Organization of the Living Dead: The Zombie Enterprise

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Abstract

The concept of the zombie enterprise could be a metaphor to explain a toxic organizational environment. While zombies are typically portrayed as grossly disfigured, half-dead humans who prey on their victims in an attempt to eat, infect, or kill them; in the zombie enterprise these individuals use the characteristics of self-centeredness and power to infect and subvert an organization. This metaphor offers a way of illustrating the causes and effects of organizations that decline into unethical, immoral, and even illegal activities for personal or institutional control. The zombie enterprise comes to life through an examination of the organizational design, environment, boundaries, and culture.

Introduction

An ever-expanding list of scandals and corruptions in business enterprises and government institutions (Yuh-Jia, 2006) permeates the media. Callahan (2004) suggests the character of Americans has changed and selfishness and self-absorption along with a desire for the good life has transformed individuals and even corporations into materialistic and envious entities. Self-centered, power hungry individuals have infiltrated organizations and are spreading their infectious disease. These zombies are creating organizational cultures where unethical, immoral, corrupt, and even illegal behaviors become the norm. This metaphor provides insights into the zombie enterprise through the characteristics of self-centeredness and power; and the elements of design, environment, boundaries, and culture.

The Metaphor

Morgan (2006) describes metaphor as an implied "…way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally" (p. 4). The goal of using metaphor "…is to increase the understanding of a very complicated and intangible field of study through juxtaposition with simpler more tangible concepts and objects" (Meyer & Schwartz, 2008, p. 7). The metaphor is paradoxical. It creates a way of seeing and not seeing that often creates distortions. It is easy to understand that

no single theory offers a perfect point-of-view (Morgan, 2006). As single metaphors become entrenched, partial explanations may be taken as complete, and readers fail to see more than is actually seen (Meyer, & Schwartz, 2008).

In an organizational setting, the ability to use common language provides organizational leaders and practitioners a way to better learn and understand experiences that may positively influence change in organizations (Griffin, 2008). Metaphors offer a capacity to understand various dimensions of a particular situation and how different qualities may coexist (Morgan, 2006). Metaphors provide a means for communicating organizational mission and strategy and can be used to reduce uncertainty in times of organizational change (Meyer & Schwartz, 2008).

The Zombie Enterprise

The metaphor of the zombie enterprise provides images of grossly disfigured, "flesh-eating" employees and staff rampaging through an office attempting to devour their victims. It is not that simple however. A zombie enterprise is one that provides conditions which allow zombies in the workplace to emerge and the infection to spread due to a lack of positive and supportive leadership. The zombie enterprise is an organization that fosters an environment which allows corruptive, unethical, immoral, and possibly even illegal activities, until it becomes part of the organizational culture.

Characteristics of a Zombie

Historically, the zombie phenomenon represented a reaction to cultural consciousness as well as political and social injustices (Bishop, 2009). Books, films, and video games often depict zombies as "half-dead" humans who feed on human flesh and are devoid of true consciousness. Ackermann and Gauthier (1991) posit there are two types of zombies: soul-less bodies and body-less souls. Those zombies classified as soul-less bodies are those who have not died at all, but are in a state of apparent death where they are deprived of will, memory, and consciousness (Ackerman & Gauthier, 1991). Zombies classified as body-less souls have no human characteristics and may be someone who has died and their soul is left to wander (Ackerman & Gauthier, 1991).

Bishop (2009) describes zombies as creatures who pursue living humans with relentless dedication and have no real emotional capacity. "They cannot be reasoned with, appealed to, or dissuaded by logical discourse" (Bishop, 2009, p. 4). These zombies are portrayed as mindless monsters whose aim is to kill, eat, or infect others (Munz, Hudea, Imad, & Smith, 2009). However, through the use of the zombie metaphor, these are individuals in an organization who attempt to achieve personal gains through self-centeredness and power. Much like what is depicted in zombie movies, a zombie enterprise forms as the result of an infection. If left untreated, this infection begins to take hold and spread throughout the organization until the entire staff is consumed by the pandemic. A pandemic is an infection or epidemic that is widespread and affects a large amount of people. To understand the pandemic process, it is important to understand the characteristics of the zombie enterprise.

Characteristics of the Zombie Enterprise

The symptoms of the zombie pandemic are often slow to develop, but once they take hold, it is very difficult to reverse and often results in the demise of the organization. Symptoms typically begin with the allowance of unethical practices such as incompetence, rigid or abusive behavior, intemperate actions, and callousness; it builds to full on corruption, and insular conduct; and it eventually manifests toward pure evil (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). These zombies are often unable to distinguish right from wrong or justify their actions for personal gain and maximize their rewards through harming others (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). In organizations as zombie enterprises, leaders and followers place their needs and wants above others and act on their own desires without regard

to the impact on the organization or their environment. A zombie enterprise then is one that is based on self-centeredness and power.

Self-centeredness

The self-centered individual is one who acts in accordance with their own desires, wishes, and interests for the purpose of self-preservation and satisfaction (Debeljak & Krkac, 2008). They are considered to be self-absorbed and have a disregard for the rights and interests of others and are focused on greed, materialism, and profit-maximization (Maitland, 2002). Callahan (2004) indicated that the character of America has changed due to changes in values. He states, "…individualism and self-reliance have morphed into selfishness and self-absorption; competitiveness has become social Darwinism; desire for the good life has turned into materialism; aspiration has become envy" (p. 19). In the zombie enterprise, self-centeredness is based on doing what is necessary to get ahead. Machiavellianism is the self-centered trait which allows leaders to engage in and promote destructive behavior (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). In this case, the use of clan control, the internalization of cultural values, goals, expectations and practices (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013) are subverted to direct follower behavior in a destructive manner. Once infected, these zombies consume organizational resources and violate group norms, they justify their actions by their own definition of morality, and they feel free to satisfy their needs at the expense of others (Hackman & Johnson, 2013).

Power

Yukl (2013) defines power as "…the capacity of one party to influence another party" (p. 186). According to Hatch (2013), power is always relational and in an organization where authority is a source of power it may flow top to bottom, bottom to top, cross-organizationally, and can even work in all directions at the same time. In the zombie enterprise, the infection is easy to spread as there are few barriers to thwart its transmission. Power in the zombie enterprise is actually used as a mechanism to foster the spread of the disease. Hackman and Johnson (2013) posit there are several factors of power, John French and Bertram Raven provide five primary sources of power:

i) **Coercive Power**

Individuals have coercive power if they have the ability to administer punishment or provide negative reinforcement (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Coercion ranges from a reduction of status, pay and benefits to physical force (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Subordinates can exercise coercive power through influential processes such as the ability to damage a superior's reputation, restrict production, sabotage operations, or hold demonstrations (Yukl, 2013). In the zombie enterprise, coercive power may be used to garner desired behavior even though such behavior does not align with organizational goals, missions, policies, or practices.

ii) **Reward Power**

Individuals have reward power if they have the ability to gain compliance by offering something of value to someone else (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Performance incentive plans and positive reinforcements including tangible items such as money, gifts, or benefits or intangible items such as titles, roles, and job security are all forms of reward power (Kinicki & Fugate, 2012). Individuals "…are likely to act more deferential toward someone who has high reward power, because they are aware of the possibility that the person can affect their job performance and career advancement" (Yukl, 2013, p. 189). The zombie enterprise uses reward power to threaten others with tangible and intangible items to get what they want.

iii) **Legitimate Power:**

Kinicki and Fugate (2012) posit legitimate power is anchored to an individual's formal position. Follower behavior is prescribed within specified parameters and often depends on the importance of the position (Hackman & Johnson). Often, acceptance of authority is based on whether the agent is perceived to possess legitimate occupation of their position (Yukl, 2013). Legitimate power may be endorsed and even encouraged to further the toxic culture of the zombie enterprise. Zombies are specifically placed in positions to exert legitimate power over others and further their cause.

iv) **Expert Power:**

Expert power is based on the person rather than the position (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Valued knowledge is used over those who need such information to perform their tasks (Kinicki & Fugate, 2012). Yukl (2013) posits specialized knowledge and skills are a source of power only as long as the dependence on the person who possess them remain. In the zombie enterprise, knowledge is power and only those who are infected are allowed to gain such data.

v) **Referent Power:**

Referent power comes about through an individual's personal characteristics and is the reason for compliance (Kinicki & Fugate, 2012). This role model power comes from the ability to influence other's behavior and depends on feelings of affection, esteem, and respect for another (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). The strongest form of referent power is called personal identification (Yukl, 2013). To gain approval, the target individual complies with requests because they share similar attitudes (Yukl, 2013). Favors are gained and the infection is able to spread in the zombie enterprise when compliance is gained through the charismatic ability of senior zombies.

The Zombie Infection

How do individuals in an organization become Zombies? To answer this question, one must look toward theories which offer explanations for how the zombie infection is able to take hold in an organization. Cognitive dissonance theory offers a promising reason for how zombies emerge. Cognitive dissonance "…describes a psychologically uncomfortable state or imbalance that is produced when various cognitions about a thing are inconsistent" (Bawa & Kansal, 2009, p. 1). The motivation behind cognitive dissonance is to reduce dissonance (Bawa & Kansal, 2009). The zombie emerges out of a need to behave in a manner inconsistent with their attitudes and these individuals find ways to reduce dissonance to alleviate their uncomfortableness (Lii, 2001). In the case of a zombie organization, the potential for cognitive dissonance among individuals provides an easy accommodating situation to create a supportive culture of change (Burnes & James, 1995) toward unethical (zombie-like) behaviors. A self-centered member is likely to reduce dissonance by satisfying their needs with little or no regard to the impact on the organization. For instance, members may begin to steal supplies from the company through justification that they often work from home. At further extremes, members feel they have the right to abuse other members (physically, psychologically, or sexually) as either a reward or sense of entitlement based on their position of power.

How does the infection spread throughout the organization? There are several methods employed to enable the spread of the zombie infection. One such method is groupthink. Janis (1982) describes groupthink as a mode of thinking individuals engage in when involved in a cohesive group that strives for unanimity and overrides their motivation to accurately apprise alternate courses of action. Maharaj (2008) posits groupthink causes members to succumb "…to the persuasive power of their peers in their thinking patterns and opinions" (p. 6). It lowers the mental efficiency and moral judgment (Kim, 2001) of those who become infected. The thoughts, actions, and decision-making

abilities are heavily influenced by peer pressure (Maharaj, 2008). Hackman and Johnson (2013) identify eight signs of groupthink as described by Janis:

1. *Illusion of invulnerability*-Members are overly optimistic and willing to take extraordinary risks.

2. *Belief in the inherent morality of the group*- Members ignore ethical consequences of actions and decisions.

3. *Collective rationalization*-Members invent rationalization to protect themselves from challenges.

4. *Stereotypes of outside groups*- Members believe outsiders are weak and unwise.

5. *Pressure on dissenters.* Members use coercive tactics to get other to go along with prevailing opinions.

6. *Self-censorship*- Individuals keep doubts to themselves.

7. *Illusion of unanimity*- Members believe a lack of conflicting opinions means the entire group agrees with a course of action

8. *Self-appointed mindguards*- Members protect leaders from dissenting opinions that may disrupt the group consensus.

Through the use of groupthink, a single zombie or a group of zombies is able to use coercive power to redefine goals and perpetuate their own personal needs (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These zombies use other tactics such as "…failing to follow decision-making procedures, group isolation, time pressures, homogenous members, external threats, and low individual and group esteem caused by previous failure" (Hackman & Johnson, 2013, p. 215) to further their selfish cause.

Another method used to foster the spread of the zombie infection can be found in the theory of change management. Nastase, Giuclea, and Bold (2012) suggest change management includes the control of change in an organization and its adaptation to constant changes. Change may be effected through group dynamics and forces that effect change, and through the interruption or removal of forces supporting an equilibrium state, a desired state is able to take shape (Ronnenberg, Graham, & Mahmoodi, 2011). Sustained change requires that the organizational culture be transformed, and this is accomplished through messages from the leadership, inadvertently or deliberately, to convey to followers what they believe to be important (Nastase, Giuclea, & Bold, 2012). In a subversive attempt to affect change, zombies employ the various sources of power along with Everett Roger's model for changing an organization which they claim offers: (1) clear advantages over the status quo; (2) compatibility with values, experiences, and needs; (3) requirements that are understandable; and (4) the possibility to observe the result of the change in another setting (Rogers, 1983).

Lastly, clan control is used to encourage the spread of the zombie infection. Clan control is inculcated through rigorous socialization and behavior-based rewards that dominate the workplace and is a method of control that is not enforced through direct monitoring or rules (Kowtha, 1997). Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) suggest the internalization of disciplinary power to organizational culture may be internalized through clan control which arises from the values, beliefs, and ideals that are shared and become the norm in an organization. Zombies use their power to influence others toward their cause through the employment of clan control in an attempt to satisfy their own ambitions.

Stages of the Zombie Infection

The stages of the zombie infection follow patterns similar to the spread of other pandemics. The stages are: patient zero, outbreak, uncontrolled spread, and zombie enterprise. Patient zero is the first infected individual that begins the spread of the infection. Once patient zero infects others, the outbreak begins until it moves into the third stage, uncontrolled spread. Once the infection reaches

every individual left in the organization, the final stage is a zombie enterprise. Each stage has its own unique characteristics.

Stage 1 – Patient Zero-

Patient zero is the first infected individual who begins the spread of the infection. This individual does not typically display signs of infection and is therefore often difficult to detect. Subversive actions of patient zero may include tardiness, absenteeism, minor theft, violating company policies, etc. Left unchecked, this zombie becomes stronger and begins to infect others as they see this as acceptable behavior.

Stage 2 – Outbreak-

Outbreak typically occurs due to lack of supervision and enforcement of policies. The infection now spreads from patient zero to others within the organization. At this stage, the spreading infection manifests itself in appearance as the infected zombies begin to recognize that their behavior aligns more with their own self-interests, rules, values, and ethics. Their self-centeredness grows and their power is increased and is seen as more and more acceptable by others. During the outbreak, zombies mentally define their targets as those belonging to in-groups (supportive of zombies) and out-groups (unsupportive of zombies). Those in the in-groups are quickly infected and those in the out-groups either quit, suffer through the outbreak, or are fired for failing to comply. Survival requires power through the coercion of others and by rationalizing their behavior through collective wants with little regard to the negative impact on the organization. The zombie behavior begins to be integrated into the organizational culture and begins to become the new norm.

Stage 3 – Uncontrolled Spread-

With the infection spreading rapidly throughout the organization, the rewards of being zombies are now desired and the organization sanctions their behavior because no one has stopped the spread. Power has been granted to the zombies either through legitimate means or is earned through coercion. With non-zombies out of the way, the zombies are now free to complete the spread of the infection. Policies are rewritten or completely ignored, and activities are focused on the fulfillment of self-interests.

Stage 4 – Zombie Enterprise-

The zombie enterprise is achieved when the infection completely consumes and transforms an organization from a recognizable business into a soulless entity. In this stage, the organization acts completely for gain regardless of the laws, regulations, or codes. They use every resource at their disposal to exploit others and focus solely on their own interests.

Elements of the Zombie Enterprise

Hacker (2010) suggests zombies have the ability to infiltrate all levels and they not only feed on human resources, but on ideas, initiative, and creation. Zombies can suck the vitality out of a work group and once the infection starts, it causes rage, blind compliance, and confusion (Schmaltz, 1993). In the zombie enterprise, unethical, illegal and often immoral behavior is not only condoned, it is encouraged. An organization as a zombie enterprise can be seen through the elements of design, structure, environment, boundaries, and culture.

Design/Structure:

Typical organizational designs provide a structure that supports the execution of corporate strategies (Kinicki & Fugate, 2012). Strategically, the design specifies the grouping of units in the organization and the relationships among those units (Burton & Obel, 2004). It normally provides a chart reflecting who reports to whom and conforms to the environment, size, technology, strategy, and operations of an organization (McLean, 2006).

In the zombie enterprise, a flexible design is preferred because it fits the turbulent environment (Burton & Obel, 2004). With this design, the company attempts to avoid a decentralized design, as the zombie leaders prefer not to relinquish their positions of influence and control (Burton & Obel, 2004). This design offers a modem for centralized decision making (Kinicki & Fugate, 2012) where zombie leaders make all key decisions.

Environment:

Organizational environment "…has been defined, described, and measured in many ways – from unidimensional uncertainty to multidimensional measures" (Burton & Obel, 2004, p. 198). Hackman and Johnson (2013) posit "environment refers to the setting where work occurs" (p. 153). For the purposes of understanding the zombie enterprise, the focus will be on environmental influences. Northouse (2013) describes environmental influences as factors which lie outside the competencies, characteristics, and experiences of the leader, and may be both internal and external. Internal environmental influences include factors of technology, facilities, expertise and communication (Northouse, 2013). External environmental influences include factors of "…economic, political and social issues, as well as natural disasters" (p. 56) which can provide challenges to performance (Northouse, 2013).

Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) posit environments place demands on organizations in two ways. First, environments make technical, economic and physical demands which force companies to make and exchange goods and services in a market (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Second, they place social, cultural, legal, and political demands on organizations to comply with (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). These influences may be placed on organizations by their customers, competitors, suppliers, government agencies, and even their physical settings or locations (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2007).

In the zombie enterprise, zombies make every attempt to influence and modify the environment for their own purposes. The first step zombies take is the elimination of factors which create feelings of powerlessness, such as inappropriate rewards, authoritarian supervision, and regulations (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Next, decision making authority is shifted (Hackman & Johnson, 2013) toward the zombies, and resources are allocated toward the infected individuals. In this turbulent environment, leaders and followers alike are often unable to cope with the complexity and rapidity of change, and soon they succumb to match their organization and behavior with the level of environmental complexity (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Thus, the zombie enterprise is able to expand and form its own toxic environment.

Boundaries:

Burton and Obel (2004) posit boundaries "…set 'what' is inside and outside the organization" (p. 14). Berry (1994) suggests boundary in an organization is used in two ways. First, legal and institutional boundaries are marked by the transactions of goods and services, and second, social and cultural boundaries are marked by the individuals and subgroups in an organization (Berry, 1994). Boundaries are established by the control of assets and grants bargaining power to those in command when issues arise (Heracleous, 2004). Santos and Eisenhardt (2005) posit "…boundaries are the demarcation line between an organization and its environment" (p. 19). They offer four distinct boundary conceptions: efficiency, power, competence, and identity (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005).

1.   Boundaries of efficiency. Boundaries are set to minimize the cost of governance and is grounded in legal understanding of the organization as distinct from markets.

2.   Boundaries of power. Boundaries are established to maximize control, directly or indirectly as appropriate to the sphere of organizational influence.

3.   Boundaries of competence. Boundaries are determined by matching resources with opportunities to gain a competitive advantage.

4.   Boundaries of identity. Boundaries are "…set to achieve coherence between the identity of the organization and its activities" (p. 12).

In the zombie enterprise, boundaries are used for the purpose of power and control. The boundaries that are established separating the inside of the organization from the outside are an important tool for controlling the workforce (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). Control is maintained through three modes: dominance, collaboration, and competition (Berry, 1994). Dominance is used by the powerful to ensure compliance by the weakness of others (Berry, 1994). Collaboration is used through joint control across organizational networks (Berry, 1994) and is used to maintain control. Competition is used to control and disseminate resources to followers (Berry, 1994).

As boundary lines become blurred, the zombie infection begins to spread. In the corporate colonization of self, workers become 'company people' who become neurotic and obsessive compulsive as they have allowed the organization to strip away the identity boundaries that once separated them from the organization (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). The traditional inside/outside boundary is eroded and the zombie culture instigates everyday norms and expectations regarding time and effort devoted to the organization (Fleming & Spicer, 2004).

Zombie organizations, like egocentric organizations, "…draw boundaries around narrow definitions of themselves and attempt to advance the self-interest of this narrow domain" (Morgan, 2007, p. 250). The dedication toward the 'culture of cool' depends on the individual to span the boundaries between private matters and work life (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). In the zombie enterprise, there is a transfer of workplace activities to home and other places to fully infect and indoctrinate others (Fleming & Spencer, 2004). Boundaries at locus are encoded into everyday practices like talking, dressing, and other activities become the physical structure of the organization (Fleming & Spicer, 2004).

Culture:

Northouse (2013) describes culture as "…the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that are common to a group of people" (p. 384). Burton and Obel (2004) posit culture is part of any organization and is a mixture of the organization's properties and behavior of the individuals. A primary function of culture is to aid in understanding the environment and determines best ways to respond to it (Yukl, 2013). McLean (2006) suggests culture in an organization: provides a way of thinking and acting; is shared by members; shapes group and individual conscious and subconscious values, assumptions, perceptions and behaviors; and offers guidelines for how group members should conduct their thinking, actions and rituals. Hatch & Cunliffe (2013) describes culture as a distributed phenomenon where it is distributed among those "…who hold the values, beliefs, meanings, expectations, and so on, of which culture is constituted" (p. 159). Value and significance is attributed to members as they interact and create a coherence to form and maintain a collective identity (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013).

The zombie enterprise typically begins as a subculture or even as a counterculture within an organization. Subcultures are a subset of an organization that identifies itself as a distinct group based on similarities and arise when they interact frequently (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Countercultures arise to challenge the dominant culture or subculture actively and overtly (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Their goal is to reshape the corporate culture and the boundaries (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). Fleming and Spicer (2004) posit through a "…purposeful attempt to manipulate and control boundaries between inside and outside spaces of employment…" (p. 10), zombies in the organization push the zombie culture out into other aspects of employees lives (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). It is through their

influence and power that the infection is able to spread throughout the organization as they gain strength and numbers.

Another method used to influence organizational culture is through the use of clan control. Clan control is a control mechanism which is used particularly on new members "…such that they internalize cultural values, goals, expectations, and practices that will drive them to desired levels of performance" (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 185). Zombies seek to exercise a large degree of clan control in which collaboration exists in both the social and cultural systems of an organization (Berry, 1994).

Conclusion

Morgan (2007) posits metaphor articulates an extreme form of ideology which adds difficulties for leaders and managers in an already turbulent world. As a symbolic expression of cultural elements, metaphors provide a definition of an unfamiliar experience in terms of a more familiar one (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2007). The zombie enterprise metaphor, while extreme, provides leaders with an understanding of how self-centered and power-oriented individuals can transform an organization into an institution of doom. Through a focus on the elements of design, environment, boundaries, and culture, the zombie enterprise is brought to life and illustrates how a once "normal" company can be transformed into a corrupt, unethical, and immoral organization.

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