

Healing the Leper Organization

Anne Toner Fung MBA, Eric Solowka MASc BSc, Adao Institute for Change

Two thousand years ago leprosy was feared as a deadly, horrifying condition and its victims were ostracized from their communities. It was disfiguring and destructive; insidious and incomprehensible. But today we know that Leprosy, or Hansen's Disease, is caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae* and for the cost of about \$275 in medication, it can be treated.

The disease process in Leprosy kills the nerves in the effected areas. So pain and other sensory signals are not sent to the brain when tissue is damaged. Without essential sensory feedback ("this is hot"), the brain does not register the damage ("I am burning") and does not recognize the need to change behaviour ("I had better pull my hand back"). Once damage has occurred, secondary infections often set in, causing further decay and disfigurement.

What does any of this have to do with organizations? Everything!

Because executives and upper management in so many organizations react negatively to pain signals, most employees stop sharing them, effectively killing the nerves of the company. So when the temperature in the market place, or production, or customer service heats up, essential feedback does not get through to decision makers and the organization gets burned.

Let's look at an example. Company X has been bidding on a large contract which represents a significant opportunity to break into a new marketplace with a substantial new customer. The contract requires them to develop and manufacture a large number of electrical parts. A proposal is put together and the electrical engineering team is asked to review it. They respond that the process looks fine, but the time lines are off by about 50%. The deadline proposed is simply not attainable.

The team is told the deadline is non-negotiable, and that human resources are capped. Each time the team tries to explain that the job will be physically impossible, they are sent back to rethink. Finally the team lead is fired for being unable to bring everyone "onside". Her replacement signs off on the proposal and cynically states to the rest of the team "don't worry, when we don't meet the deadline, they'll just replace me".

The company wins the contract. Everyone on the team works diligently on the project, although they know that it can't be completed by deadline. The project steadily falls behind, but they keep their heads down and don't mention it because they know that no one will listen. By the time the

organization realizes that they will miss the deadline by months, the damage is irreversible. Ultimately, they throw huge additional resources at the project, fire the team lead and his supervisor, but still miss the deadline. The customer removes them from the bidder's list for future projects.

When pain signals are ignored or worse, punished; when the feedback mechanisms cease to function, we have a Leper Organization. In this environment damage will occur, infection will set in and problems, easily handled in a healthy organization, will multiply unchecked.

Just as our bodies use pain to warn us of injury, negative information in an organization is an indication that something is wrong and must be fixed. Both signals warn that harm is occurring and behaviour must change. Ignoring these pain signals, or punishing the messenger, results in damage; first at the extremities and eventually to the core of the organization leading to an inevitable regression into a disease state.

Healing the Leper Organization involves cultivating and nourishing the internal feedback process. Like a neural network, an intricate system of message centers, that allow the free flow of accurate "sensory input" from all points of an organization to its decision making center, keeps an organization healthy. To prevent feedback conduits from being stifled and ultimately blocked, there must be a shift in perception at the top. Once managers and executives understand that "pain is good: disease is bad", they can begin to appreciate the value of the pain signals in bringing about required behavioural change - and they can start to heal the Leper organization.