ESCAPING THE PARANOID-CRITICAL TRAP

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ABSTRACT

During the 1996 SIGUCCS conference in Chicago, on a field trip to the Art Institute of Chicago we viewed a painting by Salvador Dali that the artist did in the "Paranoid-Critical" method. As far as fine art goes, we had no idea what the artist meant by that term. Yet the term struck a chord with us when we reflected on the many stories we had heard (and the few experiences shared) over the course of SIGUCCS. It seemed that the term "Paranoid-Critical" was a perfect description for an underlying problem plaguing many Technical Support teams in their relationships with upper administration, other departments, technology users and even other team members.

Support staff burnout, dissatisfaction and dysfunction, accelerated turnover, office politicking. "Paranoid-Critical" methods of interactions, both of individuals and teams can be one factor (although certainly not the only factor) in producing and maintaining these undesirable conditions.

The paper will answer the following questions :

- *What is the "Paranoid-Critical" method? Does it exist in our organization? What are some examples?*

- *How did we get into the "Paranoid-Critical" trap? Why is it so prevalent in Technical Support functions? What effect does it have on our organization?*

- *How do we avoid "Paranoid-Critical" relationships? What techniques or methods can be used to minimize its effects?*

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Disclaimer: The term "paranoid," in this paper, is not intended to be taken in a clinical sense, as a psychotic disorder characterized by delusions of persecution or grandeur. The author is not a psychologist or a trained counselor. Nothing in this work should be construed as professional or medical research or opinion.

The noted surrealist Salvador Dali created some introspective and ethereal portraits in what he called "the Paranoid-Critical method." It is fortunate for our culture that Dali was innovative and willing to experiment. In contrast, it is unfortunate that so many of us, especially those working in the area of technical services and support, are also working in the "Paranoid-Critical" methodology. Not realizing that it can harm our working relationships as well as the culture of our professional environment.

Implied in the desultory conversations between colleagues and friends. Found in underlying tension between administrators and their staff. Manifest as frustration and anger between support providers and their clients. The phrase "Paranoid-Critical method" seems to be an apt description for these symptoms of failed human communications.
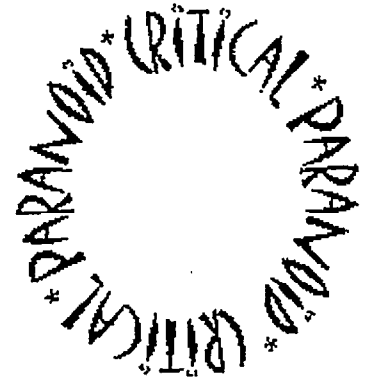
First an individual feels unfairly judged and criticized in

a particular interaction. The reaction to the perceived fault is to develop an attitude of fear or distrust of others. This slight, but pervasive, sense of paranoia colors the perceptions of the motives and actions of others. Causing our well meaning, but reactive, subject to criticize others who fail to meet the strictest of expectations. Thus, critical leads to paranoid, and paranoid leads to critical, which leads back to paranoid in turn. This negative cycle of interpersonal relations is what we will call the "Paranoid-Critical method"

This paper will present some examples of Paranoid-Critical methods of management and communications to determined if it exists in our organizations and how it affects our productivity. We will examine the causes of Paranoid-Critical methods and explore why it is so prevalent in Technical Support organizations. Finally, ways to escape the alarming gravity of the Paranoid-Critical method will be proposed.

Feeling like a Caltrop?

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A caltrop is a device of four spikes spaced so that no matter how you place it, three of the spikes form a tripod supporting the fourth spike straight up in the air. During the medieval period caltrops strewn on roads or in fields could effectively stop a calvary charge. For those *Braveheart* fans, Robert the Bruce used them at Bannockburn. We can imagine ourselves as one point of a caltrop. Our bosses, co-workers and clients make up the other three points. It might seem in day-to-day transactions that one or the other of those principles end up on top, and we have our face pushed in the dirt. When you feel like a caltrop, it is probably a manifestation of entanglement in the Paranoid-Critical trap.

The "call log," and staff's negative reaction to it, or any type of productivity tracking mechanism is a prime example of Paranoid-Critical thinking. Often technicians will see the institution of logs and journals as a means for administrators to judge their productivity unfairly. Staff commonly believe that administration has little concept of what is involved in providing quality technical support and will use the records to criticize their efforts. The technicians perceive their bosses as being critical and react in paranoia. The supervisors find their people balky and uncooperative while they attempt to initiate a powerful tool for customer support.

They react to this resistance by feeling paranoid about the underlying motives of the service team.

The "budget bluff" is another prime example of Paranoid-Critical methodology. During budget preparation a technology department will feel paranoid. The upper hierarchy, they fear, is likely to trim their submitted budget by a dangerous amount and then add projects and responsibility after the budget is completed without providing additional funding. The only relief is to inflate budget line items. The university executives will certainly feel the budget has been increased without substantial cause. They will pare the numbers down while expecting greater results from their IT people. Thus the Paranoid-Critical trap creates a self fulfilling pattern of distrust on both sides of the budget negotiations.

If we go back to our example of the caltrop and look at each of these examples. We acknowledge that Paranoid-Critical dynamics might leave one of the players standing, but the remainder of those involved, especially our clients, find themselves buried face down in the ground. The tangible effects of these dynamics adversely alter the bottom-line of our professional efforts.

Columbus and Post-it ®Notes

The often repeated truism that "communication is always a part of the problem and always a part of the solution" illustrates one of the main dangers of Paranoid-Critical thinking. In some situations the emotional noise from frustration and distrust filter out any positive, encouraging or appreciative messages. A break down in complete communication, while a serious problem to any team objective, is not the only toxic result of Paranoid-Critical methods.

There is nothing wrong with making a mistake. As Shakespeare said "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." We find history littered with

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examples of large goofs that turned into gold mines of opportunity and advancement. Christopher Columbus, on his first voyage west to the Indies convinced himself (as he also assured his crew and patrons) that it was only 2,250 miles to the coast of China. He was off by 6,900 miles or so, and had there not been another

continent along the way he would almost certainly not have survived the adventure.

Another, more recent example, is the Post it ®Notes. The adhesive for this ubiquitous little office helper is the result of a mistake. At the time 3M was trying to develop a glue to affix ceramic heat shields to the space shuttle. Their failure at one attempt has created a whole industry for little pastel paper scraps. Obviously, we can use blunders to our advantage, yet nothing squelches initiative like Paranoid-Critical environments. In the slightest degree, a fear of certain criticism by superiors, fellows, or clients, can be enough to hinder experimentation. When we become paranoid about losing our job or our reputation, to the extent that we are no longer willing or able to make mistakes. Then the Paranoid-Critical trap has robbed us of a great advantage.

TLA's or "Three Letter Acronyms" are, to technology workers, as common as fleas on a hound dog. Most of us instantly recognize "CYA". How much productive time do we lose in maintaining "CYA files" or following procedures aimed at minimizing our personal exposure to risk? The whole philosophy driving CYA is reaction to Paranoid-Critical stimulus. Another way in which this level of interaction decreases our productive time is the faddish, but often quixotic, attempt at consensus building. Sometime a consensus is not only undesirable but impossible to obtain, yet we seek it in the name of empowerment and "buy-in". If we posses enough confidence in the implicit "buy-in" that our bosses, co-workers and clients must already have in us, then it must be some form of paranoia that takes us back for constant affirmation.

It is to be hoped that we recognize the amount of Paranoid-Critical method that exists in our organization. We also acknowledge that it alters our day to day behavior by ruining communications, stealing our initiative and establishing roadblocks to real accomplishment. Having seen some examples of what the Paranoid-Critical method is and does. It is appropriate to examine the causes and propose some solutions.

From *The Honeymooners* to *The Odd Couple*

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How did we get into a position where we are suspicious, critical and mistrustful of those with whom we spend our professional lives? It did not start that way. In the beginning we were like *The Honeymooners*, we got along with everyone, our opinions were sought out and respected. Over time, too gradual to notice, things start to change. Our work relationships start to resemble *The Odd Couple* until finally we find ourselves operating in an increasingly antagonistic environment. In the service and support field it is even more pronounced, when we start viewing our clients, whom we should have the best rapport with, like lizard face aliens.

From the many likely origins of Paranoid-Critical problems, the scope of this paper will be limited to examining two of the more prevalent causes: fear and power. In order to fully appreciate the impact of these elements we need to understand the vital role that trust plays in interpersonal relationships. Stephen Covey, in his book *Principle-Centered Leadership*(Simon & Schuster, 1990) defines trust as an emotion bank account between people. When we become overdrawn in our trust account, we resort to Paranoid-Critical methods to accomplish our goals.

Every person to person transaction requires the use of some form of power, although the term "Influence" might be equally appropriate and carry less pejorative connotations. Dr. Covey delineates three types of power and warns of their misuse.

♦ Coercive power is an attempt to use fear to influence and control behavior. Although once popular among managers, it has fallen from favor for the reason that it sometimes seems expedient but is illusionary. As Soviet dissident and writer Aleksander Solzhenitsyn observed "You only have power over people as long as you don't take anything away from them. But when you've robbed a man of everything, he's no longer in your power— he's free again." Those who rely on coercive influence destroy trust. Of the three methods of power, it is not only a direct cause of paranoia, but is also the result of paranoia. It is applied when fear of non-compliance is greatest.

♦ Utility Power is the kind favored by most institutions. On first blush it appears an acceptable methodology based on fair treatment. This type of influence appeals strongly to our capitalistic sensibility. We like to get equitable exchange of goods for services. Cliched proverbs such as "quid pro quo," "tit for tat," "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine," "one hand washes the other" embody the self-interest philosophy existing behind utility power. The danger here is that trust does not feature as strongly as profit. This tends to build individualism instead of teamwork, fosters litigation over negotiation and promotes situation ethics. The revolving door to the Apple CEO office is a prime example of the use and dangers of this type of influence. Can we safely assume that the next CEO of Apple will be facing a Paranoid-Critical crises?

♦ Principle-centered power, the kind championed in Stephen Covey's book, is based on honor and integrity. Those who subscribe to principle-centered methods will act to preserve and build trust. A study publicized by Business Week reported that 59% of managers at Pitney Bowes and 70% of managers at Uniroyal felt pressured to compromise their personal ethical principles to achieve corporate goals. These types of findings imply that principle-centered power is sadly deficient in many organizations.
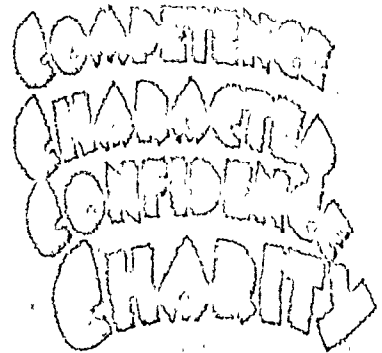
It would help if we could remember Harry Fosdick's advice "Our power is not so much in us as through us." Because power, misunderstood and misused, is one of the sources of Paranoid-Critical situations. A second source of problems, most common in the field of technology support, is that of fear.

Technophobia exists not only in the most difficult support cases, but also in the best of cases. It also exists to some degree in all technical support staff. Attempts to deny, suppress or ignore the phobia always contribute to Paranoid-Critical feelings. It is important to realize that we start each task with a handicap of inadequacy and uncertainty. With a technology base that evolves into a new organism every six months it is impossible for any one person, or even any organization to operate consistently without fault. Microsoft, for example, completely overlooked the burgeoning importance of TCP/IP. Uncomfortable as it may be, we cannot hold ourselves or others to standards of performance that are outside the realm of reality.

The rapid pace of change adds another, usually overlooked, facet to technophobia. We may be able to cope with the ever increasing level of complexity on an intellectual level, but emotionally we remain unprepared for its sophistication. This explains why we devote so many resources to the unique and entertaining, such as stereo sound and screen savers, that are essentially non-productive. Since we are relatively unprepared emotionally to explore the full potential of our technology, we are relegated to expending our efforts worrying about our desktop icons and color schemes.

Building the Four C's

Paranoid-Critical problems are caused by certain types of trust maiming behavior, brought about by fear and power abuse. Then it follows that changing behavior inside an organization, working to rebuild trust, can remove the unsavory aftereffects. The enthusiasm to institute programs or to "fix" our organization that this revelation might create has to be tempered with the understanding that, as Stephen Covey reminds us "There is no such thing as organizational behavior. There is only individual behavior." It bears repeating that the only individual behavior that we can change is our own.

When trust exists there is less inclination to be critical, or paranoid. Before trust can exist each component must evidence a greater degree of trustworthiness. In order to establish personal trustworthiness Mr. Covey suggests working on two areas, competency and character. To eliminate fully the effects of the Paranoid-Critical methods we need to focus on the four "C", not only Competency and Character, also Confidence and Charity.

♦ Competency - Constant training and professional development are not only important to avoid personal obsolescence, but the very effort of increasing our knowledge base proves that we are sincere in our motivation. The width and breadth of our industry assures us that we can each excel in any field that we choose, thus increasing our value as a resource to our bosses, coworkers-workers and clients

◆ Character - Once when I was a teenager I was told that I lacked character. My critic then, though well meaning, could not give me any positive advice as how one went about building character. I have discovered in the years since that it involves making and keeping promises to build internal security. Simple on the face of it, yet one of the biggest challenges faced by those in the service arena is having to choose either to disappoint clients early by presenting them with a realistic picture of the limiting conditions, or to disappoint them later by failing to meet expectation. The former choice is more difficult, but it is the one that builds trust and character.

◆ Confidence - It is difficult to remain confident in the face of criticism, and a little paranoia over the prospects of one's career might seem warranted. However, it should help to keep two important concepts in mind. First, we have already won the lottery! In whatever position we have, we were selected from among a pool of qualified applicants as the one best suited for that position. We are the best that can be found, that's why they gave us the job in the first place. If we have continued to increase our competency and character then we have a right to confidence

Secondly, The great demand for professional IT and technology workers, combined with the dearth of qualified people has created an environment that provides a great degree of job security. US Colleges are expected to produce ten-thousand graduates with computer science degrees this year, but the demand is estimated to be ten-times that number. The thought that there is nobody to take our positions should go a long way to dispel any lingering paranoia.

◆ Charity - Charity means giving resources to those who cannot afford the price. In our organizations it means loyalty, integrity and diligence, traits that can be donated but not hired. When the other components are in place charity is the final ingredient needed in developing trust. It proves that we are not mercenary and that efforts to contribute come from real concern and commitment.

IT Departments also need to develop the four C's, in order to illustrate to other departments and outside observers that the trustworthiness of individual team members is not an aberration but a shared trait nurtured by the environment.

◆ Competence - Professional development has to be planned, budgeted and scheduled.

◆ Character - Make and keep promises on an organizational level. Establish realistic expectations and reachable goals.

◆ Confidence - A 1997 Fred Pryor Seminar on Project management advises that "Celebrating" should be the final stage in every project's life-cycle. Team confidence, esprit de corps, can have a profound effect on eliminating Paranoid-Critical behavior. Management guru's Peters and Waterman maintain that "The simple act of paying positive attention to people has a great deal to do with productivity."

◆ Charity - An IT director recently stressed the importance of "keeping the moral high-ground." As an organization extends itself to the limits of its charter, it can freely move beyond those boundaries only if and when it has strong relationships of trust in place as a moral superstructure. Otherwise it stands the risk of being held to undesired courses by the equivalent of political extortion.

Conclusion

Having defined the Paranoid-Critical methods as patterns of interpersonal communications and attitudes that create obstacles to our professional development and effectiveness, this paper has provided illustrations to the origins and results of the Paranoid-Critical trap. We have explored how technophobia and lack of trust have let these harmful relationships thrive in our organization? Finally several means for eliminating Paranoid-Critical behavior by concentrating on competency, character, confidence and charity have been proposed.

"Critical" has been used in this discussion to mean a predisposition to judge severely and find fault, and issues that are risky and full of danger. Yet critical can also have the meaning of crucial or decisive, indispensable to reaching an objective. User support organizations can be properly defined as Critical when they are free from the shackling effects of the "Paranoid-Critical method".