

# ORGANIZATIONS WITH GOOD INTENTIONS AND GOOD PEOPLE LEARNING TO DO EVIL

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## ABSTRACT

Evil is generally thought to be caused by intentional acts of individuals with character flaws. Adams and Balfour (2004) posit that “administrative evil” is unintentional evil created good people within good organizations. This paper discusses how applying technical-rational paradigm to professional practice can unintentionally harm others by excluding important moral issues from learning. The technical-rational paradigm, a product of Western philosophy, is shown to be associated with defensive routines that inhibit effective learning. This paper concludes with some suggestions for organizations, individuals, and academics on how to recognize and inhibit organizational evil-doing.

**Keywords:** Administrative evil, organizational learning, morality

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Organizational learning proponents often cast their arguments in terms of the benefits that will accrue rather than the potential for dysfunctional learning. While one aspect of learning could be learning something that has no validity or utility, organizations can also learn to be evil. As Argyris and Schön (1996:288) point out we need research in the ethical issues of organizational learning that lead to the development of “organizational learning for evil ends.”

This paper examines the factors that contribute to organizations, populated with good people, learning to do evil without any specific intent to be evil. The first section discusses the concept of evil as applied to “good” organizations populated with “good” people. The second section examines the factors that contribute to evil outcomes from normal organizational practices and relates the practices to organizational learning literature. The third section discusses the relationship between organizational learning and characteristics defensive routines that could encourage evil. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for teaching, research, and practice and paying particular attention to techniques that individuals can use to recognize and cope with evil.

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## 2 EVIL AND ORGANIZATIONS

*Evil* is defined as (Zimbardo, 2007:5) “intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others – or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf.” This definition of evil has intent as a key component of the definition but, as Hamilton and Sanders (1999:222) point out, a second accepted definition of evil – “doing or tending to do harm; hurtful, mischievous, prejudicial” - does not rely as strongly on intention. Following Hamilton and Sanders (1999), it is this second sense of evil that is the primary focus of this paper although evil in the first sense can be the consequence of organizational intentions.

Evil is usually a topic confined to discussions by clerics, philosophers, and ethicists (Adams and Balfour, 2004). Because of its associations with non-scientific fields, evil is not a concept that is found in typical organizational or scientific discourse (Delbecq, 2001; Schemer, 2004). Even approaching the topic from an evolutionary perspective, religions (and cultures) provide behavior norms or values but these concepts are not subject to empirical verification except to the extent that they guide social action (Schemer, 2004). However, Delbecq (2001:224) cautions that “managers who are so focused on instrumental outcomes that they ignore cultural norms find evil at work.”

Three models are useful for explaining evil-doing (Zimbardo, 2007). In the dispositional model, evil acts are intentional and freely chosen by the individual (i.e., the first definition of evil). It is the individual’s disposition or character that leads to evil. The situational model posits that, while minimizing but not ignoring the dispositional aspects of behavior, context significantly influences an individual’s feelings, thoughts, and behavior (Berkowitz, 1999). The situational view often cites Milgram’s obedience experiments and Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment (Berkowitz, 1999) to illustrate the situational influences on behavior. A third model that is system of power relations that Zimbardo (2007:446) “consists of the agents and agencies whose ideology, values, and power create situations and dictate the roles and expectations for approved behaviors of actors within the spheres of influence.” It is this third model that is central to this paper.

### 2.1 Organizational evil

Laudon (1995:37) poses the question “Can good organizations commit unethical acts?” Morgan (1997:15) observes that organizations “are instruments created to achieve other ends. ... this instrumentality is evident in the practices of the earliest formal organizations of which we know, such as those that built the great pyramids, empires, churches, and armies.” Many organizations have legal recognition, can engage in legal actions, can be held accountable for their actions and, it is for these reasons and others, they can be instruments of good or evil (Berkowitz, 1999).

When organizations commit evil it can certainly be intentional but Adams and Balfour (2004:13) suggest that “administrative evil” is evil that “usually goes unseen” when an organization’s members “engage in or contribute to the acts of evil without recognizing that they are doing anything wrong.” This unintentional or at least “less purposeful” evil-doing is what Hamilton and Sanders (1999:222) call the “second face of evil” that “corporate entities are experts at its commission” (Hamilton and Sanders, 1999:231). One important aspect of organizational evil is

that the scope can be far more extensive than individual evil since organizations can usually mobilize more resources and affect a greater number of people than a single individual or several individuals can affect (Berkowitz, 1999).

Adams and Balfour (2004:10-11) posit four factors contribute to administrative evil: (1) applying the “scientific-analytic mindset and technical-rational approach to social and political problems;” (2) engaging participants through overt appeals to their expertise or technical roles via language that casts the outcomes as “good” or dehumanizes others, (3) appealing to “good,” instrumental, or technical goals to mask the consequences of the action; and, (4) blinding experts who use the “scientific-analytic mindset” of professional ethics from “unmasking” the evil. The following sections review each factor.

### **2.1.1 The Technical-Rational Paradigm**

Western culture provides the foundation for most organizational problem solving processes and is increasingly being adopted worldwide through the professionalization of the workforce (Meyer, 1994). Most professions claim to be morally neutral, to value science, and apply rational practices (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Also, professions provide ethical and moral guidance to practitioners although each profession may differ in their moral code (Laudon, 1995). Consequently, organizations that enact professional recommendations are built on a diverse and disconnected network of ethical values and understandings of nature, including human nature (Meyer, 1994). It is important to recognize that professionalization extends beyond the traditional conceptualization of the term (e.g., medicine) to many occupational subgroups including, for example, clerical workers, maintenance personnel, hair stylists, and sewer workers (Trice and Beyer, 1993).

The reliance on science and rationality, coupled with technology, promotes the notion that progress is possible via technical means. This coupling is the basis of the technical-rational paradigm (Adams, 1993). Schön (1983:32) describes the objective of technical-rationalism to be that it “sought both to give an account of the triumphs of science and technology and to purge mankind of the residues of religion, mysticism, and metaphysics which still prevented scientific thought and technological practice from wholly ruling over the affairs of men.” Schön [1983:41] goes on to describe the application of the paradigm:

*Technical Rationality depends on agreement about ends. When ends are fixed and clear, then the decision to act can present itself as an instrumental problem. But when ends are confused and conflicting, there is as yet no ‘problem’ to solve. A conflict of ends cannot be resolved by the use of techniques derived from applied research. It is rather through the non-technical process of framing the problematic situation that we may organize and clarify both the ends to be achieved and the possible means of achieving them.*

This observation parallels Simon’s (1997) view that every decision consists of two components — *values* and *facts*. Values are imperative statements about some preferable state of the world that provide goals. Values statements have an ethical component since they are “should” statements. Facts are empirically testable in principle and within the domain of “experts.” In practice goal statements often mix both fact and value (e.g., “To improve profitability, we will develop a knowledge management system.”).

### **2.1.2 Language and Professionals**

Language shapes understanding of both managerial and professional practice but it also can obscure meaning, rules, and processes (Adams and Balfour, 2004). For example, “right sizing” is widely used as a codeword for layoffs and is the transformation of a description into an explanation for an action (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004). Organizational learning systems that stress “empowerment,” for another example, may obscure the goal of improving efficiency through greater control of the workers while employees who dispute the benefits are characterized as adversaries to be ignored or eliminated (Howcroft and Wilson, 2002). When “bad” outcomes are characterized as “good” ends, Adams and Balfour (2004:4) label this a “moral inversion.”

Another linguistic technique is to use euphemisms or technical language to distance the action from the actor. Within the knowledge management arena, Friedman, Lipshitz, and Popper (2005:25) describe the reification of terms such as “absorptive capacity” that “not only obscures the meaning of a concept but also inhibits research into the relationships and dynamics a construct is meant to capture.”

### **2.1.3 Masking outcomes**

By attending to benefits or focusing on an instrumental or technical goal, role requirements and compliance with authority make ethical and moral concerns less significant (Zimbardo, 2007). The focus becomes the short-term “tangible gain” rather than long-term “abstract harm” that hides the ultimate effects of an action (Darley, 1996:22). This “temporal framing” process discounts future rewards or benefits that one would gain by inhibiting current behaviors (Kramer and Messick, 1996:76).

A related issue is the process of masking outcomes. The process entails a gradual accumulation of past actions where there is only a slight change from one behavior to another. Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004:228) describe this “slippery slope of decision making” as having two components. The first is the “numbing” effect created by the repetition of the messages that have embedded ethical dilemmas. A second factor is any change is evaluated from a previous action; if the previous action was acceptable then the next action should also be acceptable.

### **2.1.4 Distance between designers and users**

Professionals fulfill a role that typically separates their responsibility for design from the responsibility of others to act (Meyer, 1994). When the designer is distanced from the action, the design satisfies the ethics of the designer rather than the ethics of the those affected by the outcomes (Schön, 1983). The causal link between the designer and the action is lessened by attributing cause to individuals rather than systems, the framing-related processes of naming and blaming, and errors of omission (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004).

Since the dispositional model of behavior is widespread, systemic influences often are overlooked or ignored (Zimbardo, 2007). Systems also are frequently perceived as “error proof” and, thus, unlikely to cause any unwanted behavior (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004). As a consequence, system effects may be ignored as a cause of harm.

The problem framing process includes naming conventions for the entities involved. For example, information systems have “users.” While “users” are humans, the notion of a user can imply someone who is uneducated and lacks technical sophistication; in other words, the “user” is less human because he or she is “not one of us!” When the expected outcome does not happen, it is human nature to find someone or something to blame or scapegoat (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997:46).

Finally, errors of omission are not so much “acts” as they are “non-acts.” The blame shifts from the person who did not act to the person who is the receiver or “victim” of the act — in other words “let the buyer beware” (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004:230).

## **2.2 Organizing for evil**

The confluence of the technical-rational paradigm that is widespread in Western culture and the increasing professionalization of the workforce contribute to creation of organizational cultures that emphasize autonomous action within more tightly circumscribed domains while demanding accountability to organizational ends (Evetts, 2003, 2006). This confluence, as the next section discusses, creates situational and systemic conditions that support learning without recognition of the harm that may befall others.

## **3 ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND EVIL OUTCOMES**

Argyris and Schön (1996:3-4) introduce the concept of organizational learning in this way: “Generically an organization may be said to learn when it acquires information (knowledge, understanding, know-how, techniques, or practices) of any kind by whatever means. In this overarching sense, all organizations learn, for good or ill, whenever they add to their store of information, and there is no stricture on how the addition may occur.” When organizations attempt to improve their task performance, they engage in instrumental learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996). They posit (Argyris and Schön, 1996:4) that “from a normative perspective, however, instrumental organizational learning should be taken only as a point of departure. Instrumental learning may be good or bad depending on the values used to define ‘improvement.’”

The absence of values is why Snell (2001) argues that organizational learning systems are destined to fail because they do not include the necessary moral component. This type of critique has not gone unnoticed in the organizational learning literature. Argyris and Schön (1996:193) observe that “once organizational learning is taken as a neutral term rather than as a normative ideal, it is obvious to us, and others, that it need not be for the good, given some view of the good. In the Nazi period, Eichman’s [sic] bureaucracy clearly became more efficient at carrying out its evil mission and may be said, with some plausibility, to have ‘learned’ to do so.” Argyris and Schön (1996:193) go on to argue that learning is “not always beneficent.” Citing several criticisms Argyris and Schön (1996:194) conclude:

*All such criticisms rest on the idea that organizational learning is not a value-neutral activity but proceeds from values, has implications for values, and is subject to critique in terms of a conception of what is good or right, and for whom. These implications, which seem obvious once they are stated, come to light*

*only when organizational learning is stripped of its normative aura and considered as subject to evaluation in particular contexts on the basis of particular criteria of goodness or rightness. In short, we cannot escape the need to declare what kinds of organizational learning we will take to be desirable or undesirable and why.*

The remainder of this section describes how professionalism and the technical-rational paradigm relates to inhibiting organizational learning.

While it is clear that organizations can learn to be effective evil-doers, defense mechanisms also can inhibit organizations from identifying and overcoming unintentional administrative evil. Four concepts govern the use of defensive routines (Argyris, 2004:8-9): (1) intending to exercise “unilateral control” over others; (2) striving to maximize winning and minimize losses; (3) stifling the expression of “negative feelings;” and, (4) acting rationally. Given the expectation that everyone would want to “learn” something new to enhance their own situation, the invocation of defensive routines would appear to be self-defeating.

However, with the increasing workforce professionalization, knowledge sharing means sharing of the source of expert power (Reed, 1996). Consequently, sharing expertise relinquishes control of others to the organization, the person loses status, and must act rationally and unemotionally to the demand. To hide any threat or embarrassment for violating these norms, organizational members “construct” defensive routines using four “rules” (Argyris and Schön, 1996:100):

1. Craft messages that contain inconsistencies.
2. Act as if the messages are not inconsistent.
3. Make the ambiguity and inconsistency in the message undiscussable.
4. Make the undiscussability of the undiscussable also undiscussable.

The following paragraphs discuss each rule’s association with the technical-rational paradigm.

*Communicating mixed messages.* Invoking a technical-rational solution to a problem initially requires that the problem be framed in such a way that the professional can apply the knowledge and techniques available. When the message is from a powerful authority figure (e.g., a manager) it is generally accepted as legitimate (Zimbardo, 2007). “Organization learning,” for example, is, according to Weick and Westley (1996) an “oxymoron” since it suggests the paradoxical situation of simultaneously increasing variety (i.e., learning) and decreasing variety (i.e., organizing). But even more fundamental is that the term “organizational learning” is a euphemism for “radical change” that threatened the “system” (Cook and Yanow, 1993: 388 *fn5*). The system threats also threaten individuals identities. Bandura (1999:194) describes this as sanctioning “reprehensible conduct” by casting actions as socially good, using euphemisms to obscure harmful actions, and comparisons that vindicate the action. Moreover, the jargon and argot found in professional domains almost always create mixed messages (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). “Knowledge management” is also contradictory term since neither knowledge nor management has a consistent paradigm (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001).

*Ignoring inconsistencies.* Since the organization’s members each have an individual role to play, the responsibility for action is diffused and inconsistencies may be ignored. Challenging mixed messages also may be a threat to one’s livelihood or reputation so there is motivation to ignore the mixed message. Delegation of the responsibility to implement a system to support

organizational learning further decouples the outcome from the authority figure. This decoupling of the authorizing agent from the outcome and the diffusion of responsibility to “obedient functionaries” links goals to the ultimate actions while not provoking questions about the objective’s inconsistency with morality (Bandura, 1999:197).

*Message Undiscussability.* Framing a problem within a technical context suggests appropriate metrics, tools, and techniques. The one or more methodologies that are used to craft a system provide categories of entities to be included or excluded. Since, within the scientific community, evil has no empirical foundation it is excluded and not discussable (Schermer, 2004). In addition, with the infusion of information technology into organizational learning processes, decisions are no longer made exclusively by humans and make the rationale obscure. Konzynski and Sviokla (1994) refer to this split of decision making between humans and machine systems as “cognitive reapportionment” which can “hide” the decision maker and, consequently, the discussability of the message.

*Undiscussable Undiscussability.* A problem’s framing invokes a set of categories. The so-called “junk categories” become repositories of uncertainty and information to ignore. Dissent, for example, becomes a “political” factor that remains unanalyzed and the dissenters fall into the out-group (Howcroft and Wilson, 2002). The estrangement of out-group members distances them from those others which makes them less human and “perpetrators” of problems.

In conclusion, characteristics of the technical-rational paradigm used by professions provides avenues for invoking defensive learning routines. These routines can hide the ultimate outcomes from the participants. However, a caveat to this observation is that evil-doing is not inevitable when the technical-rational paradigm is used. Avoidance of evil-doing and suggestions for overcoming harm are the subjects of the next section.

## **4 RECOGNIZING AND AVOIDING EVIL**

This section suggests how the potential for processes to create evil may be recognized. It further discusses how organizations, individuals, and academics may inhibit evil-doing.

### **4.1 Recognizing evil**

In order to avoid evil, one must recognize it. In everyday life people “know” at the “gut” level what is evil without resorting to a specific definitions (Darley, 1992). Delbecq (2001) found that eighty-eight percent of the executives he interviewed on the topic of evil had encountered evil actors in their organizations. Since evil is beyond the scope of normal organizational phenomenon, it is often discovered well after its damage has been done and there are few tradition interventions available (Delbecq, 2001). However, since individuals have a visceral reaction to their perception of evil, their resistance to a problem solving process such as an imperative to implement an organizational learning system indicates the potential but not necessarily the inevitability of evil-doing (Schön & Rein, 1994). This resistance is the signal to investigate what is happening.

### **4.2 Organizational level responses**

Organizations are open systems that operate within social and legal environments. This section describes three widely-held social expectations that can be used to inform organizational value systems and processes. To inhibit evil, these three moral universals (Bok, 2002) should become part of an organization's culture in which violations of these norms need to be discussable and justice must prevail.

*The Golden Rule.* "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The "Rule" is considered the first moral principle (Schemer, 2004). Its power lies in the prescribing the nature of the exchanges between one and another. Variants of this moral imperative are found in many religions and cultures. The "Rule" also suggests reciprocity as seen in maxims such as "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

*Justice.* "Innocent until proven guilty." From both ancient law and biblical traditions, individuals have been given the presumption of innocence along with the admonishment not to "bear false witness" against others (Casarelli, 1996). To ensure fairness and justice, it also implies that some who are "guilty" will go free. This innocence presumption does not apply to inanimate objects (e.g., computers) and some collectives are not granted the presumption of innocence (Volkh, 1997).

*Precautionary principle.* "Better safe than sorry." Morgan (1997) observes that throughout human history, individuals may act independently as long as they do not put the system (e.g., the social group) in some undesirable state. As an imperative for judging actions, "guilty until proven innocent" captures the same concept and is one description of the precautionary principle which is widely applied by European countries in international agreements regarding the environment. It has been implemented in various forms, some more stringent and some less so (Sandin, 1999). A major challenge to the precautionary principle is that it is value-based and, thus, seen as unscientific (Sandin, Peterson, Hansson, Rudén, & Juthe, 2002). Proponents such as Sandin, et al. (2002) argue that it is value-based as are all scientific approaches but that it applies when there is a lack of full scientific evidence. This is consistent with Simon's (1997) view that every decision has a value component and a factual component.

### **4.3 Individual level responses**

Individuals who become embroiled in unintentional evil-doing have several strategies available to moderate evil. This section discusses three of many possible actions (e.g., see Zimbardo, 2007, pages 446-456).

*Self knowledge.* One's actions and reactions are motivated by emotion and intellect. Knowing the triggers that drive one's actions can signal when something is amiss and evil is possible or when someone is appealing to system or role requirements to undermine humanistic concerns (Zimbardo, 2007). To gain this knowledge, self-reflection is critical and a key to individual learning by recognizing and lowering defensive routines.

*Coping strategies.* Contemporary studies often cite the atrocities of the Holocaust as the epitome of evil. Based upon his psychology training and his imprisonment in a concentration camp, Frankl (1984:145 - emphasis in original) asserts that having a meaning for life is necessary to cope and that meaning is a outcome of "becoming aware of *what can be done* about a given



situation.” This focus on reality helps to ground an effective individual and organizational learning process.

*Heroic action.* Lowney (2003) describes heroism in this way: “Heroic leaders don’t bide their time until the big moment comes along; they grasp the opportunities within reach and extract as much richness from them as possible. Heroism [sic] lies in the nobility of committing to a way of life that focuses on goals that are greater than oneself.” Heroic acts are voluntary, continuous, and emphasize the good of the social unit rather than the good of the individual (Zimbardo, 2007).

#### **4.4 Teaching and Research**

Exploring organizational phenomenon and disseminating the knowledge gained is a form of organizational learning and knowledge creation subject to the same limitations and defensive routines discussed above. The remainder of this section discusses two suggestions to improve teaching and research.

*Reflective research and practice.* Dysfunctional learning is not the sole province of individuals or organizations outside of education. The consideration of factors that are outside of the problem frame is generally not part of a manager’s or a professional’s education (Schön, 1987). Frames also guide researchers and moving outside of a specific discipline’s research frame is often professionally risky (Argyris, 2004). Researchers, practitioners, and teachers can develop the skills necessary to coach others and to reduce their own defensive routines (Argyris, 2004; Schön, 1987).

*Embrace other organizational learning paradigms.* This paper’s foundation is the application of the technical-rational paradigm to organizational learning can lead to evil-doing. Other approaches are possible. For example, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) criticize some theories of organizational learning for their emphasis on rational approaches to organizational learning and knowledge. They describe how processes can be effective using Eastern philosophies and tacit knowledge. Another example is Senge’s (1990) work on the “learning organization” that offers a decidedly spiritual approach through the emphasis on “personal mastery.” In his view, learning is a “spiritual quest” that is unending (Friedman, Lipshitz, & Popper, 2005: 26). Both of these examples include the humanistic component.

To summarize this section, these suggestions focus on values, strategies, and models that support suppression of wrong-doing in addition to traditional organizational practices of policies, audits, and use of good management practice.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

The premise of this paper is that organizations can learn to be evil if they follow the technical-rational paradigm without considering the value premises organizational learning and knowledge management. Administrative evil is but one possible form of evil that may be part of organizational life but differs from ordinary notions of evil because the evil-doing is unintentional. This approach is primarily a Western paradigm that is increasingly being accepted worldwide through the proliferation of professionalization of the workforce. While applying the technical-rational paradigm or professional practices does not inevitably lead to harm, the system

it enacts suggests that a heightened awareness of the potential for harm appears to be prudent. Both unintentional evil and intentional evil are destructive phenomena and both can be learned. At one level it is a debate between humanistic and instrumental philosophies (Trice & Beyer, 1993). At a pragmatic level it is the question of how organizations approach the treatment of human beings.

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