

Domination Culture and its connection to trauma and conflict

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In this article, you will find commentary on what I have learned and some conclusions I have formulated - particularly about the misuse of authority - while observing, experiencing and hearing about workplaces over the last 40 years. During these 40 years I have been the person everyone shouts at and a person who shouts at everyone. When neither of those contributed to my wellbeing I became a mediator. In the last 15 years I have become a consultant, trainer, facilitator, author and coach. My intention is to open awareness to what I consider to be mainstream thinking, so some of these reflections are intended to be disruptive. What I'm asking of you is to allow the possibility of my opinions, even if you feel resistant.

Keywords

domination culture, trauma, conflict, power over, compliance, self-determination

Some personal history

Employee as slave

I got my first part time job at the age of 14 in 1974. The work, opening envelopes and sorting the contents into piles, was mindless, and we were shouted at a lot by some women in overalls. By my mid-twenties, it began to dawn on me that I was unemployable. This was not because I couldn't perform tasks, meet performance indicators or deliver quality work, but because I wasn't willing to do anything meaningless just because someone told me to do it. So, at 28 years of age, I started running my own business and have been responsible for generating my own income ever since. For the last ten years I have been Chief Executive of a charity, the [Centre for Peaceful Solutions](#) (CPS), that I founded specifically for ethical reasons to be a non-profit making organisation.

It took many years to realise and articulate that what I was objecting to was the misuse of authority, where instructions and directives could be based on the mood and triggers of my seniors, in a system where I mostly recognised enslavement thinly disguised as employment; I was especially amazed (in a bad way) at middle and senior management systems where pleasing a boss who is also pleasing a boss could come at a great cost to other aspects of life, such as parenting, family relationships and even personal well-being. In my opinion, even having a job that requires you to get less sleep than is good for you could be considered to be enslavement in a competitive society where we are programmed to fear losing everything, while carrying a burden of debt that leaves many people two pay cheques away from financial ruin.

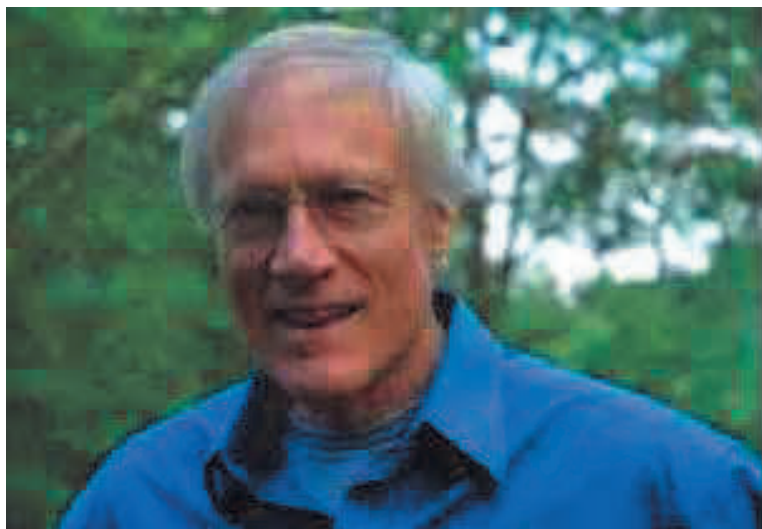
Employer as slave driver

All of this really hit home when I became the owner of a profit making business and I found myself managing my own handpicked team. I was shocked to realise that I was managing people in exactly the same unhappy way that I had been managed. Everything depended on my mood and on the team's ability to 'please' me.

I became aware that all I had done was to put myself in a position of power so that I no longer felt powerless. It meant that I was just following the same system from the other side of the coin. Yet what I really wanted to do was disrupt it. I saw that I needed a completely new approach, or a paradigm shift to be able to see workplaces through a different lens - one which is not taught in the education system or shared anywhere in mainstream teaching. I sold my business and went on a journey of discovery which provided answers I never knew the questions to.

At this point, I would like to define what I mean by 'domination culture', 'trauma' and 'conflict', to further contextualise my 'disruptive' comments.

What is Domination Culture?



[Walter Wink](#)

The phrase 'domination culture' was adopted by the theologian and proponent of non-violence, Walter Wink (1992) who talked about domination systems where a few people control many others to their own advantage. In domination systems people are trained to think in ways that support the system, even at a cost to themselves. So they are conditioned to fit in with the system.

The suppression of the self

A key part of fitting in with a domination system is the suppression of the self. This means that we are required to deny our feelings and needs in order to be compliant and obey the rules. The process of denying our feelings and needs begins in school (if our parents didn't start it) because as well as being required to learn information to pass tests and get graded, we also discovered the power of enforcement when we didn't do as were told.

Fear disguised as competition

For this reason many people find it hard to articulate how they feel. We were educated by society to ignore our feelings in order to be an interchangeable part in a moneymaking machine, where every individual is replaceable. In a domination system, obedience, compliance and pecking order are important. The inherent threat of replacement with a more compliant and obedient actor is implicit because we are trained to believe that there are always plenty of people who can step in and that we are competing for work, as if this is a

natural way of being in the world. The driving energy in this system is fear disguised as competition. Consequently, we put our energy into actions that are really driven by survival instinct instead of creativity.

A language of judgement and blame

Domination culture generates a language of judgement, blame and labels. It motivates people to act out of fear, guilt or shame through the use of threat. These phrases are not used explicitly, but you will find them hidden in the discourse in most mainstream workplaces. 'Do your work or I'll fire you', 'Do your work or we'll label you as incapable', 'Do your work or you'll be humiliated'. I call it 'or else' language. It can be very polite and can even include the words 'please' and 'thank you'. But hidden in the content is the 'or else ...'

Unintended consequences of misguided reward systems

Sometimes, domination culture uses rewards to elicit the behaviour it desires. This may seem a better way of operating, but is really another way of manipulating people into desirable behaviour. And, while it might generate short-term compliance, if the work is meaningless or if there is still threat of punishment, the incentives become less interesting. Worse still is when the promise of rewards creates a 'winner takes all' competitive mentality. This creates winners and losers; it increases and widens the gap between those who 'succeed' and those who can't keep up, instead of putting effort into collaborating in order to make something which is greater than the sum of its parts. In one Call Centre where I was delivering some training, I was introduced to the top performing sales person. I listened in to her calls, hoping to discover the magic ingredient that set her above the others. What she was doing was only entertaining calls from people ready to place an order. If a person asked questions about the product or wanted some other information, she terminated the call without warning and moved on to the next call. She had calculated that, with the amount of incoming calls exceeding capacity, she could play a numbers game to achieve higher sales. She had no interest at all in the terrible PR she was creating in cutting people off. This is an excellent example of how a focus on competition can actually have hidden unintended consequences. She was determined to keep up her continuous sales person of the month status.

The suppression of self-determination

Both the threat of punishment and the promise of rewards are ways of controlling people, yet one human need that I hear named over and over again is self-determination. For workplaces to be healthy and functional, managers need to move beyond carrots and sticks. Underlying the carrot and stick approach is an inherent belief that people need to be controlled because they are untrustworthy. Controlling people in these ways creates fear, resentment and suspicion. When people feel fear, they do not perform at their best. When they feel resentful they actively find ways not to cooperate. When they are suspicious, they gossip in order to find others with whom they can make sense of the situation.

Add to this the suppression of feelings and needs and, while workers might not be able to articulate their fear or resentment, the feelings often manifest as undesirable behaviour, leading to enhanced punishment systems or more rules. This presents the irony of a domination culture that manufactures its own culprits.

The bottom line is that the key principle of Domination Culture is 'Power Over', i.e. retaining power over other people so that they have less or no power in a situation. Where such a power imbalance exists, honest negotiation is almost impossible to achieve, because the person with the least power cannot negotiate from a place of equality. This disparity will show up in seemingly unconnected ways, even if the negotiation in the moment appears to be successful.

What is trauma?

Experiences or situations that trigger emotional distress and human suffering can be described as 'trauma'. The level of distress and suffering overwhelms our capacity to cope, and induces feelings of powerlessness.

We usually associate trauma with terrifying events which include violence. However, there are more subtle forms of trauma, where the experiences or incidents are less visible, such as discrimination, oppression, and poverty which have a cumulative effect that can lead to dysfunction. I believe that repeatedly exerting 'power over' another person creates trauma, but we have become so used to and indoctrinated by this system in society that we accept it, and override our true feelings.

What is conflict?

The traditional definition of conflict that most people identify with is a disagreement of some sort. What I have come to understand is that conflict is a natural tension. It exists within people and shows itself when we come into contact with others. What most people identify as a conflict is actually a dispute that has arisen because we don't know how to handle conflict.

If you accept that conflict is naturally within all of us, and now put hundreds, if not thousands, of people in a building for hours at a time, then add enforcement and competition into the equation, why wouldn't you expect that you have created a pressure cooker and possibly a time bomb where disputes of one sort or another are the norm?

Trying to fix all this with Disciplinary and Grievance procedures is like trying to play a game of chess with knitting needles.

How does all this knit together?

Domination cultures traumatise and re-traumatise

On the strength of this analysis, I am proposing that domination culture workplaces traumatise and re-traumatise people, leaving them in a constant state of shock that they are not allowed to articulate or heal from. And fear of losing the job, being seen as weak, or as coming across as a trouble-maker leads to suppression of emotions which find their way out in other areas of our lives, or manifest as mental and physical illness and always show up in seemingly unconnected ways in the workplace.

'Acting out' trauma

I further propose that some people come to work and unconsciously 'act out' their unrecognised trauma by using 'power over' in sadistic ways to try and pass on the pain.

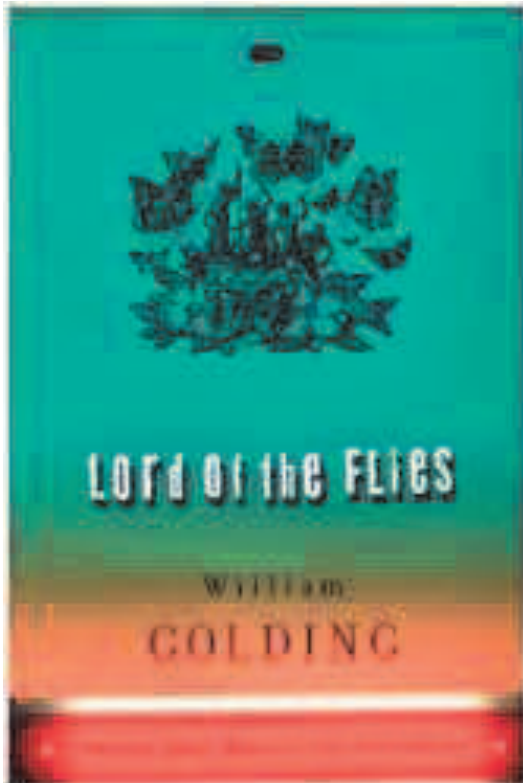
Domination cultures are unstable and unsustainable in the long run

And finally, I also assert that a competitive, target driven, high pressure workplace which promotes rivalry, where domination culture, trauma and conflict are perpetuated, is actually a sick and unsustainable workplace because it is at the root of phenomena like absenteeism, industrial action, high staff turnover, workplace stress, fraud and theft, bad conduct and poor performance.

The [Enron scandal](#) is an example where maximising profit for a few shareholders drives the agenda without integrity for how that profit is made. When there is integrity but a complete lack of understanding about domination culture as a system and no knowledge of the (in my opinion) much better alternatives, that is a different and often unseen problem.

BBC Radio 4's programme '[The Joy of 9 to 5](#)' suggested that people need structure and that hierarchy is a natural form of social order. The important part of this hypothesis is whether that structure is decided by the group or imposed.

Many companies have recognised that they don't want top-down structures. So there is a trend toward self-managed workplaces, where people are given the power to work it out and are supported when they need it. It sounds good in theory, but an unintended consequence of this structure - as quoted on the 'The Joy of 9 to 5' programme - is that people form cliques, and some people are excluded from the clique. This leads to a tribal effect. The issue here is that just getting rid of a top down structure does not change domination culture thinking.



A good example of this is in William Golding's '[Lord of the Flies](#)', where a group of boys are stranded on a desert island and, when discussion fails, they become tribal and warring. The implication is that this is what people will naturally do when left to their own devices. I am proposing that this is what we are programmed to do by domination culture conditioning which begins at school.

One model I have come across which seems to work well is the family run firm called [Timpson](#). I spoke to John Timpson and he told me, "No one is allowed to give orders. We pick people with the right personality, give them the freedom to do their job and support them with what they need".

I heard John Timpson speaking about the company, and I was delighted to hear him say that they don't have a 'Head Office'. There is just Timpson House. This certainly comes very close to my vision for effective and healthy workplaces.

So what am I saying?

Imagine ... dialoguing instead of debating, dancing instead of wrestling and cooperating instead of competing ...

There needs to be a shift from domination culture and its 'or else' language to a culture of trust if we want to create productive and effective workplaces. Here, in exchange for helping someone make a profit, we get our needs for respect, meaning, purpose and sustainability met. In my opinion, this requires a completely new language which promotes collaboration and cooperation, whilst empowering people to transform their emotional fear, thereby reducing toxic stress and removing humiliation as a tool for motivation. The [Dialogue Road Map](#), a communications tool that I created and developed over the last 15 years, provides a bridge to finding that language.

The Dialogue Road Map creates the conditions in which all parties can have an enhanced communication experience, as transactions are clearer, more detailed, rooted in accuracy and aimed at finding effective strategies and reducing inefficiencies. For example, most disturbances to workplaces lie in the gap between

Message Sent and Message Received. Even though we believe we are speaking the same language, how we communicate and what we understand differs greatly from person to person. Failing to realise that we are acting out of assumptions can result in time-consuming and costly errors or omissions. Because of a fear of repercussions, these errors and omissions are covered up or blamed on others. This might not manifest as a visible dispute but can give rise to hidden inefficient and ineffective strategies which are costly and time consuming and difficult to uncover.

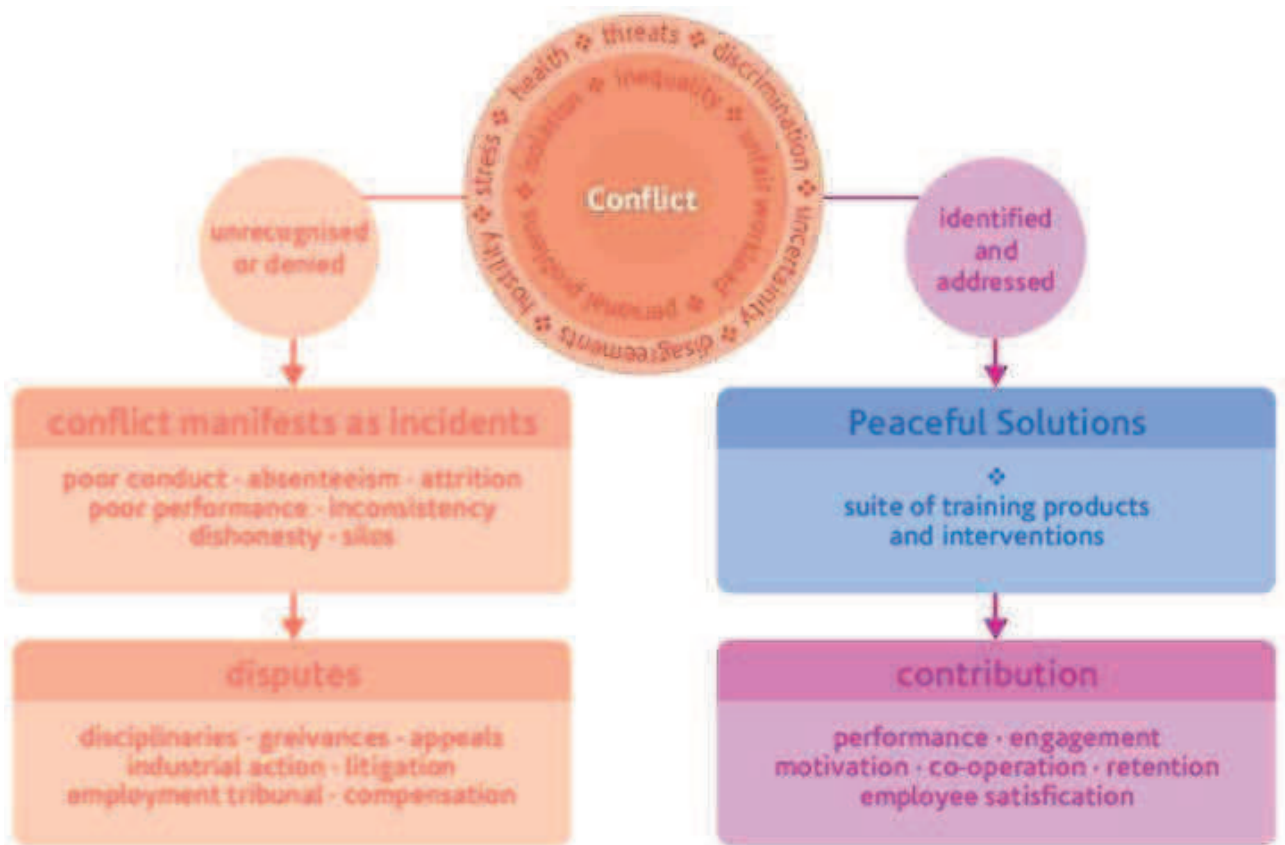


Figure: The conflict resolution model we use at CPS

I am not saying that I support anything fluffy or ‘tree-hugging’. I’m not interested in so-called ‘softer’ skills where people learn to use language in a way that still avoids the real conversation and suppresses the conflict. I’m interested in every human being taking responsibility for everything they say and everything they do. I’m saying that for people to take responsibility in a group they need to learn how to do this. And for people to learn, they need to feel relaxed. Giving people orders under threat does not relax people to learn, it puts people into survival mode, where we are more likely to act in a defensive way, repeat old patterns or do nothing.

If we accept that all businesses will encounter predictable and unpredictable disturbances, then I am advocating sustainable processes for correcting those disturbances. These cannot be found in mainstream systems, because these processes require a paradigm shift in thinking. To make this paradigm shift, we need to be open to the unlearning required of us. So while we can’t undo what has been done, we do have the power observe it, review it and change it.

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Maria Arpa (www.mariaarpa.co.uk) is founder of the Centre for Peaceful Solutions and author of *The Heart of Mindful Relationships* and *Mindfulness at Work*. Maria created the Dialogue Road Map as a model for heart based communication. She helps individuals, groups and organisations find and nurture their inner mediator. Neighbours at war, family break-ups, business deals gone wrong, gang violence and youth conflict are all in a day's work for Maria. Email: maria@mariaarpa.co.uk

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