FINAL

PSYCHOANALYSIS AT WORK

Kenneth Eisold, PhD

353 Central Park West
New York, NY 10025
Tel: 212-316-4499
Fax: 212-932-3165
Email: Ken@KenEisold.com

ABSTRACT

I argue in this paper that psychoanalysis can be applied to work with organizations primarily as a clinical discipline that illuminates four areas of organizational life. It can offer opportunities for self-reflection. It can shed new light on repetitive, intractable behaviors. It can challenge the persistence of old ideas. And it can identify deceptions or omissions in consciousness, perceptions or ideas that have been edited out of conscious thought.

How can we apply our complex understanding of relationships to the workplace? How can we help workers become better at their jobs, more efficient, more cooperative and competitive? More broadly, in what ways can we assist organizations to contend with their conflicts and dilemmas more effectively?

These tasks are being addressed by a growing number of psychoanalysts, and the rewards are significant. Improvements in the workplace touch a large number of lives, and offer the opportunity to make a substantial difference in managing organizational conflicts over the long term. I also find that executives and senior managers are often exceptionally intelligent and dedicated to being effective. They appreciate help. Organizations, moreover, usually offer better pay for professional services. It can be very gratifying work.

But such environments obviously require some rethinking of our traditional emphasis on the dyadic relationship, confined to our consulting rooms, as well as our usual goals of alleviating personal distress or improving mental health. It also requires decentering from some of our familiar psychoanalytic cultural assumptions.

First, those who want to do that work, need to check out whatever ambivalence they may have about “business,” or “profit,” or

"bureaucracy." Psychoanalysis has tended to privilege the problems of personal relationships, preferring the problems of love to those of work. Moreover, our profession has often looked askance at organizations, siding with individuals in our culture's polarization of the individual and the group. We even tend to demonize our own professional organizations, often viewing them as necessary evils.

As a result it is essential to question one's "transference" to corporations and other businesses that will, among other things, downsize employees, outsource jobs, sell off units, or pressure their workers for greater productivity. Similarly, if one wants to do this work, it is important to explore ingrained attitudes towards government agencies that implement laws or policies with which one disagrees. You don't have to like such practices or policies, but you have to join them where they are – as you have to join patients where they are – if you are to help them improve.

A second caveat: you will need to familiarize your self with practices that will seem unfamiliar, even foreign. Managers in organizations usually expect you to be familiar with the standard practices and terms they employ. It will also be useful to know some of the key contributors to the theory of management, the important schools, something about recent financial history, as well as the current management theorists and "gurus" your clients will most likely have read. I also have found it useful

to know something about group dynamics, as the effectiveness of individuals is shaped by their embeddedness in the groups within which they work. We need to be familiar with many aspects of organizational life, not just the hidden dimensions. And we have to know much of what our competitors, who will not have our clinical skills, know as well.

On the other hand, psychoanalysts have significant advantages. Our clinical skills allow us to read behavior that is puzzling or incomplete to those unfamiliar with the unconscious. And our training has helped us acquire a tolerance for ambiguity and confusion that is useful in an arena that prizes certainty and quick results. We know that, much as people may want to change, they will resist giving up old ways of behaving. As a result, we understand that real change is a slow and often torturous process.

It is possibly to distill our clinical advantage into four essential points, four ways in which we can add significant value to organizational life:

1. Self-reflection. Executives and groups, caught up in the pressure of the moment, are often unable to think clearly or freely. By offering emotional support or containment for their anxiety, or by supplying a conflict free, safe space, we can increase our clients' capacity for thought.

2. Shedding new light on repetitive, intractable behaviors. Clients can often see that they or their teams are unable to change, but the reasons for that are out of sight, not understood. An enhanced ability to reflect on their behavior together with our ability to read unconscious motives can help them see more deeply into why they are stuck and move towards relinquishing set patterns.

3. Challenging the persistence of old ideas. These can be hangovers from the past that infiltrate current perceptions (such as transference), or they can be barriers to anxiety (social defenses) that have become accepted ways of working. (See Jacques, 1955, and Menzies, 1967)

4. Identifying deceptions or omissions in consciousness, perceptions or ideas that have been edited out of conscious thought. Often conventional narratives omit key explanatory factors for those inside the organization, sometimes because they arouse anxiety, but also because they do not fit existing paradigms that are part of set identities or established ways of doing business.

These ideas may seem so simple as to be obvious, and yet I believe they can convey to potential clients what might otherwise sound arcane and

obscure. My experience is that clients are not particularly interested in the promise of new “interpretation.” Not only can interpretations seem invasive and gratuitous, they can leave the client feeling unsure of what to think or do. But these four clinical skills are the practical interventions that enhance the abilities of clients themselves to think about their experience, the difference that can lead to significant changes in behavior.

I will take up each of these four ideas and provide some examples from my own work but also the work that has been offered by others. At the end, I will provide a quick summary of how they may be linked back to a number of key psychoanalytic concepts.

1. Better Thinking: Reflection

I have often found that organizational leaders are grateful for the opportunity to “hear themselves think,” as they often put it, to get in touch with what they had not realized was on their minds until they heard themselves say it. They can also use the opportunity to think more fully and clearly about issues that are suffused with conflict, to sort things out.

The term “reflection” suggests looking into a mirror, dwelling on the experience one is having. But it is also a matter of paying attention to the feelings one is having, the memories and associations that come to mind, the details that emerge, and the trains of thought produced. Reflection stands in opposition to action, staying with the thoughts and feelings instead of acting on them.

Obviously you do not need to be a psychoanalyst or a highly trained consultant to listen and help someone listen to himself. A spouse or a friend can do the job. But a trained practitioner can often do a better job by, among other things, refraining from trying to help too much and by withholding premature comment. A trained professional can also ask clarifying questions or questions that subtly prod the client along to pursue a line of thought. And, of course, a professional provides discipline and confidentiality to the process.

Several years ago, I had a series of meetings with a client that illustrated these points dramatically. Mathematically gifted, he had set out to create a firm that would use computer-based models to identify successful trades, but for all his brilliance with numbers, programs and technology, he had difficulty working with others. To put it simply: he could be a bully. He could ask questions, even communicate what he thought were the technical problems he faced, but if that did not work to produce the

answers he needed, he became frustrated and angry, and ended up browbeating his co-workers. He wanted my help in managing those relationships.

Not surprisingly, as much as he wanted my help he could not easily accept it: the problem he had getting along with others showed itself in his relationship with me. But what I found was that I did not actually have to suggest much to him. The mere act of speaking with me seemed to open up a space in his own mind. As he described to me the interactions he was having with others, I believe, he could hear himself in a new way, and he began conceptualizing the problems he was having differently. He even developed some insights into why a particular person might have difficulty understanding what he was trying to say. Only occasionally did I have to offer a comment, usually as his request, and I think that the function of that was largely to remind him of my presence, which was to reinforce his awareness of the space that existed between us. If I spoke too much on those occasions, he simply brushed me aside, in effect, and continued with his own thoughts.

If he had been in therapy with me, I would have felt obliged to address these responses to me as symptomatic of his relationships with others in general. But he had not sought me out for therapy. Nor was the presenting problem about the quality of his interpersonal interactions.

He had sought me out to help him in his role of manager, and in that role he had serious difficulty in getting what he wanted from employees. Bullying them turned them off, made them angry and uncooperative. In that context, my role was to help him become more effective in getting his enterprise to function. He didn't want to change his behavior or even, necessarily, to understand it. He was after the cooperation from others he needed to be successful.

In this case, my client's need to control the process with me stemmed not only from his aggressive need to dominate, but also, I think, from an underlying envy. The need he felt for me was too great for him to bear, so he had to continually negate it. **Personally, had this been a therapeutic relationship, I would have been glad to work at expanding his awareness of these motives. But not only had he not come to me for that, I think, he would not have accepted any effort to widen the scope of our focus. He could have tolerated a greater degree of my intimate understanding. [**But, be that as it may,] W/ we found a way for him to take advantage of what I had to offer.

This illustrates the importance of "the contract" in consulting, the mutual understanding and agreement of the goals of working with a particular client. Needless to say, a trained psychoanalyst will see many things that potentially could be uncovered. In an organization,

one is likely to see many issues not directly related to the problem one has been brought in to help solve, such as gender discrimination, worker exploitation, safety conditions, and so forth. A good relationship of mutual trust with a client can often make it possible to note such issues in passing and test out the client's interest in addressing them. But by and large a consultant has to be willing to accept the terms one has agreed to at the start, and maintain that focus. In this case, I think it would have been fatal to try to "help" the client in ways he had not asked for.

Other clients have had less severe conflicts with accepting help. Some have little conflict at all. More usually, I find, that clients welcome and accept the opportunity to think together, not expecting me to solve their problems and not feeling on the spot themselves. Sometimes it's important to get clients away from the pressure to solve the problem, to offer them a related problem to focus their attention, something like "When did their awareness of this problem first arise?" or "Why did they think the problem was so intractable?" A somewhat different version of this is helping clients to reframe the topic, to get clients' minds out of familiar ruts that prevent new ideas from emerging. In group settings, we can often get others in the group to hear what is being said so that the group's capacity for reflection is enhanced.

Some years ago I was asked to work with the governing body of an institute that trained psychoanalysts. The presenting problem was that they were not able to talk to each other. As a result much of the business of the institute ground to a halt: promotions were not made, courses were not approved, appointments were permanently on hold, committee assignments left unfilled. The Director was stymied, and the group was frustrated and increasingly anxious about their inability to act.

In my first meeting with them I began by somewhat lamely asking them what ideas they themselves had about the dilemma. Someone suggested that it might be about succession, and differences between the more senior and junior members of the group. I asked if those sitting around the table could identify which group they belonged to, and to my astonishment – and theirs too – the members seated around the table on my left all said they were the "seniors." Those to my right were the "juniors," and the handful that saw themselves "in between" sat exactly at the boundary between the two. They had faced off in the room in perfect formation. We all laughed.

I suggested each group go off to a separate room. I assigned the task of discussing among themselves not only what they thought about the future direction of the institute but also how they thought their group was viewed by the other groups. They were to discuss those questions

for 20 minutes and designate a reporter to summarize their discussions and report back when we reconvened as a whole. Divided up in this way, reconfigured in sub-groups of largely like-minded colleagues, they were able to speak more freely among themselves. Moreover, having a reporter obligated to speak their thoughts and observations, allowed the ideas to be conveyed across the divide. Once the reports were made, the discussion became quite lively, actually at times quite heated. At the end of the meeting, nothing was resolved, but they had started talking to each other and they discovered that their anticipation of the dangers of talking were overblown. Relieved and encouraged, they asked me back for more meetings.

The reflective process started at that meeting led to the emergence not only of information within the group but also beginning thoughts about why the divide between the two groups had come to seem so intractable and dangerous. In this case, it led to an enhanced ability to look afresh at an old problem that turned out to lie at the heart of the conflict that paralyzed the governing group. Let me turn, then, to my second point about the psychoanalytic difference in organizational work.

2. Seeing Into Obstacles: Rethinking Repetitive, Intractable Problems

In the case I just described, the group's problem, it turned out, actually was about succession. Subsequent meetings revealed the key importance of an incident that had occurred about 3 years before. A dynamic, youthful leader had been selected as Director of the institute, animated by a vision of future change and growth, and he moved quickly and aggressively to shake things up. He identified a number of promising younger members of the faculty, encouraging them to take up leadership roles and appointing them to significant positions. In the process, he often by-passed the existing management group, setting up an informal advisory group for himself that quickly came to seem, together with him, to possess most of the executive power in the institute. Then, suddenly, he died in a car accident.

The institute, completely unprepared for such an event, faced a leadership crisis. But this also created an opportunity for the senior members, who felt marginalized, to reassert control. Gradually it became clear that, in moving on, an unconscious bargain had been struck. Another younger faculty member agreed to serve as Director, but with the unspoken agreement that the power of the old management group would be restored. The appointments and new structures set up by the previous director would be ignored.

Under this new arrangement the old problems of inefficiency that the former Director had tried to address with his reforms reemerged, of course, but now they were freighted with the fears and resentment in the younger faculty who had been encouraged to emerge but now felt pushed aside and rendered impotent. The seniors now clearly identified them as dangerous to their reestablished power. The fear and suppressed rage of the younger faculty silenced them. For their part, the senior faculty was immobilized by their guilt over the former director and their determination to prevent the changes he had initiated. They couldn't really talk about what had happened, and gradually over time their memories blurred and faded. What they knew for sure was that they did not trust each other. This was the situation I encountered when I met first with the management group.

It took some time to piece together this story, and to put back into relief the underlying management issue: their inefficiency and need for restructuring. Having restored the status quo ante, they had to start at the beginning to rethink the decision-making structures they needed. As a consultant, I saw that as the pressing issue and the primary leverage I had in getting them to address what had happened. Reflection was useful in freeing them to think about how they had gotten into this problem, but now they needed the more traditional advice and help of a management consultant to move forward.

In another case, I also was faced with a group that had become paralyzed. Partners in a law firm felt they never got anywhere in their discussions, and so they had stopped meeting. As a result, they were not able to select a managing partner who could run the firm for them. The firm drifted, the office manager, in effect, becoming the head. The partners started thinking about dissolving it.

What I observed when they met with me was that the two founding senior partners dominated the discussion, vociferously quarreling with each other. The others withdrew. Though the associates saw the pattern emerge again and again, and they complained bitterly about it, they didn't really see that it was their withdrawal that enabled the senior partners to continue their fighting. It became clear to me, however, that their silence not only offered them a form of protection from the conflicts between the senior partners, it created a vacuum for the senior partners to fill. The two senior partners felt comfortable with their fights and relished the opportunity to clash. The junior partners were intimidated. Though a number of them had quietly aligned with one or the other of the senior partners, most had tried to preserve their ability to work with each of them as their various cases required, and the fights made that more and more difficult.

My primary strategy was to point out the pattern again and again, virtually telling the senior partners to shut up at critical points so that the others could speak. That had some effect, but the turning point came when I had a meeting of the junior partners alone. Enjoying the absence of conflict for virtually the first time, they looked around the room and gradually came to the realization that they were the future of the firm. They would outlast the founders and inherit what was left – if they could act to keep it together.

Needless to say, that remained a daunting task, but without that realization I doubt that they could have come to the point of seeing the need to become more engaged and active. They eventually came to understand how they had not faced their responsibility for making sure the firm got the management it needed. At that point, I took on the job of helping them address the next step, the more conventional consulting task of selecting a managing partner from among the junior members of the firm, defining the role, assessing the competence of those vying for the job and negotiating the competition and anxieties inherent in the selection process.

3. Detecting the Past in the Present: The Persistence of Old Ideas

Bill Kahn, a professor at the business school of Boston University, has offered a good example of this in describing his work with a hospital. His case illustrates how old ideas that once seemed essential to embrace can continue to exert a deadening influence on current practice – but without being clearly identified and understood. (See Kahn, 2003)

Kahn was brought in to help the hospital develop a culture of innovation and teamwork. This seemed to be what they needed to improve service and become more competitive in an increasingly difficult economic environment. A major obstacle to change was a manager, a former nurse, who seemed something of a punitive stickler for rigid routines and was highly critical of any deviations from standard practices. Gradually it became clear to Kahn that the hospital administration now saw the nurse as the major obstacle to change. They were expecting he would agree about the need to replace her.

What he found was that the nurse had been given the job of manager following a surgical accident a few years back that had generated a fair amount of negative publicity for the hospital. At that point, it seemed to the director of the hospital that the staff needed to tighten their standards and procedures to ensure similar mistakes would not occur. The somewhat authoritarian and inflexible nurse seemed to be the ideal candidate for that job. And indeed she had been, except that now what

the hospital needed was a very different approach. Virtually everyone had forgotten how it was that the nurse was instated in her role and assigned her punitive role. She had become the scapegoat for the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Kahn's covert assignment was to legitimize this perception.

Kahn worked diligently to get the hospital to see that scapegoating the nurse would not help them to develop the new climate of cooperation and innovation that was their stated goal. For him, helping them to develop a greater sense of collective responsibility – essential in creating a new culture of mutual engagement – required more reflection and restraint. Indeed, replacing an old manager with a new one and imposing new values from the top would not be nearly as useful as helping the staff cooperate in seeing how such ideas get established and reinforced to begin with. Not surprisingly, however, the nurse manager was offered a severance package, and Kahn was thanked for his services.

In this case, as I see it, there were two old ideas that his consultation identified as persisting in the culture of the hospital: one was the conscious one replacing the punitive manner in which rigid standards were enforced. That social defense was no longer needed as the problem it defended against was no longer perceived as crucial to the hospital's survival. Standards were still needed but they were no longer the central

issue. The second old idea was the top down style of management that identified problems and imposed solutions. This was clearly at cross-purposes with the new management style the hospital administrators ostensibly wanted to implement in order to stimulate more creativity and engagement. In planning to impose this new culture, they failed to grasp how much they themselves would need to change to accomplish their new goal.

Reflecting on his own experience in this consultation, Kahn thought that his chances for success might have been better had he tried from the beginning to engage the hospital administration in an exploratory, reflective process. The very terms of the consultation he had accepted at the start – bringing in an outside expert to make a recommendation – helped to prevent the administration from thinking more deeply about the problem they faced.

Let me give another example of the unconscious persistence of old ideas acting as a barrier to change. I have been working with an institute dedicated to training group practitioners for a number of years. In their initial stage the founder held all the authority and essentially provided all the management. Wanting to grow and plan to be self-reliant, the founder and those who had volunteered to work with her on developing the organization set about to create a structure that could take over these

responsibilities. But none of them wanted what they saw as a traditionally rigid, bureaucratic and restrictive organization, the kind of organization they had encountered in their own earlier professional development. They were committed to the ideals of consensual decision-making, adaptable procedures responsive to new information, flexible rules and shared authority. They had strong aversive feelings about the psychoanalytic and other training institutes they had experienced earlier in their careers as well as such professional organizations as AGPA, The American Group Psychotherapy Association. They asked me to help them develop a management structure guided by their principles and values. Intrigued by the challenge, I agreed – though I was far from certain we could succeed.

The plan was to have twice yearly meetings in which volunteers to the "management group," as they called themselves, would convene from around the country. My design called for each meeting to begin with an extended set of reflections on how the various sectors in the organization were taking up their work: training new group leaders, developing curriculum, communicating the availability of training events, fund raising, publicity, and so on. We would receive reports from those involved in those activities, and from that we would build an agenda that we would address in the second part of the meeting to solve

administrative problems, restructure work groups as needed, re-staff, and so on.

As part of this design, I suggested that all existing structures would be dissolved when the “management group” convened. We would commit ourselves to rethinking the structures we needed afresh each time we met as we learned about how existing committees and work groups were functioning. At the end of each meeting of the “management group,” we would reassemble the organization as we had come then to think it should be. In effect, the organizational structures of the committees and work groups would carry the authority of the management group between meetings and implement its decisions, while doing the organization’s work, but then they would dissolve back into the body that retained ultimate authority. This was the plan they all agreed to.

Several underlying factors enabled this plan to work, despite the inherent instability of the organization’s perpetually provisional status. One was the continuing presence of the founder in the management group, functioning in the background. The work groups might come and go, but she was always there, offering encouragement and support – and continuing to hold her authority as the founder and source of the key theories that guided the group’s work. She did not intrude, but I think she was felt to be a kind of safety net.

After several meetings, the plan seemed to be working well. To be sure, I had to keep reminding the group of the underlying agreements, which was my means of reminding them of how much authority they held, how little of a self-sustaining organization structure they actually had established. And I frequently had to restrain them from moving too quickly from the reflective and evaluative parts of the meeting to the part where new decisions and actions were taken. But they respected my role and followed my direction in this, partly because I so obviously had the support of the founder who had been responsible for suggesting I become their consultant in the first place.

On one occasion, however, I almost sabotaged this delicate process. Feeling pleased with the progress we were all making, I commented, as if to underscore my sense of that progress, “perhaps soon we might even be ready to consider establishing by-laws.” There was an element of teasing in this, as I knew all too well their fear of traditional organizational structures -- and as with all teasing there was some expression of my frustration as well at the slowness of the process. I was also expressing my awareness that to become legally chartered they would eventually need by-laws, something that many of them also knew. But I was totally unprepared for their reaction of stunned silence and dismay. It was the proverbial fart in church.

You could say that my timing was off; I was pushing them too fast to confront an issue they were not ready to address. You could also say that I was challenging their fantasy of an organization: it was one thing for them to create and abide by these provisional structures; it was another to actually take a place in the world, as an organization among other organizations with financial and legal viability.

I can describe this now calmly, but at the time I was equally dismayed. We did survive the moment, I think largely as the good will we had built up enabled them to take my comment as a momentary lapse in taste, a bad joke. But a few years later, as the organization began to contemplate moving out from under the umbrella of the sheltering organization for non-profits, they were actually faced with the need to create by-laws. At that time, however, they were ready, and I was able to help them think about by-laws as a means of codifying their own principles and procedures, thus avoiding the imposition of arbitrary and oppressive rules, as they had originally feared. By now the term “by-laws” has become for us an in-joke, referring to the inevitable tensions involved in their own development.

4. Unearthing Suppressed Information: Deceptions or Omissions in Consciousness

Suppressed knowledge and information is endemic. Ponzi schemes can't last forever. At some point the pyramid will outgrow its base. Similarly, the deceptive accounting procedures that underlay such corporate scandals as Enron are doomed to be discovered. The absence of real profitability cannot be indefinitely disguised. Investors riding a boom market – as they have so often recently – also know that prices cannot rise forever, but they often convince themselves that, this time, something fundamental in the financial landscape has changed.

The recent and on-going financial crisis was brought on, in large part, by flaws in risk management. Financial institutions had found new and creative ways to offset risk, enabling them to leverage their assets to an unparalled degree. But such useful tools as the securitization of debt led many firms, driven by competitive pressures, to engage in ever more risky practices while all the time convincing themselves that they had found virtually fool-proof means of managing that risk. Many suspected that something was dangerously amiss, especially as the sub-prime mortgage market began to collapse. But those who were alarmed by what they suspected were hampered by the fact that most of these transactions occurred in the "shadow banking" system, away from

scrutiny, and were closely managed in independent "silos," distinct departments even within the same firm that did not communicate with each other. As a result, the danger of the increasing risk became either suppressed or an "inconvenient truth," as the pressure to increase profits grew. (See G. Tett, 2009)

We have no lack of examples to illustrate this point. As far as I know no one in the financial industry sought help in discerning gaps in their consciousness of risk. On the contrary, worried as they were about what many banks and other financial institutions were doing, they did not suspect a psychological collusion of denial.

On a more modest level, let me offer now just one example of a disastrous gap. A few years back, Amy Frayer, a former pilot now involved in training pilots, described events in the cockpit of a commercial airliner that led up to a crash, killing all on board. She was able to reconstruct the event using the information recovered from the plane's black box. A signal indicated that the landing gear of the plane was malfunctioning. The flight engineer, thinking that perhaps the signal itself was broken, engaged the pilot and the others in trying to solve the puzzle. The entire crew focused its exclusive attention on it – while the plane steadily lost altitude. When the pilot finally became aware of the

plane's dangerously low altitude, it was too late to avert a crash. (Frayer, 2003, 2005)

This is a classic case of basic assumption behavior (Bion, 1959) undermining the task of the work group, but with disastrous effects. We see this all the time in our work with teams, committees, task forces, hospital units and so forth: the potential heightened awareness of problems that groups can provide subverted by processes that screen out critical aspects of reality.

By now, it must be clear that the four types of intervention I am describing are not entirely discrete and distinct. They are more like focal points in a complex process. As psychoanalysts, I doubt we could work without encouraging reflection in others, as we know so well how it allows essential associations and memories to surface. Moreover, gaps in consciousness for us are obvious clues to the existence of suppressed ideas, often linked to troubling anxieties. We will be guided at every step of our consciousness of what is being said by wondering what is not being said, as we will inevitably use our clinical judgment to gauge what can be tolerated by clients and how best to approach troubling issues.

Final Thoughts

Let me conclude by making some links from this focus on pragmatic skills back to the psychoanalytic literature. While I have deliberately ignored that so far in order to show how we can more simply and directly communicate what we have to offer, actually everything I have said here is grounded in very traditional ideas that, in varying ways, psychoanalysts have espoused for years. Nothing here is radical – or even new.

My emphasis on the skill of reflection is based on the earliest psychoanalytic technique of asking patients to freely associate, while encouraging in the analyst a detached and hovering attention. Freud, from the start, recognized that if you were going to catch the unconscious at work you had to stop trying too hard. He stressed the observing ego, not the active or engaged ego. Similarly, he stressed the importance of the analyst's "neutrality," his ability to be non-judgmental, in order to provide a relatively safe environment for patients to refrain from censoring their thoughts. Later analysts elaborated this into the concept of the therapeutic alliance, a combination of collaborative engagement with detachment.

The skill of addressing intractable problems arises from our awareness of the central role of conflict in psychic life. Freud went thorough several

theories of intra-psychic conflict as his ideas developed, but throughout he was alert to the importance of tension and compromise, and the ever-present danger of impasse. Moreover, as a therapist, he was never far from the idea that patients experience seemingly intractable conflicts and need disinterested outside help. Even those analysts who downplay the role of psychic conflict, clearly acknowledge the importance of interpersonal conflict or the conflicts that inevitably arise from competing goals or different roles.

The point about the persistence of old ideas arises from the understanding of transference and what Freud called the “repetition compulsion.” Moreover, the role that trauma plays in shaping behavior is being more and more appreciated.

Finally, delineating gaps in awareness has been a psychoanalytic stock-in-trade from the beginning and goes hand in hand with appreciating the role of the unconscious in shaping behavior: defenses such as repression, dissociation, denial, and avoidance have been well appreciated in the literature, even before Anna Freud codified them in The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense seventy years ago. Bion, of course, added to our understanding a group dimension. Recent developments in neuro-science underscore the ubiquity of the unconscious and the inherent limitations of consciousness.

So what I am suggesting here is nothing particularly new, more a radical simplification. In fact, I am being deliberately somewhat reductionistic in suggesting a radical stripping away of theoretical differences so that the bare bones of our practice may be disclosed. By no means am I suggesting that we eliminate those theories from our own minds. In fact I believe we need everything we have – and more – in our work to deal with the many facets of the unconscious.

My own interpersonal training in several ways has helped me. I more easily accept that I will be caught up in the dynamics of the systems into which I intervene. My training in no way prevents that from happening, but it helps me to be less dismayed when I find that it has happened. I take for granted that the process of change requires cooperation, and that my authority is always provisional and limited. Moreover, it has helped me to deemphasize the role of interpretation in working with clients. Not only do interpretations presume superior knowledge on the part of the interpreter, it can confuse clients who simply want to be more effective.

My relational colleagues have similar advantages, especially in recognizing the mutuality of their engagement with clients and downplaying the importance of interpretation. They are quicker than

most to see how they may be contributing to the problem they are ostensibly trying to solve. But, frankly, I have worked with a number of analysts over the years who have been trained in a variety of institutes committed to different points of view: ego psychology, object relations theory, self psychology, Lacanian theory and Jungian analytical psychology. No one theoretical orientation precludes an analyst from doing excellent organizational work.

Most organizational clients will want to cast you in the role of expert, and expect (or at least hope) to receive definitive answers to their questions. That's how their world tends to function. But if you establish reasonable goals and use your basic clinical skills, if you are flexible and non-dogmatic, there is a good chance you will succeed in making a significant difference. As a colleague of mine once put it, for us it's a matter of using our common sense.

References

Bion, W. (1959). Experiences in Groups . New York: Basic Books

Frayer, A, (2003). "AeroDynamics," paper presented at the ISPSO Symposium, Baltimore, June 2004.

Frayer, A, (2005). "Team Resources Management (TRM): A Tavistock Approach to Leadership in High Risk Environments," Organizational and Social Dynamics, 5(2), pp. 163-182.

Jaques, E. (1955). Social systems as defense against persecutory and depressive anxiety. In M. Klein, P. Heiman, & Money-Kryle (Eds.), New Directions in Psychoanalysis. London: Tavistock Publications.

Kahn, W. (2003). "The Revelation of Organizational Trauma," Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 39(4): pp. 364-380.

Menzies, E. (1967). The Functioning of Social systems as Defense against Anxiety. London: Tavistock Publications.

Tett, G. (2009). Fools Gold, New York: Simon and Shuster.