

An Existential Analysis of Absurdity in Organisational Life – made visible through use of metaphor and the Lacanian Plus-one group

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This paper explores some of central tenets of existential philosophy and applies those concepts to a psychodynamic understanding of organisational life. It also provides an overview of the Lacanian Plus One group and its potential as a socioanalytic method to create learning spaces in which absurdity in organisations can be examined and acted upon.

Key Words: Absurdity; psychodynamics; existential philosophy; organisation

Introduction

Existentialists believe that the human condition is essentially an absurd one because we spend much of our time trying to find meaning and value in our life which is essentially meaningless. That sounds terribly depressing but in fact, existentialists like Sartre and De Beauvoir who were living and writing in the early to mid-20th century found the concept inspiring. Their philosophy enabled them to see past the so-called absurd condition of humanity and to make real choices that led to them living rich and fulfilling lives. In doing so, they produced immense works of literature and philosophy and a kind of bohemian way of living which broke all manner of social norms. Their lives and their writing inspired the 1960s counter-culture and ultimately progressed society. In the wake of these philosophers, inspirational works of art in all mediums were produced which laid bare everyday absurdity. These artistic endeavours enabled people to imagine more meaningful and authentic lives.

In organisational life in the 21st century, we are now more than ever, confronted with absurdity. In corporate life, we subject ourselves and others to a never-ending merry-go-round of strange rituals, meetings, decision making processes and organisational red-tape which would confound and confuse our forebears. Management Speak has become so ubiquitous it would make George Orwell blush. And yet, we yearn for authentic conversations about what's really going on. We invent the stories our leaders aren't telling us. We engage in gossip about the state of this or that project. We imagine ourselves having a conversation with our manager that tells them what we really think.

This paper is written in two parts. In the first part, I will explore some concepts in existential philosophy and hypothesise that it is possible to apply these concepts to a psychodynamic understanding of organisational life. In the second part of the paper, I will reflect on my experience as a participant in a learning process, and suggest that by creating temporary learning systems which place a surplus role-holder on the outer boundary of the system, we can see absurdity laid bare in organisational life.

Part I – Absurdity in Organisational Life

Absurdity and the Existentialists

A central thesis of existential philosophy is that humanity is intimately bound up with freedom. Being human, in contrast with being an object, is to be free to make decisions about the best way to live your life. According to the existentialists, whereas objects like tables and knives have a single essence (for example, the essence of a table is that it has legs and a surface for you to put things on, and the essence of a knife is that it has a blade for you to cut things with) humanity has no single essence. The existential mantra “existence before essence” means that every human is free to try to find their own essential meaning because it has not been bestowed upon you by some greater God or other thing. This idea invites humans to embark on a life-long ‘project’ in which they create meaning for themselves in an otherwise meaningless life (Graham, 2004).

The problem with freedom, at least according to Sartre, is that it is intimately bound up with an anguish that humans experience when they come face to face with the absolute freedom to take any action. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre provides his reader with the example of walking along a narrow path next to a precipice. He says the vertigo we experience in that moment is not necessarily due to a Fear that we might accidentally fall, but rather a basic Anguish associated with the fact that the choice we make to stick closely to the safe side of the path could just as easily be a choice to throw ourselves off. The anguish is born in the knowledge that we are wholly responsible for our future selves – who we will or will not become. He states “Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future...”. (Sartre, 1943, p 56) In their desire to rid themselves of the anguish associated with absolute freedom, humans display an array of behaviours that to any psychodynamically trained reader will sound familiar – ultimately, they engage in ‘psychic defence mechanisms’ - although the existentialists didn’t use that term.

One such psychic defence according to Sartre is acting in ‘bad faith’. To act in bad faith means to deny one’s own agency in order to rid oneself of the anxiety associated with the absurdity of life in which meaning is created not given. (Graham, 2004). People who act in bad faith behave as if freedom to choose does not exist or is severely curtailed,

even though it is not. It is an objectification of the self, or in Sartrean language a turning of the 'for-itself' (an entire complex human consciousness) into an 'in-itself' (a mere body or object) (Sartre, 1943). Acting in bad faith means 'following the pack', adopting social norms without thinking and acting without authenticity. To describe acting in bad faith, Sartre provided the famous example of a waiter that is simply too 'waiter-like'. His movements were too perfect and his attitude too eager. It was as if the waiter was not an authentic waiter at all – but rather a man playing at being a waiter. By attempting to escape into the 'in-itself' object of a café waiter, Sartre hypothesised that the choice to play act was an example of the man being in denial of his full humanity and ability to make his own choices (Sartre, 1943). In doing so, the man escapes his anguish born out of the knowledge that he and he alone is responsible for his future self.

Ethical choices in living systems

A central tenet of the field of systems psychodynamics is that organisations and roles exist in dynamic relationship with their environment. Organisations are not fixed entities, but they should be thought of as living systems which act and react in the environmental context which surrounds them – their boundaries are essentially permeable (Trist, 1993). If we hold that organisations are living systems, then it must also be true that they are not merely objects like tables or knives that have a fixed essence. In light of this, Bazalgette and Reed (2006) described a theory of organisational role analysis pioneered at the Grubb Institute in which role holders must "find, make and take-up" their roles continuously with reference to the organisational system and the context around them. Role holders in complex organisations in the 21st century should, to a large extent, expect disruption, and the skills of continuously framing and reframing one's role in relation to the context is a core capability for leaders.

It is my hypothesis that in organisational life, just as the existentialists proposed in broader life, humans have a tendency to *wish* that the 'essence' of the organisation was fixed. In fact, whilst organisations are generally formed with a purpose in mind, they must also act and react to the environment in which they are created. The turbulent environment of the 21st century as described by Emery and Trist (1997) requires organisations to continuously frame and reframe their strategy and actions in order to survive. In this context, role holders must constantly frame and reframe their purpose. However, the constant finding, making and taking of role is tiring and worst still a potential source of great anxiety for role holders.

It follows that if we belong to an organisation, we wish that the organisational roles we took up were hardwired with meaning and purpose. The advantage in thinking this way is that we are free to imagine that the organisation exists as an 'in-itself' object and

it becomes possible for us to engage in psychic defences like acting in bad faith. These kinds of psychic defences defend us from the reality that as leaders in organisations we must discover meaning and make ethical choices about what to do and how to behave.

For Sartre and De Beauvoir, being fully aware of the absurdity of the human condition and deciding to make choices about how to live your life in full awareness of your own agency was an ethical way to live. The specific choices you made did not necessarily determine whether the choice was ethical per se, but rather the manner in which you made the choices was the point at which your moral fortitude was tested. I propose that in organisational life, the same test of ethical behaviour exists. Enacting self-deception, denying one's own agency and acting in bad faith is the principle way that leaders go about ridding themselves of the responsibilities of leadership, and thus is worthy of further investigation. However, it is also important to recognise that these moments do occur in everyday organisational life, and we are all in some way 'guilty' of acting in denial of our own agency. Thus, these situations are ripe for examination and learning. In recognising them, we may continue to learn and develop our capability for leadership and decision making.

Existential Absurdity and absurd acts in organisational life

For existentialists, absurdity is played out on a meta level. Absurdity is concerned with the human condition – not individual acts per se. For existentialists, life is absurd because it has no meaning. Sartre said that "...man is the being whose project is to be called God....God, value and supreme transcendence, represents the permanent limit in terms of which man makes known to himself what he is." (Sartre, 1943 p 566). So humans, according to Sartre, are always trying to get somewhere where they can never be – a pure 'for-itself' - and so we are stuck in 'existential crisis'. The best we can do, according to Sartre, is to pursue our human project – a way of living our lives as a coherent story in pursuit of overarching meaning despite the fact that we are intimately bound to our human 'lack' and meaninglessness.

And yet, there is also another kind of absurdity - the behaviours we observe in everyday human interactions as role holders in organisations. These absurd behaviours are mirrored in art and in life as we 'play-act' our way, like a Sartrean waiter, through our organisational roles. It is these kinds of absurd acts that this paper is mostly concerned with. However, the latter is born out of the former and it is worthwhile explaining the connection between the two.

It is my hypothesis that existential absurdity gives rise to the Sartrean form of Anguish

(as we have explored earlier, to be human is to have choice, to have choice is to be free, and to be free is to be anguished). In order to rid ourselves of the anguish we experience, we act in bad faith, or in psychoanalytic terms, we enact psychic defences. These psychic defences manifest themselves in absurd acts which in organisational life form a kind of patch-work quilt which masks our anguish and, essentially, our freedom. When we are in the middle of the complex organisational system, we co-create and attend to the quilt in earnest for it serves the purpose of masking the anxiety associated with our absolute freedom. Through psychodynamic intervention, however, or by virtue of us being placed on the boundary of the system through other means, the patchwork quilt is suddenly visible. We see how one absurd act begets another, until a complex system of interwoven psychic defences is created. When we see the quilt, we are in touch with reality, we can see our freedom and it is then that we have the ability to act in good faith.

As I have suggested above, sometimes the way we act out of bad faith in organisational life has the potential in and of itself to become absurd – much like Sartre’s waiter who play acts at being a waiter, in times of uncertainty, we may see managers play-acting at being managers or employees play-acting as being employees. If we accept this hypothesis, it is possible that noticing strange or absurd situations in organisations can provide us with useful clues that psychic defences are being enacted to deny our agency and that questionable ethical choices are being made. Take the following examples:

Upon learning that, due to a cost cutting regime, 20% of the workforce would be made redundant, senior managers remarked to each other that there are ‘great opportunities in the restructure for all of us’. The lone voice at the table who dared to point out that one in five of every employees will lose their job which may cause great distress is branded as overly bleak and reminded that we must maintain our ‘strengths based approach’.

In order to protect the organisation from potential legal action, an HR professional read from a script to inform an employee that they were not selected to continue in their role due to a ‘desktop assessment of their skills, capability and match for the role’. When the employee pointed out they have 20 years’ experience and formal qualifications in the area but were usurped by a 23-year-old graduate, the HR professional just repeats the scripted lines and concludes by asking the employee if they would like a cab voucher to get home today.

Absurdity plays out not just in scenes like the above, but also in larger scale scandals in which people are left wondering “what were they thinking?” An example was the scandal that plagued Volkswagen in 2015 in which line management colluded to design and build an engineering solution which ensured that vehicles underperformed and thus emitted less carbon emissions whenever the system detected a testing environment. The engineering solution cheated carbon emissions testing regimes in Europe and the US and was fitted to over 11 million vehicles world-wide. (Volkswagen – the scandal explained, 2015).

It is possible to view each of the scenes I have described above through the lens of acting in bad faith. We could hypothesise that, faced with an array of free choices and the associated anguish/anxiety contained therein, each person or group acted so as to be in denial of their own agency. For example, faced with an absurd task of having to tell a career professional with more than 20 years' experience that they were being replaced by a 23-year-old graduate, the HR professional could actually choose to drop the script. They could speak plainly and honestly. They could discern their role in the moment by feeling their way through the conversation to work out what the person needed from them. However, that task would of course raise all sorts of anxiety – a small existential dilemma if you will. If they chose to speak plainly and truthfully, the organisation may be more open to a legal challenge on the decision and they may be drawn into a long and uncomfortable conversation with a vulnerable employee. However, all options being available, acting in good faith by going off script may continue to be the right choice. Rarely, however, in modern corporations do scenes play out that way. HR professionals, like Sartre's waiter, play-act at being HR professionals. They act in denial of their own agency and read from the script as if they have no choice to enter an authentic two-way conversation, thus organisational absurdity, especially in times of heightened anxiety, generally reigns supreme.

When prompted to reflect on our experiences in organisations, as employees, managers, customers or consultants, we can reflect on the sheer absurdity of the scenes we've witnessed. It is potentially easier to reflect on the absurd nature of the situations that we take part in when we are outside or on the boundary of the system. Likewise, it is much harder to recognize the situation for its absurd qualities when we are deeply embedded in it. As an example of this, think about how easy it is to spot inefficiencies and pure craziness in organisations when we are merely customers of them; whether it be being passed from department to department whilst on the phone to a large corporation or when visiting the post office only to find that the mere act of posting a parcel is such a harrowing experience that we are prompted to remove ourselves completely from the scene lest we 'go postal' ourselves. Yet employees in these scenes are often bewildered by our experience of them – they fail to see the absurd.

The theatre of the absurd

As existentialist philosophy grew in Europe, the theatre of the absurd was created. Esslin coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' in his 1961 book of the same name. He said:

The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and

discursive thought...The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being - that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet (Esslin, 1961, p 25).

Thus, through this form, playwrights such as Samuel Beckett were able to express the human condition and the absurdity present in the lives we lead and the groups we inhabit. Interestingly, Beckett himself as a young man was a patient of Wilfred Bion in whose works we find such rich exploration of the illogical (basic assumption) behaviour of groups. (Connor, 1998)

The act of baring witness as an audience member to the absurd lives of characters that inhabit Beckett's works feels similar to the act of baring witness to the absurdity of organisational life. Take for example Beckett's 1961 play *Happy Days*. The play features the main character Winnie – an aging woman alone on stage. She is buried up to her waist in a mound of dirt and rocks. As Winnie goes about her day, prattling endlessly and amusing herself with mundane tasks such as brushing her teeth and fixing her hair she insists to herself "Oh this *is* a Happy Day!" As the play continues, she is buried further, unable to move, burnt by the sun and clearly destined to live out her days in this sorry state, she continues to insist that it *is* a happy day.

As audience members, we are compelled to watch this spectacle, this absurd scene, unable to reach her and unable to influence the outcome, whilst wanting desperately to reach into the mound and pull her out. In doing so, we are confronted with a range of emotions and associations that speak something of our own absurd human condition. These same emotions are present in us when we witness absurd organisational scenes.

PART II – The Plus One Exercise

So far in this paper I have explored some of the core tenets of existential philosophy and proposed a hypothesis that the absurdity of the human condition in the broader social context is mirrored by a kind of absurdity in organisational life because in much the same way as existence comes before essence in humans, fixed purpose and meaning is not bestowed on organisations and role holders but is actually dynamic. This dynamism requires humans to act in good faith and to continuously discover and rediscover the purpose of their role in light of shifting internal and external dynamics and in doing so, they can take up authority and make decisions with full agency of the person-in-role. Furthermore, I have suggested that because of the anxiety associated with being fully capable to choose, role holders in organisations may instead engage psychic defence mechanisms or as the existentialists put it 'act in bad faith'. Finally, I have suggested that a clue that these defences may be at work is the extent to which bizarre, illogical or absurd behaviour occurs in organisations. Essentially, the absurd condition of human

existence and the absurd condition of organisational life begets absurd behaviours which can be witnessed inside organisations.

In the second half of this paper, I will describe a learning process that I undertook which was designed to examine my own experience in an organisation that I worked in. I will describe its particular usefulness of laying bare the hitherto unseen absurdity that I had been contributing to. In describing the process, I will suggest that this socioanalytic method is particularly well suited to opening up absurdity for observation and action.

In June 2015, I attended a professional development workshop focusing on the application of Lacanian psychoanalytic practice in relation to organisational and social dynamics. Part of the workshop included an opportunity to learn and practice a technique that Lacan advocated for use in 'Cartels' - that is groups of analysts, students and potentially analysands gathered together in a small group of between 3 and 5 people for the purposes of progressing their work. (Gallagher, 2010). When dictating the set-up of the 'Cartel' Lacan advanced a single role in the group of the 'Plus-one' (Lacan, 1964).

The facilitators of the workshop invited the participants to form groups of three - essentially a pair, *Plus-one*. The first person was asked to share a recent experience or dilemma from their home organisation with their partner. The partner could assist the person with their dilemma by helping them to examine the issue and ask questions for clarification and deeper understanding. The 'Plus-one' was only to listen to the conversation. At the conclusion of the conversation, the Plus-one was asked to share a metaphor that described their own sense of the story they heard - including any emotions or associations that emerged in them. The metaphors from each small group were then shared with the broader group. This process was followed by a second and third round of sharing dilemmas in which each member of the small group had an opportunity to share a dilemma, act as a partner and then as the 'Plus-one' - rotating in each of the roles.

In the group that I was a part of, three stories (each different but all linked) were shared, and three metaphors emerged from the Plus-one. A brief description of my story and the emergent metaphor is provided below.

I work for a large corporation in a down-sizing and cost cutting period. A large management consulting company has been brought in to oversee the process and manage the headcount reductions. As an HR professional, I am noticing a splitting of the 'rational' and 'emotional' parts of the change. The management consulting firm brings a 'cookie-cutter' style of change management. Although, I am a professional with many years' experience in consulting to organisational change, I feel like my ideas are falling on deaf ears. The management consultants are not interested in taking on board alternative ideas for how we could approach the work and my ability to influence and provide thought-leadership in the organisational system is at an all-time low.

Plus-one metaphor - the gagged woman

Reflections on the Plus-one process

As a participant, the value in the Plus-one process for me was on hearing the metaphor offered up by the Plus-one. Each metaphor made the absurdity of each story suddenly real – both for the storyteller and the listener. In my own case, the feeling I had upon hearing the metaphor was like being propelled out of my own absurd scene and into the audience – able to see my own story from the eyes of the bystander – bearing witness to my story. It helped me to realise my own moments in which I denied my own agency and acted in bad-faith.

Some months before I participated in the Plus-one process, I engaged the Executive General Manager of HR in my organisation in a conversation about my experience of the organisational change program we had embarked upon. On the topic of the external management consulting firm that had been engaged to lead the change, I explained that we already had the in-house expertise to consult to leaders about the change and that, frankly speaking, we could do a better job. We were far more connected to the organisational strategy and the leadership of the organisation and our in-house consulting team had a proven track record of delivering significant change programs. In addition, there were teething problems with the administrative side of the change, which could be easily addressed by using existing in-house systems and processes that the management consultants had ignored in favour of their own approach. I was perplexed as to the value the external firm could offer given what I had seen and experienced already; I had numerous examples of very poor consulting practice, fudged numbers and a splitting of the rational and emotional parts of the task at hand that was potentially harmful to the senior managers that we were supposed to be supporting through the process. The executive GM then spoke frankly of his own thoughts on the subject. He explained that the problems facing the organisation were of such a magnitude, and the organisational leadership were so anxious, that only an external management consulting company could ‘cut-through’ to deliver the outcomes required. He knew that the firm offered very little real value to the design and execution of the change but the one advantage they offered over the alternative internal consulting team was that they were regarded as a legitimate authority on organisational change. He said that senior management would listen to them and that, importantly, the ‘market’ (institutional investors) would believe the organisation had a plan to arrest the situation and get the company back on track.

In that moment, the executive acted as a full human in role. He chose not to toe the company line, but instead to tell the truth. The effect of this conversation on me was powerful. In hindsight, with the benefit of distance and the Plus-one metaphor, I have come to understand that this was the moment of allowing myself to be metaphorically ‘gagged’. The executive and I shared a moment of truthfulness and clarity rarely seen

in organisational life – especially between layers of hierarchy - but then I wasn't allowed to talk about it anymore. We shared knowledge, but then I forced myself to 'un-know' in order deny my own agency and continue to take up my role no differently to what I had before I heard him. It was my moment of colluding with the organisational system to act in bad-faith.

For the next few months, I worked closely with the management consulting firm to deliver the change. I didn't speak up about what I witnessed (more splitting, more fudged numbers etc.) and continued to act my part in the performance. Importantly, I wasn't able to comprehend the nature of conversation between the executive and I, nor the absurdity of the everyday scenes I took part in. The absurdity was lost on me until the Plus-one offered the metaphor. It was the metaphor that became the catalyst for a sudden awakening (or remembering) of my metaphorical gagging.

The Plus-one process is a powerful mechanism to gain distance and clarity over the organisational system which is made possible by the metaphorical and literal distancing of the Plus-one role. In the process, the Plus-one is forced to the margins of the learning system and placed in the audience – unable to speak or access the stage but only to bear witness to the scene. The distance that opens up between the pair and the Plus-one, as well as the fact that the Plus-one is unable to speak, potentially amplifies the absurdity of the situation being described.

This distance is, of course, very different to our normal experience of the organisations we are members of; rarely do we have the opportunity to just sit and watch the scenes being laid out in front of us. Even in meetings or workshops designed as 'lessons learned', employees are thrust into active participation to fix the issues at hand rather than dwell on the deeper nature of the absurdity of organisational life.

Imagine a Plus-One exercise inside the Volkswagen organisation at the time that the emissions scandal was being played out. One wonders if it might have been at all possible for managers making the decision to implement an engineering mechanism that cheated emissions testing to gain distance from their own absurd scene. The 'Plus-one' process creates a dynamic in which our scenes can be experienced from a different angle for the first time and these new angles of viewing the same story amplify the absurd parts of the story and make them accessible for the first time.

So, what is it then that makes the position of the Plus-one such a powerful viewing platform? Perhaps simply being on the boundary of the learning system stirs powerful and amplified emotions in the Plus-one in the same way the theatre of the absurd does for its audience members. The scene being described and potentially enacted by the pair in front of the Plus-one could act as a catalyst to draw out unconscious emotions the Plus-

one has about their own experiences in organisational systems in the same way as Esslin described what happens when we see the Theatre of the Absurd. So the story, as told between the pair and witnessed by the Plus-one, is far more 'poetic' than 'philosophical' (to borrow from Esslin's description), and as such our response to it is different. It may also be that because no freedom to act is bestowed on upon the Plus-one (they are merely viewers of the scene), there is also a lack of anguish. Potentially, the lack of anguish enables a kind of clarity which is missing in organisational life.

There are, however, some differences between sitting in the audience of the theatre of the absurd and being a Plus-one in a small group. Unlike the experience of the audience members in theatre of the absurd, the Plus-one has a powerfully different role – at the conclusion of the scene they are able to put voice to a single metaphor in which the scene can be captured and the absurdity laid bare. Thus, in giving voice to the single sentence metaphor, the Plus-one is able to bring into sharp focus their own feelings and give voice to their own experiences for the first time, and therein lies the power of the process.

In some ways, the Plus-one process is similar to other forms of reflective practice in the systems-psychoanalytic tradition. Like Organisational Role Analysis, it invites the role holder to examine a critical event and to view the event from multiple lenses. Like Sociodrama it evokes the spirit of a moment in organisational life in which the assumptions and values present are made available for examination. Like the social dreaming matrix, it presents an opportunity to free-associate and thus creates a rich dialogue for examination and meaning making. By no means do I suggest that the Plus-one process is superior to any of the aforementioned processes, for each (and the countless others I have not named) have their place and can be used by those who pursue the psychoanalytic study of organisations as excellent vehicles to stimulate thought and assist in the process of making meaning and taking action.

For me, however, it was the simplicity of the Plus-one process and the sharp focus with which the metaphors were able to cut through that provided the greatest moment of surprise and delight. Hearing each of the three metaphors – offered succinctly and easily at the conclusion of a ten-minute story was like being joined (no longer alone) in your own absurd scene for the first time. It occurs to me that, by virtue of the fact that the partner who is there to assist the story teller is thrust into the story, they experience some of the anguish of the story-teller which clouds their ability to offer the clarity of insight of the Plus-one. They struggle with the storyteller for the right words or to make meaning in the moment – they are required to help in the scene. They do not have the luxury of gaining distance from the scene and to reflect at the same level as the Plus-one.

Absurdity and its unintended consequences

As we prepare to conclude the paper, a “so what?” question arises that requires some attention. Life under the patchwork quilt of absurdity in organisational life might not be ideal, but if life, according to the existentialists, is essentially meaningless – what difference would it make if we lived it in bad-faith? Would it be so bad if we joined the merry band of actors in the theatre of the absurd and continued to play-act like Sartre’s waiter for the rest of our organisational lives? It would certainly be easier and those who never rock the boat are often handsomely, if only extrinsically, rewarded.

The answer is that beyond the human desire for truth and to live in touch with reality, there are unintended consequences to the layers of absurdity in organisational life. For one, there is the sheer inefficiency of organisational systems so bound up in their intricate psychic defences that they spend more time and capital in tending to the patchwork quilt than they do in undertaking their primary task. There is also the fact that decisions made in absurd circumstances are often found to be at least unsatisfactory, if not unethical when they are laid bare for review by those outside of the system – such as can be seen in the Volkswagen example. Finally, by reducing ourselves to a mere ‘in-itself’ object – such as Sartre’s waiter - we limit our human potential and capacity for progress. Progress is severely hampered, if not impossible, in organisations that are overly concerned with the desire not to be in touch with reality. Organisations that can recognise that their need to constantly frame and re-frame their purpose in light of the context in which they operate are primed for survival in the turbulent environment, and the ability to do this is impossible for those busy defending against reality.

Absurdity laid bare as an opportunity for action

To conclude this paper, I am reminded of the final scene of the 1990 film adaptation of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. In it, Ralph a natural leader of the group of boys stranded on a deserted island, has fallen from favour and is being chased by the group led by another character called Jack. The murderous tribe chase Ralph on to a beach and unwittingly to the foot of a Marine Corp. Soldier who stares down at the suddenly absurdly small, young boys covered in face paint and says in a wonderful southern American drawl “What are you guys *doin’*?” In this single sentence, the normal, clean, civilized adult renders the scene absurd and we can see just how crazy things have become. For the boys, what has become normalized is laid bare as absurd and the remembering of how they got that way is possible.

In the same vein, I think the Plus-One exercise as a consulting intervention has the capacity to lay-bare the absurd indulgences of organisational life. It opens the possibility

for the HR professional reading from the script to say what they really mean and for a meeting to be held that was free from management-speak. It also opens the possibility for individuals and teams in the midst of making what to outsiders would be seen as questionable or ethically challenging decisions to stop and think about the unintended consequences of their actions.

In an organisational context, such moments of clarity in which the absurd is laid bare, action in good-faith (be it remembering, repentance, learning or change) becomes possible. We can, in those moments, lift the patchwork quilt of absurdity back, regain our foothold in reality and be prepared to make progress.

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