

10 ways to kill an organisation

Dr Leandro Herrero explains what can go wrong when managers work to their own scripts and cast their staff in unsuitable roles, as he talks us through the plot of his latest whodunnit

I am talking here about the perfect murder, Hitchcock style. Forget the arson attack on corporate headquarters, or the mysterious disappearance of a company into the annals of history (via a merger and acquisition that merged nothing and acquired all, including the logo and a name that ceased to exist on day one of the 'union'). I'm talking about the subtle poisoning of an organisation that goes unseen by many and only slightly suspected by some. I'm talking about slow poisoning by professional assassins with a hidden agenda. I'm talking about a thriller script in the husband-poisons-wife-with-small-doses-of-cyanide genre, where the poison is administered in an apparently caring atmosphere.

In some organisations it's not that difficult to identify the prime suspects, the toxic managers. You might even know them well; you may even report to them. There are two types – the obviously obnoxious, and the caring. One of them is very dangerous. That's right, it's the one who cares, and who poisons under the duty of care.

So here are ten script outlines for an organisational thriller. You can choose the heroes and villains you want – I'm just supplying the outline. You can also choose the extras and the location. I'll be the producer. If you get back to me with a developed script, we'll try Hollywood first, and share the profits. Alternatively we may try business schools: the case-study industry is doing well and, quite frankly, anything is better than learning about the Toyota penetration of the US market and the ultimate maximisation of shareholder value in the car industry in Southern California.

Script 1: I just know

Subtitle: I just know that we'll do x, but go and explore all the options.

In this scenario, a senior manager not only openly relies on teams but declares himself the Great Defender of the Team Spirit. He nurtures and protects his team. He makes a point of personally coaching all the project leaders, although this is received with mixed feelings. He encourages the team to explore many possibilities, to be open-minded and see the big picture. But he 'just knows what's going to happen'. Confronted with a problem, he asks for ideas, although he 'already knows the answer'. This pattern is repeated several times, until the team begins to suspect it's wasting its time and that the

Big Guy is just playing ego. By the time the toxicity is revealed, half the project leaders have left in pursuit of a boss who 'knows less', and the other half are either bored or enjoying their stock options.

Script 2: Let them fail

Subtitle: Wrong path but they need to see it for themselves.

This script is acted out in paternalistic and patronising organisations where senior management has chronically mistaken a business organisation for a primary school. Toxicity is very subtle because it's acted out in a so-called learning environment where people 'learn by their mistakes' and are 'empowered to take risks'. Suspicion is raised half way through the script when some people who fail are fired. The piece ends with people having a good laugh as the CEO speaks highly about knowledge management while collecting the Learning Organisation of the Year Award.

Script 3: Try harder

Subtitle: Guess what I want.

Teams are always 'not quite there' when presenting the results of a three-month analysis of the problem, and they go back again and again to refine their exploration. Eventually one project leader has a revelation and asks: "Why don't you tell us what you want? That would save us from having to keep 'going back to the team'."

Script 4: I have the answer, what's the question?

Subtitle: Been there, done that, trust me I know.

A variation on Script 1, this organisation is governed by managers who constantly refer back to their previous experiences. If it's a management-change programme, they bring the McKinsey templates from their last company's M&A to the first start-up meeting. The answers are in there and they have them. If it's an HR problem, they are super-psychologists. If it's a financial problem, they know because they've been there before. Reality is pretty much mapped out, causing staff to switch off creatively. Sudden death occurs in this script when market conditions change drastically, and the combined wisdom of those experienced managers can't compensate for the lack of new ideas and imagination.

Script 5: Legitimised suicide

Subtitle: You decide who is redundant – this is a very humane M&A.

The story opens with M&A consulting gurus deciding it's better to let the staff decide who will survive, rather than burdening the leadership team with such an inhumane decision. Divisional heads are gathered and handed a business plan and a timetable. After several sleepless nights a good third of the managers and staff decide they'll be made redundant, so they leave. The trick in this script is that there's no

There are two types of toxic manager: the obviously obnoxious and the caring

Illustration by Rob Wilcockson



Death by management: organisational poison can come in many forms, but the effect on a company is almost always fatal.

visible murderer. Instead, a number of staff commit mass suicide while singing a rousing chorus of 'What a wonderful human death this is'. The finale has a twist: two surviving divisional heads blame the leadership team for plainly relinquishing their responsibilities and dressing the whole thing up as a democratic decision, while the CEO uses the case to show how humane, democratic and open the company is.

Script 6: Do but don't do

Subtitle: Feel free to do, but make sure we tell you what.

This story is set in a 'free' environment where people are encouraged to take all sorts of initiatives, to take action. Examples are numerous. On one occasion a manager implements a programme she feels she's been encouraged to do. She is reprimanded and de facto demoted. Puzzled and frustrated, she leaves. Colleagues demand an explanation, but don't get very far. The script ends with highlights of collective frustration when it's discovered that this pattern of 'do it, but don't do it' is common across the board.

Script 7: You are empowered to believe me

Subtitle: We are all empowered, but I am more empowered than others.

This plot borrows heavily from the 'We are all equal but some of us are more equal than others' concept. Empowerment is a heavily-used buzzword in the organisation and figures prominently in its mission statement. Life is relatively peaceful until a manager asks the question: "What does it mean?". Infuriated senior management responds with a long sermon on trust, culture, values and principles. Small guy asks again: "But what does it mean to be empowered?" Big guy says, "Look how empowered I am by the Board." Graffiti starts to appear on walls, doors and toilet partitions with unpleasant statements about the credibility of the company rhetoric. The organisation slowly dies of buzzword intoxication.

Script 8: Maximum accountability, minimum authority

Subtitle: Great titles, great visibility, great blindness.

In this script, the organisation's accountabilities are well defined – everybody knows what they're accountable for. But hidden, small doses of toxicity come from giving staff the impression that they have the accompanying authority. It turns out that this simply isn't true. Authority lies elsewhere, with people not very accountable for anything other than accumulating as much authority as possible. Managers' egos are boosted with big 'accountable' titles such as Global Project Leader (a company equivalent of UN Secretary General). A few staff discover they have no real authority, and escape from the organisation. Those trapped in become blind. The Big Titles' game is up when more and more managers become suspicious of the mismatch of accountability and authority. The CEO responds by creating a new layer of highly-accountable managers with very sexy titles on their business cards.

Script 9: Great goals, great future, great cuts

Subtitle: We're doing well but you're fired.

Growth has been declared within the organisation, and its annual results aren't bad. The CEO declares high hopes and possibilities. Almost simultaneously, R&D is cut by 20% and those in the wrong place at the wrong time are fired, regardless of their talents. The pattern repeats itself several times as the plot progresses, until a Pavlovian reflex develops: every time the CEO announces a "good year, excellent results, we need to grow", staff tremble.

Script 10: Frog boiling

Subtitle: There are two ways to boil a frog and you should be feeling a bit warm by now.

This is based on the old adage that there are two ways to boil a frog. One way is to get a pot of boiling water and throw the frog in. The frog burns himself, but hops out quickly and survives. The second way is to put the frog into a pot of cold water and switch the heat on. The frog is very happy in his progressively warm and cosy environment until he boils without noticing. This script is offered for free interpretation and application to the life of managers in organisations.

Script 11 – mathematics have never been my forte – is based on a combination of the other ten. In this script, managers believe all the previous scripts are a bit of a joke, funny stories with ideas barely elaborated on, certainly not a reflection of real life, a bit of amusement disguised as management thinking. Readers in script 11 mode perhaps feel rather warm and cosy. Please check that the heat is off.

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