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# Leading Naked: The Costly Consequences of Organizational Solipsism

By Anthony J. Marchese, Ph.D.

## Introduction

In one of the most acclaimed children's stories of all time, Hans Christian Anderson (1873) reveals the personal and corporate consequences of leaders becoming so inebriated by the effects of power and position that they become oblivious to the intricacies of the world around them as they exist within a realm of adulterated self-contrivance, devoid of truth. In *The Emperor's New Clothes*, we become acquainted with an indulgent, narcissistic leader who possesses an insatiable drive to elevate himself before his people. His *raison d'être* is being the object of admiration. His disposition contributes to an impairment of the highest order. His appetites perpetuate the law of diminishing returns as he foolishly employs two "tailors" to fashion him a magnificent garment to provide yet another opportunity to garner the approval and affection of the masses. The con artists indicate that the cloth is "invisible to anyone who is too stupid and incompetent to appreciate its quality" (Anderson, 1873, p. 1). Despite the inability of the emperor to view his new garment, he acknowledges its grandeur and concedes to the wishes of the courtiers who encourage him to place himself on display as the centerpiece of a public procession. The emperor, his courtiers, and nearly all of the onlookers reinforce the emperor's psychosis by acknowledging the exquisiteness of a fabric that does not exist. This manufactured reality is contested by the ignorance of a small child who curiously inquires why the emperor is naked. Soon after, the absurdity of the situation is heard throughout the kingdom as the crowd responds, "The boy is right! The emperor is naked! It's true" (Anderson, p. 9).

### Truth? How do we know?

In an era that elevates individuals in the public eye to a frightening place of incalculable importance, it is incumbent upon both leaders and followers to ensure that systems of accountability are instituted to minimize the likelihood of a maligned perception of reality infiltrating the kingdom or organization. How can leaders or followers prevent themselves from succumbing to the intoxicating effects of status either by position or association? Attempts to understand *what is* as we contemplate the world around us renders a reality that is unmistakably altered by the pigmentation of our personalities, preferences, and presuppositions. In other words, that which deviates from our self-construal of normality may be overlooked or altered in order to maintain an order within our contemplative universe.

In their work on human cognition, Maturana and Varela explain that, at any moment, what we see is most influenced by who we have decided to be. Our eyes do not simply pick up information from an outside world and relay it to our brains. Information relayed from the outside through the eye accounts for only 20 percent of what we use to create a perception. At least 80 percent of the information that the brain works with is information already in the brain. We each create our own worlds by what we choose to notice, creating a world of distinctions that make sense to us. We then "see" the world through this self we have created. Information from the

external world is a minor influence. We connect who we are with selected amounts of new information to enact our particular version of reality. (Wheatley, 1998, p. 49)

For most of my life, I have heard individuals including parents, teachers, and pastors talk about the *truth*. Many, especially within the ecclesiastical context, often speak extremely authoritatively and passionately about the matter. All truth claims appeal to an epistemological system by which information is processed, compared to some standard which authenticates its veracity, and then transmitted through behavior that should conform to its tenets. While I am strongly compelled to embrace the existence of objective reality, I am also aware of the impossibility of gauging reality free from personal *baggage* or those subjective elements which color our perspective. For example, one's race, religion, gender, socio-economic status, education, geographical origin, and personal tragedies all shape one's worldview. It is impossible to bifurcate our baggage from our inquiry. When we make truth claims, especially within the presence of others, it is important that we consider how our worldview impacts our process of acquiring and disseminating knowledge.

Much of the impetus behind my initial desire to study Organizational Leadership at the doctoral level came from my need to make sense out of some fascinating behaviors that I observed of some leaders. My observations led to a continuing process of questioning. What qualities are essential for one to be identified by others as a promising leader? To what extent does one's personal disposition inform leadership decisions? Within the context of religion, what is the relationship of one's personality to one's overall conception of the Almighty? As a college student, I was curious about the degree to which the message of a religious leader was influenced by the disposition of the messenger. While I agree with the tenets of organic inspiration, it seems that one's personality can strongly inform one's epistemological framework for understanding the will of God. In order to more closely align ourselves with truth, we must be aware of the impossibility of considering truth free from subjective constraints, i.e., personality, human relationships, experiences, etc. We must acknowledge the presence of these factors, consider the manner in which they influence our thinking, and move forward in our inquiry. One of the most important tools that one can use to help expose the subjective elements that shape our viewpoints is the dialectical process, or human interaction. It is within the presence of community that we are able to work together to unravel the complexities of the world in which we live and form some conclusions.

Within the context of leadership, however, some individuals choose to restrict engagement with others that could potentially call to question the perspective of the leader. That is, the leader surrounds herself with people who do nothing but affirm her own viewpoints. While A is occurring in the organization, the universe within which the leader chooses to reside prefers to embrace B as reality. This alternate universe, which closely resembles that found within Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, is primarily self-referential. I have chosen to refer to this common phenomenon as Organizational Solipsism. Solipsism is a philosophical term that is used to describe a detached, self-centered worldview or, more specifically, one in which the self or one's existence operates as the only thing of which one can be certain. Miller (1996) defines solipsism as "...the belief in one reality, the solipsist himself, upon whose thoughts and perceptions all other things depend for their existence" (Miller, 1996, p. 147). More simply, the American Heritage Dictionary posits that solipsism is "the theory that the self is the only thing that can be known

and verified. The theory or view that the self is the only reality" (Solipsism, n.d.). Upon first exposure to this concept, one might immediately recall television portrayals of schizophrenic individuals such as John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* or be transported back to an undergraduate psychology course in which the DSM was introduced. For our purposes, organizational solipsism is a condition with varying degrees of severity characterized by a self-generated, self-moderated, insular worldview maintained by a person in authority. Like Anderson's emperor, this condition may be externally fueled by other stakeholders within the organization who may believe that by seeking favor with the leader, their own agendas may be advanced. Furthermore, this form of solipsism can also act as a fast-spreading contagion within an organization as individuals acquiesce to the perspective of the leader and ultimately place the health of the organization in jeopardy. Anderson alludes to this in his fairy tale as he describes the inner struggles of the messenger who must make a decision about whether or not to abdicate what he clearly perceives to be the emperor's nakedness for what the ambassadors call magnificent. Anderson writes, "... and accordingly, he praised the stuff he could not see, and declared that he was delighted with both colors and patterns" (Anderson, p. 3).

**The consequences are costly.**

Several years ago my scholarly interests in leadership studies were piqued while working at a college wherein the president persistently offered public praise for the fact that the organization was *on the move* as a result of a spike in attendance and the expansion of the physical campus. While brick and mortar were transformed into numerous buildings, many lives were adversely affected—both students and faculty. The alternate universe in which the president resided did not acknowledge the alarmingly low faculty morale or high rate of student attrition. Divergent viewpoints offered in the spirit of sincerity and collegiality were quickly extinguished and categorized as insubordination. Decisions were made on a regular basis that diminished the value of human capital and perpetuated a crippling cynicism and blatant distrust within the culture. Students and staff members were reluctant to express concerns for fear of losing scholarships or jobs. In this story, the emperor and his courtiers sought frequent opportunities to utilize impression management with the public outside of the kingdom by emphasizing the growth of the kingdom and the remarkable satisfaction espoused by its inhabitants.

Every leader is capable of succumbing to the temptation of organizational solipsism. The unhealthy synergy of ambition, personal insecurities, mental illness for some, and the blind loyalty of followers, can lead individuals, who may have the best of intentions, down a path of untruth. History is replete with examples of leaders who achieved remarkable success but at a cost. The extermination of human populations, the loss of billions of dollars through dubious financial practices, and countless other incidents reveal emperors and courtiers inhabiting a lie. Though the allure of creating an alternate universe in which the self reigns supreme is compelling, the casualties that may be incurred along the way make it a deplorable course of action. Regardless of our skills, intelligence, or records of success, we must ALWAYS be aware that the *baggage* that we carry can have a marked impact, for better or for worse, upon those whom we serve in our organizations. Leaders, regardless of their intelligence, successful history, or ethical prowess must be cognizant of their humanness and establish practices that reinforce accountability and the pursuit of what is real.

## Considerations for Leaders

### Self Awareness

Since ancient times, understanding the complexity of the self has been lauded as a worthwhile and necessary aspiration. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato writes, "I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says. To be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. . . . Am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typhon, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny?" (Plato, trans., 2009, pp. 229-230).

Much harmful leadership behavior has its origin on the playground when an unkind word was spoken or a classmate refused to play. Old wounds unattended fester over time and can cause irreparable harm to others. Effective leaders understand their vulnerabilities. Remember: hurting people hurt others.

### Honest Feedback

Leaders who receive consistent, truthful feedback from a diverse representation of followers are less likely to practice organizational solipsism. Dotlich and Cairo urge leaders to "find the truth-tellers in your organization and ask them to level with you" (2003, p.9). This can be facilitated via the Cross the Line Test presented in the table below.

Table 1: *Dotlich and Cairo's Cross the Line Test*

You're willing to fight for what you believe in.	You're unwilling to give up a fight no matter what.
You believe that your perspective is the correct one.	You believe that your perspective is the correct one before evaluating others' ideas.
You hold yourself accountable when your strategy or idea doesn't work.	You refuse to take responsibility when your strategy or idea doesn't work.
You adapt your strongly held viewpoint to jibe with new information or developments.	You reinterpret events to fit your point of view.
You possess a powerful ego that allows you to make an impact on others.	You possess a powerful ego that causes you to dominate others.

Formal and informal feedback mechanisms that include individuals occupying positions at various levels, intergenerational perspectives, and gender and racial diversity can provide the leader with valuable breadth and depth of what is occurring. Also, identify an individual outside of the organization who will not hesitate to hold up the mirror and provide truthful insight. Be wary of those who do not offer alternative ideas. This is a red flag.

### Take a Risk

Consider spending some time with a harsh critic or two. Invite them to coffee or to lunch. Though a bit unconventional, ask them to spend some time sharing their viewpoints without fear of reprisal. Maintain a posture of humility and openness. What is this person saying? What factors contribute to their position? What of value can be taken from this exchange?

Unlike the emperor in Anderson's story, leaders who focus on serving their followers and other constituencies rather than their own aggrandizement are less prone to indulge in practices that can lead to the public nakedness experienced by the

emperor and the harming of other members of the organization. Leaders who commit themselves to increasing their self-awareness are more adept at identifying and confronting past injuries and personal idiosyncrasies before they negatively manifest themselves in the organization. What is truth? How is it verified? Is it selective and situational? To whom do we listen? To what extent does our understanding of reality correspond to that of others? Are we aware of how our past influences our present behaviors? Have we engaged in organizational solipsism?

### Contributor

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