



Looking for moral neutralisation in Leaders

*“Why would Thorwald want to kill a little dog? Because it knew too much?”
Lisa (Rear Window, 1954)*

Welcome to the next edition which is a follow-up from my first article about Leadership and Moral Neutralisation. In the first article we explored the defined characteristics of leaders who use moral neutralisation and what their techniques are. In this second article, we find ourselves taking on the role of some classic Alfred Hitchcock characters. Nurse Stella (Thelma Ritter), Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly) and L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart) in *Rear Window* (1954) as the marginalised protagonists. We all must be aware and knowledgeable of defective leaders, but how do we know? Likewise in *Rear Window*, it may be seen as a movie that criticises looking, but as a movie it also encourages looking.

To begin, this article constructs our understanding of defective leaders in the context of the moral neutralisation techniques for the awareness of employees and employers.

Moral neutralisation ‘refers to (self-) justifications of moral transgressions’ (Ribeaud & Eisner, 2015, p. 69) and entrails the 5 techniques described by Kvalnes (2014). An extension from moral neutralisation is how leaders develop their dialectical thought through their cognitive dissonance that constructs their moral justification. **Cognitive dissonance** describes the discomfort of holding conflicting cognitions. **Moral dissonance** considers the two together and is when ‘a person has the option to act against his/her moral commitments and convictions’ (Kvalnes, 2014, p. 460). Could this be that a leader may not be defective but have conflictions with the cognitions that they are bound to? This would reflect the fact that in my first article the leaders who uses moral neutralisation can be ones who not only are defective, but also because they are not and are conditioned by the

anocratic conditions in their own role within an organisation. This sad situation of the latter, is invalid if the leader is the actual owner of the organisation. Therefore, they are just straight, defective and moral criminals in the world of business. Could it be that something traumatic happened in these leaders lives as a child? As we look deeper into the dissonance of morals and cognition within leaders, **who are the people who normally experience moral dissonance?**

1. **The Moral Saint:** a person who hardly ever does anything morally wrong, and frequently goes beyond moral expectations; and
2. **The Moral Cynic:** a person who regularly shows a disregard for moral considerations in the pursuit of his/her goals.

In between these two we find:

3. **The Moral Doubter:** a person who strives to live in accordance with his/her moral beliefs and convictions.

‘Neither the moral saint or the moral cynic are much bothered by moral dissonance. This is due to the fact that morally wrong alternatives never occur as real options and the latter because he/she lacks qualms about acting in opposition to ordinary moral considerations. It is the moral doubter who can be genuinely tempted to act against his own moral convictions and experience moral dissonance’ (Kvalnes, 2014, p. 461).

A person/leader confronted with moral dissonance can either choose to reject the option which creates the discomfort or try to convince him/herself that it is morally acceptable to continue (Kvalnes, 2014). Once again, reflecting Aristotle’s Eudaimonia theories on virtue and ethics, we see that from all of this research the leader is not destined to be evil or virtue-less in their roles. They too are human with the ability to choose. The determining factors of persuasion in moral neutralisation reflect Aristotle’s four cardinal virtues: Prudence (practical wisdom), Temperance (self-control, moderation), Courage (of noble choice in excitement or fear) and Justice (what is good for the community and being just towards the enemy). Why is Aristotle and his Eudaimonia ramblings important in leadership? Eudaimonia is all about the good human spirit.

Once a leader chooses to be defective, they may find it successful in some cases and therefore it builds their confidence in developing these skills further in their future. Maybe these leaders are defective in themselves because of these internally damaged traits of Aristotle’s Eudaimonia. Unlike Grace Kelly in Rear Window, the leader’s external goods of Aristotle’s virtues of health, wealth and beauty may also play a part in the leader being defective. In summary, these guys need help obviously. Many of the defective leaders that use moral neutralisation have traumatic or aggressive past experiences that have moulded them in a blind state of moral leadership criminality, either from their childhood or in their professional lives. Help them to not continue their path of destruction in your organisation.

How can I spot these five moral neutralisation techniques in defective leaders?

Here is a description that extends our current understanding of their techniques, so that it allows us to gain an insight into what it actually may replicate in your organisation and your leaders. There is an example of a verbal definition to accommodate the assessment criteria for each of the 5 techniques below:

Denial of responsibility

A leader would:

- Conceal parts of the truth with a lack of real choice to do otherwise (i.e.: *'I told the customers we hired new staff already' [but really nothing has begun in the organisation to hire staff]*).
- Passing blame and responsibility onto their superiors in the company (i.e.: *'I'm waiting on the board to get back to me'*).
- Demanded quick effective fixes to social instability in the workplace (i.e.: *'I want all staff to come to the staff BBQ tomorrow'*).
- Recognises employees that sacrifice honesty for efficiency (i.e.: *'That was excellent how you did that, however you did it doesn't matter, it is done'*).
- Replaces employees who do not sacrifice honesty for efficiency (i.e.: *'He is a good worker, but there are just so many things...'*).
- Be a pawn rather than a responsible agent (i.e.: *'I am told that you all have to attend the marketing fair day to promote the company, without pay, and I am not coming'*).

Denial of injury

A leader would:

- Lying in reference to a situation was not a serious problem (i.e.: *'I told the customers we have hired an entire gym facility for the organisation next year'*).
- Place weight towards other staff or sectors of the organisation that are deemed stable to accommodate the issue (i.e.: *'We have a Coordinator who can help answer those questions'*).
- Have a capacity to put another employee on a constructive path (i.e.: *'If you have any problems, let the Coordinator know, they'll sort it out for you'*).
- Can create appealing moral obligations for other employees (i.e.: *'A change of environment will do him/her good'*).
- Considerations of other employees are stretched to the level of incredulity (i.e.: *'That manager and that worker are dangerous'*).

Denial of victim

A leader would:

- Believe that everyone in business does it this way (i.e.: *'They would have done the same to us. They probably have'*).
- See lying as the choice of a realistic and pragmatic leader, rather than a choice as a principled or idealistic leader (i.e.: *'I knew nothing about it, I wasn't involved'*).
- Lie in a reference situation (i.e.: *'Let us not get hasty about all of this, it will be ok'*).

Condemnation of the condemners**A leader would:**

- When criticised turn the tables to the critics (i.e.: *'If they think I have not done my job, then why was I not informed by them in the first place?'*).
- Question the motivation of the critic for being opposed to a pragmatic approach to the situation (i.e.: *'They are just trying to make me look bad and blame me for their problems'*).
- Understand capitalism (i.e.: *'What does he/she know? I'm trying to run a profitable company'*).

Appeal to the higher loyalties**A leader would:**

- Attempt to justify lying in the reference situation (i.e.: *'We can just tell them this for now, they will understand it better that way'*).
- Appeal to two types of moral obligations: (1) the individual (2) their own unit in the organisation. (i.e.: *'My loyalty is first and foremost with the company'*).
- Have a lack of credibility in moral obligations (1) and (2) since they sanction the use of dishonesty and transport a problem from oneself to another person or unit (i.e.: *'Just say that you made a mistake by putting that up on the website' [even though instructed by them for it to occur] or 'We did have staff accept the job offer, but it happen to be only the day after our meeting with all of you that they withdrew their application to take the job'*).
- Find ways to camouflage the morally dubious aspect of presenting an employee in a better light than warranted by the facts (i.e.: *'She/he has experience in this, a leader in this field and a great person for the position' [when the leader speaking has only known her/him for 2 weeks, realistically she/he has little experience and is an exaggeration from the fact that they are new to the job and field]*).

- Cause a threat to social interaction and cooperation (i.e.: *'no the doctor will hold the meeting that I should be having tomorrow' [and no one turns up], or 'I don't trust her/him, they'll probably leave soon'.*

Of course it is not possible to go away with this assessment criteria and start labelling your evil leaders out there. The defective leader has to be studied just like those in any research context that utilise moral neutralisation techniques. Leadership with diversity is a challenge to group-based contexts in diversity and inequity of multiple and unstable identities of individuals. An orientation to Leadership as described by Lumby (2009, p. 425) states that, 'the particular differences individuals perceive among one another (as opposed to other, unperceived differences), together with the meanings of those perceived differences, are continually constructed through ongoing processes. There are no essential, innate and immutable characteristics of race, age, gender, disability or other demographic categories. Instead there are history, context, process, interactivity, power relations and change'.

People act through social, political, and economic institutions that create, embed, and reproduce the inequality among people which we then call diversity. Diversity is then acted out in practices of everyday life and interpreted through the eyes of moral and ethical reasoning. This can also legitimate unearned privilege and unearned disadvantage (Lumby, 2009).

This final article on leadership and moral neutralisation is not designed to begin a witch-hunt. You may feel it should be, depending on your experiences or position. However, the righteous and ethical manner in addressing these defective leaders is not to participate in their glorious world of madness. We are to learn and understand their world to which they live. 'We have been to the moon, we have charted the depths of the ocean and the heart of the atom, but we have a fear of looking inward to ourselves because we sense that is where all the contradictions flow together' (McKenna, 1988).

Leaders like you and I are all just human beings with an active consciousness that can dictate our existence. In order to Educate organisations and leaders who are drug dependent on moral neutralisation, you need to understand the moral of this story is, 'be what you seem to be – or if you'd like it put more simply – never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise' (Carroll, 1865, p. 171). For only then they may find peace, love and enlightenment, as do we all.

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