

Increased Authoritarianism

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When danger is real and present, effective leaders take charge and give commands that are obeyed by obedient followers, thus harnessing and directing the combined power of many individuals in service of group survival. When a crisis occurs, centralization of control is significantly increased with leaders tightening reins, concentrating power at the top, and minimizing participatory decision making [1]. Even where there are strong beliefs in the “democratic way of life”, there is always a tendency in institutions, and in the larger containing society, to regress to simple, hierarchical models of authority as a way of preserving a sense of security and stability.

This is not just a phenomenon of leadership – in times of great uncertainty, everyone in the institution colludes to collectively bring into being authoritarian organizations as a time-honored method for providing at least the illusion of greater certainty and therefore a diminution of anxiety [2].

But, when a state of crisis is prolonged, repetitive, or chronic there is a price to be paid. The tendency to develop increasingly authoritarian structures over time is particularly troublesome for complex organizations. Chronic crisis results in organizational climates that promote authoritarian behavior and this behavior serves to reinforce existing hierarchies and create new ones. Communication exchanges change and become more formalized and top-down. Command hierarchies becomes less flexible, power becomes more centralized, people below stop communicating openly and as a result, important information is lost from the system [3].

The centralization of authority means that those at the top of the hierarchy will be far more influential than those at the bottom, and yet better solutions to the existing problems may actually lie in the hands of those with less authority. Authoritarian leadership is likely to encourage the same leadership style throughout the organization. The loss of democratic processes results in oversimplified decision-making and the loss of empowerment at each organizational level reduces morale and increases interpersonal conflict.

As a result, the organizational norms for all staff are likely to endorse punitive behavior, empathic failure, and traditional methods for managing difficult situations. It is hard to imagine a situation more detrimental to long-lasting, positive change in the lives of people with complex problems. As for the staff, when authoritarian behavior comes to dominate a situation, the result can also be devastating. Unchecked authoritarians can become bullies at any organizational level but when they are given power, they can become “petty tyrants”

Excerpt from Bloom, S. L. (2010). Trauma-organized systems and parallel process. In N. Tehrani (Ed.), *Managing Trauma in the Workplace* (pp. 139-153). London: Routledge.

For more see: Bloom and Farragher, *Destroying Sanctuary: The Crisis in Human Service Delivery Systems*

- Link to Disempowerment and Learned Helplessness
- Link to Authoritarianism
- Link to Terror Management Theory

References

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2. Lawrence, W.G. *The presence of totalitarian states-of-mind in institutions*. in *Paper read at the inaugural conference on 'Group Relations', of the Institute of Human Relations, Sofia, Bulgaria, 1995*. Accessed November 23, 2006 at <http://human-nature.com/free-associations/lawren.html>. 1995.
3. Weick, K.E., *Making Sense of the Organization*. 2001, Malden, MA: Blackwell.