

## **Blind to “topness,” leaders unintentionally disempower their organisations. Are you?**

In recent months I have been coaching a General Manager in an IT service business. Her business is going through significant transformation. She is exploring ways to cope with an increased experience of being overloaded and the unhelpful impact that is having on relationships, personal performance and her wellbeing. Despite being a skilled delegator, under this increased pressure, she had stopped involving her team and has been holding on to more and more herself.

As part of our shared sense making I offered my client a perspective of her experience based on Barry Oshry’s human systems theory. The theory suggests predictable conditions await us all when we take on leadership responsibilities. Predictable conditions of overload. Overloaded by the volume, complexity, unpredictability of things for which we are responsible and accountable. In this overload some of us will experience a real sense of overwhelm and burden, Oshry calls this experience our “Topness.”

In our “Topness” we are vulnerable to an unconscious reflex response to our “topness,” we are at risk of taking on even more responsibility, holding on to responsibility for things that we could otherwise allow others to take on or share, and that perversely creates an experience of increased overload and burden for ourselves. A vicious cycle gets set in motion, increasing our sense of overwhelm and burden.

If we as leaders recognise any of this in our own experiences then we know it has a personal impact. We need also to pay attention to the wider disempowering consequences for our teams of this reflex tendency to suck up responsibility towards ourselves.

As a father my “topness” appears frequently in our family system. I realise, usually with “help” from my wife and daughters, that in our busy lives I often suck up more responsibility for family stuff than I need to which means my teenagers are not given the possibility to step up and grow and I increase my moments of frustration, wishing them to do more but not seeing my part in disempowering them.

When we reflexively suck up more responsibility to ourselves we disempower others as we:

- Fail to involve other minds in creatively finding solutions to our biggest challenges,
- Fail to make progress on the trickiest and perplexing items on our agenda.
- Tend to delegate the easy stuff to which we have answers.
- Deny our teams the developmental opportunities inherent in challenging projects
- Fail to build capacity in our teams to be adaptable, collaborative, and innovate.

In short, as we unconsciously suck up more responsibility to ourselves we are taking responsibility away from others. Disempowering them and the organisation. In a VUCA world this surely is not what we leaders really want to do?

Back to my client. She has identified some alternative strategies:

- Before she says “yes” to something she is committed to asking herself “do I really have to do this?” and “who else needs to be involved in this?”
- She will reflect in her Journal (my clients are encouraged to develop reflective practices using a journal) on how much responsibility she has unconsciously / reflexively “sucked up” today / this week, and identify actions to share the responsibility.
- She will involve others in her most difficult agenda items to which she has no obvious solutions.

These are her strategies, they may or may not work for you. Oshry offers some generic strategies to protect and support us in our “Topness”:

First he invites Leaders to make a general commitment to “be a top who creates responsibility throughout the system” and to be open to finding our own ways to do this. He also offers some generic strategies as follows:

- Inform: Share real and meaningful data. Trust then to use this data wisely and well. Be transparent.
- Involve: Involve others in the most important things on your agendas. The things you are stuck on.
- Develop: Invest in your people and their development. Involve others as a way to develop their capabilities. Coach them and expose them to new experiences.
- Create and use teams: bring people together for a specific purpose, use teams to solve problems, stand back and let them get on with it.
- Inspire: Be clear what your (shared) higher purpose and vision is. Keep communicating it, talk about it, and engage others on how they connect with it. Give your people a “Why?” for being at work. (*Thanks Simon Sinek*)

### **So what?**

It matters to me that organisations are healthy, effective and productive, and that people have the most satisfying experience of work that they can have. This drives my professional work.

I want to raise awareness of our vulnerability to predictable, but so often unseen, unproductive systemic dynamics of which our reflex reaction to “Topness” is one.

I invite you to turn on your “Topness” radars. See what you notice:

- Are you feeling unusually burdened and overwhelmed?
- How much responsibility have you sucked up to yourself and away from others?
- What empowering strategies do you use well?
- What empowering strategies could you use more?
- What are your own strategies for “creating responsibility throughout your system”?

## **"Middleness" - a treatable organisational disease.**

Earlier in my career I was a functional manager in a large consulting firm. I very nearly did not survive the pressures I felt in that role. Before long I doubted my capability, worked longer and longer hours to please all my stakeholders, never felt I was doing enough, I felt isolated, and I neglected my health and home life. It was unsustainable and I blamed myself.

It never occurred to me that what I was experiencing was for the most part a predictable systemic experience of being in the tearing middle space of an organisation, I only learned that much later when I came across the powerful work of Barry Oshry.

“Middleness” – is a made up word, not really a medical condition as far as I know. I have taken it from the Human Systems Theory of Barry Oshry in which he sets out several predictable, usually unseen, unproductive dynamics of organisational life. One of these is “Middleness.”

“Middleness” deserves our attention because it debilitates so many on whom our organisations depend on if they are to truly flourish.

“Middleness” impacts important business agendas such as:

- Productivity
- Alignment around shared vision and goals
- Faltering change and transformation initiatives
- Breaking down cross - silo barriers to work more collaboratively
- Empowering an organisation and distributing leadership responsibility

With senior leaders (Tops) setting the vision and workers (Bottoms) carrying out the tasks then it is left to Managers (Middles) to help realize and imbed the vision. Being in the middle is a difficult place to master when we have multiple parties to serve, the boss, peers, customers and subordinates, who so often want conflicting things. Middles can feel torn and pulled in all directions. Yet being successful in the Middle is also critical to the health of any organisational system and absolutely critical in assuring that the goals of an organisation are met.

Operating in the tearing conditions of the Middle spaces of an organisation makes us vulnerable to the disease “Middleness.”

Classic symptoms of Middleness: (which are familiar to you?)

1. Middles tend to be involved in a hectic pace, working long and hard. Middles seem to be constantly on the go, carrying with them never ending lists of meetings to attend, items to accomplish, errands to run, unfinished paperwork, business to be transacted on the run, constant intrusions and so on.
2. Middles are prone to deflated egos, often receiving little support or gratitude up or down, feeling incompetent, seldom seeing satisfying results, and working hard but pleasing no one.
3. Middles tend to be confused by their role. Upward and downward demands may leave them without a clear position or thinking of their own, ambivalent as they try to respond to both Tops and to Bottoms. They often assume compromise positions that please no one, not even themselves.

4. Middles may have difficulty seeing them as “significant” in a system where the action seems to lie with Tops or Bottoms. As invisible conciliators rather than strategists or implementers, they may be heavily burdened yet not accomplished.
5. Very often, Middles are isolated and lonely, accepted by neither Tops nor Bottoms, separated from their peers by focus and work unit. They often silently harbour interpersonal tension and competitive anxieties with respect to peers.
6. Initiation, independent thought and action are seldom the provinces of Middles. They are more inclined to react to the situations, strategies and actions of Tops and Bottoms.
7. Middles tend to personalise their experiences. When a situation goes badly, it’s because of their own failure, their lack of skill, their low intelligence, their lack of competence, and their lack of character.

No wonder Middle managers are so often seen by others in the system, Top and Bottom alike, as well meaning and hardworking, yet often uninformed and relatively ineffective, agents of the top or the workers, inconsistent, weak, incompetent, powerless and unable or unwilling to make important decisions on their own.

We appoint well-qualified and capable people to management roles, but how often do we witness them struggling? How hard are people working at hiding the reality that they are barely coping in these roles? How can that be?

An HBR white paper published March 2013, “Danger in the Middle” - why middle managers aren’t ready to lead”, reinforces the challenging, tearing context that middle managers are working in and compelling business reasons to invest in this critical population. It provides evidence of a relative under investment in this population that ill equips them to rise to the contemporary challenges of organisations.

From my personal experiences, my work in coaching and leadership development and working with middle leadership groups I think it is a common phenomenon.

From time to time I am approached by clients inviting me to coach middle leaders or to run time management training or such like for groups of middle leaders to address what I now see systemically as predictable and familiar symptoms of Middleness. If we see situations without a systemic perspective then, understandably, our solutions are likely to be personal, e.g. Time management training. If we can see systemically then new possibilities open up. I invite my clients to work systemically. (If it really does turn out to be a personal skill need, like time management, I refer to a suitable specialist. I’m not a time management trainer).

One powerful perspective we can offer Middle Leaders and their organisations is to develop their capability to lead from the middle with a systemic perspective, to value less their attention to task and value more their impact on the wider system they are in.

Here are some systemic solutions - (medicine for Middleness):

1. Resist the urge to make other people’s problems, issues and conflicts your own. Your job is to empower them to resolve their issues, not take responsibility for them.

2. Keep your own mind: when your attention is on conflicting information from above and below, it is easy to be confused and torn. Learn to pay attention to your point of view, your values, and your solutions.
3. Be a Top whenever you can. Work on tough issues. Don't pass them up to your top. See what needs doing and act. Seek forgiveness not permission. Tops need to know only the situations that are truly unsolvable at Middle levels.
4. Be a Bottom when you should. Unhelpful directives from Tops? Middles are often better positioned to recognise and deal with downward rubbish. Deal with it at the Middle level. Don't pass it on to the workers. ("Dear Boss, regarding initiative X, I know you have good intentions here but in this state it will have unintended consequences, let's discuss amendments.")
5. Be a coach rather than a fixer. Empathise and understand their situation but don't solve their problems for them. Your job is to work with them and empower them to solve their own problems.
6. Facilitate solutions by bringing together the people who need to be together, and help them have productive interactions. Step out of being the buffer between them.
7. Integrate with peers. Cultivate cooperative, collaborative and supportive relationships with other Middles. Share information, make sense of the pool of data and identify common issues that need collective attention. Create and exercise collective influence.

So what?

It matters to me that organisations are healthy, effective and productive, and that people have the most satisfying experience of work that they can have. This drives my professional work.

I want to raise awareness of our vulnerability to predictable, but so often unseen, unproductive systemic dynamics of which "Middleness" is one. (Topness could follow; "Bottomness" was the topic of an earlier article).

I invite you to turn on your middleness radars. See what you notice:

1. Where does Middleness show up around you?
2. What is your personal relationship with Middleness?
3. What are the consequences for you? / others? / your organisation?

## IS “BOTTOMNESS” GETTING IN THE WAY OF YOUR EFFECTIVENESS?

Two recent experiences, one from my home life and one from my executive coaching work, have refocused my attention on the notion of “bottomness” and how it can have unhelpful impact on our performance.

Before I explain what I mean by “bottomness” let me share the first of those experiences: I am at times challenged in parenting my teenage daughters. My wife observed to me last week that more than usual I have been expressing my parenting frustrations and they tend to sound like: “it really wasn’t meant to be like this,” “if only she had....,” and “she really should .....

She wanted me to know that it was really not very helpful or productive and was just a little tiresome. She went on to remind me that our successful parenting strategies (we do have some) have had a common quality that is; we make more progress in our parenting and nurturing when we deal with the reality we are facing rather than moan about how it should be. I am a more effective parent when I choose to stop complaining and get alongside my daughters, engaging them and co creating ways forward.

She had caught me in a cycle of “bottomness.”

So let me explain “bottomness.” It is a made up word. This notion comes from the powerful work of Barry Oshry and his Human Systems Theory that sets out several predictable, usually unseen, unproductive dynamics of organisational life. One of these is “bottomness.”

“bottomness”: adj. or abstract noun. Describing moments when:

- we are dissatisfied with our experience and
- we feel powerless, that others are doing to us and
- we are convinced all would be OK if only others would sort it out

In these moments of “bottomness”:

- It seems clear that others are responsible, not us. We are unable to see that we might have a part to play in either creating our dissatisfactions or in perpetuating them. It is after all about others doing to us.
- We have given up our power, our sense of possibility and our sense of responsibility. Others hold all that.
- We are unlikely to sustain creative and productive relationships.
- We are unable to focus on finding alternative productive strategies.
- We are hooked into holding others responsible, our moaning, and our blaming. This is where we become unproductive as we lose sight of what really needs to happen.

Bottomness is a predictable and common unconscious human reflex reaction to circumstances. We do not consciously set out to create it for ourselves, yet with regularity many of us find ourselves in it.

How often do you hear yourselves or colleagues say things like “it shouldn’t be like this” and “if only they would sort it out”? When “they“ are usually those people “up there”: the bosses,

people in Head Office, who are held to be responsible. I think this is a common dynamic, yet how often do we catch ourselves doing it, getting caught in our bottomness?

Being around colleagues who are caught in their “bottomness” can be a pretty frustrating experience, yet we are all susceptible to moments of bottomness, it's a very human thing whatever our role or status.

Bottomness holds us in unproductive and powerless patterns. It can be a distraction from what we are really trying to achieve. If we want a different more powerful experience then we have a choice to shift out of our bottomness, a shift from being victim and complainant, from blaming others and holding others responsible for our experiences, to creators and co-creators of positive alternatives.

Here is an illustration of “bottomness” experienced by a Leader:

I was recently coaching an NZ based country General Manager. Last year his organisation had been taken over by a global organisation based in Australia. He was expressing strong frustrations about his relationship with the new overseas HQ and various individuals there. In one particular coaching session he was giving me a summary of what life was like for him at that time. His sentences were full of phrases such as: “they don't understand me / us,” “if only they would do xyz.” “It is unreasonable and unfair that ...,” “they think we are uncooperative.”

My “bottomness” radar was on full alert.

I shared with him what I was hearing, not the words exactly, but the extent of his dissatisfaction, that his reputation and that of the NZ operation were at risk, and that he might be holding “them” responsible for the situation. I asked him, “and to what extent might you be responsible for the unsatisfactory relationships with Australia? “. There was silence. A light went on.

In the dialogue that followed, my client, at first a little reluctantly, began to see what he had not seen before, that he was playing victim, that he had not realized how much of his power he was giving away to people in HQ. As the coaching progressed he identified plenty of ways for him to create the more productive kind of relationships with Australia that he desired starting with a clear vision of what he wanted for NZ and himself.

The significant shift was for him to notice his moment of “bottomness,” to notice that he was attributing significant responsibility for his dissatisfactions to others. He resolved to do something different and continues to work on creating more connected and productive relationships with every conversation he has. Today, a few months later, he is able to report that Australian colleagues are talking positively about the value of the NZ operation and he is enjoying more cooperative and supportive relationships with Head Office colleagues.

So what?

Well, it matters to me that organisations are healthy, effective and productive, and that people have the most satisfying experience of work that they can have. This drives my professional work.

I want to raise awareness of our vulnerability to predictable, but so often unseen, unproductive systemic dynamics of which “bottomness” is one. (Topness and Middleness could follow).

So, I invite you to turn on your bottomness radars. See what you notice:

- What are your familiar moments of bottomness?
- Ask a trusted partner / colleague if they have ever seen it in you
- What do you think, feel and do in those moments?
- What are the unproductive consequences to you? Impact on others? Your organisation?
- What happens to your power in those moments?
- What does it take for you to shift out of bottomness?
- Talk to people around you about this notion of bottomness
- Notice potential bottomness in others
- Use a journal to reflect on your bottomness

If you should find yourself in a moment of bottomness and choose to do something about it, here are some strategies to try:

Actions to shift out of bottomness:

- Smile! It's OK. Accept bottomness as a predictable human reflex. It's great that you have noticed (because more satisfactory possibilities lie ahead)
- Make a choice to get more of the outcome you desire
- Create a clear vision and purpose for what you want more of
- Declare your positive intentions and wishes so others may get alongside you and help make it happen
- Engage others in co - creating ways ahead

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