WHAT NAPOLEON CAN TELL US ABOUT HOW POWER WORKS IN ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIETY

Organizations and societies need continuity and periods of time without constant upheaval, in order to consolidate change and achieve sustain­able development. Change- and action-obsessed leaders, especially those operating opportunistically through a seizure of power, maintaining their power through fear and manipulation, cannot last indefinitely. But they can hurt a lot of people on the way.

Heavy-handed control by a self-obsessed leader, accompanied by a crack­down on suspected rivals and any forms of dissent or disagreement, can push opposition underground; but it may then increase, and it will cer­tainly lead to widespread discontent and explode at some point. Leaders interested only in their own personal status and obsessed with developing dynastic power tend to neglect the development of their organizations and countries in preference to actions which secure their power base.

The tolerance of personal vendettas and acts of revenge in organizations and societies (especially perpetuated by paranoid leaders) is ultimately destructive, and people live in fear and isolation. Constant expansion by takeovers – of other companies by another, and of invasions of countries by another – can create a temporary sense of triumph, a heady enjoy­ment of victory which can carry the victors along on a tide of loyalty and patriotic fervour, but this distracts them from normal development pro­cesses and is often used to divert attention from deep-seated problems.

When organizations and societies undergo revolutionary change and experience major shifts in power sources, this creates fear and discom­fort in those that are more stable, whose leaders are more conservative and who are not ready for change. It can be difficult for organizations and societies that have undergone revolutionary change and shifts in power to settle down and enjoy a period of stability; they will not be trusted by their competitors and neighbours, who will always be on the look-out for new revolutions and power-grabs.

Organizations and societies tend to develop power elites which do them no favours: they can be self-seeking, corrupt and disloyal to all but their immediate associates and do little for the organization or society itself. When the power elite idealizes itself as a meritocracy, it can lead to com­petition and in-fighting over who should be the next leader, over and above everyone else. Merit can be a good route to promotion, but it is seldom enough to keep hold of power.

Leaders of organizations and societies who try to run everything by themselves, trusting no one, can become isolated, develop an obsession with control, feel the need to spy on others – and cannot last forever. Some organizations and societies are so progressive that they are ahead of their time, and therefore on a collision course with the old order who will close ranks against them. This is especially so when they throw out old ways of legitimizing power, because they implicitly question the vested interests of those who benefit from inequality. Many leaders of organizations and societies who come from unconventional origins, very different from those in the past, find that the foundations of their legitimacy can be too fragile and are forced out. How often can leaders of organizations and societies face a self-created major reversal, a huge disaster, and survive? Can they carry on if they try to blame it on outside factors? This failure eats away at the foundation of their power and they lose credibility. Leaders need to protect resources to maintain power, or can quickly lose influence along with the resources they have lost.

A reversal suffered at the hands of a competitor or an enemy obviously not only reduces the power of the loser but increases the empowerment of the winner and gives the competitor or enemy much more confidence as a result.

Some leaders can be removed from power as the result of a reversal, but remain in denial of this loss. They want to make a come-back, and some manage it; often they thereby become more conservative forces, prevent­ing further change and development.

A network of patronage needs careful maintenance, and frequent renewal. An elite group of cronies, well-entrenched, will prevent further change, unless constantly reminded of the need for loyalty and action. A complacent network, however close to power, will be loyal only when the going is good. Intransigence on the part of the leadership group as a whole can lead to chaos and collapse. One of the problems when a leader plays one side against another is that everyone has to join in the game, destroying collaboration, learning and innovation. Everything is reduced to a fight for survival.

When enthusiasm for a charismatic leader evaporates, there can be a huge sense of relief at an opportunity to relax and realize what’s going on. When the charismatic leader is no longer there in person, the drive for whatever it is he or she wants suddenly disappears.

Some leaders have only one way of operating and one vision, and when circumstances change they are swept away; often control then reverts to canny negotiators doing one deal at a time, rather than those with the single powerful vision.

Leaders try to rewrite history, convincing themselves that they could have carried on being leaders, if only; the loss of power can be an almost impossible burden to bear for one who lived or died by it, and they struggle to understand their own part in its loss.