

Eliminate the Us vs. Them Dynamics

Unlocking the Unconscious Demonization that's Hijacking your Organization



“We’re facing a tempest of uncertainty in the coming years,” the CEO of a publicly traded financial services company said ruefully, “and if we don’t stop this in-fighting, we’re not going to make it.”

Human Resources was exasperated with how Operations pushed back on every initiative they launched; Sales scorned HR for its disregard of their business needs; Strategic Initiatives despaired at how ineffectively Operations followed through on their new business ideas, while Operations belittled SI’s plans as naively disconnected from reality; the middle of the organization despised senior management for their double talk and lack of clear direction; and, of course, everyone hated IT. In this charged climate of mistrust, performance issues weren’t being addressed, senior leaders rarely agreed on decisions that

impacted multiple departments, and several large clients walked away in disgust at the lack of integrated service they received.

I wish this organization were an anomaly, but it isn’t. Whether in a government agency, multi-national Fortune 500 corporation, privately owned brick and mortar company or the finest academic institution of our land, individuals and teams expend tremendous amounts of time and energy focusing on how intolerable others’ behaviors and intentions are. These dysfunctional inter-departmental dynamics often hijack an organization, overshadowing its most pressing business goals. Reorganizations are a popular, but ineffective, technique to address these issues, because *structural* solutions will always fail to curb the *interpersonal behaviors* at the root of these organizational clashes. More distressing, *possessing the best*

intentions of avoiding these dynamics is insufficient to prevent them.

Here’s why they happen and how to transform them.

An Illustration

The Commissioner of Social Services of an eastern seaboard state strode into the highly charged atmosphere of a monthly meeting he chaired with the presidents of the state’s psychiatric hospitals. He saw this group as self-serving and stridently resisted their constant drumbeat for more funding – which increased their profits – as long as they refused to question the inefficient way they managed the troubled children in their care. His schism with them had recently exploded in the local newspapers, as several youths had psychotic breakdowns while this committee argued over how the hospitals could maximize insurance payments. As the

Commissioner sat down, the leader of the largest private hospital handed him an agenda – for his meeting. This blatant power grab was the final straw in a long string of obstructionist affronts. As the Commissioner glanced at the agenda, he resolved that he would never allow this group to force their profitable solutions down his throat at the expense of the state's poorest children. No stranger to conflict, his moral outrage triggered a verbal dogfight that both sides promised to continue in the press.

Although the Commissioner knew that his outburst had left the problem of the neglected children completely unresolved, he was at a loss for how to work around the egos, selfish intentions and longstanding inefficiency of his interlocutors. The feelings were mutual, and in my almost two decades of consulting with senior leaders from government and private industry, I have found this stance of exasperated contempt to be



ubiquitous. My colleagues and I call this **'unconscious demonization'**.

Phase I: The Five Steps of Initial Demonization (Downward Spiral)

What our Commissioner – like most leaders I encounter – failed to realize was how he had been complicit in the deteriorating situation. In the eighteen months he had been in office prior to the above-

cited crisis, he had observed innumerable examples where the psychiatric hospital heads lobbied aggressively for their interests. Despite being confident, highly successful and undaunted by interpersonal conflict, he let many of these interactions become **(1) unchecked misinterpretations** regarding what their true intentions were. As they resisted his efforts to reform their inefficient hospital practices, his **(2) certainty about their ruthless profiteering reinforced itself over time**. Bitterly frustrated at his lack of progress on this intractable, high profile problem, he vented on numerous occasions to his staff and anyone else who would listen, unconsciously **(3) seeking reinforcements** for his point of view. As he grew more outraged at the hospital presidents' intransigence, he became less trusting, more verbally aggressive in his interactions with them, and more entrenched in his own position – all the while remaining **(4) blind to how his own behavior** was threatening and frustrating to them. Throughout this time the Commissioner's sense of righteous victimization prevented him from realizing that he and his adversaries were locked in a destructive dance of **(5) symmetrical escalation**, as the hospital presidents misinterpreted his intentions, vented amongst themselves, and felt victimized by his aggressive personality.

In the end, the parties had 'demonized' each other, only able to see what was wrong and untrustworthy in the other.

Predictably, the staffs on both sides of the conflict were passionately loyal to their leaders, buying into their resentments and beliefs about the other organizations. 'Systemic failure' was the result.



These *Five Steps of Initial Demonization* aim to shed light on how the downward spiral starts. But if reversing this cycle were simply a matter of 'assuming positive intent' in others – a frequently expressed intention when the issue is recognized – Us vs. Them conflicts would not be raging out of control all across America's public and private sector. If senior leaders of multinational corporations lose clients because their respective organizations are fighting with each other instead of taking care of business; if the programmatic and competency departments of matrix organizations around the country waste precious time and money blaming each other; if Democrats and Republicans in Congress are so hopelessly bi-partisan that they'll fight the other party's initiatives just to see them fail; when, in summary, we as humans are compelled to behave in ways that we intellectually know are destructive *then something other than our professed sense of purpose must driving us*.

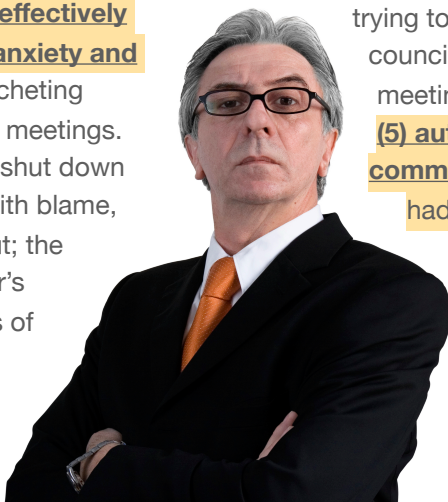
PHASE I: THE FIVE STEPS OF INITIAL DEMONIZATION (DOWNWARD SPIRAL)

Step	Explanation	Guiding Practices/Questions
<i>1. Unchecked Misinterpretations</i>	We constantly make sense of others' behavior through assigning explanations, typically linked to their (lack of) competency and (ulterior and threatening) motives. The vast majority of leaders lack effective clarification skills, either avoiding the confrontation all together or reacting aggressively, which aggravates the misinterpretation instead of clarifying it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Be vigilant when you think you know what someone means – ask clarifying questions, especially if you believe you disagree, vs. debating/responding ▶ If you want to react aggressively or 'shut down', ask yourself when the feeling started, and clarify that comment
<i>2. Reinforcing Certainty over Time</i>	These unchecked misinterpretations accumulate with each negative interaction, putting us in a biased state of heightened wariness. We progressively become absolutely certain about why we are right to dislike and distrust our adversary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Pay attention to negative conclusions regarding colleagues' intentions and competency. ▶ Test conclusions directly with colleagues with an <i>exploratory mindset</i>: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "When you say/do, I conclude..." ● "Help me understand your perspective..."
<i>3. Seeking reinforcements</i>	Our anger and frustration in these situations can become acute, so we need to vent about it to someone. Invariably, we choose people who agree with us about the other person or group.	<p>If you choose to discuss the issue with a third party,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Do so only with someone who is not invested in the situation or gaining your approval ▶ Set a clear framework that, although you may need to vent for a few minutes, you want them to challenge <i>your thinking and views of the other</i>
<i>4. Blind to our own behavior</i>	We cannot see ourselves (our tone and/or body language) and are typically unaware of how we might be interpreted by others. We tend to assume that the style and content of our communication is a transparent reflection of our good intentions. Nothing could be further from the truth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ If there is a difficult interaction, ask for feedback on how you communicated (vs. confirmation on how your colleague is at fault) ▶ Seek out people who maintain good relations with the colleague (or department), and draw out how your adversary might be experiencing/viewing you
<i>5. Symmetrical Escalation</i>	Everything occurring for us during this demonization cycle is also at play for our adversary. They are interpreting our behavior, forming a strongly held opinion over time, venting within their own trusted circles and seeing the entire problem as us, not themselves.	<p>Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What might they be feeling behind that behavior? (Beware of the easy answers where you write them off as egomaniacs!) ▶ If I were behaving that way, what might be going on for me?

Phase II: The Five Steps of Institutionalized Demonization (Emotional Investment)

The vast majority of leaders – like my Commissioner – fail to consistently implement common-sense tenets of how to collaborate because they have become emotionally invested in their demonization cycle. Inter-personal and inter-organizational conflicts can become so embedded in leaders' psyches that they deeply believe that they have no other option than to fight back or work around. Unfortunately, naming and challenging this emotional investment doesn't typically fill us with feelings of self-importance and success. To the contrary, it can feel raw, unnerving and vulnerable – in fact, any leader protective of his or her reputation would never admit to most of the feelings outlined below in the *Five Steps of Institutionalized Demonization*. So they don't – and our dysfunctional organizations continue unabated, costing us dearly in work stress, productivity and money.

When the Social Services Commissioner and I debriefed his explosive meeting, it was uncomfortable and unsettling for him to begin to acknowledge just how ashamed he had been feeling for months about his very public failure to improve this particular situation. He was sensitive and defensive, **(1) unable to effectively manage the anxiety and criticism** ricocheting through these meetings. Some people shut down when faced with blame, others lash out; the Commissioner's angry rebukes of



the hospital presidents' complaints fueled their **(2) outrage at feeling misunderstood**, unheard, and dismissed, which the Commissioner felt himself when they vigorously denied his frustrated claims of their inefficiency. Each side unconsciously cherished **(3) the addictive superiority of being right**, certain that they were on the side of goodness and intelligence. The intensity of these feelings built over time into a deeply defensive, morally righteous stand-off, like what we might hear when a colleague privately vents his or her frustrations to us in about a colleague we both can't stand, or members of Congress disparage each other's misguided ideology. It gives us an *indomitable sense of power* when we unleash these pent-up feelings. The Commissioner furthermore realized that demonizing the hospital presidents as arrogant and selfish had allowed him to **(4) completely discredit all claims and issues they raised** about his organization; he could justifiably ignore anything he didn't want to admit or that threatened his interests.

When confronted with these emotionally charged booby traps *within himself*, the Commissioner copped to a "moral hangover," realizing that he had played a far more dysfunctional role in the previous eighteen months than he had believed. When he considered trying to redress the situation with council members in the next meeting, the prospect of **(5) authentically communicating** about how he had been feeling and behaving – as opposed to defensively repeating they were

doing wrong – **was viscerally uncomfortable**. At a primal level, he realized with shock, he would rather let these neglected children – *his life's work* – suffer their fate, than risk the disclosure of weaknesses that he was sure would be used by the for-profit presidents to counterattack him.



Phase III: Reversing the Spiral (Conscious Humanization)

No significant change in these costly dynamics will occur as long as people's unconscious emotional investment is left intact. No structural reorganization; no amount of incentive, punishment or cajoling; no reiteration of a mission/vision statement will more than incrementally soften the powerful force of humans locked in this downward spiral.

When the Commissioner recognized that the true source of his ire was in fact his own shame at publicly failing to fix this problem – leading him to scapegoat his council colleagues – he took his first step in (1) dispersing the charge of his emotional investment. Although he wanted nothing more than to continue to blame them, he knew instinctively that the cost of doing so would be paid for by the very children he was committed to helping – an unacceptable outcome for him. Fighting through his fear and the resistance of his ego, he resolved to (2) be guided by his highest sense of purpose during these moments of threat and conflict. He accepted that

PHASE II: THE FIVE STEPS OF INSTITUTIONALIZED DEMONIZATION (EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT)

Step	Explanation	Guiding Practices/Questions
<p><i>1. Ineffectively manage anxiety and (public) criticism</i></p>	<p>Our deeply engrained desire to appear competent, intelligent, and right in others' and our own eyes makes us very quick to react negatively to any comments that might imply the contrary. These automatic defensive postures shut down constructive dialogue (and limit our learning).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How are my defense mechanisms (tied to my own ego) triggered? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Am I afraid of appearing incompetent? Being judged as stupid or weak? Of failing? ● Phase II, Steps #1 and #2 are the true – and primary – sources of your anger at the other person. We call these your HOT BUTTONS. ▶ What am I refusing to acknowledge about my shortcomings in this situation?
<p><i>2. Outrage at feeling misunderstood, unheard, dismissed</i></p>	<p>This outrage is rarely experienced or expressed as a sense of being hurt, because 'strong' leaders have thick skin. Current US organizational culture makes it awkward and uncomfortable to discuss these feelings, so we ignore or rationalize them to our detriment. Instead, we act them out through criticizing, undermining or withdrawing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ You need to be willing to be deeply honest and simple about these raw feelings. Express them as inarticulate bullet points vs. eloquent and rational paragraphs ▶ How were my feelings hurt? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Look in the places that feel 'yucky' – where you feel petty, needy, insecure. ● Admit them (perhaps already just to yourself). Then offer empathy to yourself that you are a human being with feelings. ▶ If you are able, aim to recenter yourself on a guiding principle such as 'I neither want to feel this way, nor cause others to feel this way.'
<p><i>3. Addicted to the superiority of being right</i></p>	<p>There is a powerful high of holding the 'right' position in a conflict, surpassed only by the discomfort of being wrong. Being right (i.e., my position and opinions are vindicated) often becomes the predominant concern in a leader's mind, overshadowing the end goal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What am I sure – certain! – that I'm right about in this situation? ▶ Seek, with others, to challenge that your view is the entire view of reality. What can you acknowledge that contradicts your position? ▶ What are your colleagues sure they are right about? What is true about their point of view?
<p><i>4. Discredit our adversary's claims and issues</i></p>	<p>If our adversary's skills and intentions lack value and integrity, it conveniently renders illegitimate the positions and issues he or she may have. This allows us to justify avoiding questioning or addressing our beliefs, views of reality, weaknesses or contributions to the conflict. Righteously preserving our status quo is one significant benefit of demonizing others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What are their priorities and incentives? What would I be worried about were I in their shoes? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How is what my organization or I are doing a threat to their priorities? ▶ How can I relate to their concerns? ▶ How do their concerns illuminate opportunities for improvement in my organization? How can I grow my understanding of the system to incorporate both perspectives? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If I can rise above my silo and see a broader vision, then I am ready to lead at that next level
<p><i>5. Authentic communication is viscerally uncomfortable</i></p>	<p>Anger is a far more powerful and comfortable feeling than that of hurt, weakness or vulnerability. Having and expressing these latter emotions can expose us to judgment, criticism or being taken advantage of. Both avoidance and aggression are rooted in these fears. Emotional courage, very different than taking business risks, is a rare commodity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What could I share that would feel uncomfortable to disclose but could help my colleagues to see beyond my defensive armor? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do I feel judged or hurt by them? ● What am I struggling to do well in my organization? How do I need their help?

his ideology about the problem might lose, as long as the suffering children were more effectively protected. Terrified of appearing weak or being attacked by his opponents, he nonetheless realized that the most constructive course of action was to (3) create trust through an act of radical vulnerability. When he began the next council meeting with a transparent analysis of why he had reacted so intensely in the previous meeting, as well as how he had contributed to the deterioration of their collaboration since the beginning, it felt like an unthinkable suicidal act. And yet, it was the very person he had most demonized as

selfish and close-minded – the leader of the largest for profit hospital – who was the first to respond to his plea for a different relationship. The president had long ago retreated into a deeply defensive state, often marked by aggressive counterattacks, in order to ward off the Commissioner’s war-like stance. When the Commissioner offered instead authentic vulnerability, the president was able to (4) ‘rehumanize’ his adversary, responding with a gracious and revealing statement of apology that similarly allowed the Commissioner to see beyond the president’s previously impenetrable inter-

personal armor. These emotionally uncomfortable acts began to exorcise the sense of ‘danger’ and suspicion from the room, and in the space of trust and aligned purpose that progressively emerged, both sides were able to (5) recognize the equal value of each side’s perspectives, needs and goals. The crisis and subsequent healing of these two meetings launched an intensive collaboration over the next eighteen months that saw this intractable, decade-old problem of unavailable psychiatric services decrease by an unimaginable 40% wait time.

PHASE III: REVERSING THE SPIRAL (CONSCIOUS HUMANIZATION)

Step	Explanation	Guiding Practices/Questions
<i>1. Disperse the charge of emotional investment</i>	People are not able to genuinely challenge their biases or begin to process and express their past pains if they are, consciously or unconsciously, captivated by the above types of emotional investment. Conversely – and this is the very hopeful part – I have repeatedly witnessed the dramatic diffusion of an otherwise intractable conflict when parties have been able to acknowledge their emotional investment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The questions of Phase II aim to create the self-awareness necessary to uproot my blame of the other person and reclaim my responsibility in the situation. ▶ Do I ‘get’ their point of view? ▶ Can I articulate why I have been emotionally invested in demonizing the other group? Do I have distance from those feelings or I still talk about them in disparaging terms?
<i>2. Be guided by our highest sense of purpose during moments of threat and conflict</i>	Humans suffer from “confused” goals. On the one hand, we want to learn, contribute, collaborate (my ‘ecosystem goals’); on the other hand, we want to be right, respected and perceived as highly competent (my ‘Egosystem goals’). When these two goals conflict, the latter type of goals (which protects our self-image and sense of self-worth) hijack our more noble intentions. Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey refer to this as ‘competing commitments’ in their book, Immunity to Change. We need to learn as a culture to not only prioritize our ‘true’ goals, but to elicit that same ability in others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What do I care about more than protecting my sense of self-worth? (Yes, there are many things, we just don’t know how to be guided by them.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● E.g., my growth as a leader, what’s at stake in our business, the quality of relationship I create, who I want to be as a human being. ▶ How is transforming this relationship an opportunity to grow to my next level as a leader? What leadership skills can I develop in leading from above the fray of this Us vs. Them dynamic? ▶ Test my clarity: even if I appear and/or feel in ways that trigger my ‘hot buttons’ (incompetent, disrespected, weak, vulnerable), are these other goals more important? Enough to keep me centered if the other person falls into their threatening behaviors?!

Step	Explanation	Guiding Practices/Questions
<p><i>3. Create trust through radical vulnerability</i></p>	<p>Since this Us vs. Them mechanism is symmetrical, the other side of a conflict has as much legitimate mistrust and pain as we do. They are as convinced as we are that if they reveal anything truthful, we will use it against them. If each side waits for the other to become trustworthy, progress will be incremental at best. As uncomfortable as it may feel, only when a mistrusted colleague (you!) has acknowledged his/her suspect behaviors, explained the fears driving them, and undertaken to make change can others feel safe enough to tentatively trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ See Phase II, Step #5. ▶ How am I threatening to these other colleagues? How do I create mistrust? ▶ Am I willing to search for the courage to take the first step in creating trust? If I don't, who will? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What will be the consequences if no one does?
<p><i>4. Rehumanize our adversary</i></p>	<p>To arrest our blind slide into conflict, we must learn to actively challenge our demonized view of others. This does not mean throwing out what I believe and naively assuming the opposite, but using my awareness of the Initial Demonization cycle to galvanize a commitment to develop a complete view. It is important to highlight that this rehumanizing process must be a very deliberate, proactive act, and will feel dissonant. No one deliberately believes in something false or wrong – thus, dismantling our certainties is cognitively and emotionally difficult.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ See Phase II, Step #4 ▶ Don't allow myself or others to vent about these colleagues, even for a minute. Challenge yourself and others to see their point of view. ▶ Schedule regular meetings with a counterpart with whom you believe you can build a rapport. Become a bridge between silos by proactively addressing issues that come up instead of letting hallway churn reinforce each sides' negative beliefs about the other.
<p><i>5. Recognize the equal value of each side's perspectives, needs and goals</i></p>	<p>This piece of the puzzle seems like straightforward common sense. In the dialogue movement, Phase III #4 and #5 are commonly practiced in aiming to resolve conflicts. Without significant progress on the first three points, however, resolution is limited and temporary.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ See Phase II, Step #4 ▶ You have a lot to learn, especially from people you despise. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do they think, lead, communicate differently than you? What could you emulate in them? ● What are their core priorities and how could you help them achieve them? How could they do the same for you?

‘Soft’ Skills Are Hardest to Learn

What is generally known – people have egos, fight-flight behaviors don't make for effective leadership, turf wars undermine collaboration – doesn't necessarily translate into personal self-awareness. Most of us are not effective at analyzing the semi-conscious motivations of our behaviors, tending to mistake sophisticated rationalization for thoughtful reflection. While the top leaders in our corporations and government may be smart, well

educated and hard working, they are not typically aware of the massive blind spots that undermine their leadership. Furthermore, dismissing the uncomfortable work of acknowledging and dispersing our emotional investment in counter-productive behaviors as ‘touchy feely’ simply allows these pervasive dysfunctions to proliferate – to the detriment of our personal productivity, work life stress, and organizational performance.

Several years later, as the financial services CEO lead a thriving

organization to record profits, double-digit employee engagement gains, and an industry-unprecedented joint venture in India, he surveyed a multi-leveled leadership cadre emotionally invested in supporting each other to achieve their collective goals vs. belittling their respective weaknesses. He summed it up: “When a lot of smart colleagues all stopped vying to be the smartest person in the room, we began learning from each other and leveraging our different perspectives to the company's benefit.”

THIS CHAPTER WRITTEN BY SHAYNE HUGHES WAS PUBLISHED AS PART OF A BOOK ON “DEVELOPING TALENT FOR ORGANIZATIONAL RESULTS”

