

# A field guide to the sycophantocracy in groups and organisations

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**W**e know a sycophant as being a person who acts obsequiously towards someone important in order to gain some form of advantage. In its broadest sense it is taken to refer to someone practising obedient flattery. It can also refer to someone who practises ‘insincere flattery’. Sycophants, it can be argued have had a ubiquitous presence within most groups and organisations.

Typically, a sycophant imitates a leader’s opinions and often seeming to share their supportive opinions enthusiastically. Sometimes this is taken to absurd lengths with sycophants overtly honing their compliments to impress. Accordingly, the weaker the leadership target, the easier it is to ingratiate and impress. It is also noted that sycophantic behaviours tend to manifest and become most noticeable in hierarchical organisational situations (Perlman, 2018). Interestingly, the concept of sycophantocracy has existed as long as humans have lived in social co-existence, but now in an era of resurgent, raw narcissism it becomes more identifiable in government and administration contexts.

Students of administration and governance were all immersed in the development of The Westminster Model of government, with its associated independent public service. At the bureaucratic-personnel level, however, the conflict between patronage and merit was an on-going problem. In 1854 the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of the Civil Service attempted to redress this problem of patronage and its associated sycophantocracy. While they hoped that the Civil Service attracted the ablest and most ambitious youths,

it was often not the case: ‘The character of the young men admitted to the public service depends chiefly upon the discretion with which the heads of departments, and others who are entrusted with the distribution of patronage, exercise that privilege’ (1854, p. 6). While patronage is a two-edged sword, it is the patronage that is diverted into personal benefits that causes systemic problems.

## Leaders’ Achilles’ Heels

Leaders’ roles are seen as complex, often stressful and there is a constant fear of failure. It is this leadership vulnerability, work-load and task complexity that forces leaders to trust others to get the job done. With trust comes two-way dialogue that impacts on the roles of all parties. However, weak, vulnerable leaders need constant propping-up and this is the hunting ground for the sycophantocracy with artful flattery.

Examining flattery, Fogg and Nass (1997) found that gaming software writers played on the users’ susceptibility to flattery to keep them engaged. In studying the effects of flattery on targets (the receiver of the flattery) the authors found that:

- Targets tend to believe that flatterers speak the truth
- Flattery creates a positive effect in the target;
- Targets like those who flatter them
- Targets judge the performance of flatterers more favourably.

And, interestingly, the payoff for the flatterer/sycophant is that, ‘Not only does the target rate the flatterer’s work performance more favourably, but the target also perceives the flatterer to be more intelligent’ (p. 553).

## Sycophantocracy in school systems

In a punchy statement about the sycophantocracy in schools, Trotter (2011) explained the development of school-system sycophantocracy:

‘(When) ... new superintendents come to town come apparently thinking that they are ‘playas for life’ (sic.) — as if landing their big new jobs entitle them to more women (or more men, depending on the gender or orientation), more financial and ridiculous perks that they assume, and the inalienable right to promote only kiss-ups and sycophants.’

And the author then goes on to explain that merit and integrity are seen as dangerous to weak leaders who prefer to be surrounded by a sycophantocracy than a meritocracy:

‘If a person maintains integrity and honour, this seems to be a liability to (weak leaders). I have told many educators that one of the reasons that their particular assistant principal or principal or superintendent doesn’t like them is because either 1) they pose a threat to them because they are popular with the students (and the students’ parents) or because 2) they have integrity, and this just scares the crap out of the dishonest administrators.’

Common among the issues experienced in organisations that are identified as having a sycophantic culture is the overall toxicity that potentially it creates among staff. This toxicity can become manifest in a variety of staff behaviours including the development of a silo mentality among faculty members with a corresponding impact on their communication and interpersonal interactions. A sycophantic culture can be described as



being divisive, excluding, and grounded in a very limited world view.

A perspective of such a sycophantic culture that aligns with the more extreme toxic description outlined above is provided by a staff member in a school where principal friendships underpinned staff selection and administrative decisions. She indicated:

“Our school is characterised by distrust and fear, with staff reluctant to challenge ideas or propose alternatives due to the potential impact that it may have on future promotional opportunities. Staff who are not identified as being in the ‘in crowd’ are often kept at a distance from overall decision making. Staff became very private and afraid of ‘being exposed’ in their work. The school change culture was best described as resistant and reluctant, generally slow on uptake of system imperatives due to lack of knowledge and currency among its leadership. Teamwork could best be described as dysfunctional.” (Silcox, 2003).

The reasons for school leaders adopting a sycophantic approach to staff selection and promotion and is seen to evolve from a leader’s personal insecurity, conservatism and a general lack of both trust and willingness to accept alternative dispositions on policy and implementation matters.

Issues relating to power and control come into play in a sycophantocracy as leaders prone to making staff selections based on the promotion of personal favourites (sycophants) do

so as they believe they can trust such appointees to reinforce their own position and personal self-image.

### **Developing a field guide for identifying the sycophantocracy**

The literature clearly shows variations of the operations of the sycophantocracy in a variety of organisations. In establishing this first field guide the authors recognise three types of sycophantic behaviours, which adjudge behaviours against two sets of variables- overt-covert behavioural displays, and overt-covert rewards and payments. The three models sitting on this continuum of sycophantocracy are:

- 1 Aggressive public displays and pay-offs
- 2 A hybrid model that mixes Type 1, and Type 3
- 3 Subtle, covert, opportunistic sycophantic behaviours often with unobserved rewards.

**Type 1.** Overt sycophantic behaviours that result in public rewards and favouritism. Nepotism is a great example of Type 1 sycophantocracy. Parker and Parker (2017) tell the story a bishop who found when he was ushered in to meet with the Duke de Vendome that the Duke conducted his meetings while sitting on a portable lavatory. When the Duke rose and wiped himself the Bishop was offended so, for the next meeting the bishop sent the cleric Giulio Alberoni who was known for his inoffensive nature. Alberoni was treated in the same manner as the bishop and when

## The MacNeill-Silcox Rule of Sycophantocracy



The number and influence of the sycophants in any organisation or group is inversely proportional to the strength of the leadership.

That is, a strong leadership generates a weak sycophantocracy; and the converse is that weak leadership grows rampant sycophantocracies.

the Duke exposed his buttocks Alberoni said, “O culo d’angelo” (roughly translated, “Oh, ass of an angel!”), and he “ran to kiss” the duke’s behind. His long career within the church and among European courts was assured.

**Type 2.** In this model some sycophants are publicly identifiable, and others are not. A classic example are *les claquers* who accept free tickets to ballet or opera and they are expected to actively acknowledge performances by clapping and shouting “bravo”.

*Les Claquers:* (from the French to clap or slap), are audience members at ballet or opera, who were rewarded to applaud plays or speeches, and this formalises the more overtly commercialised, transactional aspects of the sycophantocracy. While the ‘claquers’ at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow are rewarded with valuable passes to ballets to motivate audiences, they also claim to have an educative role in explaining to an audience what is good in a performance:

“The audience does not trust itself, it trusts someone else,” said the ballet critic Vadim Gayevsky, who fell in with the claquers as a boy in the 1940s. “If it hears someone applauding very aggressively and intensively, they think that something extraordinary is going on which they did not grasp, and they feel generally that they should not look like fools, that they should join in, so that nobody sees they missed it” (Barry, 2013).

The claquers can also be present at political rallies and in meeting stacking exercises. Claquers receive a transactional reward for the defined services that they offer individuals or organisations. However, sycophants offer subtle, non-negotiated actions often in the hope of some future reward.

### **Type 3. Subtle, opportunistic flattery.**

Type 3 sycophants are learning their craft, and they use incidental flattery to

try and gain some advantage. Fogg and Nass (1997) showed that even computer software gaming users were extremely vulnerable to computer generated flattery, which says something about human foibles.

### **What to do**

An ability that leaders must develop is a *sycophant early warning system*, because as Attila the Hun warned: “A king with chieftains who always agree with him reaps the counsel of mediocrity,” (Roberts, p. 101). Mediocrity is a pestilence that damages the operations and public perceptions of a leader’s performance. Apart from the problem of lack of excellent advice from the sycophantocracy, an added burden is that the quality of leaders is judged by those they surround themselves with.

A rule of thumb that has guided astute leaders is to recruit staff who complement the leaders’ profile and cover potential weaknesses. For strong leaders, the best advisers are those who are loyal, not afraid to give powerful advice, and have the best interests of the group or organisation at heart. And, in the case of school leaders we need to start identifying those qualities in the teachers whom we recruit as graduates.

### **Conclusion**

The leadership hierarchy common to most if not all organisations provides an ideal breeding ground for the sycophant. In more recent times given the ever-expanding human, physical and financial portfolios and legal frameworks that leaders must deal with on a day to day basis it is not surprising therefore to see a very real or perceived corresponding rise of a more overt sycophantocracy. Managing this perception, real or not, becomes a challenge for the leader. A challenge that is more ably met by a leader who has a confidence in their own skill set and

organisational knowledge and who operates with an underlying integrity in dealing with subordinates. The basic premise that is offered here is that weak leadership promotes an environment in which multiple sycophantocracies can flourish.

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