DEAR DR. HARTMANN

Met 'Em
Psychosis

Hello Patients,

Dr Hartman here again to wish you a happy new year and also to issue you with a warning.

My warning is simply this. As you move into another busy year of work and political life, beware of meeting psychosis. Put simply, meeting psychosis is a condition where the patient is only able to relate comfortably to another human being in the context of a meeting.

In a meeting, sitting in a circle with agenda in hand, the meeting psychotic is confident, outgoing, even dominant. But outside the meeting, the psychotic can’t even look another person in the eye. They fail utterly at all levels of human communication. In short, they are social cripples or, as we prefer to say these days, they are socially challenged.

In the final stages of this characteristic leftwing disorder, you’ll find the meeting psychotic constantly calling meetings at work. And when the meeting time arrives, all the workmates will be on the phone, or making a cup of tea, or writing an urgent report. Indeed, they’ll be doing anything they can think of in a desperate attempt to avoid yet another meeting.

But what is the psychotic doing? The psychotic is happily putting chairs in a circle, whistling in joyous anticipation. Anyone caught smiling at the beginning of a meeting could be showing early symptoms.

Actually, I had a very sad case in my clinic just the other day. This patient was a senior Commonwealth public servant who’d attended one too many management training workshops. This psychotic had reached the stage of constantly calling meetings in his family and home environment. Each evening he insisted that his spouse and small children turn off the telly and sit in a circle in the loungeroom. He then covered the walls in huge sheets of white butcher’s paper, armed himself with a big black felt-tipped pen and then forced them to discuss ‘their version’ of how the housework should be done in three years’ time.

Then they had to ‘set goals’ and ‘develop strategies’ to achieve their vision. He even insisted that his toddler and elderly mother identify ‘key performance indicators’ to ‘evaluate’ the dinner. Clearly, this psychotic needed help.

If you identify with his symptoms always remember that we have special programs tailored to the needs of public servants at all my clinics. We guarantee no group work and no caring and sharing. Most exciting of all, we write the reports!!!

However while we’re on the subject of public servants, I’ve been getting an awful lot of letters lately from patients in the public sector who are traumatised by change. It appears that crowds of highly paid consultants have been called in to ‘reorganise’ most government departments, over and over again.

As a result, the public sector is changing. And it’s changing so quickly and so profoundly that the reformation, the renaissance and the industrial revolution seem like minor hiccups in world history by comparison.

Inevitably at such a time of upheaval there are human casualties, and they turn up at my clinics as patients.

I had a middle manager in the other day who thought ‘creative management’ meant getting his secretary to put coloured paper in the photocopy machine. I’m sure you know the type. An ageing Catholic in a pin-striped suit who always arrives at work at 8.32 am. He always hangs his coat carefully on a coat hanger behind his office door, and then he puts on his favourite cardie. (If you live in Canberra you may have guessed he works for the Australian Tax Office.)

When this manager hears things like ‘the manager of the future will be a change agent’, he just thinks they should bring back the Latin mass. When he is told that ‘the climate of the future is constant change’, he just thinks the Luddites had a point.

In fact, this ‘change resistant’ manager hates all these fast-talking female consultants with their padded shoulders and their big fat contracts. He thinks the place for ‘imaginative’ and ‘creative’ people is in the arts, not the Australian public service. “That’s why God created the Australia Council,” he says. “Maybe all these ‘change agents’ should just go and get themselves jobs in the National Gallery.”

As you can see, this middle manager needs help. He is currently a resident in my Canberra clinic.

But with patients like this to drag kicking and screaming into the 21st century, is it any wonder that staff turnover has reached such alarming proportions? My patients tell me that in some government departments people are signing on and off so fast that if you come back after lunch on your first day, you qualify for long service leave. In some parts of Canberra the managers are changing so quickly it makes government in Italy since World War Two look stable by comparison.

I had a young administrative lass in clinic the other day. She had resorted to keeping photographs of her current managers lined up on her desk. She put little tags on each photo saying who it was and what they did. She changes these photos on a monthly basis. It was the only way she could keep up. If this is the kind of ‘organisational culture’ that you work in, I look forward to seeing you at one of my clinics.