

Dry Pain and Social Capital

Unconscious Consequences of the Financial crisis

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“*Dry pain*” is a phenomenon boxers experience in the ring. When a boxer breaks his nose during a match, he registers the pain, but it feels far less painful to him than it would if the injury occurred in other circumstances.

Given the current situation, it is likely that a significant number of leaders have been under unusually severe psychological pressure for a long period of time due to the global economic downturn. Unfortunately, not much attention is yet being paid in the business world to how prolonged psychological strain can impact on the relational qualities of the way leaders lead. Or to the economic consequences of this impact. It is our hope that this article will help to rectify this shortcoming.

The reason a boxer is relatively numb to pain during a fight is that his body reacts to the unpredictable and threatening situation by initially secreting noradrenalin, a neurotransmitter. If the stressful situation is prolonged, the cortisol stress hormone is also secreted. If a boxer perceives that he is “fighting for his life”, the body’s internal opioids are released, which cause the experience of numbness. When a boxer feels that he is fighting for something which is very important to him, and there is a threat of failure, his body reacts in a way which influences his psychological perception of himself (and others). From the moment noradrenalin is released, his body begins to react – to deal with the danger. His social engagement system switches off, his facial expressions are reduced, his body prepares to respond to the danger signals (Hart, 2009) – and his empathetic ability ebbs away...

The mechanisms underlying a boxer’s reduced sensitivity – caused by the experience of psychological stress – also occur among leaders experiencing psychological stress. Just as a boxer fights for victory in the ring and success as a boxer, many leaders currently feel they are fighting for the survival of their organisation and their own success as a leader.

An executive not only bears the legal and financial responsibility for an organisation. He or she also represents the company personally, and has responsibility for the jobs of many other people. The leader’s personal identity is also at stake. In other words, there is much more at stake than “just” profits and development.

Even though executives are not *physically* battling with competitors, partners, the board of directors or middle managers, we encounter many leaders showing symptoms of severe stress and a corresponding reduction in empathetic ability. The external signs are not the only outworking of the changes caused by stress. The changes also affect the brain of the leader, in terms of the same physiological mechanisms a boxer experiences in the ring – the feeling of his survival being under threat. It is not as intensive as 12 three-minute rounds, but takes place over a much longer period of time, with correspondingly more destructive consequences for the leader.

Increasing insensitivity caused by work-related strain develops gradually and is therefore difficult to detect before it is too late. Neither noradrenalin nor cortisol activation cause such clear

symptoms as adrenalin activation, which leads to trembling and heart palpitation, for example. This personal insensitivity often reaches the point that the leader is facing a divorce and/or the organisation is experiencing increasing staff turnover and frequent conflicts before the leader *perhaps* becomes aware of their own role in the situation. By this time things have already gone from bad to worse.

The dramatic rise in uncertainty regarding the survival of many organisations as a result of the financial crisis is enough in itself to raise the stress level in an organisation, increasing the pressure on leaders. Many organisations are experiencing similar uncertainty about the continued existence of important partners and customers, with the risk that significant outstanding debts may go unpaid and cooperation relationships may be lost in the string of bankruptcies.

Like a boxer under pressure, a stressed leader reacts by having reduced sensitivity to his own psychological pain signals and those of others. The leader is no longer preoccupied with personal welfare and empathy, but rather the fight for survival, through a heightened level of arousal which leaves no room for inner reflection, normal self-care or social engagement. In order to be able to show normal empathy, we must have a normal sensitivity to ourselves, and this is precisely what is reduced dramatically when we undergo prolonged strain. The longer the period of time for which we are stressed, the more insensitive we become.

We find that very few leaders are aware of the extensive negative consequences reduced sensitivity can have on their leadership of the organisation they hold dear – in relation to productivity, sick leave rates, staff turnover, social capital, creativity, and the frequency and intensity of conflicts. These consequences are not a result of conscious neglect, but rather a lack of self-awareness. The fact is that reduced sensitivity to oneself increases the risk that a person will neglect or abuse relationships with colleagues, workers and partners. A stressed leader is therefore more likely to make an organisation's situation even worse during times of crisis if he or she does not have sufficient emotional self-awareness.

The consequences of prolonged psychological strain are well-known within clinical psychology. It is common knowledge that practitioners laden with (too) many emotionally challenging assignments run the risk of suffering a dramatic reduction in sensitivity over time (Thorgaard, 2006, II), making them much less capable of performing their work.

In clinical psychology circles this state is called "*compassion fatigue*", and it corresponds to the dry pain experienced by boxers. When a leader has been in this state for a prolonged period, their body becomes fatigued and releases the internal opioids linked to the phenomenon of burnout. This is a state in which a person perceives even *serious* human suffering in others as irrelevant or trivial, because they have *unconsciously* made themselves insensitive to avoid being overwhelmed by their own (exhausted) emotions. In these cases, (self-aware) psychologists seek help from their colleagues in order to return to a more healthy emotional balance, so they can again use healthy empathy to help their clients. This ongoing process is called supervision, but can also involve self-therapy. We do this in order to refine our abilities to relate to others in a constructive way, as well as to maintain these abilities.

Supervision and self-therapy will also become increasingly popular among leaders in the years ahead. The financial crisis is likely to help many discover the relevance of these initiatives. The increasing awareness that a healthy emotional balance is vital for good private relationships with spouses, children and others we care about, helps increase the motivation to seek help when we need it.

There is a risk that a stressed leader will bleed professional relationships dry of motivation, loyalty and meaningfulness due to reduced sensitivity as a consequence of stress. Lack of empathy and recognition and the perception of insensitivities, both large and small, all cause hurt. It is hard to feel comfortable with and loyal towards a person who repeatedly hurts us, even if they do this unconsciously.

The leaders whom we have helped to develop their relational abilities report a major increase in the organisation's social capital and increasing creativity and loyalty as they have become better at leading with empathy, even when layoffs are required. In some ways it can be more uncomfortable to lead with a focus on empathetic leadership, because a higher degree of relational sensitivity also makes the leader more sensitive to the less happy moments in the life of an organisation. However, in general, all leaders feel leading has become easier and more enjoyable, and they find it easier to establish fruitful external relationships. This is also consistent with the studies into emotional intelligence within leadership reported by Goleman (2002).

Dry leadership eventually dries out the organisation's social capital, while the relative insensitive executive remains oblivious. This is because their insensitivity makes it difficult for them to notice what is happening around them emotionally. We believe that the major costs that will result in the years ahead from reduced empathetic ability among one or more leaders in an organisation will attract greater attention when people look at how organisations can function more effectively (Goleman, 2002). Especially because companies are far more aware of their costs during times of crisis.

Viewed in this way, emotions are hard facts which have an effect on the bottom line. Emotions play a major role in determining an organisation's potential for development and survival. Social capital is defined by emotions, and many other critical elements in the life of an organisation also depend on the quality of the emotional interaction between people. Emotions also determine the level of loyalty employees, customers and partners have towards an organisation.

For these reasons, it is valuable for leaders to refine their ability to navigate through their own emotions and the emotions of others in their professional relationships – for leaders to *consciously and continuously* work on maintaining and developing their empathetic ability. Especially in times of crisis.

Sources:

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