

Extract from:

Applying Roberto Assagioli's Psychosynthesis to today's emerging crisis of leadership - Aubyn Howard, 04-05-2018

Will

I am proposing that the existential leadership crisis is also a crisis of Will. This is probably the least recognised aspect of the crisis in public discourse (whether in generalist media or specialist leadership and organisational forums), or in other words, the most unconsciously held. I suggest that one of the reasons for this, paradoxically, is the over-emphasis on *doing* over *being* in leadership, and the confusion between free will and strong will. Action, performance, results, doing, become valued in themselves and disconnected from transpersonal purpose, will and intention. Action (can you make it happen?) becomes an obsessional, strong will drive to the detriment of reflection and sense-making. The wider context for this is the prevailing rationalistic-scientific-materialistic paradigm of modern western society, and the corresponding bias for rational-behavioural models and approaches in business and organisational theory that close down, ignore or suppress the sensory-somatic and feeling-emotional levels of human experience in the workplace. This in turn shuts down our experience of being, our capacity to connect with Self and therefore Will as the first expression of Self.

Alongside this, individual agency has gradually got lost in the shadow of all-encompassing wider organisational and societal systems. Notice the high regard that successful entrepreneurs and business people are held in, the likes of Richard Branson, Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos. These are the exceptions to the norm – remarkable individuals, who against the odds, have been able to find and express their free will (or perhaps strong will?) through their life's passion, business project or serial entrepreneurship. Equally society tends to celebrate exceptional sports people, film and television actors, artists and entertainers, who have achieved unique success amongst a very large field of potential contenders. Now, with the cult of celebrity, achieving fame has become an end in itself.

Free will in large business (also public service or third sector) organisations is a rare commodity. Mostly it seems limited to a small group of senior executives, and then on closer inspection we might find those individuals at the Top feel as trapped within the system as those in the Middle or the Bottom of the organisational system (drawing upon Barry Oshry's basic model in *Seeing Systems*, 2007). Often the organisational system is a continuing expression and embodiment of the abundant free will of the founder of the business or

originators of the organisation, even long after they have moved on or passed over control. The initial creation of value becomes enshrined in a system that then becomes a barrier to new value generation as new expressions of creative free will.

However, the endurance of past creation is rapidly lessening as market conditions change. In 'The Second Curve' (2016) Charles Handy reminds us that the average life of a business has reduced from 40 years to 14 years as a symptom of the speeding up of change cycles and the consequent need to keep reinventing ourselves, individually and collectively. He shows how the 'Sigmoid Curve' provides a useful metaphor for thinking about initiating change in our lives (as well as in our businesses and society), at the point when everything appears to be still going well (i.e. on the up-curve of our past creativity) rather than waiting for evidence of decline before acting. He cites Apple's successive initiations of the iPod, iPhone and iPad as the classic example of successful second curve thinking in business and ponders whether this will continue without Steve Jobs at the helm. Not naming it explicitly, Handy is talking about Will and the ability to act and direct our lives or our organisations rather than live in reaction to events.

Ironically, many organisational leaders then desperately seek ways to re-activate creative free will within their organisations, either through efforts to connect with transpersonal will and collective engagement with the organisation's purpose, vision or mission, or by encouraging individual agency through the development of leaders. On both pathways, if systems forces are not adequately recognised and addressed, there is little chance for success. The general level of cynicism about vision workshops, culture change, employee empowerment or engagement programmes in most large organisations is high. If the source or cause of the disempowerment or disengagement of people in the organisation is not tackled first, well intentioned leadership and people strategies may simply add to the tangle of systems forces.

With this backdrop, we can see something of what we are contending with, when as psychosynthesis coaches we work with individual leaders, to help them find, activate and nurture their free will.

It is important to recognise that the systems dynamics and forces at play in organisations and society have always been present (and clearly were in Assagioli's day, as we will see). We can argue that the degree and intensity has increased, along with a corresponding sense of isolation and powerlessness, or worse, no sensation at all as people unconsciously play out their parts within the system.

At the societal level, through the toxic combination of increasing or growing (i) complexity as illustrated earlier (we don't know how to solve our problems anymore), (ii) individual isolation and alienation, with the breakdown of traditional societal structures of family, friendship and community which become replaced by corporatism, consumerism and social media (we don't know how to be with and relate to others anymore), (iii) global interconnectedness (we depend upon people we have no relationship with) and (iv) selective visibility of what is going on elsewhere in the world (we see suffering, injustice or threat and feel powerless), often through distorting combinations of new internet and old media, most people's sense of free will has become increasingly forlorn, frustrated and distorted. Pankaj Mishra (2016), a Guardian columnist, points towards the dangers of this:

'There is much dispute about the causes of this global disorder...but we cannot understand this crisis because our dominant intellectual concepts and categories seem unable to process an explosion of uncontrolled forces...we find ourselves in an age of anger, with authoritarian leaders manipulating the cynicism and discontent of furious majorities.'

In conclusion; I would argue that, to a large degree, we have reached a state of affairs where individual agency and free will appear to have become suppressed or subordinated within the bigger system – be that the corporate system of large organisations or the western consumer society system or wider global systems.

I believe that this state of affairs is being unconsciously compounded by what is happening at the intellectual, academic or ideas level – with the advent of a new determinism in the form of neuroscience (or neuro-psychology). There is much of enormous value that has come out of this rapidly emerging and quickly spreading field. At the very least it can be seen to provide scientific evidence for much of what humanistic, transpersonal or psycho-spiritual psychologists have been saying for years. But this might come at a price – the wolf of scientific materialism in human clothing, the potential for colonisation of the subjective realms of knowledge by this super new objective realm of knowledge. At the end of this colonisation, there might be little space left for the soul or the human spirit, nor for free will, individual agency, ultimate values or universal Self. If you follow the collective thrust of neuro-psychology, the unconscious becomes all powerful, wider systems and social forces all pervasive, our capacity for individual agency and free will delusional in the knowledge of our genetic make-up and animal nature, and Self or self an illusion because it cannot be located in the brain. In other words, a rather deterministic world. For which we need an antidote – which I suggest is rediscovery of the Will.