



Leadership, betrayal and adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Change stimulates complex cross-currents between institutional requirements and the psycho-social arrangements that have formed around existing configurations. In navigating these complex forces leaders are sometimes confronted with the need to betray, even if in the service of higher purposes. This article explores the links between leadership, betrayal and adaptation. It focuses primarily on the social and psychological reverberations of betrayal, with particular attention drawn to the impact of betrayal on the leaders themselves.

KEYWORDS

adaptation ■ betrayal ■ change ■ leadership ■ projection ■ unconscious

AMALLAH, West Bank – Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, signed legislation today to create a post of prime minister, after the . . . members of his Fatah movement forced him to withdraw a proposal to restrict the prime minister's powers. Mr. Arafat's signature . . . followed an extraordinary rebuff to his proposal . . . in the Palestinian legislature and in a stormy four-hour meeting in his ruined compound here. At the meeting, Mr. Arafat accused party members of betraying him . . .

(New York Times, 19 March 2003)

The demands of organizational change and adaptation confront leaders with enormously complex challenges. Among them is introducing structures and practices that support new directions – changes that create dislocation,

disruption and even turmoil. Among the least understood or recognized dimensions of significant change are the dynamic reverberations of decisions that breach existing social, psychological and intrapsychic configurations, transgressions often experienced as betrayal.

My central hypothesis is that betrayal is an essential element of leadership and organizational change. Using a systems psychodynamic perspective to explore the betrayal that often accompanies significant change, several facets of this question are considered, including: how the exercise of leadership and the capacity for betrayal are intertwined; what dynamic challenges to both leader and follower are entailed by having to contain the experience – and potentiality of – betrayal in the collaborative bond; and about the challenges posed to the enterprise by the experience of betrayal.

Because betrayal is such a charged concept and variously used word, I want to carefully circumscribe the kind of betrayal on which I am focusing here. Usually betrayal centers on the sinister: wickedness, corruption and other violations of moral order. Even a cursory glance at the news underscores the depressing reality that there is no shortage of such betrayal. But my interest here is not with, for instance, the Enrons or Parmalats or schemes to siphon pension funds. Nor am I concerned with the smaller, pettier betrayals that occur when position is used to enhance prestige or status rather than advancing the organization's purpose, a kind of corruption that Eric Miller described as the exercise of power in contrast to that of authority. Large scale or small, the defining element of these betrayals is that leaders exploit their positions of influence by promoting personal interests rather than those of the institution.

What I am exploring here is diametrically different. My proposition is that betrayal in the service of a higher purpose is inherent in organizational life and deeply linked to the capacity to lead. This kind of 'virtuous betrayal,' so to speak, originates in the crevice between the necessity for change and adaptation, on one hand, and the need for a dependable and reliable context, on the other. It flourishes in the medium created by the complex intersecting linkages between people that arise in institutional life – the commitment to task and goal, emotional connections that emerge through work, and the group dynamics generated by organizational membership.

While 'virtuous betrayal' differs profoundly from its venal counterpart, they nonetheless share a common feature. Both entail violating a trust, confidence or (perhaps tacit) agreement. The dynamics evoked by this transgression engender the distinctive social and psychological challenges for leaders and followers coping with betrayal.

The concept of 'virtuous betrayal'

Exploring 'virtuous betrayal,' and its links with development and leadership, requires a more nuanced understanding of betrayal than is typically the case. At first glance it appears to be a contradiction in terms, yet on further examination more complex possibilities emerge. Take, for example, Kazantzakis's (1998) dramatic reframing of betrayal in *The last temptation of Christ*. Judas' betrayal, in this retelling, was an act of love and deep devotion rather than of cowardly greed. Judas alone amongst the disciples recognized the necessity of betrayal. Understanding his ally's true motivation, Jesus is profoundly grateful for only Judas was willing to suffer infamy throughout all history to enable Jesus to fulfill his mission. Judas betrays for a noble purpose – he remains completely true and embraces the duty of betrayal as a necessity. From this the sense of betrayal as potentially dutiful begins to emerge.

Before turning to betrayal in an institutional context I want to digress a bit further into the origins of the word in order to bring forward meanings that, although obscured by contemporary usage, introduce illuminating connotations. Latin precursors of the word, for example, signify the act of 'giving over to another's care; to give, transfer, to deliver into the hands or control of another or entrusting for command.' Even more striking in the context of this argument, *se tradere* refers to the act of abandoning oneself to someone or dedicating oneself to some activity.¹ Lost in the recent evolution of meaning, but central to the viewpoint I am developing here, is the sense of 'betrayal' that arises from dutiful obligation and involves consignment or 'handing over' to a higher purpose (Carotenuto, 1991).

The link between betrayal and leadership is, however, hinted at in one contemporary use of the term. *Betrayal* also refers to revealing a truth: to betray a confidence or secret is to expose knowledge. The idea of revealing truth links betrayal with leadership through the role of direction setting and vision. Leaders reveal (often unwanted) truth about directions that must be taken or relinquished. Betrayal, as transgression, enters with recognition that bringing a vision into reality necessarily destabilizes both the status quo and whatever emotional equilibrium has developed around it.

The idea of 'virtuous betrayal,' then, raises the possibility that leaders must sometimes betray in the service of the task. 'Virtuous betrayal' recognizes a transcendent purpose that supersedes personal bonds of mutuality, loyalty or love. Ordinarily the context of shared purpose and mission provides a containing function for interpersonal and group emotionality. Leaders, however, when confronted by irreconcilable conflicts between the institutional and personal, face the challenges of betrayal.

The inevitability of betrayal in organizational life

Bion's (1961) observation that we are group animals at war with our 'groupishness' serves as a useful starting point for exploring the links between leadership and betrayal because it points to complex interplay of differing emotional states that are evoked in organizational life: task and sentient relatedness, individual experience and collective life and the differing logics that govern formal and informal organization. Two distinct tensions delineate the space within which the necessity of betrayal can be understood. One is the clash between novelty and the established order: the need for innovation and direction, on one hand, and for security and reliability, on the other. Second is the tension between the institutional and the personal. Institutional requirements and the dictates of task are ultimately impersonal. Yet the interests of members, the texture of interpersonal connections and the group dynamics evoked by group life are deeply personal.

Leaders live in a centrifugal field, pulled in opposing directions by the competing demands of novelty and continuity and by those of the institutional and personal. Emotional investment in existing social configurations and interpersonal relationships establishes deeply held, often tacit, expectations and latent agreements about behavior, political choice, and mutual obligation. Powerful cross-currents are created when the forces of change and innovation collide with emotional investment in a status quo, producing conditions in which betrayal is inevitable and in which leaders either compromise the institutional or betray an aspect of the personal.

Leaders, vision and novelty²

'Vision' is commonly accepted as a core element of leadership (e.g. Collins & Porras, 1996; Lipton, 2002). Straddling the interior and exterior, leaders sense and understand external forces in the wider context, enabling groups to effectively mobilize resources. Attunement to relevant patterns emerging in the environment is the basis of what might be regarded as the 'normal vision' of leaders. Since leadership requires conceptualizing and communicating a vision, and then converting it into reality, leaders are simultaneously linked to their followers and separated from them by vision.

The imperative of vision is built into the leader's role and derived from an institutional perspective.³ It arises as an interpretation of the enterprise's tasks in relation to its environment and entails seeing how the group or organization must evolve in order to preserve its integrity. Vision is about

the novel – discerning new information about the changing environment. And novelty, by definition, threatens the status quo. From this perspective the challenges of betrayal are posed by tensions arising between the security of the familiar and the frightening but necessary novelty of the unknown.

The institution vs the personal

Leader and follower are embedded in a shared context of relatedness to the institution and its tasks. Linked through a common embrace of purposes, leaders and followers mutually authorize each other to function in their roles. Willingness to risk danger of exposure and confrontation with the unknown is based on confidence that leaders act on the basis of shared institutional purpose, not self-interest.

The institutional perspective is based on the primacy of shared purpose. The collaborative fabric it establishes provides containment for the human irrationality and emotional connectedness generated through collective life, subordinating the urges for gratification of primitive strivings to the dictates of task. Through the binding force of this shared relatedness, leaders take actions that may be injurious to followers but are sanctioned by the larger context of shared meaning and by a shared moral order. Commanders send troops into battle, some of whom face sure death. People take risks in uncertain and emotionally threatening situations to advance work. And, of course, in realignment some lose status and power, others their livelihood. When moments of significant change open gaps between the institutional and personal, betrayal can become inescapable.

Leading requires embodying the institutional perspective, a stance from which leaders must sometimes violate tacit expectations and covert political arrangements that shape their interpersonal relationships. Injury is inevitable. With change ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ are created. Futures are made and lost; long-standing collaborative ties broken as others are forged. How the fabric of interpersonal connections is altered is illustrated by the experience of two managers in a client organization in which the institutional and personal collide, posing a dilemma for the Vice President who finds she must betray either the institution or a close colleague. They had a very strong, generative work alliance. She was Vice President, he the senior policy director for the President of a large university. They worked closely as a powerfully creative pair, and developed a close trusting relationship. He was then promoted to a role in which he reported to one of her peer Vice Presidents. His attempts to draw on their personal loyalty to influence her decisions were rebuffed. The interpersonal situation deteriorated as mistrust and suspicion

came to color their interaction. Each felt betrayed by the other. An angry, resentful distance entered their relationship. With some reflection however they were able to work through this rupture by recognizing the dilemma and realigning their connection within an appropriate institutional perspective. Repairing their personal relationship could only be done by accepting that the new structural configuration allowed for a different, but more distant, collaborative intimacy.

The institutional perspective never accounts for the full range of human connection because people bring more to their roles than task-oriented behavior. Personal connections exist and are elicited in organizational life. Effective leaders tend to the needs of members, recognizing that meeting appropriate dependency needs is important to work. Organizational arrangements intended to provide enough stability and reliability to support work also evoke powerful unconscious wishes for permanence and continuity, and stimulate deep longings for protection and security. In addition, the use of organizational life as an arena to symbolize and work through unfolding developmental drama leads people to establish deeply intimate internal connections with leaders, peers and subordinates. Herein lays fertile ground for the experience of betraying and being betrayed. Either corruption or betrayal is inevitable when leaders find themselves in situations where they must choose between the institutional and personal.

Such dilemmas of betrayal are captured in the arc of Shakespeare's histories with the story of Henry IV's succession. While often seen in oedipal terms (Faber, 1967; Kris, 1962), from another perspective it illuminates the themes addressed here. Prince Hal 'locates' the role of King, and its requirements inside of himself, as he comes to terms with his father, Henry IV. In doing so he develops an institutional perspective that, in turn, presents him with the problem of betrayal.

Henry IV had taken the crown by force and desperately wanted to establish a legitimate monarchy. Yet his eldest son and heir, Prince Hal, was a terrible disappointment. The painful complexity of their relationship leads Hal to seek out a substitute father, the licentious and charismatic Falstaff. Through Falstaff and his circle, Hal is inducted into the ways of the world, and his rebelliousness is cultivated in the mocking atmosphere of the Boar's Head Tavern where Falstaff's group congregates. Falstaff, though, is a corrupt and corrupting father; Hal's association with him further confirms Henry IV's disappointment.

As Henry's health fails, Prince Hal prepares for leadership. His sense of self shifts decisively as he discovers his identifications with his father and develops a deeper understanding of his impending role. Among the resulting insights, Hal realizes that to rule nobly he can no longer associate with

Falstaff. Then, as King Henry V – fully in his new role – Hal sees the danger posed by association with Falstaff. Falstaff, on the other hand, unaware of Hal's change of heart, is thrilled to have Hal now King. This culminates in the dramatic betrayal when Falstaff, excited to see his protégé, hails the new King. Henry V's chilling response to Falstaff's hearty greeting:

I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
How ill white hairs become a fool and a jester!
I have long dream'd of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane,
But, being awakened, I do despise my dream . . .

(2 Henry IV: 5.5.49)

'Awakened' to his new purpose and mission, Hal now despises the dreams of wisdom and mentoring he associated with Falstaff. In light of his new orientation he sees Falstaff as a 'fool,' 'old,' and 'profane:' he now 'knows thee [him] not.' Betrayal, arising from Henry V's new sense of purpose, is vividly anchored in his commitment to higher ideals.

The story tells also of psychic hazards for the betrayer as well as for the betrayed. Leaders who betray, even of organizational necessity, bear the guilt of injuring others, especially when there has been a bond of loyalty. Henry V defended himself, it seems, against experiencing painful guilt by treating Falstaff with extreme harshness. After the initial rebuke Falstaff, shocked and disbelieving, continues his approach. King Henry now turns from mocking contempt to aggressive threatening, ordering Falstaff to stay 10 miles away on the threat of death. The emotions evoked in him as he betrays Falstaff induce defensive flight from emotional contact with the betrayed. Unlike with the King, for leaders of organizations who must often depend on the betrayed going forward, losing emotional contact can be perilous.

Henry's challenge – and that of leaders more generally – in maintaining emotional contact amidst painful feelings brings a crucial psychological issue into focus. Betrayal and its repercussions often stimulate a constellation of emotions and defensive responses that can compromise both the capacity to work and the development of leaders and followers alike. The two modes of psychological functioning described by Melanie Klein (1940, 1946) are particularly useful in illuminating the emotional challenges posed by acts of betrayal.

Briefly, she described how two states of mind, established in very early infancy, form the basis of how we approach the world throughout life. In one mode, the paranoid schizoid, people cope with intense anxieties and

threatening fears by relying on the primitive defenses of splitting and denial to externalize disturbing feelings, particularly aggression and envy. This produces rigid patterns of thought characterized by blame, self-idealization, persecution and other distorted perceptions. Managers acting out of this position are notable for their grandiosity, persecutory perceptions and inflexible thinking.

Alternatively, in the depressive position people function with the ability to integrate experience, think, collaborate, tolerate complexity, and assess reality from multiple perspectives. Managerial aspirations and dreams emerging from the depressive mode are less grand, but lead to the realistic exercise of power and mutuality of connection. Rather than externalizing unwanted emotions and creating persecutors in the environment, the depressive position leads to taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, wherein lies the emotional challenge posed by 'virtuous betrayal.'

The depressive position enables leaders to be effective only at the emotional cost of experiencing the impact of their betrayal for people on whom they have depended, perhaps trusted or even loved. Fending off the distress from causing injury, or avoiding the experience of mourning the destructive consequences of one's actions, leads to anxious flight or, worse, reversion into paranoid-schizoid modes of thought and action. Fleeing the emotional meaning of betrayal, as did Henry V when he banished Falstaff rather than face the painful consequences of his decision, puts much at risk. Leaders must confront the implications of their painful transgression or face their own lonely regression, as with Hal's loss of contact with Falstaff, into defensive withdrawal, contemptuous disregard or harsh moral reaction to the plight of those being injured.

Moments of betrayal also represent the limitations imposed on organizational life by humanity itself. In the ideal, leaders mobilize followers to embrace new visions of emerging necessity and harmonize their evolving connections within the transcendent context of organizational purpose. Betrayal would never occur in the world where consensus always coalesced around shared purpose, with leader and follower aligned through shared interpretative understanding of the enterprise and its challenges, and where the institutional and person were always merged. Expecting so represents, I believe, grandiose ideas of leadership that arise from the wish that leaders will provide protection from not only the external threats but from internal ones as well, including shielding us from narcissistic vulnerability. The institutional perspective is an ideal which can be strived for but never fully attained. Imagining that leaders can and should always do so is an idealization sustained by splitting, certain to create the disappointment and rage that accompanies unrealistic expectations of leadership. Nevertheless, while

more mature images of leadership may recognize the possibility of betrayal, efforts to cope with its implications are inevitably challenging.

Case #1: Evergreen Biotech

One biotech company's recent effort to merge with another illustrates some of the perils of the betrayal. In the course of negotiating the takeover of Newco Roger, the CEO of Evergreen held out a vision of complementary fit between the two companies. He believed, as did people in both companies, that apart from a few administrative redundancies, there would be little need for cutbacks. After a year though, changing market dynamics meant that the R&D units of Newco were strategically problematic. This was a painful realization for Roger who was acutely aware of the risks taken by the Newco staff, of the sacrifices they had made based on his reassuring vision and of the trust they had placed in him.

Roger had great difficulty confronting the emotional experience of betraying. His tendency to disavow the destructive aspects of his managerial role led him, in this instance, to unconsciously create and foster splits in the former Newco staff. When staff members of the R&D unit questioned the wisdom of some decisions, he took it as an attack, casting the department heads as hostile and contentious. The ensuing cycle of splitting resulted in exactly that – an angry and devalued research group whose behavior made it easier for Roger to take action. The projective dynamic between Roger and the research group created the conditions enabling Roger to fire them without feeling nearly as distressed as had he maintained fuller human contact. Working with Roger in this effort led me to see the capacity to betray from the depressive position as a developmental stage for managers and leaders.

Trust

It is impossible to consider betrayal without also considering its mirror twin – trust. Betrayal is borne of trust and trust of the possibility of betrayal. They are mutually constituted and stand in dialectical tension, a tension resolved either as growth and development or as fragmentation, recrimination and failure. Simply reasoning from contradictions between novelty and the status quo or between the institutional and the personal to betrayal begs the question of trust. Betrayal by its very nature requires transgression, violation of an agreement or trust. Actions contrary to another's interest do not, in themselves, amount to betrayal.

Yet trust is elusive in contemporary organizations. Locating the trust that pre-figures betrayal is problematic, especially in light of the emotionally tenuous psychological contract in today's employment world. Social and economic shifts following the Second World War altered the dominant organizational culture from one embracing dependency needs to one characterized by the impersonal disloyalty of market sensibilities (Khaleelee & Miller, 1985). Fueling this renegotiated psychological contract are the turbulent environments that propel constant change and uncertainty, blurred boundaries, attenuated links between leaders and followers, and a growing tendency to regard people as expendable. The resulting loss of security fosters psychological withdrawal and dilutes emotional investment in institutions. Increasingly vulnerable at work (e.g. Miller, 1998), people respond by establishing instrumental relationships with their organizations, commitment and loyalty receding. From this perspective trust becomes irrational because security is no longer provided in exchange for loyalty.

The background of trust necessary to understand the experience of betrayal can be found, in my view, in two realms of organizational life that evoke irrational yet powerful expectation and belief. One is the assumptive reality that underlies group life. The other is in the interpersonal connections and collaborative relationships that contain – in addition to shared institutional commitments – tacit agreements, powerful latent expectations and sometimes intense loyalty.

The status quo as trust in a shared reality

One source of trust that precedes betrayal resides in the unconscious substrata of organizational life. It concerns the faith, belief and dependence that shape the texture of group life and organizational dynamics. Through involvement in group and organizational life unconscious role relations, tacit internalized expectations and covert agreements about behavior evolve.

Bion's (1961) work is particularly useful in this regard. He showed how groups produce two distinct modes of functioning, one addressing the scientific challenges of work and reality while the other copes with the emotions evoked through work interdependence. Basic Assumption life refers to the second of these two mentalities, an emotional substratum that binds members together in a state of unconsciousness non-differentiation, evoking irrational states that are either aligned with or are arrayed against task requirements.

This dimension of group life is geared toward magical thinking and disconnection from the complexities of external reality, arising in response

to the anxieties and primitive fantasies stimulated by organizational life. Basic Assumption groups create an alternative reality, a simple reality, one that is certain, defined, and unchanging. They adopt unconscious assumptions organized around the idea that the group exists to not pursue its overt tasks and purposes but *as if* to further basic emotional aims of its members. At this level primal trust exists, an assumptive trust that takes for granted the truth and infallibility of its constructed reality. Differentiation of thought or practice within the fused, harmonized emotional environment of the basic assumption group is experienced, as when leaders introduce novelty, as betrayal.

Two defining characteristics of the Basic Assumption group illustrate the dilemma posed to leaders who must simultaneously be *of* the group while also being *about* the group and its adaptation – neither time nor development are relevant. In Bion's words, 'All activities that require an awareness of time are imperfectly comprehended and tend to arouse feelings of persecution' (1961: 158). In contrast, the idea of development is based on learning from reality, on struggling with novelty, and on confronting limitations.

Basic Assumption groups exist in a state of denial, platitude and dogma. Since reality, time and development are anathema to this level of group emotionality exposure to novel reality is a threat. Competence and sophistication are hallmarks of groups where the thrust of Basic Assumption life is in alignment with, and in reasonable proportion to, task requirements. A quality of effective leadership is being able to evoke emotional states appropriate to task. But when they diverge or when Basic Assumption life dominates task requirements the challenges for leadership emerge.

Differentiation and betrayal

Having considered how the collective emotional realities generated through group life create a background of belief and expectation, I now want to focus on the interpersonal, considering betrayal as an aspect of personal development and differentiation. Trust on this level is expressed through loyalty and the expectations that arise between people as they work together.

Leaders cope with a broad spectrum of complex emotional pressures, including managing their own uncertainties, containing the uncertainties of others, resisting unconscious attempts to idealize or denigrate, and responding to the longing of others for protection and care. Projective dynamics pull leaders toward affirmation of the stabilizing, largely covert, emotional configurations that structure the emotional status quo, straining their capacity to lead. While the traumatizing impact of organizational betrayal

for the betrayed may be intuitively obvious, the emotional risks associated with 'virtuous betrayal' are also daunting for the betrayer. Individual growth and organizational development intersect at this point, when important organizational decisions entail moments of differentiation and individuation on the part of those making them.

I will take, as a starting point for exploring this facet of leadership, the broad process of psychological differentiation. My argument here builds from a general view of differentiation and individuation to the specific case of leaders working with powerful interpersonal connections and loyalties.

Even before birth, parents 'invent' their new offspring and set the stage for welcoming the newborn into the family circle of collusive roles and mutual expectations. Responding to the endless projections and attributions arising in social interaction is an essential part of growth and differentiation (Hillman, 1964; Williamson, 1991). Doing so involves facing the need to violate the expectations embedded within them and finding instead a differentiated stance, what Larry Gould (1993) has described in terms of the development of personal authority. The essential role of betrayal in growth and adaptation is embedded in this dynamic (Carotenuto, 1991). Rejecting unspoken, often unconscious, definitions of the world and who we will be in it amounts to a kind of psychological transgression, as latent emotional agreements are broken and tacit agreements violated (Hillman, 1964).

In the story of King Henry, Hal's newfound awareness of mission allowed him to integrate his aggression effectively by harnessing it to task, enabling him to find his place. But he can only do so by differentiating himself from Falstaff. The betrayal, for Hal is, equally, a moment of growth and individuation: he can claim important aspects of his emerging self only through violation of the unspoken yet powerful bond of loyalty with Falstaff.

When loyalty and task no longer converge the choice is painful. Shared expectations and values that underlie ties of loyalty create a kind of legitimacy that, when betrayed, can be deeply disturbing for both. A vignette from the legendary career of Jean Riboud (Auletta, 1985) reflects the painful reality experienced by many close work pairs when loyal mutuality can no longer be supported by the evolving context of work. Riboud had been 'adopted' by the founding brothers of Schumberger and through the family's belief in his qualities he was entrusted with the company. His personal gratitude and loyalty were so strong that when he was asked to replace the ailing Pierre by the family his personal connection superseded the institutional. He resigned, saying 'I will not replace Pierre because I owe too much friendship to him' (p. 53).

After Pierre left, though, Riboud did take over and ran the company brilliantly. At one point he asked the grandson of the other founder, with

whom he had a long and close relationship to re-join the company. A gifted engineer, magnetic personality, and talented manager, Seydoux accepted Riboud's offer to head up a new acquisition and, if successful, become president of the company. The two were close, with Riboud acting as Seydoux's mentor and protector. Eight years later, shortly after Seydoux was appointed President, Riboud came to the painful conclusion that it was a mistake for the company. Soon thereafter Riboud fired Seydoux, ending their personal relationship. For Riboud it was a painful necessity arising from what he called his 'fiduciary assumption.'

How Riboux handled the climactic meeting is instructive for its simultaneous impersonality and warmth. Riboud, in Seydoux's memory, expressed in a soft and polite way his unhappiness with the arrangement and asked Seydoux to leave. They spoke for about an hour after which Riboud walked him to another office and arranged a flight back to Paris for him. Seydoux's memory of the exchange was that while 'not pleasant, it was not harsh' either, nor did it leave him bitter. The simultaneous ruthlessness and humanity of this exchange illustrates the texture of managing from the depressive position.

Case #2: Western Medical

A consulting project with the department of orthopedic surgery of a large medical school shows a very different face of betrayal, including how the dynamics of betrayal are inevitably shaped by the larger social and economic context in which the leader's dilemma appears. It also shows how betrayal can ignite a destructive cycle of paranoid-schizoid functioning.

The consultancy began when severe discord and mistrust amongst the department's surgeons and with their new chairman became a source of growing concern. The department had a distinguished academic history, although in the preceding 10 years its scholarly work had declined drastically. During this period a charismatic chairman retired, tectonic shifts in health care financing and reimbursement practices left them with an increasingly poor 'payer base,' and the successor chairman was unable to take advantage of new entrepreneurial opportunities in the local area, as several other departments had done. Two local private orthopedic surgery groups did, growing aggressively during this period. The general economic pressures and 'downward mobility' experienced by physicians over the last decade was exacerbated by the particular circumstances of the Department.

Increasing resentment toward their leadership's inability to adapt more effectively culminated in a seminal event in 1999 when five of the most

productive young surgeons left the school together to join one of the private local groups. A generation of emerging leaders was gone, leaving behind the younger inexperienced surgeons and the more senior, older surgeons who were on the cusp of retirement. The remaining group rallied to struggle with the effects of this massive trauma, which included the retirement of the Chairman under whom this rupture occurred.

After the schism the department functioned without a chairman for two years. During this period the medical school reevaluated itself strategically. The outcome was a commitment to become one of the top 10 public medical schools in the country, which meant substantially increasing the institution's research profile. Though considered strong clinically, research productivity in the school overall, as in the department of orthopedic surgery, had declined during the preceding two administrations.

Since chairmen have great influence over the direction of their departments, one of a dean's major 'levers' of influence is in selecting department chairs. The dean's first opportunity to appoint a chairman under the new strategic priorities was in orthopedic surgery. He recruited a world renowned researcher from the pre-eminent orthopedic research institution in the country.

After 18 months as chair Frank asked for help with what seemed an intractable situation, marked by intense conflict and fragmentation within the department, severe anger and resentment directed toward him, and threats of further defection of surgeons from the school. Interviews revealed an intensely negative and persecutory view of the department and school. The group climate was very primitive and dangerous, with massive projection of hateful and persecutory elements, producing chronic and virulent interpersonal recrimination, blame for the economic decline and withdrawal from personal involvement in the department. Predictably absent was the capacity for thought or reflection needed to put the situation into useful perspective.

Frank had been excited by the prospects of building research, for which he had been specifically recruited. His career reflected the priorities and values the president and dean were trying to achieve. However, he had been unable to establish a collaborative link with the department's other surgeons. His very presence symbolized the shifting priorities that were contrary to what they saw as their interests. Few of the department's surgeons were interested in conducting research and were furious with Frank's efforts to support it. Investment in the research was seen as diverting even more of their declining revenue to others; only the new research-oriented recruits believed that it would strengthen the department's position. Already beleaguered by a difficult legacy, the surgeons felt betrayed by the dean for choosing a chairman

with different priorities than theirs and betrayed by Frank's efforts to increase the research profile of the department.

Frank sought consultation because he felt stymied and rebuffed in nearly everything he did. The irrationality and hostility were so great that even when he put forward proposals that had been advocated, and largely designed, by the surgeons themselves they were rejected out of suspicion and mistrust.

Frank's situation captures the dilemma vividly: to succeed he must betray but equally, to succeed he must find a way to work with those whom he is betraying. His job is to steer the department in the direction of the school's new priorities, but to do so in a way that keeps the clinical enterprise robust. Yet the surgeons felt betrayed and devalued by the shifting priorities. The resulting psychological splitting led to a view of the world in which research and surgery were held in mind as polarities, as if it were a zero-sum game in which each pole came to represent a persecutor of the other.

Furthering the new priorities favored some and disfavored others. Frank's distress about this, and guilt about the underlying aggression, tended to paralyze him. He obsessively refined minute details of plans, for example, as if he would be able to find universally accepted solutions. This, of course, subjected him to further criticism of delay and indecision.

Frank too was emotionally vulnerable. He persevered with a researcher's persistence and doggedness but was hurt by the attacks and distortions. His efforts to cope with the hostility led to increasing rigidity and dis-identification with the other surgeons, further straining relations. Frank, a highly principled individual, considered himself judicious and fair. The projective dynamics set in motion, however, cast him as devious, uncaring and manipulative.

The toxicity of betrayal

The challenges to betrayer, betrayed and the enterprise alike are formidable. Containing the experience – and the potentiality – of betrayal in collaborative relationships stimulates persecutory anxieties, heightened mistrust and blame. The ensuing splitting can produce austere, constricted thought and compromised ability to relate. In the aftermath of betrayal leaders and followers must often depend on one another since they continue to work together, bound by shared purpose. To accentuate the dilemma, significant change puts a premium on sophisticated collaboration as new practices and orientations are established and people have to discover new pathways of collaboration. To the extent that working well depends on maintaining

emotional contact, the emotional backwash of betrayal becomes a significant factor. While the institution perseveres, both it and the 'institution-in-the-mind' have been altered by the experience.

The trauma of those betrayed both in early childhood (e.g. DePrince & Freyd, 2002) and by organizations (Galford & Drapeau, 2003; Koehler & Gershoff, 2003) has been well documented, though in relation to what might be called 'treacherous betrayal' for the purposes of this article. Whether 'virtuous betrayal' is any less disturbing is a question for further study.⁴ My hypothesis is that injury is more easily overcome, and the experience of guilt, anger and sadness more easily integrated, when the betrayal occurs in the broader context of institutional purpose. Similarly, where betrayal arises from venal self-dealing, the injuries are likely more enduring and more difficult to depersonalize and more likely to reinforce the dominance of hateful, destructive internalized images of authority.

For leaders the dilemmas of betrayal are no less daunting. Incorporating the destructive, aggressive aspects of management into one's sense of self is a complex challenge, made more difficult by the stylized popular images of leadership that dominate the mass media. Perhaps the sunny, idealized images of leaders who transform through inspiration, passion and love function as a social defense against the darker more troubling realities of leadership. Betrayal requires mobilizing aggression and a certain ruthless privileging of the institutional over the personal, often at great cost to others.

The stakes are high. Just as followers must identify with their leaders to be successful so must leaders identify with their followers. Many aspects of virtuous betrayal can be profoundly disturbing for leaders who can become paralyzed by their own persecutory anxieties or depressive withdrawal, as the case of Frank illustrates. The impact can be corrosive on leaders who sometimes develop callous defensiveness or become scarred by the recurring impact of hurting people with whom they work and on whom they depend. While such postures protect leaders from the suffering the consequences of betraying colleagues and followers the underlying splitting and projection inevitably compromises their own effectiveness and that of their organizations.

Working through the experience of betrayal – from both 'sides' – is vital for organizational functioning. Powerful, primitive emotional states elicited by group and organizational life, exacerbated by change, and anchored in personal experience as betrayal, can readily stimulate paranoid blaming, omnipotent fantasies and thoughtlessness, rendering efforts to contain its meaning in the context of a larger, shared purpose difficult if not impossible. Constricting guilt, deadened attachments and hostile environments emerge from unacknowledged loss and aggression when the experience cannot be thought about.

Converting the experience of betrayal into insight and useful thought requires, of course, mourning. Mourning the loss of the idealized images of leadership, the fantasized nature of the loyalty bond, the loss of connections, and of the group's illusions about its invulnerability are all important ingredients for managing through the emotional process of organizational disruption and deep change (Homans, 1989; Marris, 1974; Volkan, 1987). Just as mature leadership requires the capacity to resist fantasized omnipotence it also depends on the capacity to recognize the inevitability of emotional betrayal and the ability to acknowledge and address the emotional life generated by it.

To complement the work of mourning, it seems to me, the work of forgiveness is integral to working through the impact of 'virtuous betrayal.' Perhaps, as Tennessee Williams writes: 'We have to distrust each other. It is our only defense against betrayal' (1970). But the possibilities contained by mourning and forgiveness may represent an avenue for reparation and forward movement in the wake of betrayal. With forgiveness we recognize the limitations of leaders, relinquishing idealized hopes that they can always provide *both* adaptive vitality and secure protection (Lapierre, 1989).

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to open a line of inquiry into the connections between betrayal, leadership and adaptation. To introduce novel information and ensure adaptation, leaders must at times violate tacit agreements and contravene the unconscious group realities that undergird organizational life and, in doing so, betray others even if in the service of the highest ideals and purposes of the enterprise. Yet the demands of 'virtuous betrayal' create psychological challenges for betrayer and betrayed alike. Powerful connections are formed around both the institutional and personal, connections that can be at odds with one another. Gaps between the dictates of the two loyalties create the potential, or perhaps inevitability, of betrayal when leaders must violate unconscious tacit agreements to ensure adaptation.

The experience of betrayal can be corrosive for all involved. While the higher purposes propelling betrayal undoubtedly neutralize some of the toxicity and facilitate depersonalization it nonetheless takes a toll. Anxieties associated with the guilt and aggression, and the challenge of having to depend on people that have been betrayed, can induce callousness and defensive withdrawal which over time can calcify into a defensive, lonely, posture.

How the emotional residue of betrayal is managed has an important impact on the individuals involved and on the capacity of the enterprise to remain robust. Betrayal may be required, yet so is on-going collaboration.

Maintaining collaborative connections in the context of betrayal, and in mindfulness of its potential, is a vital challenge for organizations in changing environments. Knowing how to betray from the depressive position may be the saddest of all developmental achievements for the leader.

Notes

- 1 Interestingly, constricting the word's meaning from including the more duty-filled connotations into a one-sided evil-doing concept was linked with the emergence of anti-Semitism in the Church. Whether Judas' betrayal of Jesus was a greedy, despicable act or it played an essential, enabling role has centered on the historical meanings of the term *betrayal*. The negative emphasis of the term can be traced to the Church's efforts to resolve the debate by placing unambiguous blame on the Jews for killing Jesus. Until around 300–400 AD there was debate about both the term and the role of Judas. As the Church attacked efforts to question Judas' motivation, the definition of betrayal was accordingly narrowed. The evolution of the term followed and reflected the process of splitting and projection and, ultimately, scapegoating of Jews within the Church (Klassen, 1996).
- 2 The singular conception of leadership limits the usefulness of this analysis. Since leadership is often exercised by many people, at many levels, in groups or organizations I want to clarify that the focus of this article is on the leader/manager or leader/executive that makes decisions about change, usually involving structural realignment. While there is increasing reliance on the vision and strategic sensibility of people throughout organizations, there are decision points in which a commitment is made to some idea of the future. No matter how much deliberation or collaboration leads up to the decision, it is typically taken and/or implemented by one person or a small cadre.
- 3 While leaders bring differing talents and capabilities to their roles, person-centered or 'heroic' models of vision overlook its systemic roots, anchoring explanation too much in the person while neglecting role. From a systemic viewpoint vision is a *function* of occupying boundary-spanning roles, a *consequence* of being in such roles. The axiom of systems theory that perception is location bound suggests a systemic basis for vision. Leaders have vision in part *because* of their location on the boundary between the internal and external, necessitating both more intense contact with the external environment and also membership in other groups that afford different and broader perspectives. Spanning the internal and external directs the leader's attention outward. People see and think about what their roles require them to look at and think about.
- 4 A related and fascinating question, raised by Deborah Pascoe in a personal communication, concerns the differential impact of being betrayed by a trusted or beloved leader and betrayal at the hands of a mistrusted one.

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