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Pathologies and Wellness in Entrepreneurial Firms

A paper submitted for presentation at Babson Conference 2009

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Abstract

Principle Topic

Just as personality disorders afflict individuals, so too can they apply to firms. This paper examines psychological theory relating to the three clusters of personality disorder so as to integrate it the normal development of firms. The purpose is to point out pitfalls that constrain the firm from achieving optimal growth and performance and to provide guidelines to ensure organizational wellness through the growth stages of entrepreneurial firms.

Method

This conceptual paper brings together the fields of personality psychology and organizational behaviour to create a road map that depicts the development journey of individuals and firms. It relates common personality disorders in individuals to problems encountered in firms as they transition across six developmental steps. Mal-alignment of practices, over-reliance on the negative manifestations of each step, and/or an inability to advance up the steps, if unchecked, may become endemic to the firm. Firms that suffer from such 'personality disorders' have a lower propensity for growth. The paper defines three clusters of firm disorders, which correspond to the established clusters of individual personality disorders, and also guidelines to ensure firm wellness.

Implications

Entrepreneurial firms typically seek to transition quickly through the infant and adolescent stages of growth to reach prime ahead of competitors. To do effectively they should guard against personality disorders associated with inconsistent practices, negative traits and arrested development.

Introduction

Just as personality disorders afflict individuals, so too can they apply to firms. This paper examines psychological theory relating to the three clusters of personality disorder and that about the normal development of firms. The purpose is to point out pitfalls that constrain the firm from achieving optimal growth and performance and to provide guidelines to ensure organizational wellness through the growth stages of entrepreneurial firms. It brings together the fields of personality psychology and organizational behaviour to create a road map that depicts the development journey of individuals and firms. It relates common personality disorders in individuals to problems encountered in firms as they transition across six developmental steps. Mal-alignment of practices, over-reliance on the negative manifestations of each step, and/or an inability to advance up the steps, if unchecked, may become endemic to the firm. Firms that suffer from such 'personality disorders' have a lower propensity for growth. The paper defines three clusters of firm disorders, which correspond to the established clusters of individual personality disorders, and also guidelines to ensure firm wellness.

Literature

Disorders of personality consist of "configurations of traits considered socially undesirable" (Funder, 2007: 589), and have been defined as "a class of disorders marked by extreme, inflexible personality traits that cause subjective distress or impaired social and occupational functioning" (Weiten, 2008:580). Personality disorders in individuals have been grouped by the DSM (diagnostic and statistical manual). There are believed to

be overlaps in the categories, so the notion of clusters is more convenient than clear-cut (Morey, 1988).

Cluster A comprises the so-called *mad* disorders, characterized by odd, eccentric or dysfunctional patterns of thinking. These include paranoid, schizoid, and schizotypal personality disorders. Paranoid refers to suspiciousness and mistrust of others' motives, while seeing self as blameless. Schizoid includes the lack of desire and inability to form attachments to others, with a preference for being alone, leading to impaired social relationships. Schizotypal includes eccentricity, with reduced capacity for close interpersonal relationships.

Cluster B comprises the so-called *bad* disorders, characterized by impulsive or dramatic patterns of behaviour, specifically histrionics, narcissism, antisocial, and borderline personality disorder. Histrionic refers to excessive attention-seeking, theatrical, provocative, and seductive behaviour. Narcissistic includes self-promoting, grandiose or self-absorbed behaviour with a corresponding lack of empathy. Antisocial behaviour comprises deceitfulness, shameless manipulation of or disregard for others, the violation of others rights, and is associated with a lack of moral development or conscience. Borderline is characterized by impulsiveness, boredom, instability in interpersonal relationships, affect and self-image, with attempts at self-mutilation or suicide.

Cluster C comprises the so-called *sad* disorders characterized by dysfunctional anxious or fearful emotional processes. These include the dependent, avoidant, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders. Avoidant emotional processes include extreme shyness, social inhibition and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation. Dependent emotional processes include indecisiveness, submissiveness, reluctance to disagree with others for fear of rejection. Obsessive-compulsive emotional processes include exaggerated conscientiousness, overt perfectionism, lack of warmth, and inability to relax. In business these may translate to an over-concern with rules and detail, perfectionism, workaholism, inflexibility, reluctance to delegate, miserliness, and stubborn rigidity (Funder, 2007), resulting in work being done slowly, though thoroughly.

Table 1 shows the classification of personality disorders in individuals.

Cluster	A	B	C
Main affect	Thinking	Behaviour	Emotion
Symptoms	Eccentric	Erratic	Avoidant
	Suspicious	Impulsive	Dependent
	Dysfunctional	Dramatic	Obsessive-Compulsive
Abbreviated label	MAD	BAD	SAD

Table 1: Personality Disorders in Individuals

Personality disorders may be diagnosed in four ways: clinical impression, self-report scales, structured interviews, and informant reports. Accurate diagnosis requires multiple sources of information. Despite an elaborate system of classification, known as the diagnostic and statistical manual (DSM), there remain no clear-cut diagnostic tools for personality disorder. The DSM is criticized for labelling without explaining, by those who associate pathologizing with negative psychology. By contrast, the positive psychology movement (Gable and Haidt, 2005) seeks to focus on promoting meaningful and pleasurable ways of living, including positive individual traits and positive organizations rather than the treatment of disorders. According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 5), 'pathologies arise when life is barren and meaningless'.

There appears to be general consensus that personality disorders originate in childhood, although full-blown symptoms may only appear in adolescence or early adulthood. This would appear to hold significance for the field of entrepreneurship, as there are parallels between business venture creation/growth/maturity and the transition from child to adult in individuals.

Researchers have concluded that the foundations of personality variations are to be found in five dimensions. Known as The Big Five (McRae and Costa, 2003), these include

extraversion (also known as positive emotionality), neuroticism (also referred to as negative emotionality), agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience.

According to the big five theory, a range of normality exists within each of these that approximates the mean between the two extremes. In Aristotelian philosophy, the extremes are depicted as one of excess and one of deficiency, which appears a convenient way to categorize some of the common personality disorders. For example, excessive extraversion is associated with histrionics, while deficient extroversion / excessive introversion is more akin to avoidant and schizoid disorders.

Personality Disorder		Neuroticism	Extraversion	Agreeable	Conscientious	Open to Experience
		The Big Five Traits				
MAD	Schizotypal	high	low			high
	Schizoid		low			low
	Paranoid	high		low		
BAD	Histrionic	high	high	high		high
	Narcissistic	high		low	high	high
	Antisocial	high	high	low	low	
	Borderline	high		low	low	
SAD	Dependent	high		high		
	Avoidant	high	low			
	Obsessive-Compulsive		high	low	high	low

Table 2: The Ten Principle Personality Disorders in terms of The Big Five Traits of Personality (Widiger, et. al., 1994: 90)

Table 2 shows the relationship between the ten principle personality disorders and the 'Big Five' traits of personality. Blanks in the table indicate that no association has been found to exist between that trait and the disorder.

It can be seen that while most sufferers of personality disorder are high in neuroticism, there are specific variations in the other four traits. Extraversion, for example is low for the 'MAD" cluster but high for the 'BAD' cluster. Even the clusters contain variations. Within the 'SAD' cluster, for instance, dependent disorder scores high on agreeableness, while obsessive-compulsive scores low.

Though this may be too crude a way to classify personality disorders in individuals, it may be helpful in an attempt to explain personality disorders in firms.

The development of firms has been depicted as a Values Journey (Robinson, 2008) consisting of in three phases, each having an expressive and submissive track (see figure 3). The way a firm, as a collection of the individuals comprising it, thinks feels and behaves is referred to as its culture, which it lives out through its day to day practices. When firms employ day-to-day practices that correspond to those commonly associated with their particular phase of development, i.e. congruence exists between what is done and what is effective, they may be said to be normal. Firms that fail to consistently apply managerial practices that fall within the normal range, or are incongruent with the requirements for effectiveness in business, however, may be said to be suffering from personality disorders. For example, a firm that over-emphasizes profits (at all cost, i.e. while ignoring moral conscience and/or neglecting to give sufficient resources to sustainability). The firm's culture could be seen as excessively mercenary, or obsessive-compulsive in a monetary sense. But, simply identifying problems that could occur in firms and finding labels for them is not the aim of this paper. Here I am seeking a more positive psychological contribution by proposing a way of ensuring that the firm remains 'on track', so to speak, during its various developmental phases. To that end the Values Journey appears an appropriate model against which to explore what might ensue in firms

whose critical mass strays from the track or becomes stuck in a value station that is no longer appropriate.
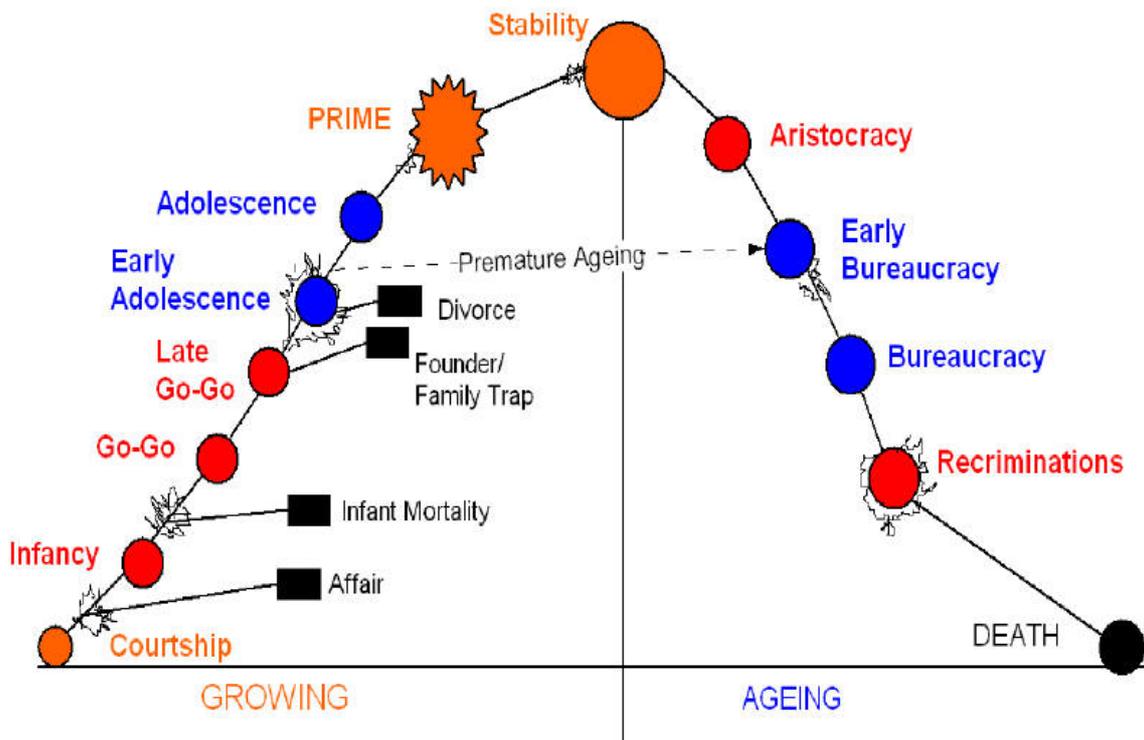

Figure 1: The business lifecycle

A typical business lifecycle is depicted in figure 1, where the left hand side refers to a firm's growth curve, and the right hand side to its decline. Interestingly, just as with people, the ailments that accentuate a firm's decline on the right may arguably originate during its growth phases on the left. Some typical disorders that commonly occur in firms are: profits at all cost; erratic styles of management, as evidenced by lack of focus, too many projects, too much change/insecurity, instability; resistance-to-change or arrested development. On a more positive note, organizational wellness (or lack of disorder) is characterized by engaged and empowered staff, timely and open communication, a sustainable work ethic, and continuous improvement.

Psychology has provided various theoretical models that explain personal development, specifically: Beck and Cowan (1995), Maslow (1954), Kohlberg (1958), McCleland (1961), Covey (1990), Egan (1997), Piaget (1965) and Alderfer (1969), Rotter (1996). Beck & Cowan developed a continual growth model using value stations (building on Graves' 1970 theory on levels of human existence). This forms the foundation of Robinson's (1998) Personal and Corporate Values Journey Chart.

The classic motivation theory, Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs, illustrates a seminal five step personal development path starting from the essential physiological needs to the pinnacle of self-actualization. Robinson's chart is not an alternative to Maslow's Hierarchy; indeed it implies that such a hierarchy of needs exists *within* each of the identified value stations. Kohlberg's (1958) Stages of Moral Development dovetail perfectly with the value stations of the chart. Kohlberg's stages 1& 2 equate to the submissive (purple) and egocentric (red) stations of the Values Journey, where people have to learn the rules of society to advance; his stages three and four equate to duty-compliance (blue) where rules are enforced for long-term stability and safety; and his stage five is equivalent to the success-striving (orange) station of the Values Journey. The sixth stage looks at the 'big picture' requiring a substantially more relativistic worldview, thus approximating the harmony-seeking (green) and synergy-seeking (yellow) stations of Robinson's (1998) values chart.

Kohlberg's phases also allude to the notion of 'leaps in understanding' as one develops. These are included in the Values Journey chart, represented by the two divides, namely ethical and holistic, representing second order change or paradigm shifts in understanding and coping. Similarly, early cognitive development work by Piaget (1965) likewise supports the levels of thinking. Egan's (1997) work on natural mind development follows a similar linear approach to cognitive growth, which supports the axis of rational conduct. Rotter's (1996) locus of control distinction differentiates the expressive and submissive value stations. This is known as the dependency ravine. The chart also includes Covey's (1990) three stages of personal development, namely dependency, independency, and interdependency. Alderfer (1969) recognised that humans may simultaneously have, and

indeed move between, successive need levels. Figure 2 shows a typical development path according to theories of development by various psychologists.
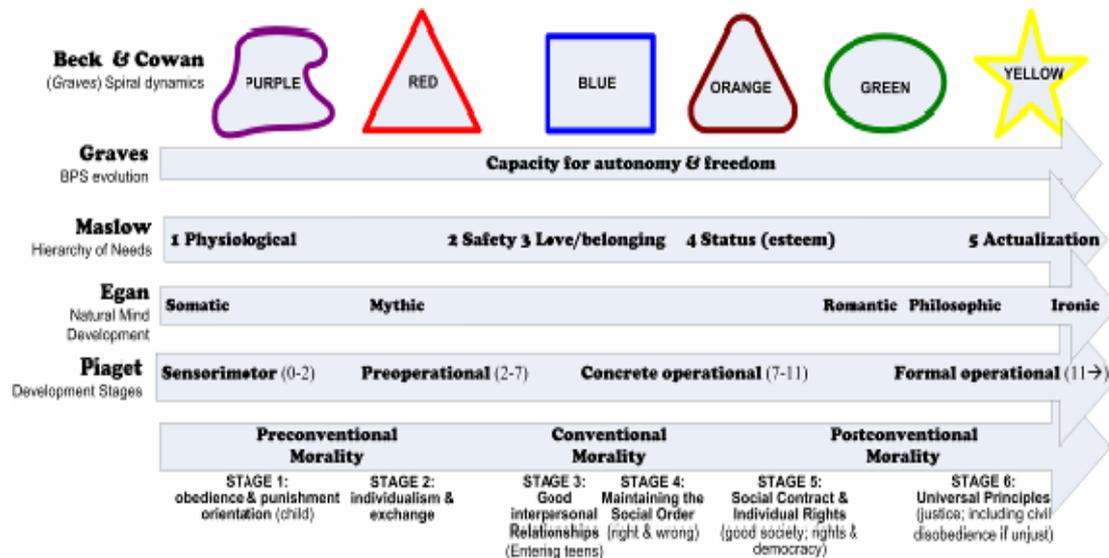

Figure 2: Healthy Development Path in Individuals

As in people, the development path to a healthy, functionally mature, sustainable firm may be viewed as a step-wise journey, where each step is intended, alternately, toward greater autonomy or responsibility. Firms develop one step at a time across ten dimensions of maturity. These are: The people they choose to employ; their approach to employee development; the way they ensure performance; the way they give recognition and reward; the way people may earn a promotion; the style of management; how the work is structured; the way they communicate within the firm; how they solve problems; what they view as worthwhile opportunities.

In the way a firm ensures employee performance, for example, the stepwise journey follows roughly the following path:

Step 1: Close supervision of small groups and a helping hand when needed

Step 2: Heavy-handed control of individuals who might otherwise cheat or manipulate things

Step 3: Implementing the standard company review procedure

Step 4: Agreeing on performance goals and expecting achievement

Step 5: Interacting with team members as equals and resolving issues by consensus

Step 6: Allowing each to use their creative talents to advance the firm

In similar fashion, the six steps are defined for each of the ten dimensions. Notably, each step both supersedes and builds upon the previous, so no steps can be skipped. Figure 3 shows the Values Journey as a stepwise progression. The steps are labelled as follows: 1. safe-bonding; 2. power-seeking; 3. duty-compliant; 4. success-striving; 5. peace-loving; 6. synergy-building.

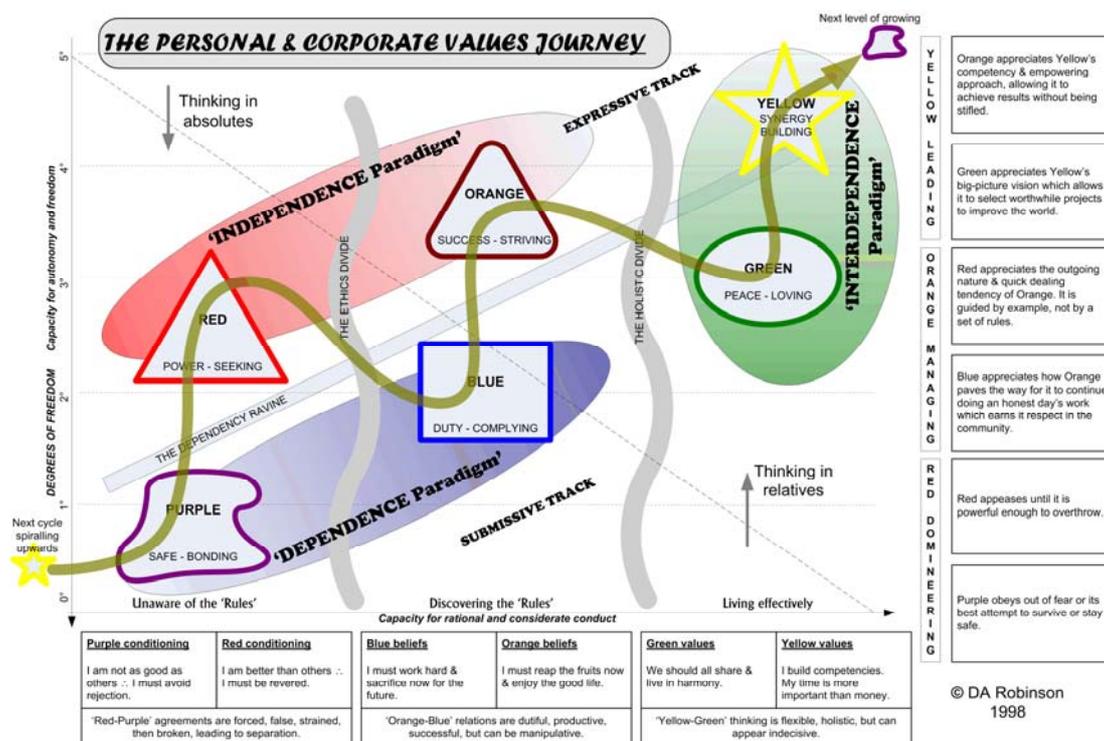Figure 3: The Values Journey as a step-wise progression

At the most basic level (bottom left, purple), individuals possess low levels of responsible citizenship and lack autonomy, thus seeking safe-bonding. Naturally, the leadership priorities at this level are survival and care oriented. Across the dependency ravine, exists the power-seeking, 'dog eat dog' type culture (top left, red), typified by egocentric

aggression. Residents of this values station enjoy a higher level of autonomy, yet have not advanced in responsibility. They will commonly exhibit a high need for power, as first identified by McCleland (1961) and the leadership imperative here is to lead by example and show strength of character. One step to the right is where social *mores* begin to emerge (middle bottom, blue). Residents of this value station are duty-compliant and it is common for them to display absolute respect for procedure and authority. Leadership at this level entails formal and centralized control and is thus authoritarian and procedural. The next value station, a step in the direction of increased autonomy, is characterised by the intense drive for success, usually manifesting as materialism and affluence (middle top, orange). Residents display a high need for achievement (after McCleland, 1961). It demands a corresponding leadership style, i.e. goal-directed leadership.

More systemic thinking emerges beyond the holism divide, where peace and harmony are the ideals sought (bottom right, green). Residents display a high need for affiliation (after McCleland, 1961) and this tends to generate accommodative behaviour in followers. Leaders are therefore expected to play a facilitative role. It is at this station that Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership, with its emphasis is on collaboration, trust, empathy, and the ethical use of influence, is best suited. Finally the sixth and ultimate value station represents inter-dependency (top right, yellow). Here, leadership is about recognizing and harnessing individual strengths, at whatever level of development or station, and requires the ability to integrate and synergise.

Figure 4 illustrates the six value stations (rows) and the corresponding dimensions (columns).

Dominant individual behaviours	Culture type	Typical organisation structure	Typical managerial orientation	Preferred management process	Typical response	Positive manifestations	Negative manifestations	Motivating need	World view
Instinctive self-denial	Submissive	Tribal	Obedience	Parental	Listen	Pride	Blind following	Belonging	Tribalistic
Impulsive self-expression	Aggressive	Mini-empire	Task	Tough paternalistic	Force	Self-reliance	Exploitive	Independence	Egocentric
Sacrificial self-denial	Compliant	Passive hierarchy	Procedural	Authoritarian	Conform	Respect	Rigid	Security	Absolutistic
Rational self-expression	Progressive	Active hierarchy	Results	Entrepreneurial	Initiate	Affluence	Manipulative	Achievement	Materialistic
Accommodative self-denial	Harmonious	Social network	Relationships	Facilitative	Discuss	Peace	Indecisive	Acceptance	Relativistic
Considerate self-expression	Synergistic	Functional access	Solutions	Integrative	Consider	Flexibility	Non-directive	Inter-dependence	Existential

Figure 4: Consistency within value stations

Each row in figure 4 represents a step in the values journey. As can be seen, a firm wishing to create or maintain a progressive-type culture (level 4, success-striving, on the values journey steps) that is results-oriented should seek to encourage entrepreneurial processes within an active hierarchical structure. Typical employees will be self-expressive, rational, achievist and materialistic. The firm should take care to discourage manipulative behaviours.

The notion of a six-step developmental process makes it possible to consider the alignment of the dimensions at each step. If, for example, the firm used step 4 practices to select the people it employed, but then attempted to reward or manage them according to step 3 practices, the firm would be 'out of alignment'. Figure 4 can be used as a guide to the degree of alignment. The extent to which a firm gets itself 'out of alignment' is a

possible measure of its disorder. A firm that then chooses to remain 'out of alignment' perpetuates erratic behaviours, thereby displaying the symptoms of a personality disorder.

Furthermore, each step is characterized by positive and negative attributes in each of the ten dimensions. For example, a step 4 firm that adopts the appropriate performance management practice, i.e. Agree on performance goals and expecting achievement, but forces or manipulates the agreement and measurements relating to goal achievement (to pay less commission, or whatever), would be practicing step 4 in the negative.

In addition, as a firm's culture may be seen as the aggregate of individuals' personalities, every firm tends to adopt an internal way of working that relates to the critical mass of thinking, emotions and behaviours. Table 3 shows how the firm's Big Five profile will tend to change as it develops along the values journey.

The Big Five Traits	The Six Stages of Firm Development					
	1. Submissive	2. Aggressive Power-seeking	3. Duty-Compliant	4. Success-Striving	5. Harmonious	6. Integrative
Neuroticism	X	X	X			
Extraversion		X		X		X
Agreeableness	X		X		X	X
Concientiousness			X	X	X	X
Openness				X	X	X

Table 3: The Likely Prevalence of the Big Five Personality Traits at Various Stages of Firm Development

Table 3 shows that the higher level stages in a firm's development are dominated by conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness; neuroticism is associated with low end stages of development; and extraversion aligns only with the three expressive stations.

Implications for Management

There appears to be three origins of personality disorder in firms. The first is when the firm exhibits only the negative traits of its value station, rather than the positive. Let us refer to these 'dysfunctional' firms as type A. Another is where the firm advances in most

dimensions but remains trapped in, or inappropriately connected to, lower stations in some. The firm is thus inconsistent in its day-to-day practices and thereby creates a confused culture. Let us call these firms type B. The third is where the firm suffers from 'arrested development', being incapable of advancing along the values journey, becoming stuck at the low level value stations. This mainly applies to those unable to develop beyond safe-bonding and power-seeking, and includes an inappropriate over-reliance on duty-compliance too. Because such firms know no better, they do not recognize themselves as being stuck. In a sense they are incapable of seeing beyond their current stage of development. Let us call them type C. Table 4 shows this classification of personality disorders in firms, with their corresponding symptoms.

Type	A	B	C
Cause	Negative Traits of Value Station	Inconsistent Practices	Arrested Development
Symptoms	Stressed	Erratic	Avoidant
	Dysfunctional	Confused	Dependent
	Self-destructive	Dissonant	Obsessive-Compulsive
Abbreviated label	MAD	BAD	SAD

Table 4: Personality Disorders in Firms

It appears that Table 1 and Table 4 contain uncanny similarities.
Because of these we can apply similar cluster abbreviations for personality disorders in individuals to firms. Thus, a *mad* firm would be one where the dominant day-to-day practices are experienced as negative manifestations of its stage in the values journey; a *bad* firm would be one in which the day-to-day practices are inconsistent, leading to erratic behaviour. A *sad* firm would be one suffering from immature emotional responses. Table 5 relates the common personality disorders to the development stages of a firm.

Personality Disorder		The Six Stages of Firm Development					
		1. Submissive	2. Aggressive Power-seeking	3. Duty-Compliant	4. Success-Striving	5. Harmonious	6. Integrative
MAD	Schizotypal		X				
	Schizoid	X					
	Paranoid		X				
BAD	Histrionic		XX		X		
	Narcissistic		X		XX		
	Antisocial		X		X		
	Borderline		X				
SAD	Dependent	X		X			
	Avoidant	X		X			
	Obsessive-Compulsive			XX			

Table 5: Common Personality Disorders Related to Firm Stage of Development

Table 5 depicts the stages of development at which firms are most likely to be prone to personality disorders should unhealthy workplace practices be allowed to prevail. It can be seen that the 'BAD' cluster mainly afflicts firms in the aggressive 'power-seeking' and progressive 'success-striving' stages, while the 'SAD' cluster is more closely associated with the 'submissive' and 'duty-compliant' stages. The table also depicts an apparent lack of pathologies in the 'harmonious' and 'integrative' mature stages of the firm.

So how may a developing firm avoid becoming sad, bad or mad and advance to a level of optimal effectiveness or organizational wellness?

Research has shown that there is no sharp dividing line between normality and abnormality in individuals (Clark & Watson, 1999; Furr & Funder, 1998; Krueger & Tackett, 2003; O'Connor, 2002), so it appears to be for the firm. Indeed, Oldham and Morris (1995) suggest that even exaggerated positive personality attributes, for example self-confidence or vigilant, can be mistaken as disorders (narcissistic, paranoid, repectively). Furthermore, having a mild degree of one characteristic cannot be taken to imply pathology. Nevertheless, recurring symptoms that constrain the firm's progress or effectiveness demand attention. As prevention is almost always better than cure, the way to ensure organizational wellness (lack of personality disorder in the firm) is to ensure that the firm develops its day-to-day practices with appropriate thinking patterns, behaviours and emotional responses.

To be free from type A disorders, managers must ensure that the firm is managed predominantly in the positive aspects of the appropriate value station. For example, at level 4, rather than manipulate they should negotiate; at level 3, instead of stubbornly imposing a set of policies, they should communicate the logic underlying them, thereby negating mistrust or suspicion.

To be free from type B disorders, managers must ensure that its day-to-day practices are experienced as indicative of the appropriate value station. For example, a firm at level 4 on the values journey, namely duty-compliance, should be careful to manage all ten dimensions of its culture in ways that are seen to correspond with step 4.

To be free from type C disorders, a firm that has reached the success-striving value station should be free of practices associated with the submissive and power-seeking stations, and be skilful in only utilizing those from the duty-compliant value station to the extent that they support success-striving. Should the firm persist in carrying inappropriate thinking patterns, behaviours, or emotional responses with it along its journey, it may be said to have formed a type C personality disorder.

Table 6 shows some of the do's and don'ts for firms at the duty-compliant, success-striving and synergy-seeking steps in the values journey, respectively.

Duty-Compliant [level 3]		Success-Striving [level 4]		Synergy-Seeking [level 6]	
Do	Don't	Do	Don't	Do	Don't
Reward loyalty	Single out individuals	Encourage career advancement	Treat everyone as equal	Allow staff to use their competencies	Enforce constraints
Standard operator manuals	Expect change initiatives	Negotiate	Cite inflexible policies	Be flexible	Demand compliant behaviour
Pay by seniority	Show favourites	Link reward to results	Expect loyalty	Allow social interaction	Show bias

Table 6: Some Do's and Don'ts to Avoid Personality Disorders in Firms

As it is impractical to mention every aspect of each dimension of culture for each of the six levels, the following guidelines are proposed to ensure that the firm's practices remain in alignment as it embarks on its stepwise journey to maturity:

1. Development of a corporate vision

There must be a clearly articulated vision for the overall organization, is consistent with the appropriate identifiable value station. For example, if the company that includes in its corporate vision statement that it strives to become the market leader, then it is placing itself, aspirationally, at the success-striving station. By so doing it raises the bar, so to speak, for all day-to-day practices to be aligned with success-striving.

2. Assessment of adherence to the vision

Management needs to take stock of how the firm's practices currently measures up to those implied in the vision. For example, to what extent is the concept of 'market leadership' understood and regarded as a driving force.

3. Articulation of values

Appropriate organizational values should be developed to create a sense of holism throughout the organization. This is best illustrated by the case where sales employees request remuneration based on performance, rather than straight salaries, resulting in a stand-off between policy-wielding financial controllers and results-eager sales directors.

4. Ongoing development

Managers across all levels and functional areas may require assistance through education/training in order to adjust their respective thinking paradigm and leadership styles For example, financial controllers might need to be re-orientated toward seeing their primary role as the supporters of orderly change that enables the company to be demand hungry and sales-led.

5. Monitoring

Expectations and performance measures should be identifiably congruent with the value station that is relevant to that level and function. An important element in all of this is the feedback loop, whereby leaders themselves may assess the effectiveness with which they are achieving congruency. Ultimately, that will enable the custodians of the organization to continually adjust the degree of emphasis placed on the vision and the values necessary to lead the firm along its developmental journey.

Conclusion

Personality disorders in individuals present as inappropriate thinking patterns, behaviours and emotional responses. The same may be true for firms in which day-to-day practices are mal-aligned and incongruent with their phase of development. A firm's journey to maturity entails six steps, each relying on the alignment of ten dimensions. Personality disorders occur when the firm harbours practices from the first two steps, thereby limiting its effective transition. The way to prevent personality disorder in the firm (organizational wellness) is to have a clearly articulated aspirational vision for the firm's future, and then constantly monitor the firm's practices to ensure that they adhere to the articulated values

and apply corrective measures as and when needed to maintain congruency and consistency.

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