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Angelika Kutz

Double Bind- Communication as a Cause of Burnout

A Proposal for a Theory on the
Effects of Toxic Communication in
Organisations

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Organisations

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What You Can Find In this *essential*

- Possible explanations why more and more employees are becoming physically, mentally or psycho-somatically ill, or why more and more employees are leaving their workplace unnerved.
- Assumptions as to how toxic paradoxical Double Bind-Communication can affect employees and the company and endanger the existence of both.
- The scientific basis for this.

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To find out how paradoxical Double Bind-Communication affects employees and organisations, I interviewed people in the workplace in a qualitative study. I present the resulting considerations here for discussion.

The reason for the investigation were *my observations as a psychological consultant, mediator and coach* that “Burnout” often resulted from certain organisational communication and interaction structures or leadership patterns, as well as a diffuse mixture of feelings of fear, insecurity and constriction in the clients, which manifested themselves in these clients in chronic exhaustion and trauma-like psychological stress states and were the reason for consulting.

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Photo: Corinna Perrevoort

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The scientific basis of the investigation are the *Double Bind Theory*, the *Attachment Theory*, the *model of the double regulation of action in personality disorders*, explanations for “Burnout” and the concept *Organisational Burnout*.

2.1 Double Bind-Theory (Double Bind-Theory)

This theory was described by Bateson et al. in 1956, after they had observed the corresponding communication and interaction pattern “**Double Bind**” (**double bind**) in the family therapy context within the context of schizophrenia. They refer to Double Bind as highly dysfunctional and “crazy-making” (*crazy-making*).

Double Bind Elements

Double Bind arises in *existential dependency relationships* between people, e. g. families, in which it is necessary to decode messages correctly.

Double Binds (*Double Binds*) are *incongruent messages* in which either the verbal and non-verbal level contradict each other (a sad message is conveyed with a cheerful-joyful body language or vice versa), or mutually exclusive instructions are given. Both orders are provided with a sanction threat. This gives the Double Bind user the opportunity to reprove or punish the addressee for any behaviour.

Example: *Wash my fur, but don't get me wet!* No matter which order is fulfilled, the actor necessarily violates the second one given at the same time, with the consequence that he/she can only do it wrong.

The *Double Bind addressee can neither leave the situation* nor may he raise the Double Bind-induced, impossibility of a simultaneous accomplishment of both messages (*prohibition of metacommunication*).

In case of permanent exposure, the habitual experience of punishment by Double Bind causes traumatizing psychological stress and *internalized permanent mental tension*.

Further Developments

Watzlawick et al. (2011) specify the consequences of paradoxical instructions in that there are *only apparent alternatives*, and the Double Bind receiver is always exposed to the accusation that he is either *stupid*, because unable to understand correctly; *rebellious*, because he has just implemented the other message than the required one or has addressed the inconsistency of the orders; or *crazy*, because not able to perceive the reality of the sender in the sense to be expected by him “correctly”. In retrospect, the receiver can always be accused of having executed the wrong order. No matter what he does, he can only lose (Schulz v. Thun, 2016).

As a result, the responsibility for the result always lies with the receiver, because an *automatic and inevitable violation* of each of the orders occurs, which gives the Double Bind user power over the addressee (Kutz, 2016).

Once learned and consolidated, a Double Bind pattern is solidified in such a way that the Double Bind addressee already preventively restricts his behavioural repertoire and loses flexible interaction patterns (Visser, 2007).

In a study presented by Smith (1976), an *aggravating effect of Double Bind communication on the level of trepidation of healthy normals was found*.

The test subjects were exposed to the contradictory messages alone or to the punishment scenario alone or to a combination of both (= all Double Bind components). The highest level of impairment resulted from the combination variant. In parallel, it was found that those who were only exposed to the paradoxical messages or only to the punishment scenario were able to adapt to the situation; **those from the combined Double Bind full variant could not**. These full variant participants left the experiment with obvious feelings of annoyance or excessively apologized for their inability to provide “correct” answers, which persisted even after the experimental mechanisms were revealed.

Analogy for Organisations

Although the concept of *Double Bind* originates from the family therapy context, it can be generally considered as a dysfunctional interaction in dependency relationships and transferred to the organisational context, because also there the correct deciphering of messages is essential for survival.

2.2 Attachment Theory

The theory of attachment goes back to Bowlby and Ainsworth and states that infants develop a strong emotional attachment to their caretakers within their first year of life (Cierpka, 2012).

A distinction is made between *attachment system* or *caregiving system* (synonym: attachment style). When threatened, the *attachment system* is activated by the child under threat; when the state of protection is entered, it is deactivated; the *caregiving system* of the caretakers is fed by their own caregiving experiences and determines their caregiving behaviour.

The *attachment theory* differentiates between *secure and insecure attachment* (Lohaus & Vierhaus, 2015).

Securely attached children have experienced that they can rely on the support of the attachment figures because they have a high degree of sensitivity to the signals of the children, which qualifies them in the caregiving system as *secure-autonomous* (Cierpka, 2012), because they allow the offspring autonomy and own needs, to which they react empathically in the right way. *Insecurely attached* children are divided into the A-type (*insecure-avoidant*), the C-type (*insecure-ambivalent*), and the D-type, which stands for *disorganised*. On the one hand, the *attachment style unresolved* of the parents corresponds to unprocessed trauma experiences (Cierpka, 2012), on the other hand, Double Bind is associated with this D-type because of its powerlessness-causing lose-lose situation, because in Double Bind the attachment figure, which is sought for the purpose of seeking protection, is at the same time the source of the threat (Buchheim, 2013), and which is probably only coincidental, but because of the initial letter **D** (**D**-type, **d**isorganised, **D**ouble Bind) particularly suitable.

Parents with the attachment style unresolved unconsciously transfer unprocessed traumatic experiences of the previous generation to the respective child. The own role ambiguity of the previous generation thus continues via its inner attitude towards itself and others, and subsequently manifests itself in the form of incongruent communication and interaction behaviour, the *Double Bind*.

This has an impact on the attachment patterns of the offspring, i. e. the *attachment type of the children* of these parents with their own unprocessed trauma experience. The respective children's generation, unlike securely bonded children, does not develop a healthy basic trust (according to Erickson) or self-confidence, and thus the lack of self-esteem or the injured self-confidence of the traumatized parents' generation is passed on to the following generation(s) transgenerationally (Geddes, 2012)—unless it is compensated for by other carers.

The pronounced control behaviour of the Double Bind pattern or the too early, unconscious assumption of responsibility often leads to a role reversal (**parentification**; Cierpka, 2012), and which results in children finding themselves in a carer or provider role that is unhealthy for their development, which must overwhelm them because it should be the other way round, and interferes with their autonomy as an independent person in the maturing process.

Although it depends on the individual coping strategies of those affected whether an objective traumatising also subjectively leads to such. If, on the other hand, only the objective traumatising criteria according to ICD-10 or DSM-5 are used as a basis (ICD = International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems; DSM = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), some resulting traumatising effects can only be explained by an equalisation of psychological damage with objective experience of violence. Even in the case of psychological violence, the emotional bond to the carer is massively disturbed and leads to anxious behaviour, mistrust and general relationship difficulties, leading to feelings of insecurity and having negative effects on the self-esteem of this young person, which is reflected in a dysregulation in the **self-esteem regulation** and an **aggravated coping with external stressors** (Sack et al., 2012).

2.3 Personality Disorders

The *model of double action regulation of action* (Sachse, 2000; Sachse & Collartz, 2015) starts from the *six relationship motives*

- *recognition/appreciation*
- *importance*
- *solidarity*
- *reliability*
- *autonomy*
- *boundaries/territory*

which should be satisfied in relationships with others in order to ensure a healthy and balanced development during the maturing process and which, depending on their “satisfaction level”, are **hierarchical** to each other. The least satisfied motive remains at the top of this hierarchy and thus predominantly determines action. Usually several relationship motives act in interaction.

Balanced relationship motives lead to **authentic behaviour** and **transparent interactions**.

If the goals of an interaction are veiled, that, what the person acting intransparently “actually” or really wants, remains hidden for the interaction partner (so-called **game level**).

The middle **layer of schemas** consists of **self-schemas (assumptions about the self)** and **relationship schemas (assumptions about relationships)**. People make experiences about their relationship motives during their childhood and adolescence. Depending on the received positive or negative feedback, these lead to corresponding self- and relationship schemas. Durable experiences, such as not receiving sufficient appreciation, lead to certain self- and relationship assumptions, e. g. *in relationships one gets devalued, relationships are not reliable*, which are later transferred to all other external relationships during the course of their lives—private contacts, partnership, world of work.

These schemas lead to negative expectations and interpretations of situations as well as negative affects. In interactions they evoke highly automated, “hyper-allergic” reactions to objectively minimal occasions, which is why they are so dysfunctional (Collartz & Sachse, 2011). For the affected people it is additionally unconsciously unsatisfactory that they only receive feedback for their actions, but not for themselves as a person or the relationship motive that is actually so important to them.

Common drive of all these disorders is therefore the relationship motive satisfaction, which was lacking during development, but which is therefore all the more desired, ultimately the longing for love and care (Sachse, 2000).

Overview

The **core cause** of **personality disorders** lies, in my opinion, **in a self-esteem problem**.

The injured and therefore unstable, “only” for unconditional acceptance longing self-consciousness is to be protected from (further) injuries.

As a result, the behaviour of personality-disordered people is in a **permanent state of tension** between their **inner injured** and—unconsciously—perceived as insufficient **self-image** and the **to be maintained outward image**, which they unconsciously want to maintain as healthy and positive, as they want to be seen by others.

The **narcissistic personality disorder picture** is only listed under F 60.8 *Other Personality Disorders* in the ICD-10 and is not a separate diagnosis. **Appreciation, autonomy, importance** and **solidarity** are the decisive relationship motives for it (Sachse et al., 2011). Their representatives alienate their interaction partners through pronounced egocentrism, which can have a highly detrimental effect on their health (Sachse & Collartz, 2015).

Compulsively inclined people in the sense of the diagnosis in F 60.5 ICD-10 are highly norm-orientated and risk-averse due to a high need for security (Sachse & Collartz, 2015). Priority relationship motives are **autonomy** and **appreciation**.

The **psychopathic personality disorder** is not listed as a separate diagnosis in either the ICD-10 or the DSM-5. It is only mentioned as a sub-item of the dissocial/antisocial personality disorder under F 60.2. These people have almost **no social norms or rules internalized which would be necessary for a prosperous coexistence** (Sachse & Collartz, 2015). Because they do not know principles such as *do not damage others, do not impair them; be helpful, solidary and supportive of others*, they also have **no value system** that would hinder them. This allows them to exploit others unscrupulously, spin intrigues, harm others and remain completely unaffected and emotionally uninvolved by doing so.

So-called **successful psychopaths** manage to adapt to social and legal norms to such an extent that they escape prison and realize (cognitively) what is expected of them, which is why they can adapt through corresponding self-control. Combined with their winning and consuming, superficial-cunning charm, they use their highly manipulative disposition to exploit and abuse others for their own purposes without scruples or consideration.

Because of their ability to focus all their resources on a specific task and often high intelligence, they can disguise their activities and at the same time be extremely successful in professional systems, even more successful than narcissists. As with narcissists, the **relationship motives of appreciation** and **autonomy** have priority (Sachse & Collartz, 2015).

His often exaggeratedly positive **self-assumptions** like *I am very successful, highly-intelligent, extremely capable; I can achieve anything, I can overcome all obstacles* etc. enable the psychopath a **high self-efficacy-expectation**, and this, through the absence of a parallel negative self-schema (as the narcissist still has), free of any self-doubt or criticism-sensitivity, which is why criticism bounces off him. Lacking moral conscience norms, he believes that he is not accountable to anyone for his behaviour, which gives him unlimited freedom of action (Sachse & Collartz, 2015).

A psychopath “needs” *relationships only to achieve his own goals* with their help. According to his *relationship assumptions relationships are exclusively relevant under utility aspects: others can be manipulated and exploited*. They lead to running rings around others, make them small, expose them to ridicule. Psychopaths are exclusively orientated to their own goals and driven by convictions like: *Be successful, the best! Make something of your life!* (Sachse & Collartz, 2015). This leads to their high motivation for performing and as a result of that their positions in organisations which are mostly equipped with high power, high status and high social prestige and wealth endowed positions in organisations.

Other convictions of the psychopath are: *Others have to do what I say, have work for me, give their best, not make a fuss and endure a lot*. Psychopaths despise so-called wimps and expect that others can take criticism with the same ease like they do (Sachse & Collartz, 2015).

With the help of effective strategies like flattery, sympathetic-seeming or even threats and intimidation, *psychopaths are masters of manipulation*. To reach this they can *willfully turn off any empathy that may be present* in order to outwit and exploit others solely for their own benefit (Sachse & Collartz, 2015).

2.4 Subclinical Psychopath in Organisations, Unethical Toxic Leadership and Dark Triad

The increasing lawlessness and unethical decisions in global economic affairs lead to a deeper scientific debate about *unethical leadership* (Brown & Mitchell, 2015; Schilling & May, 2015) and are mainly associated with the presence of psychopaths in the corresponding organisation (Stevens et al., 2012).

The callousness typical for psychopathy is characteristic for the *successful or subclinical psychopath (Corporate Psychopath)*—also: *Industrial/Executive Psychopath, Organisational Sociopath, Destructive Leader*—(Boddy, 2011a), which is used as a synonym for unscrupulously abusing leaders/employees using, manipulating and exploiting other people as well as all human, financial, resource-based and strategic organisational resources for the sole purpose of achieving their *own* goals without regard or conscience.

The Corporate Psychopath is characterized by superficial charm, dexterity/agility, egocentricity, fearlessness and good networking skills, all personality characteristics of the psychopath, which makes him particularly successful in organisations (Lilienfeld et al., 2015; Babiak et al., 2010). This type is specifically attracted by careers with high power promises (Babiak et al., 2007), status

and monetary gain, which is why some authors see them as significantly involved in the global financial crisis (Boddy, 2011b).

Corporate Psychopaths are *solely* interested in *self-gratification* and not in long-term organisational success, but *work solely because of the power, money and prestige*. The *fate of colleagues, employees and the organisation that pays them is irrelevant to them* (Boddy et al., 2010).

This makes them *wicked and malicious, heartless and cold-blooded leaders for organisational members* who ignore the needs of others, lie, tyrannise, manipulate and even cheat (Boddy, 2011a). Employees working under leaders with this psychogram feel that their work is not appreciated, not valued, they feel insufficiently compensated for their work performance (Boddy et al., 2010b). The *employees' well-being* (Giacalone & Promislo, 2010) and their *job satisfaction* suffer considerably as a result (Boddy & Taplin, 2016). According to Boddy (2014), stress-related conflicts and counterproductive work behaviour increase with the high number of corporate psychopaths in an organisation.

Corporate Psychopaths often use victimising (*bullying*) or *unfair leadership (unethical/toxic leadership)* with unethical behaviour such as sarcasm, degradation, deliberately caused work overload and rudeness because they enjoy the injury and humiliation of others, and instrumentalise the confusion, chaos and fear in order to conceal their own activities and perpetuate power and control (Boddy, 2011b). *Toxic bullying bosses* are increasingly observed in Western capitalist societies, for which Sinn (2010) uses the term *casino capitalism (casino capitalism)* (Boddy et al., 2015).

This *leads* to an atmosphere of fear (Furnham, 2008), role conflicts, ambiguities and a *toxic work environment with declining productivity* (Harvey et al., 2009) and *extreme mismanagement*—reflected in poor personnel management, directionless leadership and resource mismanagement, even fraud (Boddy et al., 2015).

Because they are *poorly organised, productivity-damaging managers* (Harvey et al., 2006), they *endanger* the *business performance and longevity of the organisation they work for* (Boddy, 2005).

In particular, the new, flexible *organisational structure “matrix” is a good breeding ground for them*. There, they act upon the employees from several sides at the same time. They exploit colleagues and damage the company through undermining morale and stirring up conflicts.

An even greater danger is the personality structure of the *Dark Triad (Dark Triad) in (leadership) employees*. This is a combination of narcissistic, machiavellian (i. e. working with intrigues for one's own victory; Furtner, 2017) and psychopathic personality disorder (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). There is also a

relationship between **Dark Triad** and **loss of quality of work performance** as well as **increase in counterproductive behaviour** according to a meta-analysis (O'Boyle et al., 2012).

The studies regarding the so-called **tyrannical leaders** probably include both the “pure” psychopathic style and the Dark Triad. Both *seem* to be ideal leadership employees, but in reality they abuse all resources, including employees, cause tension and conflict situations, disharmony and damage the entire organisation (Babiak et al., 2007). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the **sophisticated manipulation skills** of both the narcissist and the subclinical psychopath are **confused with leadership skills** by the representatives of the hiring organisation and they are seduced by the false promises and grandiose illusions of such toxic psychograms, which are later revealed as grandiose illusions (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). As a result, psychopathic (leadership) employees can infiltrate an organisation and even destroy healthy structures from within and destroy them (Singh, 2008). This is also due to the still common definition of leadership. According to Drouillard and Kleiner (1996), values, ethics, morality, etc. are still missing therein. They therefore postulate the **antipodes effective vs. good leadership** and **campaign for an expansion of the definition to include the components of integrity, honesty, fairness and humanity**, in which, in addition to a moral core, care for oneself and others and society resonate and are also included.

As long as organisations allow their infiltration by toxic and therefore dysfunctional leaders who are already burdened with personality disorders at the time of entry into the organisation, the described mechanisms have a fatal effect on employees and the entire organisation because of the toxicity that diffuses into all areas of the organisation (Goldman, 2006).

Such toxic leadership is costly because it destroys individuals, groups and organisations (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). This happens above all through the damaging effects of the toxic leadership *on* both the **psychological well-being of the led** and the **well-being of the organisation**, because this toxicity becomes part of the organisational culture if such people are not systemically prevented from being promoted (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013).

2.5 Burnout

Burnout as a symbol of increased psychological stress in the workplace (Kratzer, 2012) is now a serious public health problem (Stier-Jarmer et al., 2016). Burisch (2014) describes it as “a psychovegetative exhaustion syndrome resulting from a

chronic, work-related stress reaction”. It has overlaps with depressive and psychosomatic disorders, develops in a slow and gradual process (Kaluza, 2012) and describes a state of mental and physical exhaustion (Stark & Maragkos, 2014) with the loss of the ability to regenerate or recover (Riechert, 2015). The term *Burnout* and the symptoms associated with it are ubiquitous, although Burnout is not listed as a separate diagnosis, but only as a sub-item under Z73.0 “*Problems related to difficulties in coping with life*” in the ICD-10, and a theoretical classification is difficult.

Burnout is attributed to *lack of appreciation and stress experience* due to the thereof resulting *self-esteem injury* (Sende, 2014) or a gratification crisis *Effort-Reward-Imbalance-Model (ERI)* (Siegrist, 2011). It is also investigated under a neurophysiological and hormonal perspective (increased noradrenaline levels) as well as in connection with an increased risk of depression due to chronic stress.

V. d. Oelsnitz (2014) considers the aspect of *job design* and sees an exhaustion effect mainly due to a *mismatch of the psychological employment contract* “loyalty for a secure job” due to precarious employment relationships, excessive project work and fictitious self-employment without simultaneously increasing room for decision-making and scope of action, which causes feelings of helplessness with corresponding stress reactions.

For Seligmann (2016), *uncontrollable, traumatizing events lead to learnt helplessness* and *the loss of motivation to act or to depression*. The not controllable and therefore “unbearable” situation caused by Double Bind is comparable to the uncontrolled electric shocks Seligman chose for his experimental setup. Unger and Kleinschmidt (2013) classify Burnout as *stress-related exhaustion-depression* and *occupational accident of modernity*. According to Burisch (2014) it is necessary to have as close a match as possible between the individual abilities of an employee and the activity he or she is carrying out for maintaining health in the workplace—*Person-Environment-Fit* (Caplan, 1987)—as well as autonomy, because this is a prerequisite for the person’s having of a balanced feeling of control of a situation.

Kuhn and Weibler (2014) speak of an *emaciation through an egomaniacal organisation due to unethical leadership*, which is interested in its employees, and which has to do with a narrowing of entrepreneurial responsibility to a pure return on investment-responsibility. Illness-related absences and psychological illnesses in the workplace are linked by Michie and Williams (2002) with *unclear leadership* and unclear role concepts.

In their anthology *“The Emaciating Organisation”*, Schirmer et al. (2014) focus on both the individual person (*behavioural prevention*) and the organisation (*environmental prevention*). **Burnout** is rooted in *high goals*, which are not achieved despite great resource expenditure, which continuously emotionally exhausts people until the total loss of performance capacity. According to Wüstner (2014) or Lalouschek (2016), possible reasons for emaciation could be *perfectionism, narcissism and ambition/thirst to gain power or personality disorders*.

Burnout arises in my opinion above all, *if demands exceed the coping possibilities*, for whatever individual reasons, *or, as suspected by me*, is potentially caused *by Double Bind* (=> theory proposal paragraph 4).

2.6 Burned-Out Organisations (Organisational Burnout)

This term is based on the book of the same name by Greve (2015). It draws parallels between the Burnout of people and a similar development that can be observed in organisations.

With respect to the Double Bind Problem, the following is interesting on an individual Burnout level:

- *lack of self-confidence*
- *goal and task uncertainty*
- *difference between personal values and the value of the task*
- *fear of the negative consequences of one’s own failure.*

For Organisational Burnout, the following are noteworthy:

- *Excessive quality requirements*
- *Unrealistic performance requirements*
- *Value poverty of the corporate identity*
- *The meaning of the company is solely materially orientated.*