

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLOSION – A THREAT TO LONG-TERM VIABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of organizational implosion is not yet an integral part of the literature on management, organizations, or leadership although problematic internal organizational scenarios have been addressed in the literature for many years. When an organization implodes, many of the stakeholders may initially be surprised. However, upon review of the organization in the period leading up to the implosion, it would be evident that there were many demolition charges (seeds of destruction) in place throughout the organization. Perhaps some of these seeds of destruction could exist in the short term. However, in the long term, they would eventually cause the organization to implode, to collapse from within. This article discusses various types of organizational issues that can function as demolition charges and suggests ways to eradicate them or at least minimize their impact.

Keywords: Organizational implosion, leadership, 5P's Strategic Leadership Model, deviancy, workplace hostility, social media, time theft.

INTRODUCTION

When a building implodes, it is demolished from within so that there is an inward collapse. It is destroyed by internally-placed explosive charges that weaken the structural capability of the building. A building implosion occurs in a controlled fashion as a result of planned explosive charges. Stakeholders know when, how, and why the building will implode. When an organization implodes, many of the stakeholders may initially be surprised. However, upon review of the organization in the period leading up to the implosion, it would be evident that there were many demolition charges in place throughout the organization. Perhaps some of these seeds of destruction could exist in the short term. However, in the long term, demolition charges would eventually cause the organization to implode. This article discusses the various types of organizational issues that can function as demolition charges and suggests ways to eradicate them or at least minimize their impact.

UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLOSION

This article identifies organizational implosion as the result of seeds of destruction which can function as demolition charges and cause an organization to implode (i.e., collapse inward).

These demolition charges may have been deliberately set, or they may be the result of various inadvertent failures such as systemic problems, malfunction or misalignment of organizational elements, or even lack of timely responses. Bozeman (2013) offers the following definition of organizational implosion: “cases in which organizational members, acting in their official capacities, play a significant role in the havoc wreaked on their organization” (p. 119). He further clarifies organizational implosion as highly disruptive events caused in significant part by organizational members, generally in response to external constraints emanating from the organization’s environment and having ongoing extremely negative consequences for the organization and its stakeholders (Bozeman, 2013, p. 125). We take issue with the first definition in that acting in an official capacity is not a requirement for organizational members to play a role in organizational implosion. We also take issue with the latter definition in terms of the requirement of external constraints. While we surmise that implosions can be caused by a variety of organizational elements, we concur that people are the active ingredient that often triggers an implosion. Therefore, we offer leadership, management, work environment, and other potential causes of organizational implosion. Finally, we provide recommendations that will help eliminate the demolition charges when possible and otherwise to minimize their impact.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT FAILURES

Organizations are systems, holistic entities which exist to serve specific purposes. The strategic direction and execution are established by people who serve as organizational leaders and managers. However, these same leaders and managers may also put in place (or fail to put in place) items required by the organization for long term success and survival. Allio (2007) suggests that there are bad leaders and that there are strategic and tactical actions that must be taken if they are to improve or be eliminated. He mentions as malefactors Lay and Skilling (Enron), Kozlowski (Tyco), and Ebbers (WorldCom), and he suggests that “Good leaders find strategies that do right by all the stakeholders” (Allio, 2007, p. 12). Sometimes the problem is vision vacuity where the person is focused on day-to-day activities, but has limited or no capability and/or desire to be a visionary. When there is a vacuum in terms of where the organization will be in the future, this nothingness negatively impacts systems and subsystems from the perspective of Purpose, People, Principles, Processes, and Performance as described by Pryor, White and Toombs (1998, 2007) as elements of the 5P’s Strategic Leadership Model. See Figure 1.

Gap between Expectations and Realities (p. 12)

Jackson and Finkelstein (2005) caution that it is possible that positive financial indicators can serve as camouflage, masking other indicators such as high levels of employee turnover, and a culture of demoralization and discouragement, as well as internal conflicts. They give examples, one of which is “Morgan Stanley (which) is not the first – nor likely will it be the last – highly successful organization that sowed the seeds of its own demise” (p. 1). Other examples offered by Jackson and Finkelstein (2005) are “MassMutual, WorldCom, and Enron” (p. 1).

We suggest that leaders and managers must focus on a variety of key performance indicators that can serve as warning signals. In so doing, they can purge any charges that may

have been deliberately or inadvertently set that might contribute to organizational implosion. Those indicators or measurements should be established and utilized as an integral part of the execution of strategic and tactical plans.

Execution Fantasies

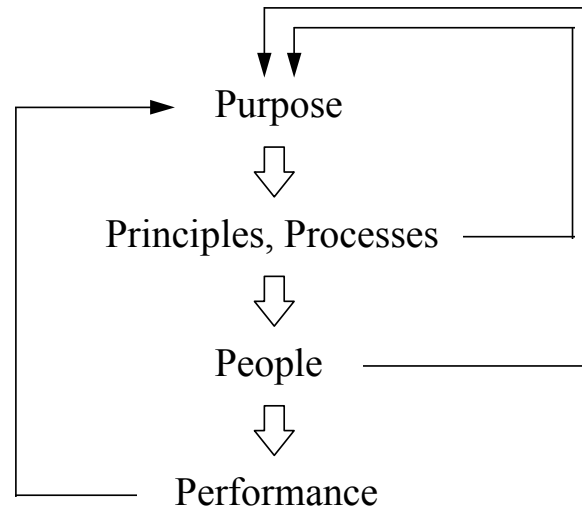
Pryor, Anderson, Toombs and Humphreys (2007) assert “whereas strategy formation has received robust examination in the literature, explicit guidance toward strategy implementation has been meager: (p. 3). As a result, it is not surprising that strategy execution is many times a dismal failure even though the strategic plans are impressive. Some leaders involve their people in developing impressive strategic plans. If executed properly, these strategic plans would make their organizations competitive and help ensure their long-term survival. However, execution requires more than simply communicating the elements of a strategic plan throughout an organization (Beer and Eisenstat, 2000). Otherwise, we suggest that strategic plans will become what we have entitled execution fantasies. These scenarios are where leaders talk about the strategies. However, they do not put in place the items necessary for the strategies to be implemented, i.e., tactics, action plans, and accountability systems that would ensure strategy implementation.

Alignment Disruptions

As mentioned previously, organizations are systems that have a variety of elements or sub-systems that must be aligned in order for them to function successfully. The 5P’s Strategic Leadership Model, Figure 1 (Pryor & White, 1996; Pryor, et al, 1998 and 2007) highlights those elements as follows:

- Purpose includes various strategic intention ingredients such as mission, vision, goals, and strategies.
- Principles include core values and operating guidelines.
- Processes are organizational structures, systems, and procedures as well as the infrastructure and rules that support them.
- People, the only active ingredient in the 5P’s Strategic Leadership Model. They are the individuals and teams who own the processes and do the work.
- Performance includes measurements and key performance indicators as well as performance results.

Figure 2
5P's Strategic Leadership Model



Source: Mildred Golden Pryor and J. Chris White, *Strategic Quality Management*, Presentation to Texas Quality EXPO, ASQC, Dallas, Texas, October, 1996.

Lack of alignment among the 5Ps can cause organizational implosions, trigger external disruptions and failures, and even result in human tragedies and deaths. Examples where strategic and tactical plans were either nonexistent or not well executed and/or where the 5P's were not aligned are Bengazi (Griffin & Housley, 2012) and Fast and Furious (Attkisson, 2011). In both cases, there were significant leadership and process issues which resulted in people being killed. Of course, there were charges set which triggered internal organizational implosions as well. Much of this continues to be played out in news media as people testify before Congress, and attempts are made to eradicate future misalignments and failures in leadership and processes.

Ethical Dilemmas and Failures

When organizations are involved in situations that reflect ethical failures, their potential for implosion is increased. For this reason, it is incumbent upon leaders to ensure that their respective organizations have a foundation of ethical principles that are the basis for all decision making and actions. Those ethical principles or core values should be real, not espoused values, if they are to add stability to an organization. Lapin (2011) emphasizes that “the values crisis is not that we don't have good values, it is that our values have atrophied; they have become impotent and irrelevant to our daily activities and choices. They do not manifest in the business cultures we craft, in the educational and other institutions we build or in the day-to-day economic decisions we make” (p.1).

Sometimes, in workplaces, organizational injustice and sabotage exist. Ambrose, Seabright, and Schminke (2002) studied “the relationship between injustice and workplace

sabotage” (p. 947). This could be in the section on deviants because sabotage is deviant behavior even if the saboteurs believe that they are responding to organizational injustices. Ambrose, et al (2002) go on to say that injustice was the most common cause of sabotage in their study. We would add that perceived organizational injustice could cause retaliatory sabotage as well. Zellars, Liu, Bratton, Brymer, and Perrewe (2004) examined “dysfunctional consequences of organizational injustice and escapist coping (p. 528). They note that employees “seeking to escape and avoid an unjust workplace experience . . . job dissatisfaction and strain” and that these “escapist coping behaviors are both directly and indirectly linked to their intentions to quit (their jobs)” (Zellars, et al, 2004, p. 538).

It is management’s job to ensure that their respective organizations have ethical foundations, i.e., core values, ethical cultures and work environments, ethical decision making and actions. The people who instigate ethical failures, whether sabotage or other ethical violations, are sometimes management personnel. Therefore, as Pryor, Oyler & Odom (2013) caution, since it is sometimes managers who violate the ethical standards of their organizations, it is they who thereby put in place some of the seeds of destruction that can trigger implosions.

DEVIANTS AND OTHER INTERESTING PHENOMENA

Organizations consist of the same elements that exist in society in general. So it is understandable that organizations would include deviant personalities, sycophants, and various other phenomena. Vaughan (1999) refers to these phenomena as part of the “dark side of organizations (that includes) mistakes, misconduct and disasters” (p. 271). Hogan and Hogan (2001) stated “We believe failure (management incompetence) is more related to having undesirable qualities than lacking desirable ones” (p. 41). They list various personality disorders or dysfunctional dispositions such as paranoid, schizoid, narcissistic, etc. They also caution that there are potentially dire consequences of dysfunctional dispositions including (1) “the inability to learn from past experience which results in repetition compulsion, i.e., repeatedly engaging in the same self-defeating behavior” and (2) “they erode trust (because they are) extremely self-centered . . . and will serve themselves before they serve others if they ever will” (Hogan and Hogan, 2001, p. 51). Through the title of their article (Organizational Sociopaths: Rarely Challenged, Often Promoted - Why?), Pech and Slade (2007) seem to suggest that being a sociopath may not negatively impact a person’s career. As long as the deviants, those with personality disorders, and other unique human elements are productive and do not serve as demolition charges, it is possible for them to co-exist within an organization. Some may even serve as innovators. However, they must not be allowed to plant seeds of destruction and interfere with the long term survival of the organization.

Sycophants, Zombies, Robots, and Dementors

When organizational leaders surround themselves with sycophants, they are laying throughout the organization demolition charges that can rapidly cause an organization to implode. While people may naturally enjoy having people around who validate their every idea as being wonderful, such input from sycophants will not help an organization to grow and thrive. It is much

better for leaders to hire people who will challenge their ideas and provide innovative, reality-based input which is necessary for the long term survival of an organization. It is also the leader's job to provide development opportunities so that people can become positive, contributing elements in the organization instead of potential demolition charges. While sycophants by nature are not likely to respond positively to the development opportunities, it is possible that they will learn to behave differently if their leader does not reward sycophant behavior.

Sometimes people are not sycophants, but they function as robots or zombies. They perform their jobs in a perfunctory manner. The job gets done, but they don't use any energy to provide innovative inputs or contribute ideas for improving work processes. Some robotic workers can be trained to work in more creative ways. Others will always function as robots. A decision must be made in terms of their long-term impact on the organization, i.e., whether they will contribute to long-term organizational survival or to organizational implosion.

Some employees can be highly productive in terms of task accomplishment and yet negatively impact the work environment and other employees. Denton and Campbell (2009) call these employees Dementors and describe them as follows:

Dementors are high-knowledge, high-skill employees driven to overachieve by low self-esteem and other personality influences that can be exacerbated by situational characteristics. The highly productive Dementor deliberately attempts to lower the productivity of coworkers to alleviate the Dementor's own performance anxiety (p. 3).

According to Denton and Campbell (2009), Dementors sow seeds of distrust and cynicism that "frequently produce discontent, stress, unhappiness, and overall reduction in organizational productivity (p. 19). We suggest that those seeds of distrust and cynicism and the negative results they produce are seeds of destruction that can drastically increase the potential for organizational implosion.

Narcissistic Personalities

Leaders and managers who are narcissistic often exhibit hubristic tendencies, including arrogance, excessive pride, excessive ambition, and a sense of entitlement. Many authors have written about narcissism and its correlation with destructive leadership (Humphreys, Zhao, Ingram, Gladstone & Basham, 2010; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Conger, 1990; House & Howell, 1992; Maccoby, 2000; O'Connor, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner, & Connelly, 1995; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Sankowsky, 1995 and Bella, Bennett, & Aquino, 2011. Humphreys, et al (2010) clarified their position as follows: "We agree that reactive narcissists crave power, consistently attempt to secure more of it, and oftentimes, at great peril to themselves and their followers" (p. 127). We would add that it is also often at great peril to their organizations as well. As these narcissistic leaders and managers seek power, they may deliberately or inadvertently plant seeds of destruction that will help elicit organizational implosions.

Cliques, Insiders and Outsiders, and Would-be Heroes

It is difficult for employees to feel comfortable at work if they have to contend with cliques that identify some of them as insiders and some as outsiders. Another potentially negative element is an employee who wants to always be “the hero” and avoids responsibilities that could make teams of people more successful. These cliques, insiders and outsiders, and “would be heroes” do not add value for an organization or its customers. Instead, they are negative elements that help trigger organizational implosions.

ENERGY-DRAINING SCENARIOS

In any organization, there may be people, processes, and/or scenarios that are energy enhancing, energy sustaining, and energy restraining or restricting. It is critical that energy restriction is minimized and energy enhancement is maximized. Therefore, the environment should be one that is positive and energy sustaining in order for people to flourish. When a work environment is replete with energy-draining decisions, actions, and scenarios, the organization will gradually be weakened so that it is in danger of imploding unless the negative seeds of destruction are eradicated. It is evident that some extraneous elements such as negativity and dysfunctional conflict would have a negative impact on the work environment. However, there are other extraneous, non-value-adding elements as well which may appear to be innocuous, but they are energy-draining because they negatively impact reality and the capability of learning from mistakes.

Negativity and Toxicity

Pryor, et al (2011) suggest that “conflict is not only unavoidable, but that (functional conflict) is a healthy, necessary ingredient for innovation and long term organizational viability (p. 8). They go on to say that “Conflict exists on a continuum from mild disagreements or diverse opinions with little volatility to extremely destructive, dysfunctional conflict with intense, excessive volatility. Therefore, it is often difficult to manage, diffuse, and/or resolve (dysfunctional) conflict” (Pryor, et al, p. 8).

When a place of employment can be described as having negativism as thick as a heavy fog, this is a toxic environment. In addition to negatively impacting key performance indicators such as safety, quality, and productivity, such toxicity can cause stress and illness. Negativity increases with time if it is not addressed. Sometimes, members of an organization can work together to determine causes of the negativity and how to eliminate it. At other times, an expert should be brought in to assist the organization. The longer that negativity exists, the worse it gets. So in terms of negativity reduction, time is your enemy. Such negativity contributes to a toxic work environment and plants seeds of destruction which can contribute to organizational implosion.

Mind-numbing constraints sometimes contribute to the negativity in a workplace. Constraints may be lack of the needed resources such as people or technology to get a job done.

However, constraints may also be processes that are too lengthy, too complex, or not well defined. Empowering employees so that they can make decisions about streamlining processes will have a positive impact in terms of enhancing energy and employee morale. In addition, as processes are streamlined, this should help reduce costs, increase productivity, and improve other key performance indicators.

Facades, Illusions, and Smokescreens

Organizational leaders tend to want to hear success stories such as positive financial indicators and teams that make process improvement a reality. So people throughout an organization present the best possible results and scenarios when they submit reports upward through their respective chain of command. As a result, the organizational culture becomes one that supports facades, illusions, and smokescreens that provide “feel good” opportunities for organizational leaders as opposed to reality checks that serve as a basis for continuous improvement. “Pretense games”, however well intended, rapidly become demolition charges that can put an organization on the path to implosion.

It is incumbent upon the leaders of an organization to understand and convey the message that they prefer reality checks and continuous improvement opportunities to game playing. Some of the best organizational leaders require updates on processes that require improvement as well as how and when the improvements will be made. The intent should be to promote an environment of openness where people learn from mistakes and where continuous improvement is a reality.

NON-PRODUCTIVE AND/OR DESTRUCTIVE ACTIONS

Many actions of management and non-management employees are non-productive and/or destructive. Some of these have already been addressed in other sections of this article. Others which are addressed in this section are hostile actions, misuse of various types of social media, and time theft.

Hostility, Bullying, and Employee Harassment

Factors which contribute to negativity in a work environment, but which also may be categorized as time theft and non-productive, destructive actions are hostility, bullying and employee harassment. The results of hostile actions include decreases in morale and productivity as well as increases in employee turnover and time theft. When people’s actions are used for negative purposes, they serve as seeds of destruction and contribute to the ultimate collapse of an organization. In addition, many such actions are at best unethical and at worst illegal. Organizational values and operating guidelines should be established, and all employees should be trained on what they mean and how to comply with them. Organizational values should include civility and mutual respect, and operating guidelines should not allow for any time of bullying or harassment.

It is especially disconcerting when managers exhibit hostile, bullying, and harassing behavior. Hunter and Bandow (2009) indicated that (such) “managers have been characterized by their targets as being disrespectful to subordinates, rude to peers, difficult to get along with, temperamental, and emotionally unresponsive to problems of employees” (p. 32).

Various authors (Ghosh, Jacobs & Reio, 2011; Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007; Reio & Ghosh, 2009) have studied the negative impact of workplace incivility and violence. According to Ghosh, Jacobs & Reio (2011), those detrimental outcomes include “poor employee health, low job satisfaction, low organizational productivity and commitment, high employee turnover, and poor application of learning at work” (p. 4). The negative consequences of workplace incivility, hostility, bullying, harassment, and violence are harmful to people, the work culture, and the organization itself. Therefore they are potentially major charges that can trigger an organizational implosion. In addition, some of the decisions and actions in terms of workplace hostility, harassment and violence may be illegal and bring external consequences as well as the internal organizational implosion.

The “Downside” and Misuse of Social Media

The best leaders have learned how to harness technological innovations for their respective organizations. Various types of social media are now being used to build positive relationships with employees, customers, and other stakeholders. Pryor, Alanaz, Alhamad, and Shomefun (2013) caution that there can often be limitations, ethical issues, and unintended consequences of social media. Some of the negatives associated with social media are as follows:

- Some management and non-management employees misuse social media and waste time “playing” on social media sites such as Facebook. While the organization can benefit from organized work on such sites, employees often spend time interacting with personal friends as opposed to customers or other organizational stakeholders.
- Once an organization participates in various social media for interaction with customers, employees, et al, that interaction can be negative as well as positive. Sometimes an inordinate amount of time has to be spent training people how to interact on social media, maintaining social media web sites, and interacting on social media sites with customers and other stakeholders.
- If an organization experiences a crisis, the media impact is immediate which means that leaders have to be ready to simultaneously address both the crisis and the media coverage of the crisis.

In terms of social media, Dumenco (2010) notes that “We’ve automated time-wasting. We’ve made it look, and feel, like work. We try to convince ourselves of the business value of social networking . . . (but) when you get right down to it, we’re just playing” (p. 16). If management and non-management employees are playing games on the internet, interacting personally on Facebook and other such social media sites, and doing other, non-work online things, even personal reading, they are engaging in time theft

and social media misuse. While social media have many advantages and benefits for organizations, the negative impacts can function as seeds of destruction and contribute to the possibility of an organizational implosion.

Time Theft

Employees steal from organizations on a daily basis. Sometimes, they embezzle money. Sometimes they steal items such as paper clips or writing pens. Such thefts are costly, and they often serve as major demolition charges for impending organizational implosions. However, the most costly may be time theft because it is not as easily detected, and more people seem to think that various types of time theft are acceptable. Henle, Reeve, and Pitts (2009) caution that “time theft (is) a common and costly form of ethical misconduct at work” (p. 53). Atkinson (2006) notes that employee time theft actions range from personal conversations to playing games, daydreaming, or anything that is not work.

Time theft creep is a dangerous reality. It may seem innocent enough at first. However, if each employee steals an hour a day, a 10,000 person organization experiences a loss of 10,000 hours a day, 50,000 hours in a five-day workweek, 200,000 hours in a four-week month, or 2,400,000 a year. Even if each employee only steals 15 minutes each day, the loss would be 600,000 hours a year. So time theft must be openly addressed. The problem is that employees at every level of the organization, horizontally and vertically, contribute to the time theft problem. Managers are reluctant to address the problem since they participate in time theft too.

Since time theft is a major demolition charge, and since time theft increases, it is simply a matter of when, not whether, time theft will help an organization implode. So what is the acceptable level of risk in a time theft situation? Organizational leaders cannot justify the existence of time theft. They can pretend it does not exist until the organization implodes, or they can engage employees in the minimization of time theft, always working toward its elimination. Each management and non-management employee must serve as a role model to help extinguish the deadly time theft phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of organizational implosion should be an integral part of the literature on management, organizations, and leadership. The concept should be addressed from the perspectives of organizational systems and strategic alignment of system elements as well as problematic leaders and scenarios. Some concepts such as negativity, violence in the workplace, and deviancy have been widely addressed, but they have not been considered as potential seeds of destruction which trigger organizational implosions. Other issues have not been adequately addressed such as time theft which can be very costly as people use their time to concentrate on things other than workplace productivity and to act in ways that are counterproductive for their respective organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

It is time for organizational leaders and managers to join the conversation about organizational implosion and be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. They need to spend their time more productively so that they understand their jobs from the perspectives of systems management and the strategic alignment of system elements. In addition, they should address the negative issues and scenarios from the perspective of their potential impact on the whole organization as well as the individual elements and the people involved.

It is time for researchers to begin to focus more on the things that will matter in terms of the long-term viability of organizations, such as the potential for organizations to implode because of multiple charges that are deliberately or inadvertently set in place over the years. It is time for authors to integrate such concepts into their articles and books and for teachers to integrate such concepts into their courses.

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