

Shame in Organisations

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ABSTRACT

This article explores shame in the context of organisations, and as a field present condition that is always in the background of contact and relationship. The four hypotheses put forward suggest how shame can manifest itself in organisational settings. The article then explores ways of working with shame individually and in the system as a whole.

The Importance of Shame in Organisations

Shame is much researched and written about in the worlds of counselling, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis; yet the literature dealing with shame in organisations is sparse. For over 16 years I have used a Gestalt approach in researching and working in organisations; it is in this context that I explore the importance of shame in organisations.

Shame seems to be an ever-present shadow in organisations, though in my experience it is rarely called shame. In an organisational context, it underlies much of the behaviour that gives rise to bullying and other abuses. If we can improve our understanding of how shame manifests itself, we may well be



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able to reduce abuse and improve the quality of organisational relationships. Shame can also have a noticeable impact on performance and reduce personal effectiveness in forming lasting individual and team relationships. Perhaps the importance of shame in organisations is seen in its being an almost invisible, unspoken part of organisational relating: "It has been suggested that shame and humiliation, and its underlying reasons are some of the best kept secrets in Western organisations and society. The reason is that we are ashamed of feeling shame and we do not want to experience the humiliation of admitting our fear of humiliation" (Starrin, 2007, p. 1).

The Paradoxical Nature of Shame

Shame is an experience that many of us have when situations arise, or there is the possibility of situations arising, that might make us imagine, feel, and react physically to hide, run away, withdraw, act defensively, or become passively aggressive, angry, aggressive – avoiding the humiliation that is actually occurring, or we think we are threatened with. This experience can be seen as the negative aspect of shame, when the feelings reduce or threaten our concept of self, may be hurtful, and may cause us to react in order to avoid or counter the negative feelings.

There may be, however, a positive aspect to shame when it is thought to be a natural and innate survival response that helps us steer our way through life without too many traumas in our relationships with others. Lee (1996) states: "Shame always occurs in the context of relationship. Even when shame is experienced in solitude, it is experienced relationally with reference to the feelings, desires, standards, rules, principles, limitations and so on of a larger relational field" (p. 7). This possibly positive aspect of shame may be a subtle factor in how we choose to behave in certain situations, e.g., backing off, withdrawing, running away, and so avoiding (potentially) painful outcomes. Lee (1995) suggests that shame is in fact a form of personal self-regulation: "We find that shame is a relational or field variable that is continually ready to inform us of the perceived possibility that our desires and urges are not supported by others who are important to us. In this way the experience of shame facilitates our pulling back from risks that are possibly unsupported" (p. 21). And Starrin (2007) puts it this way: "Shame plays an important part in regulating the expression and consciousness of all our emotions such as anger, fear, guilt and love. The extent to which these emotions are allowed to be expressed depends on the degree to which we are ashamed of them. Someone who is ashamed of showing anger will hold back that emotion" (p. 7)

Although I understand that shame can be experienced as a regulator, I

flinch away from believing that it is truly a positive feeling, perhaps because of my own experience of shame as it plays out in an organisational context. Shame, I believe, is one of the factors that may limit emotional expression in the workplace, and/or cause people to avoid the possibility of failure. What is it about shame that makes it so potentially powerful?

A Definition of Shame

Kaufman (1980) observes the following:

Shame itself is an entry to the self. It is the affect of indignity of defeat, of transgression, of inferiority and of alienation. No other affect is closer to the experienced self. None is more center for a source of identity. Shame is felt as an inner torment, as sickness of the soul. It is the most poignant experience of the self by the self, whether felt in the humiliation of cowardice, or in the sense of failure to cope successfully with a challenge. Shame is a wound felt from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and one another. Shame is the affect which is the source of many complex and disturbing inner states: depression, alienation, self-doubt, isolating loneliness, paranoid and schizoid phenomena, compulsive disorders, splitting of the self, perfectionism, a deep sense of inferiority, inadequacy or failure, the so-called borderline conditions and disorders of narcissism. These are the phenomena which are rooted in shame. Each is rooted in significant interpersonal failure. (p. 45)

Shame, in my view, is a feeling that arises from our own inner self-belief and how we react to how we are received by others. Others may create situations that induce a shame reaction in us because how we are received by them is not how we want to be received. Our core base of shame is thought to arise very early in our lives; for most of us, it is a pre-verbal experience and so triggers powerful emotions for which we may not have a reference point, or words to describe it.

Avoiding shame is a powerful regulator for some people; there are different levels of sensitivity to shame, possibly along a spectrum from highly shame sensitive to shameless (or appearance of knowing no shame). As Yontef (1996) states, "A person who is shame-less is thought to lack an appropriate sense of context and of his or her own limits. Appropriate guilt and shame are necessary for healthy functioning. Beware of those who never acknowledge guilt or shame" (p. 374).

Shame and guilt are frequently used to indicate the same or very similar

feelings, though as Resnick (1997) points out they are different, or at least have a different source: "Shame is the affective experience of believing oneself to be totally useless, "bad," basically lacking in value, and so on. Guilt is the affective experience of believing oneself to have done something "bad." Guilt is about a particular behavior; shame is about a total person" (p. 258).

Shame can be seen as a self-questioning of our own sense of worth brought on by ridicule and humiliation, non-recognition, non-acceptance, urges and desires that are not acceptable, or the fact that we are not acceptable. Perhaps we do not fit in; we "get it wrong" (particularly in terms of cultural practices and habits); we are not good enough (self comparison with others, especially those who are important to us); we are not good enough (we are told so by a superior, or someone we hold to be superior, that we cannot achieve the desired standards – our own, and those set us by others); and, of course, the fear of any of these things happening to us. Yontef (1996) speaks of shame in this context as "the feeling of being seen without cover, shield, mask, or privacy and the concomitant emotional energy of blushing, rising temperature, shrinking and so on. Of course, this is worse in a critical, unsafe shame inducing environment and is worse yet in an environment that is shame inducing whilst pretending to be more benevolent" (p. 362).

How we react to different environments, and how we experience shame, is highly personal: a conditioned response to what is happening to us.

Shame as Part of an Individual's Lifespace

The extent to which each of us experiences and reacts to shame has developed over our lives from our earliest experiences to the present:

We are our history. Our lives are packed with experiences and learning; some we have sought out and others have just come upon us. This amalgam of experience and learning is our "lifespace" (Lewin, 1951) or our field. It encompasses everything and includes physical and psychological phenomena, or everything we see and experience, touch, hear, taste, smell, and feel in the emotional sense. Our lifespace has a history and potentially a future. . . .

For some people, especially those bred in the captivity of traditional organisation thinking, this is a difficult concept to embrace. Yet, if we think about it as how we grow, change and develop, and become patterned in our interactions with the world we inhabit, then we can see how important it is. (Bentley and Boorman, 2008, p.15)

Over the years, then, each of us has developed a way of reacting to feelings

of shame, and particularly to feelings generated by being shamed. These reactions are principally focused toward surviving our experience and coming away from it with a good sense of self even if we feel damaged. Whatever these reactions – anger and aggression, hiding, running away, submission, fighting back – we attempt to retain or re-construct a good sense of self to avoid significant stress and depression and other forms of poor well-being and ill-health.

Some people's consistent failure to cope with or manage their shame becomes part of their lifespace; similarly, those who have developed a successful strategy for managing their shame rely on it in most shame situations. This form of patterned response to shame cannot be predicted or managed by others. From a Gestalt viewpoint, these patterned responses can be seen as "fixed" *Gestalten* and may not have the desired effect in the current circumstance. Resnick (1997) proposes how it all starts:

Shame is primarily a method of social control and child rearing where the child's fundamental organismic/environmental/field "lifeline" and support (love) is ruptured and withdrawn when the child does not embrace (introject) the primary caretaker's values, beliefs, and behavior. This occurs at a time developmentally when the child needs loving confirmation and support for emotional survival. Frequently, shaming adults are all too clear about their disapproval, criticism, contempt, and even disgust for the child. The experience of shame (no value, withdrawal, wanting to disappear) leaves the child desperate to please the caretaker, to avoid further ruptures, and to avoid the noxious experience of shame itself as much as possible. (p. 267)

Since shame is an inherent part of our being, it is not surprising that people working in organisations should come face to face with shame.

Shame in Organisations

My work in organisations is concerned with three levels of intervention: one-to-one executive and leadership coaching; team coaching and group facilitation; and systemic adaptation. The tendency for shame to appear in these three areas is all the more likely when we realise that organisations operate largely with hierarchical structures which, in transactional analysis terms, can lead to a strong "parent to child" culture; and that in such a situation the archaic feelings of shame can be awakened and trigger old patterns of behaviour.

The Personal Becomes Organisational

When first formed, organisations consist of groups of people who bring individual experiences of life and idiosyncrasies that coalesce into a shared culture, or a system that supports patterns of behaviour which, in turn, support the functioning of the system. In time, new recruits tend to adapt to fit in with these patterns, which change surprisingly slowly as the organisation grows.

Shame becomes an inherent part of this cultural mix, depending on the individual experiences and behaviours of the founders and early members of the organisation. As new people arrive they are influenced by the system and, to a lesser extent, they influence the system. They both adopt and adapt the field conditions they meet. This process depends on the individuals, and on the nature of the system, including how it is structured and the styles of leadership and management at play.

One chief executive with whom I worked briefly described his experience of shame as a child: how it was used by his parents as an “exquisite form of torture,” one that really hurt and did not show on the surface; one that he had become hardened to and knew how to use effectively. The executive team that reported to this CEO had learned to “keep their heads down” and to defer to “the boss.” They shared with me how this behaviour limited their creativity and initiative; one said in a group forum, “It is better to hold back and ask for permission than to act and ask for forgiveness.” Interestingly, at the next level the direct reports experienced the executive team in the same way they had experienced their CEO. In this organisation, the possibility of engaging in an “adult to adult conversation,” or in a “dialogue of equals,” was literally laughed at.

Management Style

Though I was not at that time studying shame, I looked closely in my doctoral research (Bentley, 1981) at how management style impacted decision-making and effectiveness. Here is a summary of my findings:

In the democratically managed division managers were more open, more willing to question what was going on, and more prepared to benefit from developments which they saw as being an improvement on the present circumstances.

In the division managed by the benevolent autocrat, managers were willing to partake in the research, but they had some difficulty in sorting out what decisions they made. There was overlap in the decision structure; much of the formal information was of an historic nature, used for examining what had happened rather than for decision-making. The managers were cooperative, provided the

researcher was not questioning established procedures.

In the autocratic division, there was considerable suspicion of the research, and a distinct resistance to examining the *status quo*. It was difficult to get managers to talk freely about their jobs and the decisions they took. It was as if they were conscious of the futility of pursuing an objective they considered unobtainable. (p. 95)

During my research, I realised that personal style – and all that individuals bring of themselves to their work roles – has a powerful influence on those around them. This is also true with respect to their use of, and reactions to, shame as part of their personal management style.

In a more recent example, I was coaching a CEO who never seemed to offer but criticism to his executive team. When asked about what I had noticed, he responded that his people understood that lack of criticism was a form of praise. Later, after seeing an example of his criticising a senior manager in front of others – clearly a shameful experience for the manager – I asked him again about his apparent preference of criticism over praise. His immediate angry response was, “Who the hell ever praises me?” When I told him that I praised him, he said, “You don’t count: you are my coach; you are supposed to do that.” Even though he seemed quite intransigent on this issue, I noticed that his behaviour did change, with quite startling effects: as his management team began to hear good things about themselves from him, they responded with increased commitment and improved performance.

Shame as a Regulator

If shame can be used as a regulator, or form of social control, and may seem to be helpful in maintaining standards and holding firm to organisational values, it can easily be misused and misplaced:

Organisations also use – deliberately or unintentionally – shaming and humiliation as a means to maintain the desired form of social control. Scapegoats are created and guilt is transferred onto a victim in a situation where the self-image of the group/organisation would otherwise be under threat and appear in an undesirable light. (Starrin, 2007, p. 11)

I baulk at the idea of the regulatory aspect of shame as a means of self-management, or process of self-regulation, being used by an organisation as a means of control. In my view, the use of shame as a regulator is manipulative and works against the formation of open and meaningful relationships. I have long worked successfully on the basis that the quality of relationship is the

foundation of what makes organisations good places in which to work and, consequently, successful. Using shame as a regulator contradicts this premise. I find Stiles's (2008) ideas of negative motivation somewhat de-motivating:

Shame is a useful emotion for organisations in motivating individuals to perform at a reasonable level. From the point of view of the organisation, the promoting of corporate goals and values, the encouragement of loyalty and engagement to the team and the organisation, and adherence to ethical codes of conduct can be made not only by a focus on promotion – but also by emphasising the cost of a failure to live up to these goals. (p. 2)

Stiles, however, does not seem to appreciate that shame is a highly personal issue, and that different people will act differently in the light of positive and negative stimuli. There is a huge difference between those who are highly shame sensitive and those who are not. To suggest also that shame can be used to ensure "adherence to ethical codes of conduct" is not only for me unethical but clearly, as in the case of many bankers involved in the recent financial crisis, ineffective. The organisational world has been presented, in recent times, with much material extolling the virtues of "positive emotions" (pride) on performance, and yet there has been only limited discussion (Stiles, 2008) about the impact of "negative emotions" (shame) on performance.

Positive Feedback

In my experience, positive feedback has been more effective in engendering positive emotions (pride), and hence improved performance; compared to negative feedback which seems to create negative emotions (shame) and lead to withdrawn and protective behaviour, and hence lower performance.

Verbeke and Bagozzi (2007) showed that when salespeople ($n = 453$) experienced shame in personal selling (i.e., failure to meet targets), they had protective reactions or avoidance behaviours that led to a negative impact on performance. My strong belief is that a focus on success with positive feedback and positive emotions (pride) leads to a high performance organisation; while a focus on failure with negative feedback and negative emotions (shame) leads to a poor performance organisation.

Four Hypotheses

Over the years working in organisations I have rubbed shoulders with shame, both my own and that of others. Since on these occasions it is shaming to admit to feelings of shame, other process comes into play to try to ameliorate

the shame, though the shame response is still usually evident however it is displayed. Because shame is generally experienced at a personal level – people experience shame in the light of their own lifespaces – the hypotheses posited will have different implications for different people.

Hypothesis One: *Acting to avoid shame is a primary reason for poor performance.*

Often when shame appears, attention is diverted from what is supposed to be happening to dealing with the shame. Whatever the individuals' normal patterned reaction to shame, it is likely to surface and interfere with their functioning and effectiveness. This interference may not be particularly noticeable or acknowledged, yet could still be impacting behaviour and performance. Here is an example of what can happen:

David was helping a customer in a bank complete a form to open a savings account. The customer was having trouble following all the questions, and David was carefully explaining each one. David's supervisor noticed in passing what he assumed was David's difficulty in aiding the customer, and so he intervened asking David if he could be of help. David's immediate reaction was to feel shame and to struggle even more to explain the questions to the customer. This behaviour seemed to confirm the supervisor's assumption, and he suggested that he would complete the form with the customer. This intervention increased David's sense of shame; he apologised to the customer and left his supervisor to complete the form. David went back to his desk hardly able to conceal his anger and did no worthwhile work the rest of the morning.

In this example, the supervisor did not intend to shame David and was blissfully unaware of the effect his intervention had had. Wheeler's (1996) observation is useful:

If my experience is of a social field where my gestures, my desires, cannot be received, then the result is a dampening down of energy, the hopelessness and the shame that constitute the subjective experience of depression. Again, shame is the opposite of support, of connectedness and reception in the field. (p. 54)

I have seen the impact shame can have on performance in numerous situations where, though shame is present, its presence is ignored until it is pointed out. Here is an example:

I was coaching an executive team when, at one of their regular meetings, the deputy Managing Director (MD) made a facetious comment to the Finance Director (FD) in response to a suggestion. The FD shrank in his chair, looked down, and his cheeks flushed slightly – all indicative of a shame reaction. When I asked him what he was feeling he said, “foolish and embarrassed.” The Deputy MD apologised, the FD said it was OK, and the meeting continued.

Later, the FD told me he had not enjoyed my pointing out his embarrassment, and yet it had seemed to help. And the Deputy MD told me he did not like what he had said at the meeting; nor did he understand why he behaved thus. Then, to my surprise, he revealed that at school he was skinny, small, and had asthma, and had developed a sharp, acerbic way of speaking to bullies to shame them into leaving him alone. At the time of our conversation, he was over six feet tall and had no need of the old pattern of behaviour. Before I offered him that observation he said, “I suppose I no longer need to do this.”

In support of my hypothesis, my own experiences with shame have exactly this de-motivating effect. I have two primary patterned ways of dealing with feelings of shame. The first response is to go quiet and withdraw into myself, and perhaps to withdraw physically from the situation. The second is to act with considerable degree of anger and aggression towards the person I deem to be attacking me and “causing” my feelings of shame. The effect on performance can be quite significant, though possibly called something else. Here is one research team’s comment:

The euphemisms “work stress” and “burnout,” like the labels “disgruntled employee” and “troublemaker,” are used when placing blame on individuals, instead of looking at the entire system to see how people are stressed from unnecessary conflict and unsupported in overcoming performance difficulties. Use of these labels shows how denial operates in preventing healthy and productive work. (Wyatt and Hare, 1997, p. 20)

As an executive coach I have frequently met this blaming of the individual and the shame it generates, when clearly the system is at fault. Do organisations hire coaches for their staff when, in fact, the system needs major work?

Hypothesis Two: *Being highly shame sensitive militates against achieving promotion.*

There seems to be an unspoken rule in most organisations that one has to be tough to get to the top, implying that those who succeed have a high shame tolerance (i.e., are able to minimise their reactions to shame, or are not easily shamed). Those who are more sensitive to shame seem to be considered weak and/or unable to cope with the “hurly burly” of organisational behaviour. Below is an example:

Mary was being fast tracked in the marketing department of a large retail chain. Her boss had noticed how she seemed able to cope with the banter of her male colleagues, much of which had sexual undertones. She seemed able to “give as good as she got,” which is how he described it to his boss. Mary enjoyed her job and on the surface did not seem bothered by her rather crude male colleagues.

In one of our coaching sessions, Mary told me that she did not know how much more of this banter and sexual innuendo she could take. She was fed up with trying to be “one of the boys” and scared that if she were to do or say anything, she would be ridiculed and humiliated. We explored options she might follow. She opted to let her colleagues know how she felt when they spoke to her in the way they normally did. The words she would use were: “When you say this, I feel ‘X.’” She would also let her boss know that if this behaviour continued, she would ask for a transfer. When she did both of these things her boss and her colleagues were surprised, and their opinion of her and their behaviour towards her changed for the better.

It sometimes takes great effort and energy to avoid shame reactions and continue to perform at a high level. For many people in shame-inducing situations, it seems almost impossible to feel worthwhile and a valued member of the team; one outcome is that people leave the organisation. For men in particular, it appears that feeling shame is itself shameful. Wheeler and Jones (1996) write about the impact on men of the need to avoid shame: the “willingness of men to sacrifice their inner lives without question, and their very lives if necessary to pointless and destructive social projects ranging from deadening corporate competitiveness to war itself, and all to avoid the mark of shame. Thus we see again how shame operates to keep social patterns and structures in place” (p. 93).

People who are shame-sensitive, even at the thin end of the shame wedge (i.e., those who are shy and/or easily embarrassed), can suffer at the hands of superiors and colleagues who are less sensitive to potentially shaming situations – even when there is no intent to shame, nor recognition that what is being done may generate shame. It is hard for some people to accept

that their behaviour might be shaming, since they themselves would not be shamed if they were recipients of such behaviour.

The capacity to cope with the behaviour of superiors and colleagues (even when that behaviour is abusive, cruel and shaming) is usually seen as strength, whereas to operate with kindness and to be emotionally expressive is often viewed as weakness. Here is a case:

George had invited me to work with “his” team of seven people; his stated reason was to increase the team’s resilience and robustness. In my first meeting with the team George introduced me as follows: “I have asked Trevor to work with you to ensure that you develop the capacity to cope with personal difficulties and issues, so that they do not get in the way of working together effectively.” He then started to leave, and I followed him; when I asked where he was going, he said he had another meeting. I told him that, given the circumstances, I would talk to the team but would only work with them again if he were present, as I saw him as a key member of the team. He brushed me off saying he would talk to me later. I returned to the team and asked why I had really been asked to work with them.

Over the next two hours I heard story after story about George’s arrogant and pompous attitude towards most members of the team and how several felt bullied by him.

A week or so later I shared my general impressions with George. “That’s exactly what I am on about,” he said; “I am sick and tired of their ‘mamby pamby’ behaviour and getting upset and emotional; it’s bloody ridiculous. This is no place for such things when we have important work to do.” I suggested that we have a team session at which he would be present, and we would explore how we could take things forward.

George controlled that meeting from start to finish, interrupting people, cutting them off, and displaying a forceful, perhaps even a bullying, style of interaction. Most of the team were cowed by his behaviour and said little. After the meeting, George consented to hear my views. He was shocked by what I said because he had a good opinion of himself and tended to blame his team for what went wrong. My experience of how he impacted his team – how, rather than supporting them he seemed to enjoy undermining them – took him by surprise. He looked at me and said, “I really had no idea of this; what can I do?” I suggested we might explore ways he could work with his team to bring the best out of them. He agreed, and we set up a series of coaching sessions.

Wyatt and Hare (1997) express the general levels of acceptance of such behaviour: "Like young children who are battered daily in abusive families, people see their abusive work situation as "normal" and the shaming way others behave toward them as "human nature" because they are either unaware or disbelieving of another way of working" (p. ix). The idea that the way "their" employees behave and react might have something to do with them, that such shaming situations and reactions are cocreated, is anathema for many senior people in organisations.

Hypothesis Three: *Shame is used in organisations to control and punish those who do not fit or who do not perform.*

Those who do succeed in organisations seem to have low shame sensitivity or become good at avoiding shame; they appear not to understand those at the other end of the spectrum and so deliberately, or accidentally, trigger shame reactions and shame avoidant behaviour. Here is the case of Miranda:

Miranda had worked at the company for 18 months and her confidence was increasing as she got to know her way around the office politics. She had noticed that the deputy MD would often embarrass people with his acerbic and facetious comments, so she had steeled herself for his reaction when she was presenting a new marketing plan at a meeting he was chairing. She was well into her presentation and all seemed to be going well, when the deputy MD said, "OK that's enough, I would like you to completely rework your approach and leave out all this fancy stuff about a loose-leaf brochure." Miranda was devastated and acutely embarrassed. She could not continue and left the meeting in tears.

The following day the deputy MD summoned her to his office and asked if she was OK. He went on to say that he thought he had been rather hard on her and apologised for upsetting her. She told him how she had felt, and how difficult it was for her to face her colleagues who had been at the meeting. He responded by saying that he was sure she would "get over it."

In our coaching session, Miranda told me how she had felt "put in her place" at the meeting, and that when her boss had apologised and told her she would "get over it," she had felt ashamed of her behaviour. She said that she would be careful in the future about what she presented; that she would make sure she had covered herself by not coming up with new and novel ideas without checking them with the deputy MD before presenting them.

This attitude of putting people in their place is very prevalent; it usually occurs by engendering some form of shame reaction. Wyatt and Hare (1997) state:

The many reporting levels in bureaucratic organizations, which tend to be highly blaming and shaming, are structured by job roles that minimize genuine relating between people working in the organization. The mechanistically defined and enforced job roles objectify people and keep managers from regularly having to assist employees, or to confront their own or employee's behaviors. Mechanical role interactions between managers and employees protect managers from shame feelings that might arise during more genuine contact. (p. 95)

Hypothesis Four: *Shame reactions are themselves a source of shame, and people can easily slide down the shame spiral until there seems there is no way out.*

The shame spiral impacts significantly on individual performance, and it seems to encourage a growing defensiveness and avoidance of situations that may give rise to shame, e.g., taking risks and using imagination and initiative. Being ashamed of feeling shame is the process that Lee (1995) describes as a shame bind, suggesting that it operates in this way:

Shame-binds form when a person's feelings, needs, or sense of purpose (i.e., the building blocks of ways of being in the world) are seriously unsupported by the environment, through, abuse, neglect, or loss. When the experience of shame is severe enough or chronic enough a linkage forms between shame and the feeling, need, or sense of purpose that is unsupported. Thereafter, whenever the person experiences the given feeling, need, or sense of purpose he or she will automatically also experience shame. And in more severe cases, with greater unavailability of support, the person will lose awareness of the feeling, need, or sense of purpose and only experience shame. (p. 15)

In the above example, the deputy MD's comment that "he was sure she would get over it" was a further invitation for Miranda to visit her shame. She had chosen to share with him her sense of shame, and now he was triggering her shame about feeling shame.

Munt (2007), in *Queer Attachments*, suggests that certain cultures support this spiralling effect: "Shamed cultures infect membership, drawing down

practices of shame and a glut of other emotions allied to shame; these shame patterns are spiralled in the sense that they have the effect of magnetising other negative emotions and intensifying them" (p. 105). In my experience in organisations, people think they have to desensitise their reactions in order not to feel shame, which is itself shaming, so that if we do not feel shame in the first place we can avoid the shame spiral. This sounds like a useful strategy, except for the fact that the process of desensitisation blocks our capacity to feel and to relate, so that we become robotic or, as Wyatt and Hare (1997) suggest, "mechanical" in our reactions and contact. Here is another example:

David had first come to me at the suggestion of the HR Director of his company. He described his issue as follows: "I need to be able to deal with the relationships in my peer group more effectively. I am fine working with my own team, but I seem to struggle working with my colleagues."

After a number of sessions he admitted to me that he often felt embarrassed and somewhat put down by the robustness of his colleagues' language and behaviour. He said, "I refuse to join in and become like them, and they call me a wimp."

I asked what he wanted to do, and he talked about becoming more thick-skinned and not so sensitive. I asked him if that was what he really wanted, and he answered: "What I really want is not to feel ashamed about my reactions to their language and behaviour."

We worked together for two or three sessions, and then he told me he had sorted it out: "I have handed in my resignation. I am going to work for an organisation where I think my sensitivity will be respected not ridiculed."

I have experienced many situations in which people inadvertently trigger shame reactions from some seemingly innocuous comment or action.

Working with Shame in Organisations

My experience and research indicate that the organisational field is a veritable shame minefield. It becomes essential to provide some means of negotiating through the minefield without causing self or others permanent, crippling damage. Wheeler (1996) suggests that reactions to shame have far-reaching behavioural impacts:

The nature of shame is to hide; thus the experience of shame becomes uncommunicable to others. And the actual experience of shame

may go unnoticed from the outside. Instead, what may at times be seen is the behavior associated with the strategies that people employ in attempting to escape or cope with their experience of shame – behaviors associated with blame, rage, control, withdrawal, perfectionism, contempt, and so on. (p. 106)

My first thought with regard to this shame minefield concerns individuals' options for dealing with their shame experiences. Simon and Geib (1996) posit that every relationship operates under the shadow of shame: "Shame is also an interactive occurrence. This means the potential for shaming is present in any relationship" (p. 315). Individuals working in organisations need to treat all contact with others with awareness of the shame potential, and to react to any sense of shame by naming what they are experiencing. The first step is to know what is happening. This then presents an opportunity to choose what we do rather than acting with an archaic patterned response. When the feelings arise they provide a powerful signal that can override whatever else is happening or, as Jacobs (1996) once said, "Shame, fear, guilt; these are the 'feelings about feelings,' the boundary keepers, the affects that color our lives like a background wash on canvas lending a feint or intense hue to whatever other thoughts and feelings may be occurring" (p. 298).

Many of us do not possess a high level of self-support; dealing with shame successfully has a great deal to do with support, as Lee (1996) notes: "Together shame and support have the potential of enabling contact. Support allows the person to take risks; shame (perhaps in the form of embarrassment, shyness, or mild disappointment) induces the person to pull back when there is no immediate support" (p. 10). This view of shame is in itself supportive. We can look upon our shame feelings as a way of managing our contact and of knowing when we are approaching or crossing our boundary limits; that is, when we are in danger of taking a risk too far. So, far from seeing shame as a damaging reaction to a relational blunder or breakdown, we can see it as a guiding indicator of what is happening for us in the current interaction. We can, as Jacobs (2005) encourages,

make friends with our shame; in other words, learn to recognize it, monitor it, live with it and use it, because shame. . . arises at certain times in certain contexts. An exploration of how and why it arose gives us the opportunity to use it as a signal that an important interactional event may be occurring.

My next thought concerns those individuals, at all levels in organisations, who deliberately or inadvertently induce shame experiences in subordinates

and colleagues. This only happens because we each carry with us some shame threshold that has to do with how we measure up. When I am not as “I should be,” either in terms of my internalised “should” or the externally socially established “should,” I am liable to have a shame reaction. So, if my comments, suggestions, ideas, etc. are not welcomed or received well (i.e., if I feel they are deflected or dismissed) when I am in contact with another, I am likely to have a shame reaction. Yontef (1996) puts it in this way: “Apparently innocuous stimuli can trigger intense reactions of feeling bad, inadequate or unworthy” (p. 353). This reaction on my part may not be what the other person intended, and yet it happens because of what I am feeling. The visible aspects of my reactions may or may not be minimal. As Jacobs (1996) states: “It is not uncommon for one who is threatened with growing shame to protect oneself by attacking the other in a shame provoking manner. This is shame transfer. It can set in motion an escalating shame-blame cycle” (p. 305).

I have found little material in texts on leadership and motivation that deal with shame. This lack is a shame in itself because avoiding the potential of inducing shame on others is a crucial aspect of good leadership and human relations, and of enabling people to perform at their best. If we overlook our potential for inducing shame, Yontef (1996) provides a stark warning: “I believe that, in our culture, shame operates as an intense but usually unaware force that undermines confidence and identification with self, decreases self-esteem, inhibits social interaction and increases rigidity and defensiveness” (p. 353).

Reactions to induced shame, or to the threat of shame, can generate responses not immediately or obviously associated with shame or with its avoidance. Yontef (1996) says the following: “Attacking, rationalising, raging and self-righteousness are often used to avoid the feeling of shame. It is as if the person is saying, ‘I have to be right and adequate, and you have to be wrong and inadequate so that I don’t have to feel ashamed’” (p. 355).

It seems feasible to reduce the possibility of inducing shame in others by following a four-stepped approach that makes the other person feel valued:

1. Receive what the other is saying or offering: Listening to and letting in what another person is saying (i.e., really hearing it, whether you agree or not) is important so that the other experiences “being heard.” Not only does this display respect for the other, but it also means that you can respond from a more informed place.

2. Affirm others in their right to say or offer it: By acknowledging that each person has a right to hold and express beliefs and opinions, you strengthen your right to express your own, particularly when they are different from those of others.

3. Self-disclose how what you are hearing or being offered impacts you:

It is especially effective to express what you are feeling and thinking about what others have said.

4. Respond to what you have heard or been offered: Your response to what you have heard can now be expressed; since you have taken the time to develop a meaningful dialogue, it is unlikely that the other person will feel shame. Both the person and the viewpoints have been valued rather than dismissed; this is still the case even if your response was to disagree.

To reiterate: the basic learned shame reaction usually happens in response to our experiencing some sense of being ignored, dismissed, humiliated, ridiculed. When instead we feel a sense of being listened to and accepted, shame reactions become unlikely.

Systemic Implications of Shame

It is not surprising that organisations, as social networks of human contact and relationships, should use shame as a mechanism for enforcing conformity. As Yontef (1996) points out: "Shame and shaming are means of social control. Social definitions of appropriate behaviour and the boundary of private and public are protected and strengthened by the strong need to avoid the shame experience" (p. 355).

We do not have to look far into history to see how village stocks were used as a means of public shaming and humiliation. Today, we are only a little more subtle. Campaigns to "name and shame" transgressing organisations, or poor performing schools and hospitals, are recent examples in the UK. I would argue that forcing compliance through the threat of shame is a poor alternative to creating an organisation where people are willing to take risks, be creative, and able to enjoy fully their contact with others.

Do such organisations exist? Of course they do, and they are usually highly productive and profitable. How do they do it? How are positive organisations created? The first step is to remove shame as a tool of control.

- **Surrender the need for control:** Recognise that the organisation is not a system that can be controlled by pulling levers and pressing buttons. It is a complex web or network of human relationships that functions best when these relationships are of high quality and relatively shame free. The desire for control, often out of fear or incapacity to cope with events, can lead to behaviour as if other people are just a cog in the systemic machine. This denial of the others' humanity often leads to shaming experiences.
- **Operate with freedom and flexibility:** By both ceasing to chase the illusion of control and operating with a high degree of freedom and personal initiative, we can open others and ourselves to possibilities and opportunities that might otherwise go unnoticed. Freedom with responsibility can be a

powerful and effective way to operate in the modern organisation.

- **Develop real conversations, or dialogues of equals:** By creating an environment that invites people to be authentic and communicate with honesty and thoughtfulness for the impact they have on others, we can allow them to become real. The conversations that take place through this process (and following the steps mentioned earlier) make it possible to avoid shaming experiences.

The next step is to develop performance management systems based on measuring and rewarding success, rather than assessing and punishing failure. Goals and targets are an important part of motivation; measuring individual and team success in relation to such aims seems to be fundamental to performance management. The key is to encourage and reward performance (positive reinforcement and pride), rather than to measure and punish failure (negative reinforcement and shame). Here is how I see it (Bentley 2001):

Encouragement and appreciation are the keys that will open the door to people's commitment and motivation. Criticism, for most people, kills off commitment and motivation whereas encouragement and appreciation fertilise and nurture commitment and motivation for everyone. Even the most mediocre performers can rise above themselves when encouraged and appreciated. Encouragement and appreciation should not be reserved for good performers – it should be ladled out generously to everyone. (p. 22)

I worked with one large financial services organisation to introduce a positive performance management system. Initially, I discovered a highly shame inducing appraisal system based on issuing grades at five levels:

- | | | |
|--------------------|------------------|---------------|
| 1 – Poor | 3 – Satisfactory | 5 – Very good |
| 2 – Unsatisfactory | 4 – Good | |

In performance appraisal guidance notes, managers were directed to award grade 4 only in exceptional circumstances and grade 5 in very exceptional circumstances. Staff I interviewed stated that they were relieved to get a grade 3, never expected to get a grade 4, and a grade 5 was unheard of. When I suggested to the HR director that the system encouraged mediocrity and was shame inducing and de-motivational, he was shocked. He cooperated, however, with the development of the new approach and was startled by the beneficial results.

The use of “noncritical feedback” is perhaps the aspect of positive performance management that impacts the most. It is relatively easy to be noncritical when giving feedback to good performers; managers struggle when giving feedback to poor performers. The first key in this process is to

separate the performance from the person, i.e., to focus on performance and not on the individuals themselves. Managers can ask poor performers whether they are pleased or disappointed with their performance, and then share their own sense of disappointment with their performance. They can then look at what needs to happen for the performance to improve, e.g., what support they can give. Persons concerned need to feel that their manager is disappointed with their *performance*, not with *them*.

The aim is for people to leave the appraisal meeting feeling inspired and motivated to improve, no matter what their current level of performance. This is not always a straightforward process, as people can be extremely self-critical and take an expressed sense of disappointment to heart, no matter how much the conversation is steered to the positive.

Conclusion

Both my research and my work in organisations with individuals, teams, and complete systems have provided a wealth of information and experience about the impact that shame can have on performance at all levels. My stated belief is that, far from having a beneficial effect, the power of shame to regulate and control has a largely negative effect, especially on performance at all levels – individual, team, and whole system.

The strategies people use for dealing with shame can be separated into two broad categories: “defensive” and “aggressive.” I personally have both reactions to shame, depending on the situation. Many people have a tendency toward one or the other of these reactions; both are frequently met in organisations.

The desire to hide from shame, to withdraw, to not be noticed, is apparent when people meet and may be exposed in a more “public” light. People defend themselves against shame by avoiding situations where there is a possibility of humiliation on any level, a sense of failure or of feeling not good enough. People stay quiet at meetings. The more the organisation fosters a “blame and shame” culture, the more apparent this defence mechanism. In the aggressive response to shame, on the other hand, persons feeling shame project or transfer these feelings to others. It is as if they refuse to acknowledge their own shame and so blame others for how they are feeling. This approach can lead to a bullying climate, which in turn exacerbates the impact that shame has on everyone, including those doing the bullying.

Because these responses are often deeply buried in our psyche, we may not be aware of what we are doing and the impact we are having on others. Bullies are often surprised when they are confronted with how they are experienced by others. However people respond to shame in the organisational context,

the constant presence of shame not only will make the environment an unpleasant one, but also impact negatively on performance at all levels. There are probably many people who work in organisations who will disagree with my hypothesis, and who will continue to use shame as a means of regulation and control. I would ask them to think about the impact they are having on those around them, and to consider their motivations for using shame as they do. Perhaps, as I suggest, they do it to avoid having to face their own shame.

I do not believe we can ever be shame-free; it is part of being human to want to be valued and worthwhile, and this will not always be the case. Yet, surely, we can appeal to individuals and organisations to stop using shame as a way of controlling, hurting, and damaging people. My appeal is that we do the best we can, or as Jacobs (2005) urges, "[L]et us 'play within ourselves.' That means, let us trust in ourselves enough to not try to play better than we can" (p. 8).

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