

THE MORDRED FACTOR AND THE MACHIAVELLI MANEUVER
The Killer of Synergy & Innovation
by Robert Porter Lynch

The Quest for Synergy is deeply imbedded in our human psyche. Its roots are ingrained in our historic literature, where every bonding to create synergy is broken by an equally forceful betrayal.

The opposite of synergy is not individual aggrandizement – that is just the result. Synergy's opposite is *Betrayal*, which then results in separation, disillusionment, isolation, and often worse, such as anger, revenge and vindictiveness.

Our civilization's written history is replete with the Quest for Synergy and the Terror of Betrayal. The Old Testament tells of the synergy between God, Adam, Eve, and the Garden of Eden. But an evil force, here named the devil, interceded to break the synergistic bond. This force for self interest, rather than the force for the greater good, became our first documented betrayal, forcing Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. The next story of betrayal is of two brothers: Cain and Able. Cain, rather than bond with his brother try to re-bond with God and reenter the Garden of Eden, takes betrayal another step farther, slewing his brother for his own self interest. With so few people on the earth, he chooses to take it all for himself rather than create more together.

Abraham is called upon to sacrifice his only son for God to show his faith. It is a horrible choice, but God does not fail the synergy test and keeps Abraham's bond with God and son by lifting the sacrificial burden. Later Abraham betrays the King of Egypt by telling him that his wife, Sarah, is his sister, and the King, unknowingly betrayed, illegitimately marries Sarah. Years later when the King learns of the betrayal, his becomes, with good reason, quite angry, and God reigns a plague upon all of Egypt as a consequence.

Abraham's brother Lot, to protect the angels sent as messengers to forewarn of God's impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, betrays his two daughters, sacrificing their virginity to the guards outside his house. As the family makes their escape, Lot's wife Ruth is turned into a pillar of salt as punishment for her betrayal of her oath to God not to look backwards toward the city being leveled to ruins. Now alone and hiding in a cave to elude detection, Lot is lured into a seduction by each of his two daughters on successive nights in the cave.

The stories of the New Testament are filled with the stories of synergy and betrayal. The stories of the New Testament, while covering only a few years in the adult life of Christ, are filled with the stories of synergy and betrayal. For Christ, the ultimate form of synergy was first *to love God with thy whole heart, thy whole mind, and thy whole soul*, and then *to love thy neighbor as thy self*. Christ's antidote for disconnectedness was forgiveness, not more punishment: *Judge and ye shall be judged, condemn and ye shall be condemned, forgive and ye shall be forgiven*.

However, Christ, in his Quest for Synergy as symbolized by his unity with God, was perpetually being stalked by betrayal. His own church leaders, the Pharisees and Rabbis

were masterminding a series of manipulative tricks and traps, attempting to lure him into making statements that would condemn him as a heretic. He eluded these maneuvers, but was ultimately betrayed by one of his own disciples, Judas, which led to the decisive price for betrayal: death by crucifixion.

GREEK LITERATURE: Euripides, Homer (Scylla & Charibdys), (Abduction of Helen of Troy), Aesop,

Socrates, who had practiced the synergy principles so carefully, had bonded closely with his students in a manner that could not be understood by outsiders. Threatened by the sense of internal community, Socrates was accused of having an intimate homosexual relationship with his students. The accusation alone was the most horrific of betrayals, because the nature of the accusation meant interminable defenses and lingering innuendo, regardless of the outcome of any trial. Rather than suffer such degradation of character, he chose hemlock (poison), death being a better alternative than living dishonorably.

Archimedes, the great mathematician and inventor, lived at the time just as the Roman conquerors were invading their Grecian neighbors. Knowing of his great capabilities, a Roman general ordered his troops to find Archimedes and bring him to headquarters, where he might be a valuable asset in inventing war machines. When a soldier found him, Archimedes told him to get lost, he was too busy trying to solve a mathematics problem. Angered by this disobedience to an order, the soldier killed Archimedes and brought his dead body to headquarters.

Despite the onslaught of despair during the Dark and Middle Ages, there was not a dearth of the synergy quest. The search for the Holy Grail and the codes of chivalry were all stories or allegories of the quest for synergy, and, true to form, with tales of betrayal and intrigue.

Perhaps no story imbedded in our collective psyche could be as compelling as the medieval legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. As the legend has evolved, it may be the ultimate story of the Quest for Synergy and the Tragedy of Betrayal. Originally written by Sir Thomas Mallory over a twenty year period from 1450 to 1470 as *Le Morte d'Arthur*, (The Death of Arthur), nearly 600 years after the presumed Arthur lived, the legend portrays King Arthur as the man with the vision for a Round Table of honorable and chivalrous knights who, together united in a common vision and ideal, would save their kingdom, prosper, and flourish. Joy would prevail throughout the land. Rewritten in the apocryphal tale in the twentieth century with the prophetic title *The Once and Future King*, then transformed into the play and later movie *Chamelot*, the story dramatically portrays Arthur's holy synergy with his Queen Guinevere, his brotherly synergy with his fabled knight and friend, Lancelot du Lac.

However, in a series of traumatic betrayals, Lancelot has an affair with Guinevere, destroying the beauty and bliss of most passionate of trios.

But yet, the penultimate betrayal is revealed with the unkindly arrival of Mordred,¹ who is Arthur's illegitimate son (and thus heir to the throne) into the court of Camelot. Born of a deception seduction by the witch Morguise,² Mordred is the classic conniver, a no-holds-barred schemer whose only intent is to relentlessly destroy every trusting relationship among the Knights of the Round Table. Playing one off against the other, setting each out to destroy the values and ideals that created Camelot's synergy, Mordred systematically destroys everything that Arthur dreamed or created. Portraying himself as a realist who can act appropriately in the arena of *real politic*, Mordred, in the most sinister of plots, excommunicates nearly all of the knights, who, now marginalized, link to become Arthur's enemies and overthrow Camelot, destroying the ever-present and forever lingering dream of synergy.

Despite Arthur's passionate but unrequited hope that Mordred might have a spark of goodness in him, Mordred persists on his destructive path. Lancelot's offer to thrust an iron spike through Mordred's heart is rejected by Arthur, for whom hope for man's salvation reigns eternal. Arthur remains the dreamer, the idealist, and the failure, for there is neither hope nor salvation for Mordred – only death or isolated incarceration (like Napoleon's exile to St. Helen's island) is the only workable fate. Like the allegory of the frog carrying the scorpion across the river, then being stung to death by the unappreciative passenger who says to the dying frog "it's in my nature," there is no alternative to dealing with a Mordred than to cut him out like a cancerous tumor.

Mordred is the embodiment of the sinister. His evil essences is destructive, not through direct aggression and attack, but by undermining, by indirection, by manipulative abuse to cause others to do his wicked bidding, by guise and guile.

Several of the quotes from movie *Camelot* are highly insightful into the nature of the character of Mordred:

Guinevere: Not having Mordred for dinner makes it a party:
He mixes wine and disloyalty like a witch over caldron

Arthur: We must not let our passions destroy our dreams
Mordred is my son – I hope there is something in him I have never reached

It is Mordred's characterization as a person whose values are the archetypical antithesis to the Arthurian Quest for Synergy that we term *the Mordred Factor*. Not only do these people have neither the desire nor ability to collaborate, synergize, and synchronize, but go to the opposite extreme, and purposefully (either intentionally or unintentionally) destroy synergy, teamwork, co-creativity, and spiritual community. When done unintentionally, it usually takes a variety of forms, such as selfishness or insecurity, and manifests as: blame, criticism, attack, negativity, complain, or fault finding.

¹ Mordred is most likely a combination of the French word *morte* (as in mortician) for death, and old English word *draden*, meaning terror or fear, from which the current word *dread* is derived.)

² Note the close connection to the word *morgue*: *a tomb (womb?) of death*

When done intentionally, the result is usually far more insidious, destructive, and often horrifying. To reveal the nature of the intentional Mordred, a particularly unique characterization emerged during the Renaissance.

A hundred years after Mallory's classic tale, as a prelude and warning to the emerging Renaissance, Niccolo Machiavelli³ wrote his classic tale: *The Prince* as a handbook for power and control. Machiavelli, a student of *real politic*, details the use of initiating manipulative techniques to offset, counter-balance, overthrow, or combat others engaged in Mordred like activities. The age of intrigue was formalized, making betrayal, conniving, conspiracy, and scheming its own art form.

Machiavelli's Prince is not strictly evil, he is a fox. And a fox he must be in a world of Mordreds, where there may be limited options to slay the dragon Mordred. Outfoxing a kingdom well populated with Mordred's takes the cunning of a fox.

As the Italian Renaissance evolved a century later into the English Age of Enlightenment, Shakespeare took Machiavelli to the theatre. Shakespearian tragedy is the personification of betrayal. *Romeo and Juliet*, is the story of the Quest for Synergy in the form of love betrayed by class distinction. In *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* the audience is bedazzled by a string of multiple betrayals that enfold us in the tragedy of a denied dream of collaboration, honor and joy. In the *Merchant of Venice*, the hope for synergy in Portia's Quality of Mercy speech is contrasted with Shylock's betrayal of the code of fairness in his desire to extract a pound of flesh. *Julius Caesar* pits the betrayals by the conniving Cassius and the murderous Brutus against the vision of patriotism and honor of Mark Antony. As Cassius observes to Brutus of the evil:

Why, man, he doth bstride the narrow world . . .
Peep[ing] about to find ourselves dishonorable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates:
the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.
(Act I, Sc 2)

Think of him as a serpent's egg,
which hatch'd, would, as his kind,
grow mischevious, and kill him in the shell . . .
O Conspiracy,
Sham'st thou to show thy dangerous brow by night,
When evils are most free? . . .
How many ages hence
shall this . . . be acted o'er,
in states unborn and accents yet unknown! . . .
Oh! Pardon me,
thou bleeding piece of earth,
that I am meek and gentle with these butchers!
(Act II, Sc 1)

Then Caesar's friend, Mark Antony proclaims:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;

³ It's worthwhile to note the important distinction between Mordred and Machiavelli. The former was insidious, self-centered, and evil; the latter amoral and practical.

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones....
Caesar ... was my friend, faithful and just to me.
(Act II, Sc2)

In *Henry V*, Shakespeare stakes out the vision of synergy:

From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered:
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother...

Shakespeare leaves us with an epic struggle with no classic heroes, no optimism for defeating Mordred or disarming Machiavelli. Consequently, despite the great artistic vision of the Renaissance, as a practical matter, western society was left with a helpless archetype for a role model, a modern Hamlet bedeviled by treachery, cunning, and manipulation, with few tools or strategies to create a sustainable Camelot. Only by combining iron will with the cunning of the ruler can the forces of Mordred be held back.

Literature that prevails in our hearts today like Alexander Dumas' *Three Musketeers* tells the tale of friendship through adventure. What could be more synergistic than the exploits of D'Artagnon, Athos, Portos, and Aramis?

As the Age of Enlightenment unfolded in America, the synergy quest became the united passion of the founding fathers. Blessed with a deep understanding of the fundamentals of the Greek experiment with democracy and training in reading ancient Greek, coupled with a strong foundation in Christian theology, a unique group (Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Franklin, et al) congealed to frame the Declaration of Independence and later the Constitution. Each document carefully outlines the vision for a synergistic new republic based upon a rebirth of Plato's Republic. The system of rights was designed to produce a win-win relationship between people and their society, while the system of checks and balances prevented tyrannical abuses from the Mordreds and Machiavellis that continually prowl and prey upon the idealistic vision of democracy.

The American Revolution produced its Mordred in the personage of Benedict Arnold. In the fifty year period after the revolution a string of Mordred's appeared, the most recognized today being Aaron Burr, or the scandalous theft of the presidential election of 1824 by John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, along with other scoundrels of equal magnitude, despite their relative historical obscurity today.⁴

The American Civil war, with its monumental loss of 600,000 lives, is deep testimony to the commitment by Abraham Lincoln to the vision of unity and community, and the betrayal of those values by the South with its rigid adherence to an anachronistic system of economic piracy reliant upon the enslavement of others.

⁴ The amateur historian may look to the actions of James Wilkinson or Jesse Duncan Elliott as epitomes of more modern Mordreds in the early 1800s.

In Europe Marx and Engels produced a highly idealistic (and equally unrealistic) Communist Manifesto based on other movements in Europe and America to form economic communities and collaboratives based on common ownership and interest. Not having reconciled the relationship between common and self interest, and reacting more to the perceived enslavement of the working class by capitalism, Marx sought the unity of interest and the release from economic bondage of those less fortunate.

Similarly, the massive union movement of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries drew passionate cries of common synergies among the oppressed. Sharing in the wealth stimulated Robin Hood behavior in public policy. But the ultimate betrayal of the Communist Movement came not at the hands of the dreaded capitalists, but from the Mordreds and Machiavellis within. Lenin, then Stalin and Mao Tse Tung, under the guise of noble idealism, slaughtered or imprisoned tens of millions (perhaps over 100 million all tolled) in the name of justice falsely intended.

During that same era, Hitler, and later Pol Pot became the unapologetic manifestations of Mordred, setting a new standard for hideous and uncompassionate disregard for human life.

In America, the Mordred of the mid-twentieth century was Senator Joe McCarthy, who abusively spread fear, hate, and distrust across the land with the campaign to find a communist in every closet.

From the ashes of ages of continental strife, the nature of the European Economic Union is based on a desire for synergy among compatible differences to predominate.

In Israel, the Kibbutz movement has attempted to keep Marx's values alive in a quasi-communistic-capitalistic economic world.

As the latter half the twentieth century unfolded, the Quest for Synergy became more and more manifest. The Civil Rights Movement, led by Martin Luther King, dramatically envisioned unity, community, belonging, and equality. His language was Arthurian in scope: We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools. Or the entire *I have a dream* speech. At the same time, JFK was presumably living in Camelot, and met the same fate as King Arthur.

The Mordred Factor is highly visible in today's sports arena. Several coaches are notable in their ability to eliminate the Mordred's from their teams, thus producing a synergy of performance excellence. Take the following sports examples:

Basketball: Red Auerbach of the Boston Celtics was a mastermind in building team players who create mutual value in each other. His teams that had players like Bill Russell, Bob Cousy, Tommy Heinson, Jim Havlichek, Larry Bird, Robert Parrish, and K.C. Jones had unparalleled strings of championships because of the synergy of teamwork.

Football: Bill Bellichek of the New England Patriots has carried on the Celtic tradition into football. By contrast, Terrell Owens is a classic Mordred, now having been cast off from the

Philadelphia Eagles for inciting internecine warfare on the team.

Teamwork: Arguably, the two greatest athletes of the twentieth century were Michael Jordan in basketball and Wayne Gretzky in hockey, because they not only led their respective sports in points scored, but also in assists – handoffs to other players who then scored. Watching these two men play was synergy in motion.

In our world of emerging value networks, alliances, and cross functional teams, it is essential for every leader to be cautious and observant regarding the potential Mordred on the team. As one respected leader told me recently:

“I’m leaving my organization to join another. My boss hired a person for our team who has been so disruptive that now everyone is being played off against the other. I spend all my time now worrying about who is going to put a knife in my back. I used to be a high flyer. Unless I leave I’ll have no future.”

Another executive lamented about her subordinates:

“I hired the most qualified people I could afford. But they are always breaking down, working for their own self interest. There is no teamwork, no synergy, and no synchronicity. We don’t coordinate well. No amount of team building seems to work.”

Unknowingly, she made the mistake of hiring her team based on competence, not character,⁵ resulting in a majority of people being or becoming “Marginal Mordreds.”

How an organization creates a culture of innovation and collaboration is critical in either stimulating or repressing the Marginal Mordred and the Machiavelli Maneuver. As I was editing this piece, the phone rang. It was a senior manager from a large corporation who lamented:

“There is no real innovation here and little collaboration. We all have a fear of failure because people are fired if they fail. If we do make a mistake, we are criticized in front of others. So no one takes any risks. We talk of innovation, but we don’t walk it. No one collaborates unless someone else is willing to take the risk and responsibility if something doesn’t work out. When we try to work in alliance with other companies, there’s an attitude that our products are always better, and theirs are junk. We see only a very limited set of options. If someone does have something good, our approach is arrogant: ‘We’ll just buy them.’ When we do, we kill all their innovation.”

This was said by a man of courage and vision who had been struggling for years to rally his small team against the overwhelming power of an antithetical culture. Yet we cannot expect those of vision and courage to act forever like fools. Unless new leadership is brought in, or alternatively, those of courage join forces as a “band of brothers,” each of the courageous visionaries will be picked off, one-by-one, or be relegated to live a sorry life of disillusionment and despair.

Leaders play an enormous role in determining attitudes and behavior.

⁵ Japanese corporations are more skilled at getting teamwork to prevail. They hire on the basis of character weighing in at 80% of the person’s value, and competence at 20%. American companies typically base their decision on just the opposite proportion.

Unknowingly, many leaders unintentionally betray their subordinate's expectations for being acknowledged and rewarded for excellent work, innovative thinking, and willingness to take risks for the greater good of the organization. When these expectations are unfulfilled, their morale takes a long, low road to disappointment and despair. The climate of excitement and innovation yields to an attitude of complaint, blame, and resentment. It is in this swamp of despair the marginal Mordred breeds like a mosquito.

If the ghost of Mordred and Machiavelli are prolific in your organization, look to the top where their spirit may reside. And also look within to see if you are trapped in a culture of intrigue, innuendo, and doubt in which you've become one of the principal or supporting actors.

Like the smoker who gets a momentary nicotine high, leaders who feast on a diet cynicism, criticism, blame, negativity, and rule by fear may get an emotional power-high, but in the long run, with each passing day, sustainable energy is drained from the organization on its slow decline to death. Work then becomes nothing more than a bitter-sweet travail with neither victory nor valor, honor nor heroics.