

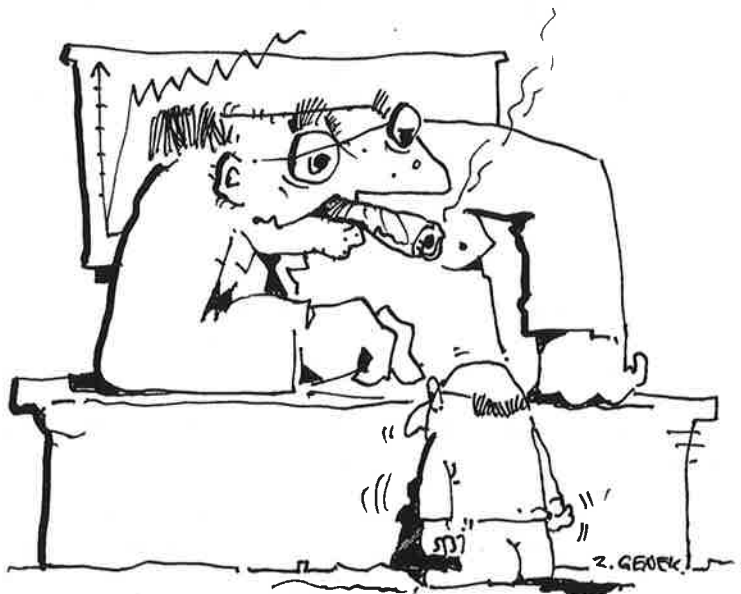
# Surviving in the Organisation

Think of nonviolent action and the usual picture is of something happening in public, whether it leafletting, rallies, sit-ins or perching in trees. Just as "politics" is normally thought of as happening in public rather than private, so is nonviolent action. To counter this perception, feminists and others have argued that "the personal is political," meaning that patterns of personal behaviour need scrutiny and change as well as formal political structures.

One domain often left out the picture is the organisation, especially corporations and government bodies. There is one notable form of nonviolent action involving members of organisations: the strike. However, many of the usual forms of nonviolent action, from speaking out to organising alternative decision-making systems, can also be used in organisations. Yet this arena has been relatively neglected by nonviolent activists, many of whom are more familiar with protesting against organisations, such as governments and corporations, from the outside than operating on the inside.

Schweik Action Wollongong did a study of how to go about transforming bureaucratic organisations from the grassroots. We looked at case studies such as the Movement for the Ordination of Women and the Dutch soldiers' movement. We made an analogy between bureaucracies and authoritarian states, and looked at some examples of nonviolent challenges to states - the toppling of the El Salvador military government in 1944 and the collapse of the East German communist government in 1989 - in order to suggest ideas for challenging bureaucratic systems of power. Our conclusions were as follows.

- It is extremely difficult to change bureaucracies.
- A collective challenge is needed to bring about change.
- Challengers need to have a vision of an alternative, such as a self-managing workplace.
- Struggles to change bureaucracies usually take a long time.
- Bureaucracies are vulnerable to loss of



legitimacy.

(Challenging Bureaucratic Elites, published by Schweik Action Wollongong in 1997, is available free at <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/>, from PO Box U129, Wollongong NSW 2500, Australia, or by ringing me at 02-4221 3763.)

Schweik's study focused on major collective challenges to bureaucratic elites. One of our conclusions was that the lone organisational dissident who speaks out has virtually no chance of bringing about change. Whistleblowers typically are attacked in several ways, including ostracism, harassment, punitive transfer, demotion, referral to psychiatrists, dismissal and blacklisting. They have little chance of personal survival, much less changing the organisation.

Yet it is only occasionally that a large-scale challenge can be mounted inside organisations. Usually, those who are willing to act are surrounded by co-workers who are afraid to buck the system. A nonviolent activist in a traditional authoritarian organisation who mounts a campaign at the first instance of injustice is unlikely to last long enough to make a difference.

There is certainly plenty of exploitation and injustice in organisations that is wor-

thy of attention. Activists well know the problems in their own groups, which have their share of poor dynamics such as cliques, snubs and emotional blackmail. Nonviolent activists usually have high expectations of their own groups, and what is found upsetting in them would be the merest blip in a typical authoritarian organisation. A boss who is a bully may subject victims to petty harassment (slighting comments, loss of files, inconvenient postings), undermine their performance, spread rumours about them, make threats and invoke formal procedures such as reprimands and demotions. Individuals may be singled out for whatever reason, such as their sex, ethnicity, personal style or good performance, or just because they are a convenient target. Some workplaces are so toxic that virtually everyone suffers in ongoing battles involving put-downs, tantrums, set-ups and physical assaults. In many such toxic workplaces, one person - the scapegoat - becomes a convenient target for everyone's abuse.

What should you do if you or one of your co-workers comes under attack? Doing nothing is not much help, since the abuse usually continues or worsens. Formal complaints often lead nowhere and trigger further abuse. Traditional techniques used by nonviolent activists, including analysis of power systems, role plays and

gradual building of support, are very helpful. But they may be of limited help to a worker who is highly traumatised and barely able to do a day's work, much less join in a campaign for change.

Books on management and organisations don't give much guidance. There are stacks of books on dynamic leadership, empowering the workplace and creating positive change. Unfortunately, these sorts of optimistic writings give little recognition of the really terrible dynamics of many workplaces. Furthermore, they are invariably oriented to managers, especially top managers. They assume a sincere will to bring about beneficial change. There is virtually nothing directed to middle and lower-level workers who would like to change things but have no support from, or are actively sabotaged by, their superiors and co-workers.

Given this situation, it is exciting to find a new book that provides some real hope for workplace victims: Judith Wyatt and Chauncey Hare, *Work Abuse: How to Recognize and Survive It* (Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman Books, 1997). This is a comprehensive guide to surviving harassment, scapegoating, humiliation and undermining. It is by far the most helpful manual that I've come across.

The authors have years of experience in counselling work abuse victims. They are blunt in stating that most workplaces are abusive and that there's no easy way to change them. Therefore, they argue, the individual who is a target of abuse needs to develop personal skills to understand the situation, change their emotional response and rehearse new behaviours.

Their underlying premise is that in order to survive, change the situation or leave successfully, one has to change oneself. Although this will not be welcomed by those who seek to confront and expose management, the approach nevertheless has useful insights for organisational activists, especially in understanding what may be happening to others and learning how to support them.

The authors rely on the concept of shame as the driving force behind organisation-

al dynamics. People are shamed (humiliated) in various ways, for example by being exposed or criticised for doing an inadequate job, by having suggestions ignored or laughed at and by being revealed as too emotional or caring.

To develop a method of coping with the dynamics of shame in organisations, the authors examine the psychology of both individuals and groups. They develop the ideas of "cims" (childhood individual maintenance strategies) that shape individual psychology and of "norms" (native organisational maintenance strategies) that shape group dynamics. Both cims and norms are unconscious, and their interaction affects how individuals cope.

Wyatt and Hare's basic strategy for workers is to learn how to analyse people and the organisation (cims and norms) and to develop the capacity to not be affected by shaming, but instead to psychologically distance oneself. In other words, rather than being caught up in toxic behaviours at work, they believe it is possible to emotionally separate oneself, maintaining integrity internally and helping to survive and promote beneficial change. They are quite clear about how difficult it is to get others to change, especially managers, who have a stake in their power and who are threatened by those who demonstrate competence (not to mention those who mount a direct challenge).

They elaborate two major methods for survival: "empowered awareness" and "strategic utilisation." Empowered awareness is basically becoming conscious of what is happening, including all the abuse, rather than denying it. It is a process of developing the skills for building one's own inner psychological world. It involves observing one's own feelings, evaluating other people's character styles and observing the organisation's norms and power structure. It includes generating meaning and purpose in one's own life, coping with shaming by others, avoiding self-shaming and avoiding futile power struggles.

Strategic utilisation involves setting goals, planning and preparation, evaluating alternatives and taking action. One

important part of this is working out one's own self-interests and also the self-interests of others, and then aligning one's self-interests with those of others, especially superiors, in order to achieve one's own goals while not threatening others.

The authors give some lengthy examples, showing how shaming, abuse and their recommended strategies operate. Their analysis is based largely on experience with US workplaces, but most of it would apply readily in Australia.

*Work Abuse* is a long book. It is not something to read in a day or even a week. It does not provide a quick fix to urgent problems. Rather, it is best studied slowly and thoughtfully. The process of changing one's own habitual ways of responding to abuse is not easy. The authors recommend finding either a therapist or a friend to help, especially in recovering from a crisis. But most important is being willing to undertake the process of change and putting in the effort to do so.

The authors believe that the culture of shaming is so pervasive and taboo that it is extremely difficult to bring together a group of co-workers who can be open, honest and mutually supportive about processes of shaming. If a worker is fortunate enough to be involved in an affinity group involving people who are not co-workers, this might well provide the emotional space to recover from a crisis and develop the strength to continue on the job.

To a considerable extent, the reader must take what the authors say on trust. There is no detailed justification for the analysis (such as their assumption that shame is the key driving force in abuse), nor any statistics on the effectiveness of their methods compared to other techniques. Their case rests primarily on how well their explanation fits with readers' own experiences and understandings. In other words, you need to ask, does what they say ring true? To me, having talked to many dissidents and whistleblowers over the years, it does!

The authors' focus is on surviving personally and developing strategies to move

ahead. In most cases, making a formal complaint or a public statement about problems leads only to grief for the person who speaks out and no change in the organisation; the authors argue against any such self-destructive path. They say that justice cannot be expected from top management. In fact, they say, "Justice is a myth, a story; expecting it to happen within a negative-norm workplace is always self-destructive."

Nonviolent activists will want to do more than this. They are, after all, passionately concerned about justice. However, the passion needs to be tempered by a realistic assessment of what it takes to bring about beneficial change. Some activists may not worry about losing their job, and be in a good situation to stir things up in

an organisation. Others, though, may have family or other commitments, and want to survive on the job to continue the struggle another day, or to stay employed to provide resources for non-work activism. The techniques explained in *Work Abuse* thus are worth exploring for a number of reasons.

Wyatt and Hare do not connect their analysis to ideas about nonviolent action. It would be an intriguing project to make the connections. For example, how well does their perspective on shame apply to situations encountered by nonviolent activists? How does their vision of a personal psychology able to survive abusive situations relate to emotional frameworks recommended for or adopted by nonviolent activists? Is their pessimism

about organisational activism in abusive work environments justified, or can techniques of nonviolent campaigning be readily applied in organisations? Is survival in an abusive workplace even a worthy goal from the perspective of a nonviolent activist?

Wyatt and Hare are completely sympathetic to the goal of transforming workplaces into collaborative, egalitarian, supportive environments. The question is how. Their primary concern is individual survival. Nonviolent activists usually focus on social change. Meshing these two orientations productively seems a worthy task.

Brian Martin

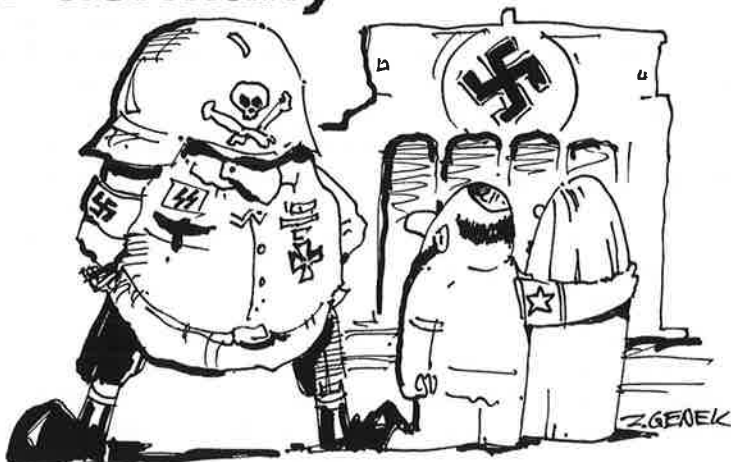
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## Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany

Nathan Stoltzfus;  
W.W. Norton & Company,  
New York, 1996.

In *Resistance of the Heart*, Nathan Stoltzfus details the final roundup of the Jews in Berlin in 1943. To the great surprise of the SS and the Third Reich hierarchy; one small group of Jews and their supporters proved to be one of the most successful challenges to the Nazi reign of terror during World War II. On February 27, 1943, intermarried Jews (Jews married to non-Jews), along with several other categories of Jews, were arrested and detained for final processing before being sent to concentration camps where they would face almost certain death.

Intermarried Jews were detained at the Jewish Community's public and youth welfare administrative centre at Rosenstrasse. As word of the roundup spread, the unexpected occurred - the spouses of the detained men (most of the intermarried individuals detained at Rosenstrasse were men) gathered outside the building and demanded the release of their husbands. Despite threats from the armed



guards to fire into the angry crowd, the women continued their loud, vocal protest day and night for a week challenging the supremacy of the SS on a new front - the domestic front.

The historical backdrop for the protest was the ever increasing military losses suffered by the Nazis. In early 1943, the Third Reich war machine was beginning to struggle with tremendous losses on the Eastern front. The detention, resulting protest, and deportation of intermarried Jews had the potential to gravely injure

public morale on the home front.

Intermarried couples faced job discrimination, reduced food rations, and a regime, which not only banned further intermarriages in 1935, but also encouraged divorce among intermarried couples.

The official condemnation, however, was often relatively minor compared to the treatment couples received at the hands of their neighbours' and families. Many non-Jewish families chose to disassoci-