REGRESSION IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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The choice of good leaders is a major task for all organizations. Information regarding the prospective administrator's personality should complement questions regarding his previous experience, his general conceptual skills, his technical knowledge, and the specific skills in the area for which he is being selected. The growing psychoanalytic knowledge about the crucial importance of internal, in contrast to external, object relations, and about the mutual relationships of regression in individuals and in groups, constitutes an important practical tool for the selection of leaders.

In an earlier study (Kernberg, 1978) I described the effects of regressive pressures in psychiatric institutions on the administrators of these institutions. There, I pointed out that while crises in organizations often appear at first to be caused by personality problems of the leader, further analysis reveals a more complex situation. Quite frequently, a breakdown in work effectiveness stemming from various internal organizational factors and relationships between the organization and the environment induces regressive group processes first, and regression in the functioning of the leadership later. If these group processes remain undiagnosed, only their end product may be visible, in the form of what appears to be primitive, inadequate leadership and, more specifically, negative effects of the leader's personality on the organization. Thus, leadership problems are not always the real cause of the crisis. In what follows, I turn to the consideration of regressive pressures stemming from within the administrators themselves. At every step I will emphasize the importance of distinguishing between regressive organizational components and regression in the leader.

My approach is intermediate between two positions: (1) the traditional approach, according to which leadership is "inborn"—particularly "charismatic" leadership; (2) the opposite, more recent theoretical thinking, which considers leadership as derived mostly or exclusively from learned skills and understandings. My approach is based on the findings of various authors (Bion, 1961; Dalton et al., 1968; Emery and Trist, 1973; Hodgson et al., 1965; Levinson, 1968; Main, 1957; Miller and Rice, 1967; Rice,