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# Organizational neglect: The toxic triangle of deficits<sup>☆</sup>



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## WHEN CHANGE FAILS AND LEADERSHIP IS LACKING

In our OD practice we are often consulted after the failure of previous OD interventions:

- After the far-reaching restructuring of the organization of the municipality of the Dutch capital Amsterdam old habits and patterns of behavior returned notwithstanding replacement of 70% of the managers en 40% of the staff.
- A comprehensive training program on culture and behavior after the financial crisis of 2008 did not change organizational reality in financial institutions.
- The implementation of self steering teams in the faculty of a university of applied sciences led to a chaos in the scheduling of courses and to destructive group dynamics.

This article is relevant for practicing managers because organizational neglect is not visible at once and often denied by senior management.

Practicing managers learn what happens when an organization lacks leadership in the dimensions of structure and consideration for a protracted period of time. Everyday life in such organizations becomes destabilized. To cast it in terms from the field of developmental psychology, an organization in this state is no longer able to fulfill its developmental tasks. As a whole, it becomes a case of arrested development.

When change processes in an organization fail, it is a sign of arrested development. In such cases, there is usually a lot of management, but a lack of leadership. Emotional neglect in an organization is never the result of a single, drastic

reorganization process; neglect is always gradual and starts with habituation. When looking at an organization's dysfunctionality through the lens of developmental psychology, the question is: What went wrong in the organization's development and how to restore the deficits? Management's role is crucial; they are responsible for the development of the organization's human capital. When we compared emotionally neglected organizations to families with neglectful parents, we found in both a lack of availability and sensitivity. When management is not emotionally responsive, staff members turn away and cope with the situation on their own.

We learned from the treatment of abused and neglected children that the first step is: restore a safe environment with repetitive daily routines and close availability of a caretaker. In organizations this means that leaders take their responsibility in role and that they guide members of the organization to discover through experience what normal daily organizational life is like. The CEO's of neglected organizations need to face the inconvenient truth of arrested development and demand their managers to take their responsibilities in guiding the development of individuals, teams and departments. The CEO him- or herself is a role model in the process of restoring the arrested development.

The approach brought forward has turned out to be effective in over a hundred OD projects in different sectors over a period of ten years.

## THE PARALLEL BETWEEN LEADERS AND PARENTS

Considering that Sigmund Freud introduced the metaphor of the leader as a father figure as far back as the 1920s, it is remarkable that OD literature contains so little about the parallel between parents and leaders. Freud offers a fascinating and surprisingly broad account of leadership. It

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includes the ideas that groups have an instinctive need for leadership, and that individuals whose personal qualities are strong and prototypical, and whose ideas are compelling, are likely to succeed as leaders. It argues that followers have strong emotional attachments to leaders. It holds that fair treatment by leaders is key to producing trust and good followership.

Freud's ideas about fathers and leaders and their role in group dynamics offer a complementary perspective on the study of emotional abuse and neglect in organizations.

Like parents, leaders are figures whose role includes guiding, directing, taking charge, and taking care of less powerful others whose fate is highly dependent on them. What is lacking thus far is a theory about developmental problems in organizations from this leadership perspective. The resemblance between parenting and transformational leadership led us to explore the domain of emotional abuse and neglect of children and to question what the effects on the development of children are and how these can be healed. That helped us to recognize and restore the effects of prolonged absence of leadership in organizations.

We transferred research findings from the domain of child development literature about diagnosing and restoring developmental problems of children to the domain of OD. The theory of organizational neglect has been applied in over 100 cases over a period of ten years in a wide variety of organizations from small local hospitals to international financial institutions.

We start by presenting findings in the child development literature that we used to define and detect neglect in organizations.

## NEGLECT BY FAILURE TO PERFORM PARENTING DUTIES

Children and teenagers who are not parented when needed, are neglected. It is a parent's duty to prepare children for reality. Neglect may occur when parents are overwhelmed with child management issues and fail to supervise children. Neglect generally results from parents' lack of:

- awareness and knowledge;
- particular parenting skills;
- willingness to meet the child's needs;
- physical, emotional and financial availability.

Emotional abuse and neglect are defined as a carer-child relationship that is characterized by patterns of harmful interactions requiring no physical contact with the child. Cases of emotional neglect are not readily recognized, because there is no clear intent to harm the child, although the interaction is clearly harmful to the child. The abuser is almost invariably the primary carer and attachment figure for the child. There are three factors that cannot be ignored when defining and conceptualizing neglect:

- community deficits: an uncaring society, characterized by a lack of social support;
- parenting deficits: the absence of necessary caring and parenting behavior towards children for whom parents are responsible;

- child deficits/outcomes: neglected children show more hostile, aggressive, destructive, depressed and withdrawn behavior than children from non-neglectful families.

Neglect can go undetected for a long time, even by people who are very closely involved with the family where it occurs. Even physical abuse is often hidden and doctors could only see internal injuries caused by child abuse after X-ray technology became available. Diagnosing emotional neglect is even more complicated. Neglect is generally experienced over time, with harm developing insidiously, and often without obvious and immediate impact. This is one of the reasons why the damage of emotional neglect has long been downplayed and ignored, a phenomenon that is called 'the neglect of neglect'.

Of all forms of child maltreatment, neglect has been studied the least because it is the least visible, most time-dependent process and because it is difficult to identify a group that can be researched. Neglect is on a continuum ranging from excellent care on the one end to totally inadequate care on the other. It is very hard to determine exactly where mere inattentiveness ends and neglect, with detrimental effects on the child, begins. Therefore neglect is more difficult to diagnose than abuse because it is about the absence of 'a desired set of conditions or behaviors', rather than the presence of 'an undesirable set of behaviors'. Just as it is easier to detect a presence than an absence, it is simpler to take measures against acts committed than against acts omitted.

Neglect is by nature a gradual process that can occur even when parents have no bad intentions. Parents are often unaware of the possibly harmful effect of their conduct on their children. Neglect is about a prolonged pattern of inadequate care. Parental neglect and children's responses to it manifest themselves in behavior.

When diagnosing neglect, it is important not to blame the neglect on children, but to maintain a clear distinction between the symptoms children display and the neglectful conduct of parents.

## Children's Behavioral Problems

The studies we consulted about the behavior of neglected children focused on interactions between children and social workers and therapists. They make clear that inadequate responses to such children's behavior triggers new behavioral problems. Neglected children's behavioral problems are listed as: defiance and "cockiness" with peers, persistent dishonesty, inability to admit fault for misdeeds or imperfections, self-centeredness and stinginess, coexistence or outward compliance with adults and open or surreptitious aggressiveness toward peers and smaller children, perfectionistic behavior and compulsivity in the form of guarding and neatly arranging possessions, inability to entertain oneself and an irresistible urge to provoke punishment from caretakers. Children consciously try to elicit a controlling or punishing response because this justifies their distrust of caretakers. If caretakers then respond with trust, neglected children will put this to the test. If caretakers respond with kindness, neglected children will escalate their provocations. This, in turn, confirms the caretakers' belief that

trust and kindness are of no use. Neglected children's emotional bond with caretakers or youth workers is often artificial or superficial. The social workers who carefully observed and analyzed the behavior of neglected boys in a residential treatment center, distinguished between behavior that arose from inability and calculating behavior.

## Parenting Styles

More than any other type of child maltreatment, neglect may be influenced by parental inadequacies. But what is parenting exactly and what constitutes adequate or inadequate parenting?

Parenting is a complicated process that comprises many types of behavior which, both individually and in conjunction, affect a child's development. Research has shown that it is not individual acts of parenting but the totality of consistent parenting behavior that predicts child outcomes. Researchers studying parenting styles try to identify stable characteristics within parenting behavior. They search for correlations between stable parental behavior and stable child behavior. A behavioral pattern is seen as stable if it manifests itself in various situations and circumstances. In developmental psychology, such stable parenting patterns are known as parenting dimensions. Research is aimed at determining which parenting dimensions explain the relationship between parental behavior and child development. Child development is not influenced by a single parenting dimension alone, but rather by a combination of different dimensions. This combination is known as a parenting style. A parenting style is a constellation of attitudes towards the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create an emotional climate in which the parents' behaviors are expressed. Research into parenting behavior has shown that the key dimensions are:

- responsiveness or warmth, often explained as involvement or supportiveness; and
- demandingness or behavioral control, often explained as making demands or disciplinary efforts.

In this breakdown, responsiveness refers to the regularity of parental affirmation while demandingness refers to the frequency and type of demands parents place on children. The kinds of demands referred to here are intended to socialize children, to teach them how to function independently in a social setting. Parenting can only be successful if there is a relationship between parent and child. Parents and children must be able to trust each other. Mutual trust is a precondition for a healthy parent-child relationship.

Researchers arrived at four parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent and neglectful. *Authoritative* parents score high on both responsiveness/reinforcement and demandingness/control, while *authoritarian* parents score high on control, but low on responsiveness. The difference between authoritarian and authoritative can also be characterized in terms of 'psychological pressure'. Authoritarian parenting may prey on children's feelings of guilt; parents tell their children they are embarrassed, or threaten to love them less. Authoritative parenting, by contrast, consists of regulating behavior by providing rational arguments. In essence, authoritative parenting stresses healthy

child development. Rather than power – which refers to parents' overall dominance over their children – authoritative parenting relies on authority, which is the exercise of a degree of control necessary in a particular situation. The balance between responsiveness and control is seen as crucial to a healthy and effective hierarchical relationship. Permissive and indulgent parenting is characterized by high responsiveness and low control. Neglectful parenting is characterized by a complete lack of both responsiveness and control.

This research paralleled with our observations in organizations with failing performance and declining commitment of employees. This led us to use the analogy between parenting and leadership and the effect on the behavior of children and employees.

## SIGNS OF NEGLECT IN ORGANIZATIONS AT VARIOUS CONTEXTUAL LEVELS

The study of child neglect led to the following definition of problematic OD: *Neglect in the workplace is the prolonged lack or absence of supervision and control of organizational development, which has led to patterns of harmful interaction between management and staff.*

An example from our OD practice:

Bus drivers made their own informal rosters and their managers were supposed to look away, otherwise they risked a complaint about intimidating behavior.

And:

The annual appraisal meetings at a health care institution had been omitted for the fourth year in line, due to other commitments of the managers.

Neglect in the workplace, in the widest sense, comprises emotional neglect, indulgence, permissiveness and overprotection, as well as authoritarian attitudes and overestimation (making demands that do not match the organization's developmental phase: for instance introducing self-steering teams in a hierarchical and bureaucratic organization). If the impact of neglect on adults is comparable to its effect on children, neglect in the workplace will ultimately manifest itself in staff's behavior.

An example from our OD practice:

Accidentally a new team manager in a power plant discovered that copper wire disappeared from the warehouse. When asked, no one seemed to know. It was registered as waste material and sold afterwards, by the employee who took it away, to a friend. By the way: His predecessor shared in the profits.

Neglect is a gradual process whose consequences become visible only over time. In an organization plagued by neglect, relationships between management and staff are characterized by distrust and game playing. Employees pretend to be committed to the organization's objectives. Management and staff's behavioral patterns are mutually reinforcing; management's behavior provokes a knee jerk response in staff. In severe cases of neglect, relationships are so completely dysfunctional that reciprocity vanishes and self-preservation becomes employees' top priority. Neglect in the workplace becomes evident when an organization cannot perform key developmental tasks anymore as it should.

An example from our OD practice:

Student ratings of an educational program declined over the years. Over 50% of the students left school after the first year of study. The lecturers however insisted that it was not the program but that the preliminary training fell short. So they felt no urgency to upgrade the program nor to reflect on their way of teaching.

According to research in child development, child neglect can be detected by looking at the social climate, the behavior and the emotional availability of the parents and their response to the behavior of the children. This tripartite division to detect child neglect is followed to categorize three areas in which OD consultants and managers must look for neglect in the workplace. We name it 'the toxic triangle of deficits'.

#### I. *The organization's context*

To assess the impact of the organization's context on the process of neglect and to put a stop to that neglect, it is crucial to compare organizational deficits to community deficits (such as the lack of social support by management and support staff). The main goal is to establish the extent to which factors in the organization's context point to and perpetuate neglect. This pertains to the organization's history of development, the characteristics of the primary process, the commitment of the board of directors, senior management and support staff's attitude toward possible neglect as well as direct supervisors' positioning.

As an example from our OD practice: In an international investment bank the policy to prevent financial malversations after the crisis of 2008 consisted of three defense lines of compliance. At the same time when targets were met substantial bonuses could be gained by the traders. When accidentally a case of malversation was reported the trader was immediately dismissed, stating that 'rotten apples, should be removed from the barrel'. The management did not consider the possibility of the whole system being a rotten barrel.

In [Table 1](#) the signs of neglect in the organizational context corresponding to community deficits are presented.

#### II. *Leadership behavior*

To determine management's role in the neglect, we need to compare leadership deficits to parenting deficits. The main goal is to establish management's capacity or incapacity to act in its role and whether management takes responsibility in that role, and at the same time, whether (operational) management has also fallen victim to neglect.

An example from our OD practice: In an engineering and maintenance firm in aviation services the dominating style was management by exception: as long as budgets and timelines were met no attention was paid to the needs of staff members. Staff found their own ways to fix problems in operational planning. After a major incident the CEO found out that the operation was out of control.

In [Table 2](#) the signs of neglect in leader behavior corresponding to parenting deficits are presented.

#### III. *Employee behavior*

Behavioral problems are a sign of neglect, so it is essential to compare subordinates' deficits to child deficits. The main goal is to detect self-preservation behavior by observing the interaction between staff and management and employees in group settings, including the interaction with the OD consultant.

An example from our OD practice: In a team session at a large institution for healthcare of elder people about 'how to cooperate better between disciplines in order to best serve our clients' needs' the first question of a senior staff member was 'is this group setting safe enough when an external coach is present'. This set the tone for the rest of the day. A minority of staff members undermined the program and the colleagues who were glad to talk about the way members of the team could improve their cooperation did not dare to speak out for themselves. Afterwards an anonymous letter was sent to the board of directors questioning them why such a negative approach was taken in a team that was so dedicated to the clients. The external consultant was blamed for this negative atmosphere.

In [Table 3](#) the signs of neglect in employee and direct supervisor behavior corresponding to child deficits/outcomes are presented.

We now come to explore the role of leadership in organizational development from a parenting perspective.

**Table 1** Signs of Neglect in the Organizational Context

Organizational context: to what extent are these signs present/absent?

	Signs	What is explored/revealed
1	History of drastic reorganizations and high turnover of managers	Diversity, complexity and effects of the series of changes; how they were implemented
2	The board is not engaged with the organization's challenges	Role played, positioning, orientation and involvement of the board in the internal issues and daily organizational life
3	The board lacks unified leadership	Extent to which board members hold explicit vision of a joint leadership role, speak with one voice & act accordingly
4	Senior management lacks authority and influence	Degree of authority inherent in senior mgt's formal position & extent to which senior mgt identifies with this position and acts accordingly
5	Support staff has undue influence	The positioning of support staff vis-à-vis operational management & the professionalism of support staff's actions
6	Direct supervisors are not invested with authority	Direct supervisors' formal position, informal relationships & extent to which they are supported by senior mgt & support staff

**Table 2** Signs of Neglect in Leader Behavior

Leader behavior: to what extent are these signs present/absent?	
Sign	What is explored/revealed
7 Management is not demanding	Whether leadership is lacking in the sense of making demands and monitoring compliance. It is key here that management's demands are realistic in terms of what can be expected from the person or team in question.
8 Management is unresponsive	The relationship between management and employees. Does mgt respond to signals and see what is needed? Is mgt's attention turned inwards (toward the organization) or outwards?
9 Management is unavailable (physically and/or emotionally)	The distance between management and employees, the distinction between past and present, possible accumulation of reasons why the board, senior mgt and direct supervisors are not available.
10 Direct supervisors do not act appropriately for their role	Extent to which direct supervisors show leadership behavior. Includes the extent to which employees are prepared to accept leaders (good followership).

**Table 3** Signs of Neglect in Employee/Direct Supervisor Behavior

Employee/direct supervisor behavior: to what extent are the following signs present/absent?	
Sign	What is explored/revealed?
11 Transgressive behavior	The harm of what is lacking; the seriousness of the neglect; transgressiveness in all areas of work and social interaction. Employees are not always aware of the effect their conduct has on others.
12 Inability to reflect and learn	How safe or unsafe employees feel; the extent to which they display outward compliance and how they react when people question their effectiveness.
13 Shirking responsibility	Tendency to pass the buck, continually set conditions and ask for more clarity. Holding management responsible for everything. Takes different shapes, not only apathetic behavior.
14 Self-preservation	Defense mechanisms, the 'shadow side', people protecting their own interests, relationships and dealings in informal networks.
15 Strong resistance	This is an indication that the OD consultant has hit a nerve; 'strong' may also pertain to implacability and blackmail, some more subtle than others.
16 Undermining authority	Behavior by employees, managers or support staff who compensate for, or take advantage of, the weak position of direct supervisors and who know that they will lose influence if their superiors assume the position of authority that is formally theirs.

## ABOUT 'GOOD' AND 'BAD' PARENTING AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

Based on developmental psychology theory, we may distinguish between leadership behavior that fosters constructive organization development and that which can be regarded as neglectful with destructive outcomes. Developmental psychology is useful for both diagnosing and treating neglect.

Neglect, in the sense of a behavioral problem displayed by managers, can be interpreted as an expression of incompetence. However, such incompetence does not absolve managers of their responsibility. Neglectful managers shirk their responsibility; they do not play their part in initiating structure and responding to their subordinates' needs, abilities and skills. This is labeled as *laissez faire* leadership.

*Laissez faire* leadership is characterized by a lack of control and guidance in organizational development. What is missing is *sensitive responsiveness*: sensing what the other thinks or feels and responding appropriately. Inherent in the notion of sensitive responsiveness are *reciprocity* and *interaction*, both of which are lacking in the communication between management and staff in non-lead or neglected organizations.

As an example from our OD practice: In the weekend the late night shift of the ticket inspectors on a very busy train connection was not very popular because of the aggressive behavior of many of the young passengers, returning home from an evening in the city. Their union urged for more personnel on this shift. In a certain weekend one of the inspectors was spit in the face. The next day he turned up late because he could not sleep after the incident. His team manager corrected him on being late, but did not notice the inspector was not looking well. The next day the ticket inspector took a sick leave. He got a call from his team manager only after two weeks.

Permissive and indulgent parents have no authority over their children. Likewise, managers who lack clear competences and responsibilities in the organization have no authority over their subordinates and are not in a position to make demands on them or discipline them.

For instance this example from our OD practice: a team manager did not dare to refuse a request for a day off by one of his team members, as it was the informal leader, while the manager absolutely could not miss anyone.

The context in which the organization operates affects managers' availability to their subordinates. In situations of

neglect, therefore, we need to determine the extent to which management's preoccupation with everyday concerns or external issues makes them psychologically unavailable to staff.

For instance this example from our OD practice:

In an insurance company communication between employees and their supervisor is easy in the open-plan office. The supervisor is busy however: his subordinates see him rush from one meeting to another. When someone wants to ask him something, he replies 'not now'.

Another key factor is how long leadership has been lacking. A temporary unavailability of management because of a particularly time-consuming project does not constitute neglect. But of course it never should last as long in this example we came across: The new manager of a team of police-officers discovered that his people had had no performance review for eight years in a row.

The diagnosis must also include situational factors of laissez-faire leadership as well as the history and context of the organization. As an example from our OD practice:

After the restructuring of the ten front-offices of a municipality the new manager discovered that in four of them people lacked the actual knowledge of the work processes.

If the reader recognizes the signs, the incompetence in leadership and the examples, the question comes up: how can you heal the deficits?

## HOW TO RESTORE NORMAL ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

We learned from the treatment of abused and neglected children that the first step is: restore a safe environment with repetitive daily routines and close availability of a caretaker. In organizations this means that leaders take their responsibility in role and that they guide members of the organization to discover through experience what normal daily organizational life is like. Reflecting on the intervention strategy in our OD practice by means of action research in over 60 projects we detected four main interventions in daily organizational life:

### 1. Restoring work routines

Neglected organizations obviously have rules and procedures, agreements and instructions, just like healthy organizations. The difference is that none of them are enforced. Hence, employees start to ignore them or interpret them in self-serving ways. This is how unwritten rules start to replace written ones. Of course, this happens in all organizations to an extent, but while in healthy organizations it may be intended to circumvent excessive bureaucracy, in cases of neglect unwritten rules are primarily aimed at self-preservation. Most organizations hold meetings at regular intervals. In neglected workplaces, attending meetings may have become optional; everyone is free to prioritize another activity. Another routine is vacation and leave. Unlike healthy organizations, where everyone is supposed to submit their requests before a particular date, neglected organizations have no strict deadlines and a solution can always be wangled for late requests. If not, employees simply call in sick. Job performance evaluations have become empty rituals or fallen by the wayside altogether because management is too busy dealing with other matters.

Restoring work routines is relatively simple because it involves no more than enforcing existing rules and procedures. Yet, this requires a lot of time and attention from everyone involved, particularly direct supervisors. They need to tackle something they have let slide for years. A majority of their subordinates will accept this and ultimately appreciate the enforcement and monitoring with thoughts like: 'Phew. Someone's finally taking charge'. A minority who used to benefit from operational management's laissez-faire approach will resist vehemently, as the return to routines often entails constraints on personal freedom or exposure of incompetence.

### 2. Normalizing interactions at work

This is the encouragement of positive interactions among co-workers and to humanizing relationships at work. For example: lending a hand when a co-worker has a big backlog, paying a co-worker a genuine compliment, or noticing that a usually talkative co-worker has been uncharacteristically quiet for a few days. Other examples are: speaking up when a co-worker is treated unfairly and when realizing someone has made a mistake. Often this pertains to behavior that is taken for granted or that people hesitate to bring up because it makes them uncomfortable. One type of interaction that is difficult to broach is the separation of work and private life. This pertains to friendships between co-workers, co-workers taking vacations together, and love relationships on the work floor between co-workers or a supervisor and a subordinate. Interventions are aimed at teaching the team to intervene on their own, in the here and now. This entails that people in the organization have to learn to reflect on how another person's behavior affects them and to say this directly to the person involved. Team meetings are held to this end, focusing on:

- increasing the participants' self-knowledge and awareness of their own behavior;
- increasing the participants' sensitivity to other people's behavior;
- developing a joint understanding of what constitutes normal and abnormal behavior in this particular context;
- increasing the participants' awareness and understanding of group dynamics;
- increasing the participants' diagnostic skills in interpersonal and intergroup interaction.

### 3. Rebuilding basic structures and functional relationships in the workplace

This third intervention process is the most drastic because it affects the way everyone works. This intervention pertains to standardizing work processes, for example: standard client registration in health care, or recording student results in education. In neglected organizations, such work processes have never been standardized because management always feared worker's reaction to change and avoided making waves. Employees have therefore learned to record information in their own idiosyncratic, unverifiable manner out of concern for their clients or students. Another example of a basic structure in need of rebuilding, and one very relevant to higher education for instance, is rosters. In a situation of neglect, management's laissez-faire conduct will have left room for dozens of exceptions based on private problems, rights granted in the past that have become entitlements, requests for leniency, and deals to favor

friends or loved ones in the workplace. The original reasons for these exceptions are no longer pertinent; the exceptions have begun to lead a life of their own. Once such basic structures are introduced or rebuilt, the informal relationships that have been keeping the organization going come to the surface. In a case in higher education, for instance, we noticed that the students attended their courses, but not according to the formal schedule. At this point it becomes obvious that there is a 'cavalry' in the organization that keeps things going and that has much more power than operational management. The roster makers, shift schedulers and management assistants know the ins and outs of the scheduling patchwork; they are the ones who know who to call when the number of people on sick leave exceeds the number of people on standby.

#### 4. *Tackling transgressive, dysfunctional behavior*

This pertains to undesirable or impolite behavior at work which in many cases has gone unchecked for years, such as: frequent absenteeism, lateness, leaving early, taking time off during working hours, intentionally dawdling and taking longer to finish work, not answering phone calls or e-mails, gossiping about co-workers, criticizing direct supervisors behind their back, denying the existence of agreements, not completely finishing duties, and unauthorized trading of shifts with co-workers. To get a grip on such work-related dysfunctional behavior, direct supervisors must explicitly state their expectations regarding behavior and call out subordinates when they fail to meet them. Sometimes, however, this is not enough. Direct supervisors may have to draw a line in the sand, making clear there will be consequences if the transgression recurs.

The recovery process takes several years to complete in a particular organizational unit. The primary criterium for evaluating success is: how long does it take for reciprocity in relations between staff and managers to return. Reflecting on the recovery process in 60 projects we discovered there are three distinct phases and attending effects:

1. The first, year-long phase places the greatest demands on senior management and the board. They keep discovering new problems and issues that have gotten out of hand as revelations of misbehavior keep emerging. In this phase, support departments, particularly HR and finance, play an important role. With their support, team managers can tackle the most serious cases of dysfunctional behavior and reveal the prevalence of misbehavior by employees at every level of the organization. The majority of the workforce experiences relief and a measure of respect for the management that has finally stepped up to the plate. The workers' council continues to look on in distrust. Some direct supervisors will have to be replaced. Direct supervisors spend a lot of time communicating and garnering support from the board. Absenteeism goes up and productivity drops: clear signs that operational management is starting to do its job and makes demands to their subordinates. These ostensibly negative effects are actually positive early indicators of recovery.
2. In the second phase, operations and support are starting to find the right balance. More people are replaced because of incompetence, and even some senior managers and support department staff are fired.

Standardization of the work processes is starting to show results. Work processes become more predictable. The workforce is resisting more because people can no longer get away with their old ways and are consistently called out on their performance, attitude and behavior. Most of them are now forced to leave their comfort zone. At this point, the first steps are taken to remedy employees' deficits in knowledge and skills. All sorts of 'out of control' situations are addressed. This calls up resistance, particularly among informal leaders and people who enjoy many acquired rights. Several employees will try to undermine the changes, going over their supervisors' heads to appeal to higher echelons or even the board or seek media attention. The workers' council is in dire straits because it has to take sides. By now, about half of the direct supervisors may have been replaced.

3. In the third phase, operational staff is learning to take a stand and assume responsibility for their duties. Social interaction is becoming more functional. Employees can give and take feedback, and are starting to help each other out. Some ten per cent of the workforce continues to shirk responsibilities and sabotage the changes. The direct supervisors are leaving more responsibilities to their subordinates' own discretion, including those who continue to duck their responsibility. Shirking responsibility is no longer tolerated, however, so these employees are dismissed. Standardization of work processes and investments in human capital and facilities continues. Operations is back on track and fully functional. Some 70% of the direct supervisors may have been replaced at this point. The different management levels are starting to connect and the various units and teams are forming horizontal links. Now the deficits in the support departments may come to light. Those who cannot meet the demands made by operations, or who refuse to relinquish their own agenda in exchange for a supporting role, will have to go. This is also the time to remain tough on the most persistent issues, such as efficient workschedules and formalizing work relationships. The workers' council usually walks away at this stage because its role as prosecutor and savior has been played out.

In a large organization, various organizational units will be in different stages of the recovery project at any one time. This is due to possible delays in the recovery process of a particular unit resulting from changes in senior or operational management.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHANGE AGENT

During our OD projects in neglected organizations we compiled a list of practical suggestions for OD professionals who are hired as external consultants to help an organization recover from neglect.

1. *Be sure you secure the commissioner's commitment* at the start of the project and invest in a functional relationship of mutual trust. The trick is to involve the commissioners in the uncovering of the organizational reality and to encourage them to discover the fascinating nature of human weaknesses in the organization without

condemning people. Successful involvement of commissioners is evident when commissioners start applying the term 'neglect' to the signs they recognize out of their own accord.

2. *Be wary of applying standard approaches or methods.* Always ask yourself whether your standard approach or method is likely to work in the context of neglect in the workplace. It is extremely important to empower and teach people to solve their own problems, so avoid the use of templates and fixed notions.
3. *Be especially careful when using tools.* Double-check whether a tool matches the developmental level of the organization and particularly whether it could potentially be used to evade more pressing problems.
4. *Refrain from writing comprehensive reports.* Avoid writing comprehensive, well-founded reports. In neglected organizations, chances are these will be misconstrued, will spark denial and will make management feel blamed rather than responsible. Instead of written reports, use real examples from daily life in the organization and analyze these with the stakeholders, using your knowledge about the signs of neglect to suggest certain tendencies. Leave it to the commissioners to draw conclusions.
5. *Avoid support structures such as working groups and project groups* and focus on consistently encouraging people to fulfill their assigned roles and duties. In a neglected organization, change has to be constructed in the real world of daily organizational life rather than in temporary structures. A more effective instrument is work meetings or thematic sessions.

Unlike other OD projects, where it is usually safe to assume that relationships are reciprocal, an OD project in a neglected organization is not based on mutual relationships. This has a few specific consequences for OD professionals who embark on such a project. They should:

- maintain a certain aloofness in their relationships by keeping them strictly functional, while simultaneously showing commitment. This entails staying on the ball: responding to the behavior displayed in the neglected organization and not letting stakeholders shirk their responsibilities.
- have extra competencies, in addition to those of the 'average' OD professional. These include being able to see what is not there, reconstruct past events, trust their gut feelings and possess negative capabilities. With the latter we mean abilities to absorb and contain emotions and refrain from taking immediate action. They must possess a streetwise, empathic ability to observe human drives and behaviors without getting judgmental. They must dare to confront people about their behavior without judging them. They must be able to cope with highly emotional responses, help other people contain their negative responses to change, and sense the difference between inability and obstinacy. They must act as a role

model and display an exemplary leadership style by validating, structuring and disciplining.

- accept their need for support and take steps to organize it. Change managers meet a great deal of resistance and need support and validation from the commissioners or board when they become victims of envious attacks. Change agents need to be able to recharge their batteries; they need a regular debriefing and shadowing in order to hold their own, and stay alert and consistent.

## CONCLUSION

The parallel between leaders and parents helps us to understand the cause of developmental problems in organizations. Prolonged absence of leadership may lead to neglect and in a way to emotional abuse.

The presented theory and research on emotional abuse and neglect in the workplace echoes the notion of Freud about the hated/loved father/leader as the key to group cohesion.

Freud wrote at length about the precise nature of the emotional or affective relationship between leaders and followers. People form highly emotionally charged attachments to leaders. When leaders do not act as attachment figures, as was shown in this study, they neglect the emotional needs of their followers. This causes panic for individuals. In these groups people become unthinking, emotional and often hostile. Freud tells us that within highly organized groups there is a consistency of existence based on structured membership, customs and routines and, more importantly, a hierarchy culminating with a leader or abstract conception. In the organizations in this study structure, roles and routines are missing.

These are interesting notions that shed a new light on why emotional abuse and neglect are extremely harmful to the development of individuals, groups and even whole organizations. And why trust in the leaders is lost.

To investigate organizational reality a number of signs should be taken into account that can be subdivided in three contextual levels, ie at that of the organization, leadership and employee level respectively. We called this the toxic triangle of deficits meaning the neglect is systemic, consisting of destructive organizational dynamics. The recovery process is demanding and tough on everyone involved.

Freud's ideas help to understand why the recovery from emotional abuse and neglect has a strong resemblance to a therapeutical process. The OD professional needs to adopt the attitude of a therapist. Freud insisted that the therapist must remain neutral so that resistance could be seen as clearly as possible in patients' transference, and become obvious to the patients themselves.

Restoring normal organizational life is an indispensable process consisting of three phases. Just as in parenting, most neglect and emotional abuse in the workplace is unintentional, but nevertheless harmful, materially and immaterially taking a great toll on the development of individuals, teams, departments or even whole organizations.





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For a more in-depth exploration of the OD concept of organizational abuse and neglect, see:

Kampen, J. (2015). *Emotional Abuse and Neglect in the Workplace: how to restore normal organizational life*. London/New York, Palgrave.

Freud's ideas about fathers and leaders and their role in group dynamics originate from:

Freud, S, (1921). *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego*. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. 28. Beyond the pleasure principle, Group psychology and other works* (pp. 65–143). London: Hogarth Press.

The parallel between parenting and leadership is not new. Popper and Mayselless conducted an extensive literature

review: Popper, M., and Mayselless, O. (2003). *Back to basics: applying a parenting perspective to transformational leadership*. *Leadership Quarterly* 14: p. 41–65.

It is not widely used in OD practice however and the parallel between neglectful parenting and destructive leadership was not studied and applied in OD practice before.

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