

CAN YOU KEEP THE BAD APPLES OUT OF YOUR COMPANY?

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Imitating nature may be the next frontier in leadership research according to one of the world's leading behavioural psychologists. By Gerard McManus

Is it possible to inoculate businesses from organisational parasites that can destroy value and ultimately the business itself?

US-born leadership expert Dr Matt Barney argues there is enormous fertile ground for researchers in organisational behaviour to look to nature for answers on value creation and value destruction.

During a recent Australian tour, Dr Barney, the vice president and director of the Infosys Leadership Institute, explained how biology may be used to imitate and inspire new organisational models and protect against moral turpitude and potentially destructive, but hidden human defects.

He defines an organisational parasite as anyone who is destroying more value than he or she creates – consciously or unconsciously.

'The problem with parasites is they can start out small, remain hidden for years and do damage without anyone realising it is feeding off the host,' he says.

'But a parasite doesn't necessarily have to have malevolent intentions, like a Bernie Madoff (perpetrator of the largest fraud in US history). They could be totally innocent.'

On the other hand, people who don't do what they say they are going to do, who act inconsistently, are readily identified and usually despised by colleagues and subordinates, he says.

The past decade of economic upheaval has been due in part to the ability of prominent individuals to rise to the top of organisations to positions of trust and who then take mercenary or self-motivated actions that have resulted in dire consequences for the organisation they feed off.

Rogue bond traders, greedy executives, dishonest accountants and individuals inside credit rating agencies that have turned a blind eye to shady practices and the falsification of numbers have not only contributed to the downfall of mighty banking and insurance firms, but debilitated entire economies.

The sciences of biomimicry, or biomimetics, are already huge fields of industrial research with billions of dollars poured into possible ways nature can be imitated for industrial use.

For example, the Velcro fastener was inspired by Swiss engineer George de Mestral during a trip in the Alps after his dog kept getting burrs caught in its coat.

Other examples of biomimicry are synthetic spider silk, which is tougher than the polymer Kevlar, sharkskin swimsuits and beetle-shaped armor.

There are thousands of nature-inspired products developed every year, but Dr Barney is among a small group of organisational and behavioural psychologists who are undertaking work examining whether business can borrow from nature in teaching lessons and perhaps inoculate organisations from such parasites.

'For thousands of years, human inventors have been successfully copying nature,' he says. 'The Chinese imitated the grasshopper and the monkey as they developed martial arts.'

Dr Barney says he was inspired to do research by the work of social psychologist William J McGuire, who developed new resistance techniques through studying the behaviour of American POWs in the Korean War, who had been brainwashed by their captors into wanting to stay with them.

McGuire's Inoculation Theory was used to keep soldiers' original attitudes and beliefs consistent in the face of persuasion attempts.

He built up psychological immunity by exposing soldiers to small amounts of viruses or counter-arguments sufficient to trigger a response, but not enough to overwhelm a person's resistance.

'There is lots of evidence to suggest this worked brilliantly,' Dr Barney said.

'From this you can see how you might then be able to inoculate people against unethical or inappropriate persuasion attempts. You can give followers or other people weakened arguments and they then remain committed to defending against stronger arguments. Protecting a person's attitudes from persuasion is like inoculating the human body against disease.'

Another trailblazer in this field is Robert Cialdini, author of the best-seller **Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion** (<http://www.aimbooks.com.au/Influence-The-Psychology-Of-Persuasion.html>), who developed methodologies to protect the elderly in the US from phone scammers trying to swindle people from their life savings.

Cialdini found some con artists were so brilliant and well-crafted in their techniques, and that there was much complexity in the world, it was often impossible for individuals to cognitively take everything in. As part of his research, he, arguably the world's most cited social scientist, developed methods of emotional self-monitoring whereby people can check their own emotions.

For example, if you feel like you are liking someone a little too much too quickly, feeling too obligated, that should be a catch for you that maybe the relationship is going too fast.

As part of his research, Dr Barney has immersed himself in parasitological literature. 'Some of these helped reinforce existing good organisational practice, others gave me fresh ideas for new things that are not really done much in organisations,' he says.

For example, Dr Barney said he had discovered a breed of Australian duck fed on a crustacean whose dominant response was to stay in the dark to avoid getting eaten, but a particular parasite forced the crustacean into the light.

'The way this parasite behaved was similar to the way a bad idea is able to high-jack an organisation,' he said.

He said organisational citizenship behaviour also has parallels in medical inoculation against foreign bodies.

'People are often very good at managing up – they can manage the people with the money or power or who have control over their career, but they leave a trail of dead bodies all around them much like a parasite that can have its teeth in the carotid artery of an organism,' he says.

A strong body of evidence suggests people around an individual are better at seeing whether an individual behaves consistently in a certain way. In other words, multi-source assessment of an individual's behaviour is a superior predictor than an individual's own self-assessment or self-report. These studies reinforce the value of modern techniques such as 360-degree feedback.

'If we can assess unconsciousness behaviour or citizenship behaviour, even if it is not on my job description, we can ask what's the right thing for the company? What is the right thing for the client?' he said.

'If I can get that feedback I stand a much better chance of selecting people who think like that, or for people who are not like that, of having the opportunity of making them more self-aware.'

Dr Barney's research is likely to assist organisations in discovering early warning signs during selection processes, and performance reviews. 'It won't just be about whether an individual is hitting their numbers or not, but whether they are good organisational citizens.'