BOUNDARY SITUATIONS AND LEADERSHIP CHOICES IN DEFENSE ESTABLISHMENTS

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Abstract: *Change is an inherent part of today's world. To become a part of it, to juggle with it, to work against it, to be engulfed by it or simply ignore it are all part of choices daily made. The problem that arises though is that regardless of the type of change, both legal entities and individuals are confronted with their limitations and finitude. Hence the conundrum of finding the way through the plethora of possibilities may either lead to gaining or regaining the freedom of choice by daring one's own limitations or remaining entrenched in these. Regardless of the choice, the waste of opportunities or the gain is experienced in both situations as a pain that, if not properly managed, may lead to either sudden or slow immobilization and finally to extinction. This encounter of finitude and limitations is best described through the concept of "boundary situation" as discussed by the philosopher Karl Jaspers. However, the inherent solutions proposed by him rely solely on the strength and willingness of the individual entity experiencing a situation loaded with multifarious possibilities towards change. What this paper proposes is an academic approach to the boundary situations that defense establishments are confronted with nowadays. Starting from a bird's eye view of these, the analysis is to focus on the mandatory rewriting or reinterpretation of the script underlying contemporary leadership roles. Thus, the paper also aims at initiating a discussion on whether nowadays' changes in the defense and security environment are by themselves boundary situations that, if ignored or simply blindly struggled with, will eventually lead to wide immobilization of legitimate defense systems to the detriment and dramatic consequences for their stakeholders.*

Keywords: *defense challenge; leadership roles; boundary situation; macro and micro organizational behavior*

1. INTRODUCTION

More than half of any individual's active life focuses on task accomplishment, workload, and interactions that are an inherent part of profession. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult to tell apart individual professional behavior from group and organizational behavior. What is more, the former is nothing but the mirror of the other two since organization processes, procedures and practices derived from policies, doctrine, strategy leave a heavy footprint on how groups, teams, individuals behave under specific circumstances.

Given modern and contemporary professional life features, an increase in the number of organizational and individual external affiliations, bonds, relationships leads to a higher likelihood for the same individuals and organizations to discover their own real or imaginary limits and to experience tension when trying to align and integrate these into their own existence.

The question that this article attempts to address is as follows: if leadership is about doing the right thing, then what is the right thing to do, what is the right course of action when confronted with these real/imaginary limits that restrict/ blindfold the capacity to act and react in full awareness as a whole? Inherently, the goal of this paper is to provide a framework for reading, understanding and possibly for choosing what course of action to be followed when extreme situations are to occur in organizational life.

2. BRIEF CONCEPTUAL DELINATIONS

The article is anchored into the philosophical concept of *boundary situation* proposed by Karl Jaspers. According to him, this is "an encounter with an insuperable limit at which we necessarily fail", "a negative limit experience", "an ontological flash" (Strenger, 2011:93) involving acknowledgement that an apparently crafted/ designed life can divert course. The paradigmatic situations defined by Jaspers as boundary situations are "*illness*" and "*death*" of oneself or another, as well as guilt and anxiety. Moreover, boundary situations

do not change, but only their manifestations; in their reference to our existence they are totally valid. We cannot see beyond them; in our existence we do not see anything behind them. They are like a wall that we push and walk into. They cannot be changed through us, but we can only bring them into clarity without being able to deduce them or to explain them from something else. They exist with existence itself. (Tymieniecka, 2010:244)

As such, boundary situations become a source of philosophical inquiry and human awareness of freedom. However, debatable as this may seem, the contexts in which humans are truly free are very few. What is more, they are subject to restrictions that are not dependent upon them and that reduce reality. When encountering boundary situations, the choices have a dual nature: love/hate, facing reality with dignity or avoiding it in cowardice. What is worth remembering though is that these situations may generate a dramatic change in behavior or attitude for the best, in Jaspers' opinion, or for the worst, as numerous cases of deployment in war zones prove it. Thus, understanding boundary situations is about

> rescuing significant parts of common experiences from oblivion, repression, but most especially from domestication - the sense that common human experience is routine, humdrum… (Gerhart, Russell**,** 1984:185).

However, the inherent solutions proposed by Karl Jaspers rely solely on the strength and willingness of the individual entity experiencing a situation loaded with multifarious possibilities towards change. What this paper proposes is an academic approach to the boundary situations that defense establishments are confronted with nowadays and leadership choices that can be/are made in line with or against system constraints. Starting from a bird's eye view of these, the analysis is to focus on the mandatory rewriting or reinterpretation of the script underlying contemporary leadership roles. Thus, the paper also aims at initiating a discussion on whether nowadays' changes in the defense and security environment are by themselves boundary situations that, if ignored or simply blindly struggled with, will eventually lead to wide immobilization of legitimate defense systems to the detriment and dramatic consequences for their stakeholders.

3. PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATION BOUNDARY SITUATIONS

As this chapter is to outline, in an organizational framework, boundary situations are

related to any transformation/change endeavor or challenge that an organization as a whole needs to tackle and/or to changes that groups or individuals undergo as a result of exogenous factors like socio-economic, political, geo-political, technological influence factors or endogenous triggers that are mostly related to the size of the organization, its structure (i.e. centralized, decentralized), the type of technology it chooses to use and hence the type of tasks and core competencies required for its proper functioning.   In this respect, it is worth noting that one of the most common acronyms used to define such external and internal struggle with what may be called boundary situations comes from the defense area under the acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) (Normore & Brooks, 2017:197-198) and fully illustrates what Handy predicted back in 1993:370: "Changing values in the environment linked to a changing technology will affect current assumptions of what makes organizational sense" (Handy, 1976:370). The means of mitigating the risks raising from assumptions that are proven untrue by the changing environment show whether an organization is able to acquire and convey new meanings/sense to its employees and hence adapt in an agile manner to the waves of change or, on the contrary, remains stuck in old routines, practices, norms, values, in other words becomes "domesticated" and doomed for extinction.
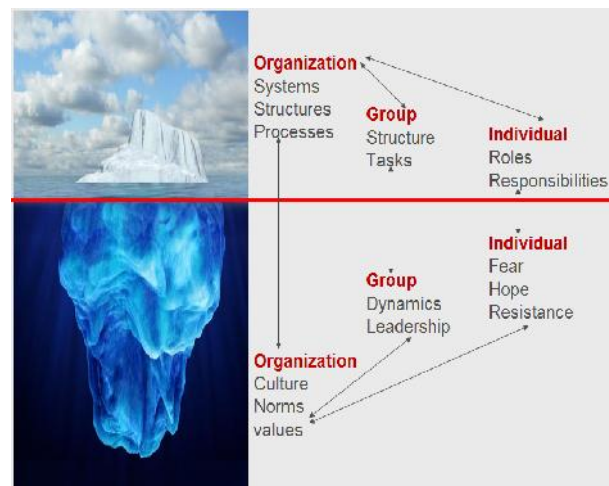

Fig.1. Levels of boundary situations within macro and micro organizational behavior.
Source: Adapted from Aslı Goksoy (2015)
Organizational Change Management Strategies in Modern Business, Chapter 4: The Power of Three.

As Goksoy (2015) underlines, for an organization to change it takes three directions to act upon: the overall system, the group and the individual, as represented in Figure number 1.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that unless the covert layer of each of the above undergoes the very definition of a boundary situation, namely the "encounter with an insuperable limit at which we necessarily fail", "a negative limit experience", "an ontological flash" it is impossible for the outer layers to actually transform the negative limit into a positive rewriting and consequently into dramatic changes. Thus, if these three fold perspective is to be taken on the triggers of boundary situations, a possible taxonomy and reading of these in organizational context starting from Jasper's definition is as follows.

Death can be equaled at organization level to a new stage in maturity that either requires **transformation** or **decline and extinction**. In this respect, it is worth noting how these are tightly linked to the interplay of the values, norms, practices, leadership, and individual feelings to be found at covert level. A significant example that has multiple ramifications within defense establishment is that of the effect that the values purported during communist times have continued to bear on the former Communist countries and their public systems and services. A study conducted by Wayne Sandholtz & Rein Taagepera (2005:127) shows that

> communism does appear to affect corruption, both indirectly (through its effect on cultural values, especially the survival/self-expression orientation), and directly. Pervasive corruption was practically a necessity under communist regimes, though government agencies exercised some restraining influence. The transition to democratic institutions and market economies removed the regulatory forces that had constrained corruption. The initial phases of the democratic and market transitions thus created massive opportunities to grab assets through bribes, kickbacks, payoffs, and extortion, but without new institutional and normative structures that might curtail such behaviors. … Communism had produced a culture of corruption; entire populations had been socialized into norms and expectations that made corruption part of their way of life. Those cultural legacies of communism were unlikely to simply vanish with the political system that engendered them. Not surprisingly, most of the post-communist countries of central and Eastern Europe have found corruption not only to be retarding the development of market economies, but also to be undermining public trust in democratic institutions and public administration.

As it can be noticed in the above case, at state and institution level, a regime may apparently die/disappear, but its footprints may still be present decades after. Thus, in such a situation, the attitude, the behavior at organization, but also at group and individual level can be multifarious. It can be wrought with anger and hate at the beginning when the regime becomes similar to a boundary situation and for individuals and groups is equated with death, as communism was a relevant example in this respect, or, if this death does not result in a meaningful transformation as expected it only leads to the perpetuation of the same culture, norms, rules, values under the disguise of slightly different systems, structures, processes. Nonetheless, what is worth noting in such a case is that for the very definition of a boundary situation to come to effect, (i.e. "encounter with an insuperable limit at which we necessarily fail") there are two conscious and opposite choices yielding from the very same type of boundary situation (in the example above, an oppressive regime).

On one hand, it can take time for organizations, groups, individuals to continue to react and behave in line with the "*ontological flash*" that they experience when confronted with a boundary situation and more often than not they fall into the pleasant trap of choosing the simplest solution possible equated with cowardice and defection from direct confrontation. In this respect, it is worth noting the covert effects of the shallow changes in the outer layers of post communist countries' regimes, organizational entities' structures, processes on subordinated organizations, groups, individuals, as defense establishments are, that prevent the transformation of the negative limit into the 'a positive rewriting' of existence itself and hence to a dramatic transformation at behavioral level. For example, the formal and informal rules for officer promotion based on "cronyism", as well as on time and not real merit in service, or on political/ideological merit rather than on professional competence led in most former communist countries and their respective military to a perverted rewriting of the very concept of "merit" "that is difficult to reform" (Ulrich, 1999:122). In such cases, on short and medium term, the effects of undergoing system transformation may lead indeed to downsides like hate, cowardice expressed as acceptance or perverted rewriting of values, as the above example highlighted. However, in societies that do choose democratic regimes and hence become open to international trends and influences, the 'ontological flash' takes time to aggregate and lead to a rewriting of existence itself. In this respect, it is worth noting the taxonomy of change proposed by Huczynski and Buchanan (2013:624) that highlights the need for a paradigm shift in terms of thinking, solving problems, boundary definition, doing business should real transformation and in-depth change be envisaged.

Fig. 2. A taxonomy of change and related measures
for implementation
Source: Andrzej A. Huczynski, David A. Buchanan
(2013) *Organizational Behavior,* Pearson Education
Limited, p.624

On the other hand, for the "ontological flash" to lead to a dramatic rewriting of the organizations', groups' and individuals' covert level it may take war or armed conflict, either as a boundary situation by itself or as a trigger of death and suffering, to occur. For example, in the case of Georgia, a former communist country as well, the transformation of state institutions after the fall of the communist regime followed the same lines as the ones already described. Nevertheless, the Russia-Georgia conflict proved "a catalyst for reform" (Hamilton, 2009), leading to a strong commitment on behalf of Georgian leadership to preserve democracy and truly reform state institutions, the military one included.

All of the above considered, boundary situations related to state entities, and in our case with the military organization should actually prompt the need for self reflection and hopefully for dramatic changes:

…how adequately have we (i.e. scholars, educators, political analysts, senior military leaders) examined and reformed our organizational structures and our traditional conceptions of military command and control, so as to enable, rather than inhibit, the kind of autonomous exercise of judgment, prudence, courage, compassion, and commitment to the principles of professional military responsibility…? (Lucas, 2008).

Another way to look at death as a boundary situation is as **departure/alienation from one's own culture** and experiencing a **culture shock**. This is proven more than a common circumstance in the case of deployed soldiers. In this respect, a

study on deployed German soldiers (Zimmermann, Fischer, Lorenz, Alliger-Horn:2-16) unveils the profound change in values that most of these experienced as a result of their personal clash with other cultures and that manifested as an increase in their regard for non tangible artifacts, care for their close ones (colleagues or families), focus on "control, structure, order, and sense of duty", hedonistic inclinations, to mention just few such transformations.

Collapse of structure, a chaotic environment, the apparent absence of rules are also equivalent to death as a boundary situation and they do not necessarily lead to the positive transfiguration that Jaspers associates to the former concept:

The unstructured environment in which the serviceman operates in times of crisis or war, can lead him to modify the framework of his peacetime system of reference. With the collapse of the normal distinctions between what is 'good' and what is 'bad', he may be prompted to alter his behaviour, whether consciously or not (Royal: 2010: 67).

Group think or, in military terms **"brotherhood of arms"**, even though with positive effects in normal, healthy organizational climates and environments in terms of the values purported by these, can also prove to generate negative effects when the (sometimes fake) urgent need for consensus trumps all other considerations and individual opinions. That may also equate to the death of individual initiative and independent thinking and may become a boundary situation not necessarily for the group itself, or for its members, but for the environment in which these act. For example, it is worth taking account of an initiative of the US Army in Iraq to focus on training a group of military into a skeptical type of thinking to counter the effects of poor decisions generated by group think:

In the wake of chaos and a lethal insurgency in Iraq, blamed in no small part on poor decisions and a lack of planning at the highest levels, the U.S. Army has had a startling insight that is upending conventional thinking about how the military works. That epiphany is that the force needs fewer yes men. (Mulrine, 2008).

As for **illness/ sickness** as boundary situations poor communication instances and lack of or poor understanding of ethical principles and rules of behavior are the most common triggers of negative 'ontological flashes' into the witnesses/victims of

these, be them individuals, groups or entire organizations. Bottlenecks in the communication flow imposed by the sometimes falsely understood rule of "need to know" vs. overall guidance that says vision is to be shared with everyone, or highly formalized communication, insufficiently formalized practices in a highly bureaucratic environment that is not prepared for the autonomy required by these are but few instances that transform communication into a negative experience and hence may lead to dramatic, yet sometimes hard to detect changes in behavior. However, the underpinning of all of the above may simply have to do with what makes us humans, which is character:

> Failures of character may be the most pernicious form of failure. Such experiences can have a dramatic and sometimes irreversible impact on the leader and those he or she leads. Like yeast or cancer, it spreads in ways that can compromise large organizations and entire societies. (Ashgar, *et al.* 2015).

For establishing a prospective leadership decision making framework for defense establishments that is conducive to 'positive ontological flashes' or prevents the negative ones a proper reading of signs is required, and a brief identification of these follows in the next chapter.

4. SIGNS/INDICATORS OF BOUNDARY SITUATIONS

The indicators by which to evaluate whether there are prospects for negative boundary situations or these have already occurred may be labeled as positive or negative ones.

The most positive indicator that may show grounds for change or that the latter has already occurred is the freedom to question taken for granted assumptions. In author's opinion that is probably the most dramatic change that can occur at behavior level and the most difficult endeavor. First, the stumbling block comes from the nature of the humans that look for comfort zones and preservation of self-esteem and face in front of others, and these are all the more enforced by organizational structures where decision making is top down, and responsibility comes without authority or accountability.

In terms of the negative indicators that highlight the difficulty of triggering positive dramatic experiences conducive to acknowledgment of the need to change, or, on the contrary, they are either the hallmark of a negative experience leading to cowardice or the sign that repeated negative

ontological flashes have contributed to something similar to an attrition at self level, the most visible ones fall into two categories: linguistic indicators and form over content efforts/acceptance.

Linguistically speaking, replies like 'It's not my job', 'Who are you to speak on somebody else's behalf', 'Mind your business', 'An order is an order, not an invitation', 'I don't know', are but few signs of alienation caused by inequity, differentiated access to resources, disempowerment, lack of commitment, ambivalence. As for the 'form over content' indicators they are recognizable in the "blind" acceptance of rules or a search for cumbersome rules and procedures by which to justify one's professionalism, a so called "proactive" search for bounding rules.

When faced with such instances of overt behavior, it becomes obvious that leaders bear an enormous responsibility, especially considering the negative instances of boundary situations. Therefore, it is important to identify a number of directions of action for these that simplistic as they may seem may resonate regardless of the environment in which they act.

5. THE ROLE OF LEADERS RELATED TO BOUNDARY SITUATIONS

One important take away for any leader in relation to the discussion on boundary situations, is related to the obligation to properly read the signs and understand the causes triggering them, as well the covert consequences. In this respect,

> If a person is truly a great leader, he or she in all likelihood is capable of recognizing the situational and contingent aspects of leadership, adjusting as necessary to accomplish his or her goals. (Asghar *et al.*, 2015).

In relation to that it is also important to underline the need to adapt communication to the type of tasks to be performed and the urgency of the situation. Thus, complex, vague, ambiguous tasks require for collaboration rather that authority and orders, and that is all the more true in nowadays' environment already acknowledged as volatile, uncertain, ambiguous and complex, as well as the power to admit that real power is anchored into competence and not authority of position or rank, nor in somebody's whimsical behavior. (Ashgar *et al.*, 2015).

One important word of caution for leaders is not to turn their own management or leadership style into the trigger for negative boundary situations at employee or group level, since

Many executives can run the numbers or analyze the economic structure of an industry; a precious few can master the social and political dynamic of decision making. … As a result, critical assumptions remain untested, and creative alternatives do not surface or receive adequate attention. In all too many cases, the problem begins with the person directing the process, as their words and deeds discourage a vigorous exchange of views. (Roberto, 2013)

Last but not the least, it needs to be reminded that boundary situations are very much prompted by dilemmas arising from the cracks within fabric made of legal framework, ethical principles and moral principles. These allow for both positive and negative 'ontological flashes' and therefore it is leaders' responsibility to carefully reflect and choose their words, actions and to behave as role models and not as mere tools or products of a given system.

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