



## ALL ORGANISATIONS NEED THEIR ZERO-POINT JESTER

– THE ROLE TO SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

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*"The person who has license to say no to the sovereign, so long as this is done with humor or song."*

Professor Mary Rowe

*This paper describes the Ombudsman function as a modern-day jester – someone who can speak truth to power. A Jester must possess certain qualities and abilities to perform his or her work just like an Ombuds, someone who is there to hold up a mirror – without judgement to those in power. A variety of statements about how power is managed and shared are detailed and shows how negative power corrupts, as one can get caught-up in the hubris of power. The Jester or Ombuds is available to make sure that this does not happen.*

It takes a strong and well-balanced person to be able to speak truth to power. That was the unofficial job of the Jester – much like the ombudsman function. William Sommers<sup>1</sup> was the Jester of King Henry VIII, where he was held in high favour, as a wise King knows he needs his jester to maintain leadership. Sommer was a man of integrity and drew the King's attention to extravagance and waste within the royal household by means of a joke. William Sommers was known as the "King's Fool". Not the most flattering title to our modern ears, but he was a good one as he kept his head. This jester possessed wisdom, which he exercised even on very powerful people like Cardinal Wolsey. He is said to have warned his master of the wasteful methods of the exchequer. He was known at court for his discretion and integrity, a rare thing indeed anywhere but especially at a royal court. Using his wit and humour, he was able to bring attention to extravagances and waste in the court that no one else could. It was reported that the King's chief

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<sup>1</sup> William "Will" Sommers (or Somers; died 15 June 1560) was the best-known court jester of Henry VIII of England. Source Wikipedia

minister Thomas Cromwell often supplied the jester with situations, that he wanted to bring to the King's notice, but didn't dare to do himself. The specific position of jester and ombudsman becomes apparent, as the ombudsman must embody the quality of the jester. Cromwell was later decapitated on orders of the king, so maybe he should have used the jester a bit more.

Today we may say, that the function of the jester to speak truth to power is not only for the court in the middle-ages; we argue, that this role is more important than ever before, particularly where power is concentrated, and therefore needs to be unfolded in independent positions. The role of the Jester has found a modern-day equivalent in the role of the Ombudsman, serving three objectives: firstly, the modern ombudsman provides a safe space for everybody in the system, facing issues and seeking amicable ways to resolve them as third-party independent and neutral; secondly, to provide feedback to the leadership about hidden dynamics which risk undermining the functioning and purpose of the larger whole; and thirdly to provide the leader(s) with a space to self-reflect on the rightful use of the power s/he has been entrusted with by the organisation s/he is serving. The first important objective is not covered here as this article focus is on talking truth to power, an ability that clearly is sensitive and requires tact, diplomacy and courage. Today's times do not differ to those in the past, as we know too well the risk of the fatal ending of the messenger conveying painful truths.

We all know that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely<sup>2</sup>, but what else do we know about power? Before going deeper into the role of the Jester, we would like to share the latest insights about power, looking specifically into the Hubris Syndrome.

## WHAT FOLLOWS IN THE WAKE OF POWER

In his role as British Foreign Secretary, Lord David Owen saw the consequences for politicians when holding high office. He observed that once in power, leaders every so often demonstrate a personality change, *'marked by out-of-control egos, high risk decision-making, arrogance and contempt for others'*, which is referred to as 'Hubris Syndrome'. *'It has the capacity to destroy economic value, ruin careers, subvert great ideas and institutions and take lives in unnecessary wars and accidents that could have been anticipated'*<sup>3</sup>. This led to his initiative to create the Daedalus<sup>4</sup> Trust in 2011. The aim is to study and create an awareness about the impact of power.

We believe that Henry VIII's Jester, William Sommers, knew about dynamics and risks associated with power and how it could negatively impact people towards hubris – therefore he survived and stayed in his position. But the Jester also knew how to facilitate power to see through his or her eyes, what was invisible to the hubris eyes, which is why the King may have saved the life of his Jester.

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<sup>2</sup> Lord Acton, expressed this opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

<sup>3</sup> Extracted from web-site of the Daedalus Trust, see: <http://www.daedalustrust.com/tag/lord-david-owen/>

<sup>4</sup> "In Greek mythology, Daedalus advised his son Icarus to be bold enough to fly but not to fly so high that the sun's heat would melt the wax of the wings he had fashioned for him. Thrilled by his initial aerobatic successes, Icarus ignored his father's advice and paid the ultimate price – a sobering demonstration of unjustified self confidence and the abuse of power." See <http://www.daedalustrust.com/about-us/>

Hubris is associated in Greek mythology with Nemesis. According to Lord Owen, the syndrome develops irrespective of whether the individual's leadership is judged a success or failure<sup>5</sup>; and it is not dependent on bad outcomes. The full-blown hubris, associated with holding considerable power in high office, may or may not be transient. There is a moving scale of hubris and no absolute cut-off to distinguish it from fully functional leadership. External events can influence the variation in both intensity of hubris and when it begins. Hubris can even evolve from early childhood, where situations – like winning the fight in a sandbox – can boost the ego and later create the ground for a hubris syndrome. Specially, if the situation is not balanced by an adult response, the win adds to the child's conviction that he or she is powerful or even omnipotent.

In making the diagnosis of Hubris Syndrome, David Owen says in his book "The Hubris Syndrome: Bush, Blair and the Intoxication of Power", that three or more of the following defining symptoms should be present, at least one of which should be among those identified below as 'unique':

- A propensity to see the world primarily as an arena in which to exercise power and seek glory
- A predisposition to take actions which seem likely to cast the individual in a good light – taken in part in order to enhance their image
- A disproportionate concern with image and presentation
- A messianic way of talking and a tendency to exaltation in speech and manner
- An identification with the nation or organization – to the extent that they regard the outlook and interests of the two as identical (unique factor)
- A tendency to speak of themselves in the third person or use the royal 'we' (unique factor)
- Excessive confidence in the individual's own judgement and contempt for the advice or criticism of others
- Exaggerated self-belief, bordering on a sense of omnipotence, in what they personally can achieve
- A belief that rather than being accountable to the mundane court of colleagues or public opinion, the real court to which they answer is much greater: history or god
- An unshakable belief that in that court they will be vindicated (unique factor)
- Loss of contact with reality; often associated with progressive isolation
- Restlessness, recklessness and impulsiveness (unique factor)

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<sup>5</sup> Article "Hubris syndrome: An acquired personality disorder? A study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 years" by David Owen and Jonathan Davidson Brain Advance Access published February 12, 2009.

- A tendency to allow their ‘broad vision’, especially their conviction about the moral rectitude of a proposed course of action, to obviate the need to consider other aspects of it, such as its practicality, cost and the possibility of unwanted outcomes (unique factor)
- Incompetence in carrying out a policy, where things go wrong precisely because too much self-confidence has led the leader not to worry about the nuts and bolts of a policy.

A Jester recognizes these symptoms, addresses them and gives space for self-reflection and another way of seeing themselves and the role as a leader in an organization in order to broaden their view. Like in a deck of cards, which has four suits: Clubs, Spades, Hearts and Diamonds. The Jester has the ability to serve all four suits – and therefore to describe the whole picture to this in power instead of falling in love with one version of the suit, which is the trap of power.

#### FROM POWER THAT EMPOWERS TO POWER THAT DISEMPOWERS

Even though a leader caught by hubris can create a visible success, it can be like the old saying: *The operation was a success, but the patient died.*

We argue, that even though a board is satisfied with the CEO or General Secretary’s ability to reach his or her goals, the ombudsman function has to be able to observe the whole organisation, and share *what is* and the consequences of the power game, even though the visible and limited result shows that leadership is a success according to the stated goals. This makes it even more difficult for the Jester to serve his or her function, because showing that the process is not working for the organisation as a whole is never welcomed, even though management is reaching its goals.

Let’s imagine a situation where a Governing Board is satisfied with the CEO or General Secretary’s results against stated goals, even though these results may have been the result of hubris-driven management style, possibly be short-sighted and at a large cost for the organisation as a whole. The jester has the perspective of the larger system, and his challenge is to share *what is*, i.e. the overall impact on the organisation with the resultant, negative consequences of an abusive use of power. This is rarely welcome, particularly where huge egos are at play.

Professor of psychology, Dachner Keltner at the University of California, Berkeley states, that people abusing their power will make other people feel powerless. The result is that the powerless have a higher stress level and suffer from poor health. The cost for organizations is that they do not capitalize on the full human potential of their workforce. It is also economically costly for society at large.

Through his research, Professor Keltner, found twenty principles describing ‘power’ or ‘lack of power’. He groups these 20 principles into three groups, from firstly, power as a way to empower others, to secondly, power used to disconnect individuals from relations and thirdly, powerlessness as a consequence of power games. He discovered that power is gained through serving others. At the same time, having this very power can bring about a behavioral change towards serving primarily oneself and being infected with hubris as mentioned above, ultimately leading to a loss of

power. Therefore, the title of his book is: "The Power Paradox".<sup>6</sup> The 20 principles referred to in this book, are:

Power Principles - gather and strengthen relations:

1. Power is about altering the states of others.
2. Power is part of every relationship and interaction.
3. Power is found in everyday actions.
4. Power comes from empowering others in social networks.
5. Groups give power to those who advance the greater good.
6. Groups construct reputations that determine the capacity to influence.
7. Groups reward those who advance the greater good with status and esteem
8. Groups punish those who undermine the greater good with gossip
9. Enduring power comes from empathy.
10. Enduring power comes from giving.
11. Enduring power comes from expressing gratitude.
12. Enduring Power come from telling stories that unite.

Power Principles - disconnect individual from relations:

13. Power leads to empathy deficits and diminished moral sentiments.
14. Power leads to self-serving impulsivity
15. Power leads to incivility and disrespect
16. Power leads to narratives of exceptionalism

Power Principles - consequence of power games:

17. Powerlessness involves facing environments of continual threat.
18. Stress defines the experience of powerlessness.
19. Powerlessness undermines the ability to contribute to society.
20. Powerlessness causes poor health.

These 20 power principles are a clear guide to when power becomes dangerous and destructive, and when a jester should respond.

#### THE JOBDESCRIPTION OF A JESTER

The zero-point in physics is pure potential without structure. It is nothing and all at the same time, but also contains an endless sea of possibilities. With zero-point we mean the ability to operate without judgement– a place beyond right or wrong – where the whole is observed, included and embraced, as it is the judgements that create fragmentations.

A Jester must possess certain qualities and abilities to perform his or her work from the 'zero-point' like the Ombudsman strives to be without judgement having learned how to bracket his or her

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<sup>6</sup> "The Power Paradox" by Dacher Keltner, Penguin Press, 2016

opinion and put it aside. When the Jester is operating from this point it is neutral and only describes what is.

The Jester has a toolbox that contains coaching (intrapersonal relations), mediation (interpersonal relations), and constellation (systemic), and other tools that give access to the not seen.

The Jester is also a magician, as he or she knows that the observation has to be shared in such a way that people in power have a choice how to enter or use the scenario that the Jester is describing – and thereby not lose face, when correcting their former strategies.

The Jester is like the shaman living outside the system – because serving from within the system you fall in line and become part of the system. It's like the goldfish that cannot describe the water it is swimming in – one has to be outside the aquarium to describe the water. The Jester therefore serves as the zero-point without judgements – seeing the invisible – being the neutral – and has the freedom to describe *what is* like the little boy in the fairy-tale: "The Emperor's New Clothes".<sup>7</sup>

Above all, he or she must be experienced in life and be familiar with the secret paths of the soul. The Jester must have experienced and largely healed these issues with him- or herself. It also means serenity resulting, on the one hand, from the experience of life and, on the other hand, from intense engagement with the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and with the abysses of the soul. Profound knowledge of systemic phenomenology and constellation work can largely contribute to work from the zero-point and the ability to observe without judging. Phenomenology demands to work with *what is*, as it is the study of experience and the ways in which things present themselves in and through experience.

Above all, the Jester needs intuition. The crucial steps in the work of a Jester are psychological and have to be expressed with a twinkle in the eye. It's not primarily about factual skills; it's about the ability to feel imbalances and to restore them.

The Jester must be aware that it is never about winning, but achieving equilibrium, because it's about peace work. Where there is a winner, there is also a loser and therefore no peace. Because the loser unconsciously thinks of revenge as compensation. A victory is but a truce for a limited time.

Other qualities are:

The Jester must personally meet high moral and ethical standards.

The Jester is experienced, clarified and free of personal interests.

The Jester is familiar with human and interpersonal dynamics at the soul level.

The Jester must be free from greed.

The Jester is capable of not being conscripted and remaining outside the considered system, though he or she sees and knows it as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> "The Emperor's New Clothes" (Danish: Kejsereens nye klæder) is a short tale published 1837 by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen.

The Jester is calm, contains and observes

In summary: The true Jester is rare, because the function is an idealized figure. The ideal, compassionate, just altruistic human, but as the Jester William Sommers showed us embodying most of these qualities will keep the Jester alive and at the same time serving his or her role.

#### WHAT IF THE EMPEROR HAD A JESTER

Imagine if the Emperor in the famous fairy-tale by Hans Christian Andersen had a Jester. A Jester who knew how to address his erroneous perspective in such a way that was not threatening for the emperor. The Jester with his or her different outlook to the whole, is no threat to anyone and will therefore be able to deliver the message in such a way that it does not fragment or create conflicts. The Jester comes with his or her observation without judging - and perhaps this observation may not immediately be accepted – as the Jester describes the invisible or not yet seen.

To enable the Emperor to see the whole system and embrace and include it, demands the Jester is able to include the 3<sup>rd</sup> perspective seeing the whole, to show the emperor that he was tricked and thereby open his eyes towards the truth. Then the Emperor will not only know that he was not wearing any clothes, but also allow him to save his face and power in front of his people. By wisely allowing a neutral function to share his or her observations and listening to them, a leader neutralizes the embodied danger of hubris with its self-inflated ego that believes it can fly to the sun. For such a role to be effective, the wise emperor has thus to make an agreement with the Jester, that he or she will be protected and not 'killed' when revealing unpleasant truths.

Therefore, a healthy system will make space for the neutral function as the wise King knows he needs his Jester to observe and share his perspective on the whole system.

#### WHAT CONDITIONS NEED TO BE IN PLACE FOR THE OMBUDSMAN TO BE ABLE TO DO HIS OR HER JOB EFFECTIVELY?

Clearly, the benefit the Ombudsman may bring to an organisation, as a reality checker, smoke detector, conciliatory force and change agent, depends on the degree that s/he is expected and permitted to work freely and according to agreed professional standards, engaging with everybody in the organisation, addressing uncomfortable truths and interchanging with the leadership in a non-judgemental, yet frank and constructive manner. The psychological safety that this requires needs to be based on a clear agreement at the outset of the assignment and be written into its respective contractual terms. We advocate for an agreement that spells out the commitment and governing principles by both parties, by the Ombudsman as well as her/his organisational counterpart, and be countersigned accordingly. The cornerstones for the Ombudsman practice are the principles of confidentiality, independence, impartiality, neutrality, informality. The organisational counterpart, on the other hand, needs to accept these very principles and agree to a 'carte blanche' giving the Ombudsman access to everybody in the organisation, as well as their own unrestricted accessibility. Eventual options for the renewability of an Ombudsman-assignment by

the very leaders that the Ombudsman engages with, needs to be carefully considered against the risk of affecting the Ombudsman' neutral stance and emergent conflict of interests.

#### IS THE OMBUDSMAN ABLE TO SERVE AS A JESTER IN OUR CURRENT SYSTEM?

Yes, definitely, at least this was experienced by one of the authors in a particular case of a big energy company after the catastrophe of Fukushima. He served as a Jester in a strategic process of the board. His observations were rejected first and finally successfully implemented. This included the experience that the Jester must also be a magician presenting the situation in such a way that it leaves space for leadership to find their own strategy of how to implement what is being shared by the Jester. The Jester must know how to present his findings in a non-judgmental, unthreatening, if not playful way, so that the King can preserve his dignity and those who are addressed could ultimately feel included saying "we had an excellent idea".

#### SUMMARY

In this article, the authors argue for the important role that organisational Ombudsmen play to support healthy organisations, embodying the qualities of the jester. History tells us, that all healthy systems always have had and used their Jester to survive – the role of observing without judging, operating from a zero-point – and the role of speaking truth to power. In the article the authors include the latest research into how power and hubris are working, and which Jester-like qualities the Ombudsman must have.

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