently to realities that inconvenience them, partners can always be found to participate in their collusive behavior; yet others join the cabal with dire effects on future organizational functioning.

Predictably, executives who behave in such ways create organizations where only yea-sayers survive. Contrarian thinking is no longer permitted; disagreement with the leader's point of view is not condoned. People are not allowed to question things. Those who are prepared to participate in collusive behavior are given only a submissive role. A corporate culture evolves in which communication is restricted; a lack of openness prevails. Soon distrust and fear develop. Predictably, when fear rules in an organization, the processes of organizational adaptation and learning stop.

A further cause for worry is the presence of a top executive who insists on making all the decisions and allows nobody to think for him- or herself. Having to overcontrol everything that affects the organization becomes such a person's major preoccupation. In this kind of organizational culture, empowerment becomes a dirty word (and delegation is therefore unheard of). In this context, a top executive's refusal to plan for
succession becomes another indication of trouble. The addiction to power and the need to hang on to control make it very hard for some executives to let go (or even begin to think about handing over the reins). Not surprisingly, in an organization dominated by such executives only collusive relationships are possible. And unfortunately, when that is the case, the best people start to leave. In addition to that present crisis, the absence of succession planning leads to predictable crises in the future.

Unpredictability is another case in point. When a leader becomes unpredictable, his or her behavior is bound to contribute to a climate of distrust and uncertainty in the organization. People who work for such a leader no longer know how they are supposed to act. Furthermore, because of the leader's behavior, the company may have adopted a short-term, fire-fighting mentality. In such instances, priorities are unclearly set and tend to vacillate.

An additional question that should be raised in testing an organization's relationships for collusion is how realistic the senior executive's outlook on the business is. If his or her strategic initiatives bear little relation to the realities of the company's situation, alarm bells should start ringing loudly.

A decrease in morale is another warning sign of collusive interaction. Companies troubled in the ways described here often become increasingly politicized. Infighting and gamesmanship become the norm. A lack of teamwork is predictable. Good corporate citizenship behavior is absent, because an increasing number of executives have become turf defenders. Having adopted a parochial outlook, they no longer care about things that are good for the company. A siege mentality may prevail.

We could go on and on. These are only some of the more obvious danger signs that can derive from collusive entanglements. From our observations, we have determined that the possibility for collusive entanglements is not an abstraction; it is an
organizational reality. After all, we all have, at one level or another, some unfinished business originating from our past history. We can all find ourselves stuck in vicious circles, the victims of typecasting. The ultimate challenge, however, is not to let this happen, to avoid the kinds of damaging relationships that result in organizational pathology. It is salutary to remember that such processes will eventually destroy any organization.

An important question then becomes, What can be done to prevent (or nip in the bud) such dysfunctional relationship patterns? How can these vicious circles be broken before they take hold in the workplace? An appropriate starting point for the unraveling process would be an attempt to help executives gain a better understanding of the kind of script that they are acting out in the organization as a whole. How can we discern whether a collusive trap is set by a senior executive in the organization? How to acquire this kind of sensitivity to notice at an early stage what is happening?

Understanding others requires a solid dose of self-awareness, a recognition of the role of emotional processes in motivation. Thus self-knowledge is the first step in the process of disentanglement from an unhealthy situation. Here—as mentioned earlier in this paper—the possession of emotional intelligence is a sine qua non (Goleman, 1995). The ability to monitor one’s own reactions makes it easier to understand how others may become enrolled in a collusive effort (and the effect this kind of relationship can have on the organization). Thus executives would do well to take regular stock of their relationships to others, asking themselves whether these are continually evolving and growing or have become stuck in a repetitive interplay. If executives suspect that someone is trying to draw them into a neurotic game, they should have the presence of mind to decide whether they wish to participate or not—and realize the implications of participation.
Understanding one's own role in the interactive process is not generally easy, given the blind spots we all have about our own character. To move from a fusional state to one of true separateness can be hard work (Meltzer, 1967; Lachkar, 1992). Superior and subordinate need to be able to sort out their own subjective experiences without the kind of confusion that characterizes these collusive interaction patterns. But recognizing these patterns in oneself and others, and gathering the motivation and courage to address these failings, may require outside help. Psychotherapy, coaching, or participation in a group-dynamics seminar in which feedback about personal style is part of the process may help an individual disentangle his or her role in the process.

All too many people forget that if we do not like a play in a theater, we can leave. The same thing can be said about organizational dramas. We do not have to play along; we always have the option to quit. In organizational life, it is important to retain our sense of individuality and not be swept away by forces that stifle our ability to play and to be creative. After all, life is not a rehearsal. We would do well to continuously remind ourselves that, in the final analysis, mental health means having a choice!
## Exhibit 1

**Collusive Superior-Subordinate Interaction Patterns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant</th>
<th>Submissive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narcissistic</td>
<td>Complementary narcissistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mirror-hungry)</td>
<td>(ideal-hungry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissistic</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissistic</td>
<td>Masochistic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sadomasochistic Collusion**

| Abrasive                  | Masochistic              |

**Paranoid Collusion**

| Paranoid                  | Paranoid                  |
|                          | Dependent                  |

**Controlling Collusion**

| Controlling              | Controlling              |
|                         | Passive-aggressive       |
|                         | Dependent                 |
References


