

Borderline Executive Disorder

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Ever wondered why really inept executives seem to collect like lint at the top of modern organizations? I have an explanation for your consideration.

We're technologists on the move. We don't have time to waste waiting for the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) for clues as to why our organizations are run by LINO's (leaders in name only). It's time to peek behind the curtain and face the frightful reality that many modern executives are evolutionary dead ends. Herewith, I offer a modest account of our dilemma that I'm confident will soon become the accepted view.

Having been an academic for most of my career, I'll focus primarily on the modern university, though I predict my analysis will easily port over to any modern organization. Faithful to the doctrine of cognitive dissonance, I'll place all blame squarely on others. In the pages to follow, I'll endeavor to explain the perceived deficiencies of the executive classes by means of new mental health discoveries. As I lay out my argument, you'll see the pieces fit together like the gears of an expensive Swiss chronograph. Or not.

THE POSTMODERN ACADEMY

Although it's approximately 40 years in the making, the postmodern academy is a relatively recent phenomenon. Previously, a campus administration building's inhabitants were scholars drawn from rank

and file faculty, each serving as executive pro tem out of a sense of obligation to the institution (*érudit oblige?*). There was no permanent administrative culture in those days. Today, the administration building has become a repository of the flotsam and jetsam of academic life.

So how did this come about? Well, as the notion that an educated citizenry was beneficial to the community began to fall out of favor, it was replaced by the idea that serving the business communities' interest in having a skilled, dependable, and inexpensive workforce was more important than providing the community with graduates capable of independent thought. This is the phenomenon that Benjamin Ginsberg calls the "supply-side view of the curriculum" in his book *The Fall of the Faculty*.¹ On this view, education is but the means to an end, where the end is landing some job, and the students (or their parents) are fee-paying customers who are pre-paying for product—much like magazine subscriptions and groceries.

The opposite, a "demand-side view of the curriculum," is what we senior members of the academy consider the





traditional view of higher education. On this view, education is itself the end. This view held sway from approximately the time that the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) was formed in 1915 to the first decade AN (after Nixon), which is when the war on the universities/science began. The AAUP's and John Dewey's Georgist overtures toward higher education haven't withstood the test of time due to continuous assault from external forces. They're now considered quaint remnants of a bygone era.

Never one to avoid resurrecting dead or dying ideas, I offer you an educational paradigm designed to challenge students to use their heads for more than a hat rack—the “More Than a Hat Rack” core, or MaTaHaRi core. On this account, we'll simultaneously advance the theses that higher education's primary end is the creation of a graduate who can think for him or herself, and that it's in society's best interest to *avoid* labor arbitraging and the creation of labor caste systems through the dumping down of its population. The MaTaHaRi core is pedagogically minimalist in the sense that if we can't at least agree on it, we'll be forced to accept vocational training as our premium postsecondary educational experience.

If all we need is skilled labor, then all we need in an executive is a customer relationship manager who specializes in connecting clients (read: students) with stakeholders (read: employers) by means of a revenue stream (federally funded student loans that have the added benefit of ensuring permanent indebtedness of the borrower). Scholarship goes to the back of, if not under, the bus.

Why emphasize discovery, imagination, and critical thinking when the profit lies in creating a constant supply of inexpensive labor? If the labor gets too pricey, we, can always manufacture an artificial STEM crisis and use

H1B visas to drive labor costs down even further, with the added benefit of casting aside any iconoclastic graduates (see my March 2014 column, “STEM, Revisited”²).

THE BAYH-DOLE ACT

But wait, there's more. The second cause of administrative dysfunction is the desire to make not-for-profit universities profitable. This is motivated by a reduction in state and local support for universities and has fueled an increasing emphasis on turning productive faculty into profit centers or using them to build consortia and

civilian academic research began to dwindle with the passage of the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980.³ This piece of legislation gave inventors with federal research funding the ability to pursue ownership of those inventions. Before that, equilibrium existed between publicly funded research and the resulting public benefit from the fruits of this research. Jonas Salk's polio vaccine is a noteworthy example. In exchange for public support of his research, Salk labeled the vaccine a “public good” and put it in the public domain.

As both Ginsberg and Washburn make clear, Bayh-Dole obliterated the

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public-private partnerships to land lucrative research grants and contracts. In the era of enlightenment, pure academic research was highly sought after, regardless of its potential for attracting extramural research funding. But there's only one kind of research mission these days: that which is funded to include overhead—those indirect costs attached to the grant that tend to exceed 50 percent of the actual budgeted expenses. Some top-tier universities might still encourage scholarship as such and in general, but the unfunded variety is rapidly becoming as unwelcome on the modern campus as an outbreak of measles.

This dependence on external funding has made the academy a centerpiece of the emerging military-industrial-surveillance-political-media-prison-Wall Street-banking-energy-health care-academic-think tank-corporatist-homeland security-complex. As Jennifer Washburn makes clear in her book *University Inc.*, Vannevar Bush's vision for publicly financing

distinction between rival and nonrival (marginal costs are zero) scientific knowledge, and encouraged a tsunami of private, exclusive licensing for publicly funded, university-based research that in turn produced a classic double-whammy for the public: they got to pay for the research twice, once to create it and once to use it. Bayh-Dole meant that patents and licenses were now a revenue stream for universities, but public recoupment of investment was gone for good—as was any mechanism for preserving the taxpayer's interests.

A bigger concern is the negative effect that such market forces might have on the quality of the research conducted. Market-model university protagonists welcome the infusion of corporate influence for its ability to increase the efficiency with which research is brought to market. For them, Bayh-Dole represents an inherent good because it gives universities and faculty skin in the commercialization game. Numbers in the billions of dollars per year in licensing and

royalty fees are frequently adduced as evidence. Washburn cites data from a recent Association of University Technology Managers report claiming that from 1991 to 2000 university patents increased by 238 percent, royalties increased by 520 percent, and product sales resulting from academic research totaled more than US\$40 billion, supported 270,000 jobs, and produced \$5 billion in tax revenue in 1999 alone.³

I'm always suspicious of claims that are based on self-serving surveys. But let's just assume that there's some truth to this data. The important follow-on questions are

- › Were there any negative externalities as a result of this arrangement? Specifically, is there any evidence that the market model negatively affected the quality and balance of the research?
- › Were there any conflicts of interest between the players? and
- › What impact did Bayh-Dole have on the commitment to a diversified, well-rounded education for students?

A quick review of history reveals that Bayh-Dole is a mixed bag. It certainly changed academic incentives, but in some cases this negatively influenced research outcomes.^{4,5}

The Ginsberg and Washburn books, together with Naomi Oreskes's and Erik M. Conway's *Merchants of Doubt*⁶ and Chris Mooney's *The Republican War on Science*,⁷ all confirm that the impetus for overturning Bush's vision for publicly funded, curiosity-driven research was driven by for-profit corporations and the avaricious university administrators seeking a piece of the largesse. That the impetus for Bayh-Dole didn't come from the public, faculty, or students shouldn't be overlooked.

THE ACADEMIC MARKETPLACE

In the academy's golden age, the university was known as the marketplace

of ideas—"marketplace," that is, in the sense of a swap meet. This marketplace has come to resemble more of an intellectual hedge fund, where all manner of community assets are bundled into something to be sold, for a profit, essentially to the very people who seeded the investment to begin with. This isn't to say that the academy was ever free of partisan influence or bias, but the influence is more overt these days. Look to the Charles Koch Foundation's and Branch Banking & Trust (BB&T) Foundation's pay-to-play endowments at the Florida State University's economics department to see a poster child for this spurious brand of academic support.^{8,9} The BB&T bequest even mandates Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* as a course textbook.⁸ Isn't it ironic that the BB&T corporation lists "independent thinking" as its fifth core corporate value (<http://bbt.investorroom.com/corporate-governance>)?

Charles and David Koch's and BB&T's agenda-gifting isn't unique or without precedent in US history. However, the Koch model in particular represents a radical departure from the enlightened free expression model that's characterized the academy for much of the last century. Curriculum dictated by external stakeholders and their biases rather than sound pedagogy looks a lot more like indoctrination than education. Let's be clear that the fault in such arrangements lies not with the ideologues who seek to proselytize via the academy, but with the university administrators who go along with it. Accepting agenda-gifting with strings attached is but another lapse of integrity in today's market-model academy, and, according to Thinkprogress.org, the Koch brothers' foundations now support 129 colleges and universities.^{10,11}

ACADEMIC NOSOLOGY AND BORDERLINE EXECUTIVE DISORDER

The current market-model academy could be seen as a strategy for focusing

on both job training and improving the university's profitability. The external forces that have helped bring about this change include the political shift away from public support of education and the corporate desire to profit from government-funded research. The internal university forces pulling in this direction, however, were largely misguided university leadership, the subject to which we now turn. Let's try to better understand the administrative behavior that's inconsistent with the MaTaHaRi core.

How did senior university leadership lose its focus on educating students so that they could think for themselves? And how did university leadership get hung up on pedestrian issues such as job training and profitability? We'll colloquially refer to this transition as "sliding off the cerebral highway into John Dewey's ditch." I offer for your consideration a new mental health discovery: *borderline executive disorder*. BED is actually a cluster of disorders that includes but is not limited to *university leadership dysfunction* (ULD) and its industry counterpart, *executive leadership disorder* (ELD). When BED surfaces in modern organizations, it's a terrifying sight to behold.

The symptoms are easy to recognize. First and foremost, affected administrators and executives have never heard a good idea that wasn't theirs. Further, they have a serious lack of impulse control; they're inclined to engage in random acts of management, no matter how idiotic, just to keep paper flowing through the organizational veins. In addition, this poor impulse control leads to frequent bouts of reckless spending. They also endorse a boot camp approach to employee relations that undercuts any hint of esprit de corps. It goes without saying that these individuals are universally recognized as egomaniacal, inattentive listeners who have a selective, self-promoting memory. They master the art of double-speak, particularly with respect to acronyms and technology buzzwords derived from

excessive viewing of the Military and Discovery Channels and Fox News. They're easily distracted and have the attention span of a gnat.

Since BED has yet to make it into the *DSM-V*, I have no choice but to offer the following nosology as a prolegomena to my forthcoming and likely much-anticipated dictionary of executive disorders. And although our present *lame leadership malady* (L^2 in our forthcoming dictionary) isn't limited to the academy, I emphasize it because I'm most familiar with the symptoms as they're exhibited in that domain. Those of you in business and industry can confirm whether it applies to your organizations as well.

Executive obsessive-compulsive disorder

Let's first take a closer look at modern academic administrator—an oxymoron involving what logicians and linguists call a conflation in terms. There are at least two uses of academic, one of which has nothing at all to do with anything scholarly or cerebral. Rather, in the context of administration, "academic" should be taken in an accounting sense, that is, "associated with entities that qualify as educational institutions under 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service code." It's a mistake of the first order to confuse this sense of "academic" with anything resembling scholarship—academic administration is akin to military intelligence in this regard.

Incapable executives discover early on that their inflated self-image fails to be supported by reality. This internal tension leads to *executive obsessive-compulsive disorder* (EOCD)—a disorder characterized by irrational beliefs that lead to round after round of repetitive and unnecessary behavior in the form of issuing pointless policy memos, requiring unnecessary reports and purposeless planning exercises from subordinates, scheduling interminably boring meetings, and engaging in a seemingly endless array of micro-management initiatives. All of this

unnecessary activity helps executives to feel their existence is justified.

Although executives might be clueless as to how they might actually improve the organization, they do understand how to order other people to do things they don't want to do. This has the benefit of ensuring that everyone in the food chain comes to appreciate who's in charge and in possession of real power, which in turn soothes the delusional executive mind.

EOCD at its most virulent can lead to *academia nervosa*, which itself is a special case of ULD. In the academy, as EOCD takes hold, it leads to unnecessary strategic planning exercises, SWOT analyses, curriculum revisions, impact reports, workload reporting (that interferes with actual work), and other sundry distractions from core pedagogical issues. Requiring and discarding the printed fruits of such labor produces the executive binge/purge cycle that's de rigueur in the modern organization. Make no mistake, the intended outcome of these exercises is

fits in well with the general reporting requirements of executives (and politicians, for that matter). A variation on this disorder is taking credit for invisible successes and triumphs—those that only happened in the executive's imagination. An example would be claims of profitability for the quarter without revealing that these profits came from the sale of corporate headquarters or a government bailout.

By and large, the media has little understanding of either generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP) or academia's unique approach to "black hole financing," so most false or exaggerated claims reported by administrators are taken at face value and acted upon as such by the unsuspecting audience. Such claims fall under the category of "spinfluencing"—and the practice of infecting the entire leadership team of an organization and the media that covers it is called "spinfluenza." Surprisingly, these false proclamations—produced by brittle, under-exercised minds—tend to be

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an improved self-image for the administrator, pure and simple. Of course, the alternative to EOCD would be an objective, arms-length measurement of organizational impact by third parties, but you can see where that might go.

Executive amnesia

Executive amnesia (EA) is another form of BED affecting executives when they're asked to report on their activities to boards or the media. Thanks to the extreme diversity of personnel in the modern organization and executives' detachment from things that matter, there are always opportunities for executives to take credit for the accomplishments of others, so EA

taken as gospel by stakeholders. This is especially true when such proclamations can be used as excuses for program retrenchments and downsizing.

Executive impulse control disorder

Also called *executive kleptomania disorder* (EKD) when referring to executives on Wall Street, *executive impulse control disorder* (EICD) is a conduct disorder in which an individual executive comes to hold the belief that he/she is entitled to everything that he/she can get his/her hands on. This usually surfaces in imperial-level housing subsidies, bonuses and stock options that are totally severed from performance measures, sundry perquisites like

take-home yachts and aircraft, country club memberships, and golden handshakes, to name but a few. Sergei Brin and Larry Page came down with EICD after sharing a bowl of desktop hegemony with Bill Gates. EICD is exceedingly contagious and closely related to cyber-dipsomania—the overwhelming desire to control every aspect of cyberspace—which seems to have infected the National Security Agency leadership. In this latter case, EICD is associated with EOCD: NSA leaders don't know how to prevent terrorism, but they do know how to collect every bit of network data and store it in Bluffdale, Utah.

this reason, pTSD is sometimes called mental shingles.

So there you have it: the thinking person's guide to the administrative dysfunction responsible for the decay of the modern university (and beyond). These illnesses, and the part they play in most of our leadership vulnerabilities, are largely responsible for the decline of the modern organization.

So the next time your deputy associate pro-vice president of awesomeness asks you to participate in a SWOT analysis, strategic planning session,

A quick review of history reveals that Bayh-Dole is a mixed bag. It certainly changed academic incentives, but at what cost?

Pre-traumatic stress disorder

Finally, we deal with *pre-traumatic stress disorder* (pTSD)—a condition affecting executives who are preparing traumatic events for others—such as termination of employment. Frequently associated with a potpourri of euphemisms such as downsizing, outsourcing, offshoring, furloughs, restructuring, and reduction-in-force (RIF), instances of employment-related pTSD include events covered by acronyms such as eRIF (fired by email), smsRIF (fired by text message), USPS-RIF (fired by first-class mail), and roaRIF (fired in a shouting match). For the executive, employment-related pTSD is by definition associated with someone else's trauma, the witness of which is, eo ipso, traumatic for the executive. As a result, pTSD is usually sufficient justification for enormous salary increases and over-the-top bonuses for the executive. If you'll recall, pTSD was cited as the main rationale for executive bonuses during the collapse of the financial sector. Executives claim unbearable associated pain. For

curriculum revision, impact assessment report, or workload evaluation, break out the Prozac, reread this column, and seek a Zen meeting group near you. ■

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