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# The Management of Power in Municipalities: Psychoanalytically Informed Negotiation

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*The paper takes the view that the psychoanalytic process is a form of negotiation or mutually constructed reality and applies these clinical insights to dispute resolution between two municipal entities: a fire department and a city government. The success of the mediation process is described as depending on the disputants' developing awareness of the impact of power struggles on their own thinking and functioning, and how group dynamics shape perceptions. Operating as a change agent, the mediator needs to be aware of three commonly recurring issues that interfere with the negotiation process: transference/counter-transference enactments, enactment by fundamental attribution error, self-serving enactments, and self fulfilling enactments. Vignettes are given to illustrate these conceptual issues.*

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**F**or several decades, psychoanalysts have been regularly consulting with organizations over dispute resolution and other organizational malfunctions.<sup>1</sup> The clinical psychoanalytic process has been conceptualized as a negotiation process. Goldberg (1987: 110) says that psychoanalysis is a "communication made to arrive at some settlement of a matter," i.e., a mutual construction of reality by analyst and patient. It is this more interactive view of the process that we feel might enhance the effectiveness of negotiation outside the clini-

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cal setting, especially when the organizational disputes are the focus of the work.

The model we developed uses multiple theoretical bridges to create an integrated participant-observer model for resolving disputes, especially in municipalities. In addition, we integrate information derived from a psychoanalytic understanding of attachment theory, and the relationship of containment and holding relationships to the development of personal relationships central to an effective outcome of negotiation.

The mediation-consultative model described in this paper and derived from psychoanalysis, can assist complex organizations, including municipalities, to understand and ameliorate the vicissitudes and unconscious motivations behind the power dynamics that occur in groups. We suggest that interventions from the application of this model can substantively change the way in which people function within imperfect bureaucratic structures in a way that promotes more effective work and enables them to cope with the dynamics of their environment.

## Conceptual Foundations

Three concepts or caveats are central to defining our approach: the role of the change agent in negotiations, the definition of violence and power dynamics in a municipal setting, and the unique challenges presented by fixed organizational structures in an interdependent municipal system.

*The Role of a Change Agent.* The roles of the Consultant/Mediator/Negotiator in municipal disputes are complex, in part because of the varied contexts of the work (e.g., labor disputes or hospital team functioning), and from differences in training and attitudes (e.g., lawyer, trained mediator or psychoanalyst). For the sake of clarity we will define “negotiation” as a two-person process of interactive decision-making<sup>2</sup> and “mediation” as a technique using a third person recruited to help the negotiation process reach a mutually satisfactory outcome. That is, negotiation refers to the process and mediation to the technique.

Though the role of the consultant has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, the consultant must initially establish a personal connection with the parties involved. Shapiro and Carr (2000) describe the task of the organizational consultant as striving for a shared interpretive stance with individuals working to create a lens that would allow for compromise and mutually beneficial action. Our model blends the roles of consultant negotiator and mediator into one flexible, personalized role we call “change agent.” Functioning as a participant/observer, the change agent has two main tasks: problem solving and “transformation” of the participants through the development of shared mutual trust (Jacques 1998). While the first task is usually not problematic for either mediator or psychoanalyst; the second task may be. Bush and Folger’s (1994) transformative mediation concept suggests that the values of the negotiating parties be humanized so that each side can see

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and appreciate the other's viewpoint. We agree wholeheartedly with this position; in fact, we consider it critical to a successful outcome.

Mediators who are not psychoanalytically informed often fail to remember that the most basic element of the negotiation process is that two human beings are interacting. The mediator can become the victim of powerful unconscious power struggles. This sometimes renders them powerless to resolve disputes and instead, they become bystanders in the process.

Blending the "transformational" and problem-solving roles into the role of change agent allows the change agent to catalyze a new awareness between the conflicted parties. We see fear in the negotiation process as a non-reflexive reaction to conscious, unconscious, and unresolved coercive power struggles. Without psychoanalytically informed management of the process for mutual benefit, the parties are likely to regress into primitive fantasies of hurting and being hurt by the other party. The net effect is that problem solving may terminate due to the preoccupation with the coercive unconscious fears and fantasies rather than the issues on the table.

The importance of building personal relationships to successful negotiation has only recently been recognized in international diplomacy (Saunders 1999; and Montville<sup>3</sup>). For example, Montville's Track II diplomacy emphasizes unofficial negotiation coupled with relationship building as a necessary preliminary phase. Diplomats are discovering that what they call a "realistic" approach (psychoanalysts would say "rational") generally does not work and that psychological factors are intimately involved with the success or failure of negotiations.

An example of failed diplomacy occurred in the Arab-Israeli negotiations. An apparently reasonable proposal placed upon the negotiation table was viewed by Yasir Arafat as "a take it or leave it" ultimatum. He left the negotiations without reading it. Arafat's repeated refusal to decide on proposals at the negotiating table and his contentment to rely on consultation with his advisor instead was viewed as either a delaying tactic or an indication of weakness and loss of control over his followers by the Israelis.

Recognition of the role of unconscious and conscious influences is gradually finding its way into the negotiation literature. Kolb and Williams (2000:11) call "shadow negotiation a process . . . where hidden agendas and masked assumptions play out."

Jessica Benjamin (1995) depicts the central problem when conflict occurs as a "breakdown of tension between self and other in favor of relating as subject and object." She insists that these breakdowns from personal to impersonal are not necessarily pathological impairments of mutual recognition but are grist for the interpersonal mill. From our change agent perspective, such a self-other attitude helps negotiating parties tolerate and recognize each other's idiosyncrasies and return to the necessary position of recognizing the other as an independent, living person, not merely as a pawn in somebody else's political chess game, or some other dehumanized

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object or caricature. Effective negotiation can only occur from this interpersonal posture.

Both parties must have some awareness of the meaning of not only the conscious but also the unconscious process for it to be useful in the negotiation. In municipalities, the change agent has to participate and absorb the experiences of both sides of a conflict and search for common psychological ground, which can sometimes lead to a temporary loss of contact with the neutral perspective, resulting in getting “pulled in” to an advocacy role for one side. Just like analysts who need supervision to manage counter-transference enactments<sup>4</sup>, (unconscious biases or blind spots), the mediator in this model is well served to work in a team with a supervisor during this phase. Psychoanalytically informed mediator supervision allows maximum immersion of the change agent into each side of the conflict without destructive countertransference enactments.

*Defining Violence and Power Dynamics.* Individuals in violent organizations covertly use power to hurt others in order to shape their behavior and to create illusory feelings of being in charge. We call this dynamic impact of the conscious and unconscious influence of this use of power by individuals or groups “power dynamics.” Violent organizations are defined as not necessarily in physically violent disarray but where employees feel under threat in the work environment. It is useful in any organization to look at covertly structured situations that produce anxiety about unmanaged aggression.

In other work (Twemlow and Sacco 1996), we have defined characteristics of violent communities since by the time a municipality calls in a dispute consultant, some destructive power struggles are usually evident. Defining organizations in disarray as violent creates a preparedness in the change agent that is critical to a successful intervention. In individuals, violence often reduces the capacity to think in creative ways. In organizations, violence tends to produce more stereotyped, less-accurate assessments of others by leaders resulting in labor disputes, grievances, and bad press.

The human mind tends to sort perceptions into categories and recognize the unique aspects of these categories by comparing them against known (remembered) experience. Fear, with its attendant psycho-hormonal impact on cognition, perceptions, and volition affects this sorting categorization in the direction of stereotyping and dehumanizing in an oversimplified way. Table 1 summarizes some of these influences and reactions.

People in violent organizations often feel more like objects than individuals. For example, Kray (2001) reports a study of the influence of gender stereotypes on negotiation that confirmed that the mere threat of a negative (i.e., powerless) gender stereotype hurts women’s performance relative to men. However, when these negative stereotypes were made specific in a challenging way, women outperformed men. When gender was superseded by a shared identity, the differences were less obvious.

In addition, coercive power dynamics encourage complex and especially primitive defense mechanisms to enter the crucible; often with the

consequent serious misjudgment of the strengths and weaknesses of others. In the case of the dispute between the fire department chief and his district chief, paranoia caused the chief to become almost omnipotent in his subordinate's eyes. Twemlow reports:

“At one point midway through the initial phase of the intervention in the fire department, the District Fire Chiefs (DCs) expressed fears that the Chief was keeping a J. Edgar Hoover file on each of them and was waiting for a chance to drop it on them. Every time the Chief would ask to listen to a tape of a fire, the group fantasized that the Chief was getting ammunition to hurt them. The mediator offered to approach the Chief with a letter stating that all the DC's had no current or past charges. The Chief agreed and went further by writing a letter forgiving ‘all’ past acts. The DCs reacted to this blanket clearance with anger pointing to the Chief's lack of specificity. The mediator interpreted the meaning of ‘all’ in a less paranoid way, but the DC continued to distrust the Chief's intentions. They feared his omnipotence, which was a real part of the fire department's paramilitary organizational structure.”

**Table 1**  
**Coercive Power Imbalance in Organizations**

<b>Violent Mind Set</b>	<b>Effects on the Individual's Work Functions</b>
Reduced response options	Boredom and arrested growth
Obsessive and perservative thinking	Rigidity of view point with inability to anticipate problems
Sleepiness	Forgetting procedures, losing track of process
Types I, II, III enactments	Misjudges people, create victim-victimizer polarizations and misjudged boundaries
Submissiveness	Reduced curiosity and initiative
Dominating Manner	Resentfulness and enhancement of submissiveness in others
Stereotyping and oversimplification	Misjudges people—both their personalities and the meaning of their actions

*Fixed and More Flexible Organizational Structures.* When compared to the fluid, flexible organizational structures often employed by private sector businesses where profit is the unifying goal and the methods employed

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to reach that goal can be changed fairly effortlessly, the rigid and interdependent governing structures of municipal organizations, which vary from city-managed governments to cities with a mayoral and city council structure, present a complex of potential problems. Since their function is to deliver basic public services such as public safety, utilities, and management of local tax revenue, municipal governments are beholden to a city's electorate as well as irrational political forces and the slow pace of change inherent in bureaucracies.

For example, all municipalities must have public safety departments, but police and fire are unique departments within a municipal organization. Paramilitary by nature, they differ substantially from other municipal departments in the areas of authority, command structure, and process. Officers give orders to subordinates, who in turn are duty bound to respond without question. In the Health Department however, a manager might suggest certain approaches, but does not usually give public health nurses direct orders. Each department is its own little world that operates on varying principles and sets of rules. This divergence is further complicated by the fact that these departments work closely with one another and impact each other's group psychology, although they may communicate poorly. A public works employee may be painting a fence for eight hours while watching firemen sit and play cards waiting for a fire.

Power struggles abound in this patchwork of kingdoms that is a municipality and can become especially vicious in these inflexible contexts, which manifest personnel discontent with bureaucracy as well as each other. In turn, the intervention becomes more clinical, like a treatment, since to become effective and happy at work, often an individual must make painful personal adjustments rather than expect change in the system.

Thomas (1999) describes a successful intervention in an English probation service, which formerly had in place a deeply resented organizational structure. The consultants worked on the professional identities of the probation officers and their comfort in their roles, encouraging personal investment in work. They also helped all staff manage the debilitating effects of bureaucracy with its attendant dynamics that force the worker to prioritize maintaining the job and its benefits over doing outstanding work.

## **Two Case Studies in Power Dynamics**

The cases examined in this paper involve interventions into municipalities experiencing a range of problems. Each used two styles of intervention based on a psychoanalytically derived diagnostic evaluation undertaken upon invitation. Our model calls for a serious analysis of the problem as a necessary first step. In both examples this systematic process was used to diagnose and plan further action and is outlined in a series of vignettes to illustrate the theory behind our interventions.

The first example involves an intervention into a dispute between a warring city council and a mayor. The problem grew to such a proportion

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that the business of the city took a back seat to the power politics of the disputing members of the city government.

This city has a council representation system that used a seat or representative city councilman for selected geographical areas. Each councilor had a clear neighborhood interest and style representing the character—good and bad—of the communities they represented. Styles and interests clashed and the media had a field day covering the infantile eruptions that happened at public meetings. The intervention involved a series of individual meetings and a retreat led by a psychoanalyst with media outlets, and the formation of an action group to pursue the city government's goals of maintaining a healthy community.

The second example involved a dispute in a fire department in a small urban West Coast city of 150,000 with a fire force of 475, resulting in a vote of “no confidence” signed by the district fire chiefs against their department fire chief. The intervention involved several years of close contact with the fire chief to help him modify his management style and understand the dynamics of the group.

### **Case I: A Warring Mayor and City Council**

The incumbent mayor invited the mayor-city council intervention. Since the city council was wary of anything suggested by the mayor, the change agent's first move was to reach out individually and personally to each city council member. This greatly reduced the city councilors' fears. The intervention then moved off-site because reducing power dynamics and establishing dialogue can be done in a relatively straightforward way in an intensive retreat setting (Twemlow 2000). Twemlow describes what he calls Phase I: Sustained Direct Dialogue with Establishment of Personal Relationships and Trust:

“The retreat lasted for four hours one evening and two hours at the end of the next workweek. I indicated that rather than using polished and impersonal exercises to illicit and elucidate the problems, ‘I meet with each of you to get our assessment of the nature of the problem, the nature of the personalities, the possible solutions for the personal dynamics, and also to get to know you a little personally.’ I gave a brief review of the power dynamics theory and what it leads to and then asked each person to speak about what motivated them to stand for political office. In the main, these stories were quite idealistic and produced a reflective space in the group together with the beginning of a tolerance for each other, as each person became seen as unique with interesting complexity as opposed to a simplified narcissistically distorted stereotype. A self-administered and scored inventory was given to the group to help them assess burnout, negativity, and bully-victim and bystander roles in their management styles.”

After analyzing the council members' duties and their relationship to each other, Twemlow made the following suggestions:

- Focus on relationships not problems.

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- Represent yourself, your municipality as a whole, as well as your constituents.
  - Keep your remarks brief; speak from your heart as well as your mind.
  - Listen attentively without interrupting or being distracted by what you are planning to say next. Watch your nonverbal responses (e.g., fidgeting).
  - Be proactive, not reactive about resolving interpersonal issues or professional disagreements.
  - Keep personal issues confidential; do not offer opinions to the press.
  - Observe self-control and take a breath before expressing any strong emotions.
  - Ask yourself, “What has triggered this reaction in me?”
  - Don’t use disclosed information to take political advantage or bully your opponent.

Negative publicity and highly critical newspaper editors aggravated the intensity of the power dynamic, fueling aggressive and name-calling behavior of the city council group. These factors served to create stereotypes of the council members, who were depicted as rude, violent, and incompetent. During the retreat the council members talked about what motivated them to stand for public office and discussed the more altruistic and idealistic aspects of their lives with each other, resulting in the emergence of a more human picture.

In Phase II of the intervention: Sustained Indirect Dialogues with Shuttle Diplomacy, it was recommended that each person read “Public Peace Process” by Harold H. Saunders (1999), which emphasizes the importance of relationships and sustained dialogues when negotiating sensitive issues like racial and ethnic matters in international diplomacy. It is applicable to the sort of leadership structure that often exists in city governments.

It was not difficult for this group to understand the concept of transference presented as the way the past shapes perception of the present, and, the idea of how defenses are ways of adapting oneself and are intensified by exhaustion. Time was spent discussing projective identification, regression, double bind, and paranoia<sup>5</sup>. Twemlow asked the group to give personal examples to test their understanding of the concepts. Besides the triangle of power dynamics<sup>6</sup> and the way in which these roles are enacted in the workplace, coercive dynamics often appear in the ways people manage and respond to being managed. Ultimately, each side seemed to have a mirror image view the other.

The city council members saw the mayor as forcing decisions without adequate discussion, trying to use the city council as a rubber stamp body, being arbitrary and controlling, accusing city council members of not being



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team members, failing to give credit for ideas of others and providing insufficient and unreliable information on items up for city council consideration.

The mayor saw city council members as using the council as a forum for their personal and political advancement, wanting to be spoon-fed information on the issues without doing hard work, and as ineffective in their duty to help the city because they were so caught up in their own personal agendas, and incapable of working as a team.

The group discussed possible ways to reduce these conflicts including:

- Setting significant time limitations on city council meetings to reduce exhaustion.
- Training and mentoring of new councilors.
- Defining the role of the mayor and the city council by the use of self-assessment questions.
- Looking at the way in which television forces people to perform in certain artificial ways.

During the interventions process, the consultant-mediator must be willing to be a regular go-between in the fashion of shuttle diplomacy. The media can become a useful “familiar enemy” to relieve immediate power dynamics (Volkan 1988).

Immediately after this retreat and in the succeeding several months, the mayor and the mayors’ main antagonist had several cordial meetings which fostered a much more collaborative relationship that lasted until the next election cycle.

## **Case II: Dispute Mediation in a Fire Department**

Interventions into public safety departments require a special type of group intervention combined with individual interpretation and support. The Law Department and Personnel Administration invited the authors to mediate a very public dispute between a fire chief and his district chiefs/line firefighters, who brought a 31-point set of complaints to the Fire Commission in a vote of “no confidence” against their chief. The municipality had few tools to use in mediating this conflict other than traditional grievance and civil service administrative procedures.

Both sides agreed to mediation and made an initial one-year commitment to the process. A design was developed using a shuttle diplomacy model of the mediators moving between the disputing parties. The initial group meeting used “engineered conflict” (Twemlow and Sacco 1996) to decompress the district chiefs’ group rage, and individual supportive/integrative “treatment” for the chief. The goal for this process was to create self-awareness and offer new and less destructive defenses for both sides to use when dealing with each other.

The intervention began with an intensive three-day “engineered conflict” where both sides of the problem are argued out in a way engineered by the authors to produce concrete possibilities for resolution. Initially focus-

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ing on the district chiefs alone, the group and power dynamics theories were outlined in a psycho-educational way with very intense interchange. Points covered included:

- The psychophysiology of fear and anger and how those emotions change people's capacity to think and respond.
- The ways in which victim/victimizer relationships cause distortion in interpersonal relationships.
- How power struggles can polarize and distort the way in which people think and behave.
- Group dynamics and the central importance of dialectical relationship between leaders and followers and how necessary they were to each other's functioning.
- An approach to problem solving focusing on collaboration, consensus and communication without blame.
- Relaxation and self-help strategies to reduce impulsive decision-making.

The intervention concluded by asking the district chiefs to discuss points of agreement with the chief—his strengths as well as his weaknesses. One complaint was analyzed to illustrate how such a situation may be resolved. This complaint centered on where newly-donated weight-training equipment was to be placed in a fire station.

The fire chief wanted it in certain rooms but instead, it was assembled in an empty bay on the apparatus floor where various fire equipment and fire engines were located. The fire chief angrily ordered the equipment to be disassembled; but for nearly two years it sat unused. *Points of consensus* were that weight training is useful and a democratic decision-making process was desirable. The chief had taken a poll about room choice but instead of implementing it, the two sides bullied each other, resulting in the unproductive power dynamics of a stalemate. *The collaborative response*, in contrast, involved discussion with the chief over his fears that the apparatus would get in the way of the proper functioning of essential equipment. Both groups agreed on that point of view and then upon a location that allowed the weight-training equipment to be used. The issue here: communication without blame, was possible when the power dynamics were settled without loss of face. Other examples of complaints are given in Table 2.

In sum, the fire chief (who jokingly named himself “the evil chief”) became aware of his tendency to behave irrationally and to overreact to the demands of his district fire chiefs. Although the DCs never did become fully aware of their dynamics, they did realize how they usually became “off task” when dealing with the chief. This insight helped the chief modulate his tendency to over- or under-react to their projections. At the same time, bully-victim-bystander dynamics were more easily identified by both sides, encouraging modification of power distribution, which became less coercive, enabling a slow rebuilding of trust.

**Table 2**  
**Analysis of Complaints from a Coercive Power Dynamics Perspective**

<b>Example of Complaint Against Fire Chief</b>	<b>Overt Themes</b>	<b>Covert Theme (Power dynamic)</b>
Undermining a Board of Chief's attempts to revise rules and regulations by slipping in a provision that would give him, the fire chief, the power to name any officer he wanted to any post.	Unreliable communication of decisions	Victimization by deceit and ignoring opinions
Arbitrarily deciding to bar any visitors (including other firemen) to recruit classes to prevent disruptions.	Failure to get input in decisions	Victimization by devaluation of other's opinions
Giving junior staff (who are his favorites) special assignments and allowing them to avoid hazardous and onerous tasks due to their special relationship.	Arbitrariness in personnel assignment	Victimization by divide and conquer (favoritism)
Shouting at secretaries and making them cry. Threatening to suspend and fire people he doesn't like.	Disrespect of personnel	Victimization by direct attack
Using money for pet projects like parades and car shows while more essential projects are not funded.	Discretionary fund use for pet favored projects	Victimization by overvaluing self

The fire chief became aware that he was unnerved by the anger and blame directed at him by the DCs and, thus, felt controlled by the men's emotions. He also realized that his tendency toward an aggressive and narcissistic leadership style elicited a fight-flight posture in the DCs (Bion 1959, 1967). The insight helped him understand and control his own aggressive and narcissistic personality traits, and he was able to reestablish authority and respect. By acting consistently in good faith and showing kindness and caring, the fire chief helped model more tolerance and trust in the DCs. In tandem with marked shifts in his bullying narcissistic personality, the chief also slowed the pace of the planned changes to make them less frightening.

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“As part of the individual work done with him, we had asked that he pass any major decision-making requests by us to allow us to modify the aggressiveness of his communication,” Twemlow explained. “He was given Margaret Rioch’s classic paper on Bion’s basic assumption groups (Rioch 1970) and it has a permanent place in his briefcase. Besides its talismanic function, he said, ‘it especially made me realize that there was a distinct group behavior that existed. This was something I could not see early on due to emotions that I felt. The joke that we developed was my new nickname, the evil chief. What I could not see initially, but I understand now, is that this group’s psychology gave them certain comfort and security that they no longer were getting from the chief.’”

The chief began to realize the importance of his need to understand and modulate his strong feelings and opinions. As he became more aware of how much his behavior was determined by projective identification, he became a commensal container in Bion’s sense<sup>7</sup>.

The net result of this labor negotiation was the appointment of two non-union deputies to reduce the pressure on the fire chief, an increase the chief’s administrative support, and the creation of a buffer between the chief and his frontline fire commanders.

This Fire Department’s experience became a benchmark for other new fire departments. It is worth listing characteristics of what has become known in fire department circles as the “evil chief syndrome,” since it is a predictable progression of the dynamics of the group, its leader, and the agencies in the public safety network. In summary these are:

- The chief is supported by the City but forced to implement unpopular fiscal policies.
- Upper management dumps all negative decisions on the “evil chief.”
- The chief micromanages personnel and is personally blamed for all difficult and unpopular decisions.
- The chief becomes alienated from upper management who tend to side with the line fire fighters.
- Upper management forms a tight group and amplifies the negative feelings towards the “evil chief” who then bullies and engages in a self-fulfilling prophecies.
- The chief is privately and publicly humiliated and threatened.
- The chief reacts with increased coercion and decreased input from upper management and lower management.
- There is an increase in labor disputes and decreased management by teamwork.
- Communications between the firefighters and district fire chiefs model the resistance of upper management and reinforce the “evil chief syndrome.”

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From this perspective, Twemlow helped the chief to create a reflective space for himself and increased his capacity to maintain boundaries. A test of the “strength” of this intervention occurred after 16 months of work:

“The fire chief discovered two dead rats and a dead mole in the ceiling of his office. In response to the stench of the decaying animals, he investigated in the true manner of an evil chief detective and ascertained that there were no droppings, and further consultations with Animal Control Officers clearly established that, “moles do not go into ceilings, and if they did, there would be droppings.” He also found fingerprints in the dust left when the culprit moved the tile in his office ceiling to insert the animal carcasses. Typically, this would result in an interdepartmental transfer and a tirade of paybacks. After consultation a strategy of no response was recommended.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the chief went out of his way to be nice to the men responsible. He took some pleasure at their apparent confusion.”

This event occurred at a very delicate moment in labor dispute mediation that had begun successfully but had run into conflicts between the attorneys representing the two sides, with much of the dispute related to overtime pay and continuing education. The chief’s response to the caper facilitated resolution of the labor dispute.

### **Common Enactments in Violent Organizations**

For an effective negotiation mindset, counter-transference/transference enactments (Plakun, 1999) need to be carefully delineated and monitored by the change agent. The social psychological literature reports experimental evidence for these as common interpersonal patterns, clearly observable to the change agent with an awareness that trickles down through many layers of the organization. We have also noted these enactments are more common in what we define as violent organizations.

*Type I Enactment by Fundamental Attribution Error*<sup>9</sup>. Considering the other person as crazy rather than as responding realistically to external stress is related to what social psychologists call a “fundamental attribution error” (Ross 1977). Others often get sucked into the role of victimizer or victim, appearing and often feeling much different than they usually do under these coercive power dynamics; an effect called projective identification (defined in footnote 5). These invasive projections are often experienced as bodily symptoms, thus affecting the capacities of those on both sides of the negotiation table to think and function.

One instance occurred in the middle of intensive negotiations when the change agents were being severely criticized for apparently siding with the fire chief. “Since we are ‘shrinks,’ we must be crazy,” said Twemlow. “I am not a somatizer by nature and have never been seriously ill, but I had an overwhelming fear that I had serious cancer and needed to go to the hospital immediately. Strangely, it turned out later that one of the district fire chiefs had had a spouse who had been recently hospitalized with cancer, but the real cancer contained was the murderous feelings toward the fire chief. My

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counterpart, Frank Sacco, was reduced to cursing and street diatribes, which made him look silly and out of control (in effect, he became crazy).”

*Type II Self-Serving Enactment.* Another common violent transference/counter-transference enactment is called a self-serving attribution from the viewpoint of social psychology (Mullen and Riordan 1988). It is the tendency to lead others in the service of one’s own self-esteem and powerfulness. In violent organizations such a pattern places the leader in the role of victimizer accompanied by an inflated and grandiose self-esteem. The grandiosity fuels misjudgment and is fed by the subservience of the victim. The abusive boss in the case of organizations may seduce, bribe, favor, and otherwise threaten employees. Pride is maintained at all costs.

This pattern was particularly evident in the fire department dispute where the chief was perceived as doing what he did to maintain his shaky self-esteem since it was felt that he gained obvious pleasure from violent and contemptuous actions. The letter of complaint to the Fire Commission of the city read:

“The chief is not approachable; he is explosive, erratic and tyrannical in his leadership style. His demeaning and condescending attitude discourages any conversation. He is arrogant and belligerent when challenged on most matters. Many of his decisions have been arbitrary and impulsive, without consideration of the impact caused by these decisions. His ‘judge and jury’ style results in favoritism that is clearly disruptive to the department. Threats and intimidation are common bargaining tools and his extreme vindictiveness eliminates any hope of relief once you have fallen out of his favor. The Fire Chief’s Association can no longer ignore the signs as he further isolates himself with an ‘I vs. them’ mentality. Wild mood swings, paranoia, accusations of conspiracies, bulletproof glass and security lock installations for his office all point to a potentially serious problem.”

The fire chief eventually became aware that his district chiefs felt abused by his use of power. He said in a letter about one mediated meeting:

“One of the best things that came out of that meeting was a statement from one of the members who I consider to be representative of the group psychology. I asked the group just what it was that I had done to them that was so terrible. There was a long moment of silence from the group but finally this particular member said, and I quote, ‘You put the fear of God into us.’ I thought about that statement for a long time. I realized that his statement was about power and the perceived abuse of power. I had never considered myself as the type of chief who abuses his power over others, but. . .the mediators helped me to see what happens when a group feels threatened by someone who has power over them.”

*Type III Self-fulfilling Enactment.* Type III enactment occurs when both parties become locked in self-fulfilling predictions, as occurred in the classic study of the self-fulfilling prophecy by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) with schoolteachers who thought they were teaching gifted children but were not. Their “gifted” students then made greater gains in IQ than the rest.

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Rosenthal says, "One person's expectation for another person's behavior can quite unwittingly become a more accurate prediction simply for its having been made" (vii).

In the case of the mayor and city council intervention, the public eventually saw the mayor, who by nature was a reflective and experienced politician, as making impulsive, poorly thought-out decisions. The mayor's personal frustration was very high because she knew that her despair fostered increasing attacks by city council members, actualizing her worst fears that the public and council members would see her as unable to cope, which she felt might even be true. Thus these fears became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

She felt that the city council maneuvered her with endless harassing and trivial agenda items that would take hours and hours of negotiation far into the night and to a point of exhaustion, forcing her to ignore more important functions of city administration and cornering her into the position of making short-term, crisis-oriented, band-aid decisions. This often resulted in media humiliation and she felt helpless to stop this outcome. For example, an hour of a televised city council meeting was spent debating the placement of a \$75 compulsory stop sign when urgent action on another matter was delayed, risking serious loss of federal funding for the city.

Members of the city council particularly reactive to her were young, insecure men with demonstrative, aggressive natures. After the intervention, which produced a palpable improvement in the way the mayor and city council interacted, Twemlow received an email communication from one member who said he was going to remain in his role (as victimizer) until he succeeded in displacing the mayor. Over months, the situation continued to deteriorate and the mayor became desperate and asked Twemlow for further assistance. She said she felt like a "battered woman." Although usually assertive, even aggressive, she had become uncharacteristically submissive (Type III enactment). The mayor became visibly less confident as the attacks became more and more bizarre and the attackers more grandiose.

When the mayor was able, with the assistance of the change agent, to be more assertive, she focused her attention on using her widely respected knowledge of city ordinances and politics, rather than engaging in word games and name-calling, with significant success and improvement in her self confidence.

As a counter to this Type III enactment, Twemlow (in the role of change agent) wrote to each council member about how the attribution of blame and unsubstantiated accusations reflected more on the accuser than on the object of the accusations. He wrote, "As with school violence, serious conflicts emerge when the victim and the victimizer develop a narrow and fixed perspective so that the only matter of importance in their lives is the destruction of the other." However, at the next election the mayor, who was a landslide winner of the last election, lost the primary.

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The intensity of the community's regression was illustrated shortly after the primary, when a mannequin with its head in a toilet and a sign saying "flush the mayor" was found outside the mayor's office. It was a "tasteless prank" by a county commissioner and a city council member who had been most voracious in attacks on the mayor.

Before leaving office, however, the mayor was empowered enough to have the last word. She set up a Healthy Community Initiative of community leaders and volunteers to help revitalize and rejuvenate the damage done to the city as a result of the power dynamics of the city government. This initiative is being supported by the new administration (Twemlow and Wilkinson 2003).

### **Lessons from the Classroom**

In summary, there are at least two main factors influencing how large group pathology emerges in violent municipal organizations. Power dynamics emerge in large groups similar to the process in school classrooms (Dreikurs 1957). From an Adlerian viewpoint, we can see organizational power dynamics evolving through four stages:

1. **Attention-getting:** The earliest signs of imminent trouble are signaled when employees are regularly pleading for increased compensation, improved working conditions, and the like. A shift toward attention-getting behaviors that can alert the aware manager of early signs of regression in the group.
2. **Power struggles:** Attention-getting ploys evolve into more overt power struggles evident in formation of cliques, union problems and the like. Here, the asymmetrical coercive power dynamics are more obvious and more disruptive to workplace morale. The roles of bully, victim, and bystander are, however, less entrenched and more amenable to negotiation.
3. **Revenge/retaliation:** Patterns emerge as the bullies and victims assume more entrenched roles. When the roles are fixed, revenge/retaliation dynamics dominate the workplace, and problems become more serious (e.g., votes of no confidence in leaders, scandals, and investigations).
4. **Withdrawal/despair:** Victims become fixed in frightened and despairing roles or pathologically fixed patterns such as martyrs, rescuers, or detached observers (Twemlow 1995). A rescuer/martyr role can lead to misguided intimacy with the leader through identification with the aggressor and altruistic surrender (A. Freud 1936). This can result in absenteeism, increased sick leave usage, and office affairs (e.g., secretary-boss).

The dominant contemporary model for political negotiation: "realpolitik" from which is derived the "Rational Actor" model, is often the limiting



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one in dispute mediation (Volkan 1999atb). This “quid pro quo” model, as Volkan details it, ignores unconscious forces. In its modern form, it means the rational and thorough assessment of the interests and options available on both sides. The “rational actor” approach dominates most contemporary organizational management systems as well as municipal politics. Such “rational actor” organizational leaders will be resistant to recognizing the power of irrational unconscious processes, and blind ways to alter one’s management style to accommodate those forces.

### **The Containment and Holding Function of the Change Agent**

If the role of change agent is to reduce the level of the coercive power dynamics and primitive pathological transference-countertransference enactments so that the group can be brought to the negotiating table, an active role needs to be maintained in which the change agent demonstrates interest and involvement while being nonjudgmental—with the sole goal to help resolve the conflict and return the organization to effective functioning.

The change agent must be able to convey to the group as a whole, that he/she has two capabilities: the ability to inspire hope and to be supportive and comforting—elements not dissimilar to the holding environment of Winnicott (1965). The issue here is that chronic power dynamics produce despair and regression. Winnicott’s metaphor of the “good enough mother” is helpful; however, its derivation from the developmental model overemphasizes the positive need-satisfying role of the holding mother<sup>10</sup>.

The container-contained metaphor, a term elaborated by Bion (see footnote 7), suggests the capacity to hold not only positive, but negative projections. Bion divides the container-contained into three types of relationships: commensal (healthy give and take), symbiotic (pathologically dependent), and parasitic (destructive) (Billow 2000).

As the power dynamics and group regression ebb and flow, the change agent can be swept up into basic group assumptions (Bion 1959), which can be used to the advantage of the work group—the dependency assumption enhances a supportive comforting role, the fight-flight assumption engenders an energetic “can do” attitude, and the pairing assumption supports a hopeful outlook. However, the challenge is for the change agent to remain as free as possible from actions which derail the negotiation process and to avoid presenting himself as the good mother/omnipotent leader in contrast with the bad.

It has become obvious to us that there is a pattern in violent organizations where individuals fail to regard others’ responses to them as valid or worth considering. Fonagy (1999) calls this capacity to be aware of the working of the minds of others, “mentalising.” Mentalising requires a degree of differentiation that individuals working in violent organizations do not usually possess. Although the analogy is a rough one, in a study of imprisoned male perpetrators of domestic violence, Fonagy (1999) describes the

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very limited ability of these people to see their spouses as human beings with rights and opinions and they often treat their spouses as mere physical objects.

What is known is that coercive social systems encourage a similar attitude in its members, which, if enacted by leaders, creates an organizational mindset in which feelings cannot be adequately expressed, aggression is usually over- or underestimated, and the mid-level managers do not have the knowledge or social skills to mediate conflict—a situation exemplified in both cases in this paper. Thus, in a violent organization, the employees feel dehumanized by the enactments and projections of the leaders. The leader is like a parent whose primary function should include helping manage feelings, but instead, leaves employees at the mercy of uncontrolled bullying and coerciveness.

### **Conclusion**

In our work with federal, state, and city governments, the probability of being able to change the basic organizational structure and job descriptions is virtually zero; although sometimes, as in the example of the mayor and city council, it appears to be the only possible solution. It is our contention that much can be done by adopting a model derived in theory and practice from psychoanalysis which accepts the existing management structures and enhances the line workers' potential for understanding the vicissitudes and unconscious motivation for power dynamics in groups.

In our experience, workers often seem able to take steps toward altering their own personal relationships within existing bureaucratic and organizational structures, as defective as they may be, if they can see the work as a role and feel less trapped and over-identified with the task—not unlike the personal work an analyst does with counter-transference.

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## NOTES

1. For example, Robert Gordan, M.D., *Psychiatric News*, March 2, 2001, p. 32.
2. Professor Roger Fisher, PON, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA, June 21, 2001.
3. Joseph Montville, "The Greening of Diplomacy," presented at the conference on Identity, Mourning, and Psychopolitical Processes. Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction, Charlottesville, VA. May 26, 2001.
4. Although a skilled change agent may at times need to advocate (e.g., when children or sick or at-risk groups are involved), it can lead to a loss of credibility with one party. Counter-transference enactments are actions the unsophisticated change agent might take to advocate or act in ways detrimental to the negotiation process, without being aware of it. For example, a professional mediator sought psychiatric care because he could not work effectively with morbidly obese parties. Exploration revealed that he was enacting an unconscious hatred of an obese and abusive grandfather.
5. *Projective identification* refers to a tendency to feel unusually controlled and upset by an opponent's opinion. The advice is to stand back, take a breath, and evaluate yourself frequently, especially during heated interchange. The dynamics are that the opponent attributes disavowed aspects of themselves to the other who lets it get under his skin, ie it gets projected "into" him. Regression refers to the group pressure to behave and think in a childish, reactive non-constructive manner. *Double binds* are interpersonal interactions in which people feel trapped and that whatever they do is wrong including doing nothing. The example often used is how to answer when asked "Have you stopped beating your spouse yet?" Putting an opponent in a double bind leads to regression, paranoia, and projective identification.
6. Triangle of power dynamics refers to the dialectical, co-created roles people assume in violent organizations. Victimizer (often a bully), and victim are accompanied by an audience of bystanders who are passive (do nothing to help, don't want to get involved), bullying, or chameleon like (assume victim and victimizer roles to achieve political advantage). These roles are exchangeable and are rarely seen in nonviolent organizations.
7. Wilfred Bion was a British psychoanalyst who is credited with being the first to understand group dynamics and suggest therapeutic possibilities of groups. His idea of *container* reflects an unconscious role a person or group may take to help others manage negative feelings, clearly an important insight for a leader. Using a zoological metaphor, *commensal container* is a person or group who does not over- or under-react to the projections of others, but instead helps people handle projections constructively.
8. Clearly, other strategies might promote more growth, e.g., meeting to discuss with the DC's why his leadership style produced such desperate measures - promoting a model of aggressive containment and task focus. However, his response as the tolerant good mother/leader facilitated the bargaining process by providing no immediate grounds for outrage (affect modulation).
9. I am grateful to Kimberlyn Leary, Ph.D. who first drew my attention to the social psychological literature on these topics.
10. Donald Winnicott, a British pediatrician-psychoanalyst, did a great deal of research on the mother-infant relationship. He theorized that the "good enough mother" was one who responded in a developmentally appropriate way to the child's needs. This model has been applied to healthy versus dysfunctional social systems in a way not dissimilar to the container-contained model in footnote 7.

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