

Doing One's Business

Business psychology: are we designed to burn ourselves down?

“If you must break the law, do it to seize power; in all other cases observe it.”
— Julius Caesar

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Business Psychology



The more I think about it, the more interesting the psychology of business becomes. It becomes interesting not because it's deep or insightful, but because it's pathological. Human beings are pathological in the literal sense: personal logic is always distorted. But peoples' logic is more distorted when they act in groups.

Working with people who think they are dysfunctional is one thing; working with people who think they're functional is another. Working as a therapist I try to convince people that they're not psychologically disabled, they've just been thrown off their psychological horse. For those people who insist they have no psychological horse, I ask them to look at their feet, metaphorically speaking, and to stand up and start walking, to explore the territory.

Dealing with the alternatively mentally enabled teaches me a lot about mental ability. I learn everything from my clients, much more so than my friends. In fact, until my friends become my clients I find they don't have much interesting to say. The conscious mind is generally boring and uncreative. Your subconscious mind is more interesting to me, and it should be more interesting to you, too.

But what about those people who think they're sane? In general, they are the most deluded and they can be the most dangerous, by far. We recognize the danger of psychopaths but we don't recognize the reason

they're dangerous. They're dangerous because they appear to have entirely normal intellects but have entirely abnormal agendas.

A psychopath's intellect will be above normal in proportion to the degree that their agendas are abnormal. They are taught to be, as that's how they succeed in performing the abnormal. They've got to be better than average in order to prevail in the unusual. It's only those who are not better than average, and who fail early in achieving their goals that we peg as psychopaths. The successful psychopath is not caught, they get rich and famous. In this, they're just like criminals: the successful criminal is never recognized.

There is a higher percentage of psychopaths in the population of business executives. That should be both obvious and reasonable. What's more, it should be recognized that being a business executive, especially an executive who wields great power, is not a normal human position. A high powered business executive is essentially controlling an inhuman machine.

Executives are expected and even obliged to control an institutional machine designed to accomplish what is normally inhuman ends. Certainly, individuals cannot compete with the institution when the prosperity of the institution is the highest priority. Working with such executives might provide another window into the interesting subconscious of human beings.

Those who affirm their mental dysfunction provide quite a different window into the subconscious from working with those who affirm their superior abilities. It's not clear that either perspective withstands much scrutiny, but the dichotomy seems ubiquitous. We're often of two minds, and this is as true for the depressed dictator as for the mad scientist: both manifest a dual character. It is incorrect to call those in the former category neurotic and those in the latter psychotic but, having put out that idea, I believe it has a certain appeal.

Normal Means are Ineffective

Neurosis and psychosis are more different than simply the difference between a therapy client and an executive, but I'll build an analogy. To the extent that a therapy client thinks there's something irremediably or irredeemably wrong with themselves, they tend to the neurotic. To the extent that an executive thinks there's something irremediably or irredeemably wrong with everyone else, they tend to the psychotic.

Beyond this, in the doctor/patient relationship, there is a built-in neurotic/psychotic dichotomy. This is demonstrably true: doctors tend to think they know more and have greater power than they do, and patients believe less in both regards. Incidentally, this is why I have no patience with the doctor/client relationship, or with people who insist that they're a member of one group or the other. But that is a tangent and I will return to the point.

We're not going to understand thinking, consciousness, free-will, or mental health by working from either the empowered or disempowered perspective. Both are delusions that arise from the ego's orchestral role as the bureaucrat of perception. Of all the culprits of bureaucratic overreach, there is no bureaucrat more guilty of it than the ego.

Clearly, if we want to grow beyond the lopsided view of mind offered by remedial psychotherapy we must deal with high-functioning people as well. This is why I'm packing some of my bags and setting off in the direction of science and business psychology. This might be called therapy or it might be called consulting, depending on whether one wears a white coat or a sport coat. I won't wear either coat because I would need to wear both at once. Besides, I insist people I work with see beyond coats. That's my prerequisite for moving outside the paradigm.

To a large extent, I deal with function when I deal with dysfunction but there's a certain "woe is me" attitude that therapy clients exhibit. I understand that. My job is to open their minds to the implausible reality that

they have and have had the power to fix themselves all along. There's a mixture of confusion and disbelief that comes with this realization. I work to reframe the “woe,” the “is” and the “me.”

I find myself leading people toward the light with the invitation to move into it. I ask them to let me know how it goes in the illuminated world I introduce them to. In most cases, I never hear from them again, which is understandable. They don't need me anymore. In a few cases I do hear from them, which is great. Then, I gain insight into what one sees from the high functioning middle ground between the bounds of inflated and deflated self-opinions.

I want to walk in the land of self-congratulations, to see the world through the distorted lens of success. I want to observe that world in which distortion has made the shadow smaller than the self-image that casts it. I want to do some high-performance consulting.



The Sick and the Well

I've announced a course in the psychology of business. I'm offering it at the local technology incubator, Viatec, in downtown Victoria. It's going to be a six-session course and the majority of the audience will probably be new graduates, independents, and start-ups as these are the people at the incubator. These are puppies and I'm interested in the tigers, but that's a different hunt. I should think of those attending as the bait for the bigger fish, a deprecating image perhaps, but students define themselves as cannon fodder from the start. That's why I don't like the category of "students," but I'll have to sidestep that for the moment. At least students are appreciative.

I've made a webpage for the course, [you can see it here](#), and on that page I say:

Of all the skills in which people are most lacking, the primary lack is an understanding of oneself and others. I take a three-part approach with my clients and in my research to remediate, enlighten, and enhance. These three perspectives are critical for progress in any project:

- *recognize and address flaws*
- *always expand one's vision*
- *strengthen skills that can be brought to bear*

For most people and in most projects, one of these areas fails most egregiously, but you cannot fix one without having strength in the others. Growth rests on this tripod so we must be all of these things: our own therapist, mentor, and advocate.

Business is the crucible of experience. That light you see at the end of the tunnel is not daylight, and because most people fail to develop these skills they do not fare well. The primary tools that get you through these situations are your emotional skills, first, and your ability to reason, second.

Explaining how the course will work I say:

I will kick your butt and make you think. I will address everyone individually in the workshop and consider your individual issues privately. This is personal work. You must have skin in the game to be rewarded. The requirements for this workshop are that you attend and that you get more than enough sleep.

From this workshop, I plan to write a book, but not so much as to make a text or syllabus but rather to further attract the tigers. I want to work with those people who dance on the edge of leadership and psychopathy. There is something in that role that strikes me as offering insight into the future.



The Apex Predator

We hear a lot about the effects of civilization, science, and technology on our future. The elephant in the room seems to be institutions, governments, and corporations. If it weren't for them we'd still be living a balanced, indigenous lifestyle. It's because of them human culture seems unstable and unsustainable. We're so embedded in these institutions that we cannot see beyond them as if modern life without them is inconceivable.

For some reason, we venerate the apex predator. I think it's a holdover from our days as animals of prey when we longed for security. We fail to recognize the apex predator is the most insecure species. Not only is their dominance dependent on the stability of their environment, but their lives are not particularly easy,

either. There is a reason that they are the fewest in numbers and the first to fall.

Humans have the enviable position of being both apex predators and beings that have learned to control their environment. We're still just as dependent on the environment as we ever were, but now we have some power over the environment and questionable insight about how to control it. This is where the institutions come in.

We consume as individuals but we control through institutions. Unfortunately, the institutions consume, too, and some of what they consume is us. Yet it's people that control the institutions, or at least we think of them as people. We call them executives but their minds are malleable. All of our minds are malleable, of course, but the executive mind is stretched in ways that are not entirely human in the sense of humans as individuals.

What does it mean to recognize flaws, expand vision, and strengthen skills in this context? I know what it means in the context of individual therapy, but how about corporate governance? I would like to think the goal is to create more Leonardo DaVincis, but then Leonardo never ran a corporation. I don't think he's a good role model.

Dwight Eisenhower was an interesting personality. Abraham Lincoln may have been more colorful, but also more tragic. I think Eisenhower is the direction to follow, but how many of either have we had? Who have we got today, Julius Caesar? Need I ask?

Autopoiesis is the system that creates itself. Autopoiesis is the incarnational wisdom that the system generates and, through that means evolves itself. As you know, evolution doesn't always mean progress. The trees that make up the forest are designed to burn down on occasion. For the forest, a forest-fire is progress. Are we designed to burn ourselves down, too?

This is the question that leads me to executive consulting. To some extent we see this kind of self-immolation going on at an individual level. We do make progress when we hit rock bottom. Illness is a kind of forest-fire that marshals our healing power. Perhaps the question of whether we will do this as a culture will be found in the executive mind.

"I am prepared to resort to anything, to submit to anything, for the sake of the commonwealth."
— Julius Caesar

