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# **Blessings or Curses?**

*Succession in organisational existence*

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# Blessings or curses?

## *Succession in organisational existence*

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### **Introduction**

On an organic level, at every moment in society generations are shifting. Like the slow movement of continents these shifts create powerful forces that affect every aspect of human life - in ways we are only beginning to understand. At the fulcrum of this dynamic is the process of succession. We only need to look to animal life on this planet to see how the process of succession is about life and death. The survival of our blood lines, our values, our beliefs, who we are and what we stand for all depend on succession. As we grow older the new generations demand our passing to make way for them - bringing us closer to the inevitability of our own deaths.

On the other hand, as we are born into this world we immediately become inheritors; the experiences, failures and desires of the generations ahead of us can feel like a heavy burden. Our dependence on older generations puts us in situations where we unconsciously wish them to die in order for us to live, while at the same time we are faced with the question of what it means for us to take up the reins and truly live.

The focus, in this paper is to see succession as a *natural* process which, in a sense, is always happening to us - it is the axle in the wheel of human life. So, rather than propose a *model* for managing succession, we have tried to go back and look at how the natural aspects of the process affect organisational existence. In doing so, we will suggest that managing succession is about creating opportunities which enable us to resonate and transform with its processes.

### **So, why is succession an important issue now?**

Organisational succession is about the *corporate* - the sustainability and regeneration of the body - a shared realisation of ownership and responsibility for something bigger than the individual. It is no surprise then that the rising culture of individualism in organisational life is changing how succession happens. There are examples all around us of where individual ambition is the primary value in any institution, the processes of succession can become nothing more than a struggle for power, which can lead to exploitation of organisations, their staff and their clients.

The natural realities of succession challenge this culture of individualism because working through succession is about both taking personal *and* corporate responsibility for the sustainability of an organisation as a whole. What organisations become unconsciously faced with, for example, during a significant leadership succession is questions about the individual's relationship with the whole and vice versa - this strikes at the heart of the reason for their existence. Inasmuch as any organisation as a whole can answer these questions, succession can become meaningful and developmental; if it cannot, then succession has no corporate meaning and the power of individuals takes over the process.

This is why this issue is now of great importance - the sustainability and development of our institutions may be under threat if new generations cannot be enabled to inherit and take ownership of them - with their successes *and* their mistakes. This is particularly an issue for organisations where there was a clear founding vision, which needs to be taken into account and may need to be re-framed in a changing context. This is the case for most agencies in the voluntary sector and also for many of the bodies and networks sponsoring group relations conferences. Many of the issues are also faced by others such as new headteachers taking up their roles in schools with established traditions and reputations, good and bad.

In this paper we shall argue that individualism can be harnessed and made corporate if people can work to the *purpose* of an organisation and relate that purpose to their own desires and the needs of the world around them. This is not purpose in the sense of 'what' we are doing but in the deepest sense of 'why' we are doing it. We shall draw on our experience of work on succession issues with clients, particularly in the voluntary sector, and our experience of living through the process of succession in our own organisation.

## **1 Jacob and Esau**

Whilst some of the issues of succession have been explored psychoanalytically in relation to the story of Oedipus, in this paper we will open up our exploration by using one of the stories from the Judaeo-Christian tradition - the story of Jacob and Esau, which can itself be read at many levels.

Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, with Esau being born first. They were born into a small family clan which had become wealthy because Isaac was a successful farmer. But this family saw itself as special because God had made a 'Covenant' with the boys' grandfather, Abraham, and promised that he would be the "father of many nations" and his descendants would possess the whole land of Canaan.

As the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter and the favourite of his father Isaac, who was partial to game stew. In contrast, Jacob became "a quiet man preferring life indoors among the tents". He was his mother's favourite, particularly after Esau married two local Hittite women whose attitudes made Rebekah's life completely miserable.

There was great rivalry between the two brothers, with family stories telling of how they even fought in the womb.

One day Esau returned starving and exhausted from an unsuccessful hunting expedition. He found Jacob cooking a delicious stew and just had to have some. But when he asked for some, Jacob seized the opportunity. He said, “make me a trade: my stew for your rights as the firstborn”. Esau is in such a state that he agreed to this saying, “what good is a birthright if I’m dead”.

By now Isaac had become an old man, nearly blind and fearing that he might die any day. He wanted to give his personal blessing to Esau before he died. He asked Esau to go and hunt for game and make his favourite meal and then receive Isaac’s blessing. Rebekah overheard this request and immediately told Jacob to kill two young goats which she prepared to be like Isaac’s favourite meal. She wanted Jacob to receive his father’s blessing, not Esau. She gave Jacob Esau’s best clothes and told him to take the stew and pretend to be Esau. This deception worked and Isaac, although suspicious, blessed Jacob, asking for God’s blessing on him, that peoples will serve him and he will be master of his brothers.

When Esau returned and the deception was discovered, he was furious. He felt that his brother had now “tricked” him twice, taking both the birthright and the blessing to which he was entitled. Isaac had no blessing to give Esau, except one that he will live by his sword, hand-to-mouth, and serve his brother. Esau, seething with anger, planned revenge: “the time for mourning my father’s death is close - and then I’ll kill my brother Jacob”.

When this was reported to Rebekah, she suggested to Jacob that he went to stay with her brother in Haran for a time, “until Esau’s anger subsides and he forgets what you did to him”. She went to Isaac and persuaded him to send Jacob to Haran, using as an excuse the possibility that Jacob might also marry a local woman. Isaac sent Jacob away, with a blessing in which he asks that God “will pass on the blessing of Abraham to you and your descendants”. When Esau discovered what had happened, he married another local woman to spite his parents.

On the night that Jacob fled, he dreamt of a staircase to the heavens, and of God blessing him and his descendants and promising to protect him wherever he goes. In the morning Jacob named the place *Bethel* (meaning God’s House) and made a vow that, “If God stands by me and protects me on this journey on which I am setting out, keeps me in food and clothing and brings me back in one piece to my father’s house, *this* God will be my God.”

In the event Jacob spent twenty years in Haran, acquiring wives and sons and great wealth as a result of his skill as a herdsman. His stay there was full of double dealing, love, jealousy, deceit, exploitation and envy. But in the end the envy of his in-laws became so problematic, that he and his family decided to flee Haran with all his possessions and return home to his father Isaac, who was still alive.

As Jacob approached his home country, he sent messages ahead to Esau together with considerable gifts from his flocks. He became alarmed when he heard that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. When the two brothers eventually met, each having prospered away from each other, they were reconciled. But Jacob was still wary and decided to settle apart from Esau.

Jacob bought land in Canaan, the land that the Covenant had promised to the family. Over time it was through Jacob's family that the nation of Israel (and its twelve tribes descended from his twelve sons ) came into being and the Covenant promise is taken a step further towards its fulfilment.

We would like to explore five features of this part of the Jacob and Esau narrative as they relate to succession in organisational existence.

- First, this story is not only an account of family dynamics, but also of a wider enterprise and *purpose* - represented by the Covenant with God and the hope that it offers of this small family becoming a great nation, occupying a land flowing with milk and honey. The issue in this story and every succession is in part about who is best fitted to carry forward this purpose. Esau is judged wanting because of his casual “shrugging off” of his birthright, because of short-term desire. Jacob's desire to inherit is evident in his actions, as is his willingness to commit himself (albeit conditionally) to God's purpose at Bethel.

So, organisational succession raises issues about how inheritors commit themselves to the vision and purpose of the enterprise, particularly when succeeding *founders* or those who have radically reshaped the organisation. This inevitably raises questions about the different participants' understanding of the *'institution-in-the-mind'*.

- Secondly, it is helpful to see Isaac as a ‘post-holder’ (the one who will be succeeded), and Esau and Jacob as two potential ‘inheritors’ - these are roles they take up in the succession process. However, they are not the only players. Rebekah, with her strong feelings about Esau and his foreign women, also has a key role in engineering what happens. She can be seen as a ‘member’ of this enterprise (the family) - someone who has a sense of ownership and emotional investment in it. In any succession, it is important to look at the interaction of all three players - *'inheritor'*, *'post-leaver'* and the *'members'*.

- Thirdly, this story raises the importance of the *context* for succession. In our view it is significant that Esau is a hunter/gatherer at a time when this is becoming harder, while wealth is with those who grow crops and manage herds (Isaac and Jacob). We would suggest that a systemic approach requires us to look not only at internal dynamics but also the realities of the shifting context. Who will enable these realities to be tackled?
- Fourthly, we note that this succession is in part resolved by *schism* and separate development, with Esau and Jacob becoming leaders of their own parts of Isaac's family. This is a pattern which has also been evident in, for example, the development of the group relations movement. We will explore whether there are other ways in which the important tensions around succession can be resolved.
- Finally, we wish to open up the significance of 'blessing' in the story. At one level it is clearly a traditional ritual around the death of a patriarch. But we are aware more widely that the attitude of the post-leaver to the inheritor can be a key factor in what happens. It opens up for us the wider question of what *rituals* or *rites of passage* we can develop in organisational life to contain the feelings aroused by succession more effectively.

## 2 Succession in Organisations

Any change of leadership<sup>1</sup> in an organisation inevitably triggers anxiety about both the wider sustainability of the enterprise in its context and whether individual members will survive the changes which may follow. Will the inheritor really be able to grasp the essence of why this organisation exists and be able to lead it to fulfil its *purpose*?

In the story of Jacob and Esau it is not immediately obvious that either brother is concerned about much more than their rivalry and personal desires. But over time, Jacob progressively develops an understanding of the significance of the Covenant and commits himself to living and working within it.

In our discussions with those who have been inheritors in the voluntary sector, we have been struck by the number who, in preparation both for interviews and/or taking up their role, have gone back to the founding vision of the agency and been concerned to test whether they can own it for themselves and whether it is still relevant in the current circumstances. They saw this as important in enabling them to successfully take up the leadership of their organisation. In contrast, one chief executive found little evidence of any real 'vision' behind the original setting up of her new organisation (other than administrative convenience for other local government agencies) nor could she make much sense of the pattern of varied activities which it had accrued over time. When she tried to tackle management incompetence and a precarious financial situation, she met a great deal of resistance and did not survive.

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<sup>1</sup> Including not only designated chief executives, but also those who exercise significant leadership, whatever their formal position.

This example underlines the reality, that as an inheritor it is not just the founding story or the organisational prospectus or structures that have to be understood, but the different pictures of the enterprise which have been internalised by the different stakeholders. At The Grubb Institute, we have explored this using the concepts of '*organisation-in-the-mind*' and '*institution-in-the-mind*' (Hutton, Bazalgette & Reed, 1997; Hutton 2000; see also Carr, 1999).

- ***Organisation-in-the-mind*** is the different pictures in the mind people have (consciously and unconsciously) of how their organisation is internally organised. It is how they see the way the internal relationships, behaviours, roles and modes of organisation function together to meet the purpose of the organisation.
- ***Institution-in-the-mind*** is also a picture in the mind but it is a picture informed by the feelings someone has about their organisation because of their experiences of it, the context it is in, their personal desire and projections from the context. It is fundamentally about meaning - why the organisation exists and needs to exist in its context.

Institution-in-the-mind can be conscious in that it is the picture of the person's desire and how that desire can be transformed into engagement with their context through this organisation. However, it can also be largely unconscious. It can relate to how a person's attachment style affects how they feel about an organisation, as well as how they identify with projections about the organisation from the context - the context may 'curse' or 'bless' the organisation (for example, everyone who works in a school is hugely affected by what society thinks about schools). So, institution-in-the-mind is inextricably linked to context and purpose.

### **Institution-in-the-mind and ownership**

Institution-in-the-mind helps us understand how the enterprise is owned in the hearts and minds of those involved in a succession, and therefore what is actually being inherited and passed on. In our experience a key factor in leadership succession is the extent to which those involved are able to be in touch with and articulate the institution-in-the-mind.

Working with institution-in-the-mind can be challenging because of the projections from the context, particularly when they are negative or are creating an expectation of nothing changing. For the inheritor this raises a series of questions: Is this an institution through which I can engage my personal desire? How do I feel about where this enterprise has come from and where it is in society now?



To make this process possible, the inheritor needs access to as many people as possible whose involvement with organisation means they have developed an ‘institution-in-the-mind’ in relation to the system, and through that a sense of ownership of it<sup>2</sup>. Such stakeholders may include clients, trustees, previous leaders and staff, the press, *etc* as well as current staff. All of these people potentially shape the institution-in-the-mind which is being surfaced, and hopefully passed on and inherited. So, when someone takes over an enterprise they need to take account not only of their internal picture of the organisation, but of a much wider multifaceted collage which is their inheritance.

So, we would argue that succession needs to be understood as a *corporate process*, and as many stakeholders as possible involved. This increases the probability that a shared institution-in-the-mind can be identified and worked with.

### 3 The dynamics of succession

Having identified the significance of institution-in-the-mind, let us look at the dynamics of succession in organisational life. We have suggested that it is important to look particularly at the interplay of the post-leaver, the inheritor and members.

In choosing the word ‘members’ we are very much thinking in terms of the group relations distinction between ‘participants’ (who merely attend), and ‘members’ who show they have joined and committed themselves to the task. Thus we are not assuming that all employees of an organisation are ‘members’, but are focussing on those who have an emotional commitment to the enterprise and its success and a sense of belonging. They are part of what Miller & Rice (1967) identified as a *sentient system* which coincides and overlaps to some extent with the boundaries of the task system.

Members are significant because there is likely to be a complex pattern of splitting, projection and projective identification, particularly around those in leadership positions. The process of succession inevitably disturbs this pattern, facing members with issues about what they have projected onto the post-leaver - and also what of the post-leaver they have internalised. Do the projections get transferred onto the inheritor, or does a new pattern of splitting between the inheritor and post-leaver develop?

To tease out these dynamics, let us look at them from the perspectives of the post-leaver, inheritor and members.

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2 *There are parallels between this process and the experience of staff during the Institutional Event in group relations conferences. In the conference, the struggle is to discern from the behaviour of participants and staff the picture of the conference as a whole which has been internalised. To the extent that this is able to be articulated in a hypothesis, it opens up the possibility of transformation. But this is always a challenge, particularly if there are limited interactions with participants.*

## The post-leaver

The desire of the post-leaver depends on a number of factors - history, context and their personal narrative. In general what the post-leaver desires is that what they have achieved and built in the organisation will continue and stay alive after they have gone. This is why the post-leaver's own understanding of the institution and their values and beliefs about it (*ie* the post-leaver's institution-in-the-mind) will shape how they work at the succession process.

One underlying dynamic behind this can be framed in terms of mortality and the wish that something will remain when we die. This brings with it the challenge of what Erikson (1968) described as **generativity** - "*the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation*", including productivity and creativity. He argues that "*the meeting of bodies and minds leads to a gradual expansion of ego interests and to a libidinal investment in that which is being generated*". When such enrichment fails altogether, there is often a "*pervading sense of stagnation, boredom and interpersonal impoverishment*".

Where there are potential inheritors in the organisation or a period of overlap with the inheritor, handling generativity can lead the post-leaver to vacillate from hope to despair, at times perhaps wanting to see the organisation destroyed rather than continue in some attenuated form. Has the inheritor really grasped the essence of the institution, or completely failed to do so? The post-leaver also has to deal with her own relationships and feelings about possible inheritors against a judgement of who will most enable the enterprise to prosper. In the story, we can see Isaac struggling with the issue. His favourite is Esau who makes him feel good, but in the end he blesses Jacob whose guile makes him better equipped than the impetuous Esau to ensure that a small clan survives in a time of acute competition for the best land and water.

If the post-leaver is retiring or towards the end of their working lives the desire can become confused with their own personal narrative - what they feel they can leave behind becomes equated with value judgements about who they are and what they have achieved. In this case the inability of the organisation to inherit certain things can be experienced as a personal rejection.

The post-leaver is also faced with powerful projections from members reflecting what the nature of the dependence between them has been. The anxiety of the membership can cause them to project omnipotence into the post-leaver as a means of splitting off their own potency - especially when the organisation feels unsafe. If the post-leaver identifies with this projection the enterprise can enter a state of stagnation.

The post-leaver may continue to be caught up in these dynamics even after the succession has taken place. We are aware of one post-leaver who burnt his retirement gift and returned the ashes to his successor because he disagreed with what was happening. Similarly, Chad Varah very publicly resigned from the Samaritans because he felt that the new leadership had changed

a fundamental principle of his founding vision. These gestures were clearly designed to influence the inheritor - to curse them for their perceived misuse of the inheritance.

### **The inheritor**

For the inheritor the big question is what the nature of the inheritance is - is this a blessing or a curse? Not only is there an inheritance of the enterprise's conscious existence, there is also an unconscious inheritance which includes the 'sins of the father' - the mistakes, internal conflicts and desires. The inheritor is faced with the question of how they marry their personal desire with the purpose of the institution and transform the organisation's primary task .

The inheritor is also faced with powerful projections from members - projections around killing off the post-leaver, projections around their own incompetence if the post-leaver is being imagined to be omnipotent and perhaps the most powerful projection - hope. These projections represent something about the life and death of the enterprise in its context; at different times members will wish it to live or die and that becomes an internal struggle within the inheritor themselves.

Faced with all this the inheritor goes through not only the process of being appointed, but also of *self-authorisation* - they authorise themselves to take the role of inheritor. This process can involve them testing and challenging the boundaries of the organisation, relinquishing the role of protégé and challenging the projections of the members. They have to find their own way of finding, making and taking their new role, resisting the pressures to treat them as if they were merely fitting into a 'post-leaver shaped' hole in the organisation-in-the-mind of members.

### **The members**

For the members the departure of the post-leaver raises all the mixed feelings about endings - feelings of gratitude, anger, being abandoned and of unfinished business. These feelings will be coloured by the extent to which their relationship with the post-leaver was one of dependence, pairing or fight/flight. Tensions and conflicts, both organisational and interpersonal, which have been contained by the post-leaver, are potentially let loose.

Esau's threat to retaliate for the injustices Jacob has inflicted on him, although held in check until Isaac is out of the picture, precipitates Jacob's flight from home. It is not unusual for such rivalry to emerge around succession, particularly where there are potential successors within the organisation. This may find expression not only through open competition, but also through seeking support of other members or the unwillingness to trust and support potential inheritors. It is not unusual for some members, like Jacob, to decide now is the time to move on.

At the same time, the inheritor raises the question of whether and how the organisation will change. This is likely to be acute for those whose roles have developed consciously, and unconsciously, to compensate and complement the post-leaver's particular set of skills and ways of working. They are faced with the probability that they will have to re-find, re-make and re-take their roles in quite a different way in the future.

However, underlying these organisational adjustments is a more fundamental challenge - the possibility that the arrival of the inheritor will lead to the *transformation* of the institution. Some may look for such a transformation whilst others are anxious about whether a transformed enterprise will be a place where their desire can be worked through. We talked with one inheritor, where a key factor in deciding to seek the chief executive role was to ensure the continuation of the vision which he had worked with the post-leaver to develop, which might not be understood by someone from outside the organisation. In the same way, Rebekah's anxiety about Esau and his wives was that the family might be absorbed into the local Hittite clans and abandon the Covenant promise. Thus succession becomes a struggle about whether the institution (as understood by the different members) should live or die.

### **Relationships and interactions**

The interplay of all these desires creates a three way dynamic - as the post-leaver struggles to pass on their experience and vision, the inheritor struggles to integrate their own in new ways, and the members struggle to hold both those often conflicting desires within them. The members may mobilise different aspects of the inheritor's and post-leaver's desire at certain times depending on the dynamics.

It is easy to locate succession issues solely in the personal relationship between the inheritor and the post-leaver. This is *not* an accident - there are aspects as to why this may be useful to the members.

- The inheritor and the post-leaver are carrying out something on everyone else's behalf. So what ends up happening between them has a systemic dimension<sup>3</sup>. So, for example, if an inheritor fails - this may be because there was a wider wish to preserve the past, or because the institution is no longer meeting the needs of the context, or because the members could not recover the power they had projected into the previous leader. It becomes useful then to locate the process within these two people alone.
- It also allows members to split off all the difficulty and struggle of the realities of the 'here-and-now' - the succession can become a means of living in the past or future.

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<sup>3</sup> *We would argue that even when the post-leaver and inheritor do not overlap, the inheritor has to deal with the reputation and memories of the post-leaver - and the potential transference phenomena.*

- Equally it can allow members to split off the internal change process from themselves. Succession in an enterprise of which we feel we have some ownership can be traumatic - it challenges and can transform our institution-in-the-mind. This trauma is strengthened where personal narratives are intertwined with the institution-in-the-mind and issues of belonging, empowerment and envisioning are triggered in the individual.

Thus where there is an ongoing relationship between inheritor and post-leaver the process of succession can be complex. Inheritors and post-leavers we have spoken to, in the course of writing this, have talked about finding themselves very confused, and finding dynamics entering their dialogues which, they felt, were not their own. They have spoken about feeling “taken over” at different times by murderous desires, terrible loneliness, and ecstatic hope; they have spoken about being given “silver bullets”, feeling “blessed” and feeling “cursed”; they have felt, at moments, both full of life and empty of it - all feelings they have experienced as coming from beyond themselves.

Thus in exploring the dynamics of succession it becomes critical to look not only at what is happening between the inheritor and the post-leaver, but also at the interactions with (and between) members and between the enterprise and its context.

#### **4 Dealing with the realities of the context**

As the inheritor finds, makes and takes their new role, they experience the weight of the institution as a whole, its realities and hopes and what is needed for it to survive and flourish. They become aware of the risk factors and anxieties the post-leaver was containing, and the internal issues which they may not have faced up to.

One chief executive we talked to had found himself dealing almost immediately with making a senior member of staff redundant. The problems around that particular development role had been evident for over a year, but his predecessor had delayed this decision in the hope that the development would produce new income. The inheritor’s experience was that, whilst he had received a number of jokey comments along the lines of “now we know you’re a bastard”, in fact staff had felt safer because he had dealt with the realities of the situation.

Thus part of the inheritance for the new leader may be the issues that the post-leaver had not recognised or confronted. Can the inheritor lead the organisation in tackling the realities in relation to the context. This is a real challenge, for example, for headteachers who take over what are seen as ‘failing schools’, where the impact of this perception undermines the morale and effectiveness of both students and staff.

Where the context is changing, this may require a very different leadership from that provided by the post-leaver. For example, we have suggested that in the story of Jacob and Esau the context is one where the responses of a hunter/warrior may be less successful than those of a

farmer/negotiator. This seems to us to be a factor in the recent difficulties exhibited by the Conservative Party in being able to stay united behind William Hague or Ian Duncan Smith.

In a situation in which the social structure of the United Kingdom is changing, it seems that the traditional splitting and polarisation between ‘left’ and ‘right’ no longer enables us to deal with the realities of a globalised economy. The Labour Party has recognised this and responded by moving to the centre ground as ‘New Labour’, although not without difficulties with its membership. It seems to us that the Conservative Party has not recognised that the real challenge is to redefine their purpose in this new context. What is the Conservative Party for? What is the Party’s relationship with the context? How can the Party respond to these changes and remain true to its traditions (*ie* its inheritance)? The inability to answer those questions that relate them to the outside world has led them inside themselves; their focus has become their own internal organisation.

In this situation, effective succession becomes difficult, for how do we choose the leader we need when we do not know what we are for and where we are going? Constantly changing leaders does not really substantially change anything - it becomes a way for everyone in the party to avoid the realities of *inheritance* and *purpose*. When members of the Party are clear about what they wish to inherit and what its purpose is, succession will become meaningful because now there will be a leadership *role* to be taken, where before there was only a *position* to fill.

## 5 The modes of succession

In the Jacob and Esau story, the tensions around succession are resolved through schism and separate development. This is one possible outcome, but there are others which have been identified by Mat Bird, who has written about generational issues (Hilborn & Bird, 2002). He suggests that as well as succession by *schism*, succession by *cloning* and succession by *shared envisioning* are also possible<sup>4</sup>.

We would go further and suggest that these are not only outcomes, but represent tensions at play in interactions within enterprises throughout the succession process.

- **Struggling with difference** (*leading to schism or shared envisioning*): This does not necessarily mean that the enterprise itself splits but rather that schisms occur between members or members experience schism within themselves.

It can occur when the post-leaver’s preoccupation is whether their personal narrative will survive, when the inheritor’s desire becomes skewed by personal ambition, or when the members cannot hold the difference within and amongst themselves such that it becomes

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<sup>4</sup> These were the terms he used in discussion with one of the authors; different descriptions are used in the published version.

outwardly manifested as a schism. Schism is a particularly likely outcome when the leadership are people with a valency to fight/flight behaviour (Bion 1961).

Schism, however, is part of the transformation process. As new ideas and visions are introduced by the inheritor they may be temporarily rejected as too challenging to the 'institution-in-the-mind' of everyone else in the organisation. As long as the organisation can contain these schisms, new ideas can be integrated over time. Struggling with difference is necessary if *shared envisioning* is to occur.

What may become difficult for some members is if they experience change as a form of criticism of what the post-leaver did or embodied. They feel under pressure to reject the post-leaver, previously internalised as a good object. As Mannie Sher has argued (Sher 2003), this turning away from internal objects may be experienced as a form of corruption.

- **Regression to 'sameness'** (*leading to stagnation or 'cloning'*) Regression to 'sameness' happens when the organisation cannot transform and demands that the successor behave as the post-leaver had. The inheritor introjects the institution-in-the-mind of the post-leaver and becomes a type of clone. At different points in the process the inheritor will necessarily collude with this, usually depending on how freely the post-leaver is passing on ownership. This cloning can be manifested as a desire to 'teach' the inheritor and subsume her or his ideas into the organisation's internal narrative.

This pressure may also come from the members who encourage similar behaviours from the inheritor as they have been used to. This is a result of the inability of the members to transform their own institution-in-the-mind. These processes are *necessary to an extent* to avoid schism; however, if difference is not worked with, the enterprise faces *stagnation* as nothing new can emerge. This is particularly likely in a situation in which a significant number of those involved have a valency towards dependence (Bion 1961).

- **Succession by shared envisioning** is when the inheritor and the post-leaver envision a transformed institution and collectively buy into a process of *transformation*. This involves the recognition that the organisation will and must change. This is often enabled to happen when the members contain their own projections - giving the inheritor and post-leaver enough space to work through their own desires and develop a vision for the future of the enterprise.

The process of shared envisioning is likely to be mobilised where the inheritor and others have a valency towards pairing behaviour. However if this envisioning is not able to address the realities of the context, then it is likely to be characterised by basic assumption pairing behaviour (Bion 1961) which sustains hope but does not necessarily ensure that the enterprise is sustainable.

## Resistances

If these processes are worked through, everyone's institution-in-the-mind will have changed. It is useful to look at the resistance to that happening and how it manifests itself. These are some of the main resistances we have identified. This list is by no means exhaustive.

**Resistance through postponement** occurs when the enterprise avoids facing the issue of succession by focussing its energies on a primary task of maintaining the old leader. This usually occurs when the members of the organisation cannot work through their dependence on a leader such that their organisation-in-the-mind becomes subsumed in the personal narrative of the leader. When succession becomes inevitable and can no longer be denied, members need to distinguish between realities about the organisation and personal narratives. If this cannot be done, the inheritor will not be able to internalise the inheritance.

**Resistance through displacement** occurs when, though the succession in positions is between an inheritor and a post-leaver, there is another succession of power between other members. In this case the post-leaver or inheritor may not receive the projected power of members as the actual succession, for the members, is happening elsewhere in the organisation. This process can become mobilised by the members as a means of avoiding the realities of the planned succession.

**Resistance through replacement** This is the 'fat cat' process where the organisation simply replaces or 'kills off' the leader, often with large cash payments. Though this appears to avoid the struggles of succession dynamics it suffers from the fantasy that succession only happens between two people and is not a corporate process. The act of power whereby the leader is replaced splits off the membership from the leadership of the organisation, which not only disables the members' own leadership, but also disables the leader's ability to own the institution and lead it. In the long term this form of avoidance inhibits the sustainability and development of the institution as a whole.

## 6 Conclusion - *from managing succession to 'creating succession'*

In this paper we have suggested that in thinking about succession in organisational life, it is necessary to take into account the institution-in-the-mind that has been internalised, the dynamics between the post-leaver, inheritor and members, the realities of the organisation's context and the seductions of schism, cloning and shared envisioning, and resistances. For us, it raises questions about whether as consultants, as leaders or as members of organisations we are sufficiently sophisticated in acknowledging or handling these dynamics.

For example, it is interesting that we have developed few 'rites of passage' around succession other than the 'leaving party'. We note that for the chief executives in the voluntary sector whom we interviewed, their first Annual General Meeting (which on other occasions is usually



a pretty meaningless ritual) became a key moment in symbolising they were now ‘the leader’, accountable for the position and future direction of the enterprise.

Some so called ‘primitive’ tribes seem to handle this rather more realistically. The social anthropologist, Victor Turner (1969), writes about how the Ndembu people of Zambia go about the installation of a new paramount chief, who is not only the focus of the political-legal hierarchy but is also seen as symbolically embodying the total community and its well-being. In this rite of passage, it is possible to identify:

- the members taking responsibility for the inheritor and the inheritance that is being left behind for the new generation;
- active involvement of member subgroups, in a way which is designed to reduce the risk of schism;
- the desire of the inheritor being confronted - whether in greed, desire or meanness he will try to possess for himself what ought to be shared for the common good;
- the resentments and rivalries of the members being made public, and hopefully laid to rest;
- the debt to the post-leaver(s) being acknowledged and their “shades” asked to give the inheritor strength.

This dramatic ceremony handles ritually many of the dynamics we have identified, with a strong wish that the succession will prove a blessing, not a curse. We doubt whether many of our present organisational leaders would be willing to submit to such a ceremony!

But if we cannot find appropriate ways in our time to address the underlying dynamics of succession, then we may face real problems, particularly in terms of stagnation and a lack of transformation.

What Jacob succeeds in doing, despite the complex relationships with the members of his extended family, is owning and carrying forward the purpose represented by the Covenant. The challenge we face as post-leavers is whether we can face up to our responsibility to new generations and ask ourselves what we are leaving them to inherit. The challenge we face as inheritors is whether we can we honour, own and develop the inheritance we have received.

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