

# Exposing Hazing

By Chad Ellsworth

This is an excerpt from Chad's forthcoming book:

*Building up without tearing down: How to cultivate heroic leadership in you and your organization*



"The line between good and evil is in the center of every human heart."

*-Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

In the last chapter, we discussed what is probably a common experience with hazing. After all, nobody was hospitalized or killed, and nobody was imprisoned. But that certainly does not make the experience a positive one.

Now that we have experienced hazing, we will examine and expose hazing, laying bare all of the ways that it falls short of its lofty promises.

## **HAZING IS A BROKEN PROMISE**

Hazing promised big things to me.

Hazing promised to forge lifelong friendships with my fraternity brothers.

Hazing promised to provide positive character traits, such as integrity, respect, and responsibility.

Hazing promised to tear me down, only to make me stronger.

Every one of these promises was broken or left unfulfilled.

However, most of all, hazing promised to make me a man.

Of all of the promises that hazing made to me and countless others throughout the world, this was the greatest lie of them all.

The truth is, hazing causes adults to act like children.

As a father of two boys, I have seen how children develop, first from infants into toddlers, and then from toddlers into school-aged children.

Likewise, as a professional, I have worked with 18- to 22-year-olds on a daily basis since 2002, including roles as a fraternity house director, professional fraternity and sorority advisor, academic advisor, and career coach.

My professional background and education is in the area of counseling and personal development. As a result of that experience and training, I know that one of the most important transitions that each of us must make is from "me" to "we."

As infants, we shook our care-takers countless times from their slumbers, striving to meet our most pressing needs, regardless of how sick, stressed out, or tired our parents may have been.

One of our most important developmental tasks as we grow, first from infants to children, and then from adolescents to adults, is to develop mature interpersonal relationships, which is described as not only a freedom from narcissism, but also a shift from dependence or dominance toward interdependence between equals.

Hazing is at its foundation an act of dominance and power, not to mention that you would be hard pressed to find anybody anywhere who would describe hazing as a demonstration of maturity. After all, one of the most common excuses in support of hazing is some variation of "boys will be boys."

As a pledge, a full member, and as a professional, I witnessed innumerable others who became caricatures and immature, reckless imitations of their true selves, despite the fact that I knew many of them would not claim those darker, more juvenile versions of themselves as parts of their real identities.

Hazing became a way for these people to act out ego-feeding, self-centered roles, without any concern for consequences or any reflection of who they "really are." They did not have to worry about how they may be perceived by others, both inside and outside of their organizations, because they were merely carrying

out a role prescribed to them as members of their organizations.

If those who completed the hazing process are regressing to less mature and more reckless stages of human development, isn't it obvious that hazing is therefore failing to fulfill its promises of building better people?

Why does hazing continue to exist, and how does it manipulate not only its victims, but its perpetrators, as well?

## **HAZING IS DYSFUNCTIONAL**

Hazing persists because it does in fact meet some human needs, albeit in a destructive and dysfunctional way.

If you were to ask people about motivations for hazing, what do you think they would say? The most common responses usually include a combination of a desire for bonding, for instilling discipline, to prove one's self, to show respect for the organization, and a mechanism for ensuring that only the best become members of our organizations.

Let's examine each of these one by one.

### **BONDING**

Look back at a few of the hardest and most painful moments of your life. Who was with you? Were you hurt? It is probable that you bonded with the people who experienced that hardship with you.

Have you ever seen one of those shows where the host collects a group of people who went through some sort of traumatic experience together? Have you ever wondered what it is like to have one of those experiences that most outsiders will never fully understand? Or maybe you have had one of those experiences yourself?

The people who share those experiences share a truly unique bond. Psychologists would refer to it as the severity-affiliation-attraction hypothesis, which put simply means that human beings bond to the people with whom they go through traumatic experiences.

But, this does not mean that those people bond to the people who are inflicting the traumatic experience on them, explaining why those who are hazed may not ever truly forgive and forget those who hazed them.

For those who do bond to those who hazed them, they are conditioning their brains to conflate affection with affliction. They are training themselves to accept torment and torture in place of compassion and love, or what is commonly known as "Stockholm Syndrome," which develops when a person is in such a dire situation that they have to rely on somebody who abuses them for their survival. Compliance and subjugation become mechanisms for survival.

In hazing situations, aren't those who are hazed likewise reliant on their hazers for their survival, whether a very real physical survival or a metaphorical social survival where they continue as members of the organization?

Is inflicting psychological violence the way that we want to build and continue our organizations? What are the lasting impacts on our members as they leave our organizations and continue their lives? What is the lasting impact on our society?

### **DISCIPLINE**

There also are people who will defend hazing as a disciplinary process, or a program through which the newest members acquire skills such as organization, time management, and work ethic.

In my experience, however, that high level of discipline that was demanded during my own six month pledging process disappeared as quickly as the evidence of any of the hazing activities themselves. The men who were ridden hardest regressed as soon as they reached the "finish line" of initiation, becoming full members of the organization.

In other words, the discipline lasted only as long as the punishment. Much like the changes to one's brain chemistry when they bond to those who inflict trauma on them, this type of discipline can condition us to need the threat of punishment in order to perform. In other words, discipline becomes a result of an influx of

stress chemicals in the person's brain, rather than an intrinsic motivation they can tap into on their own. When we engage in hazing, we are inhibiting, rather than promoting, the type of behavior we desire.

## PROVING YOURSELF

One of the most audacious boasts of hazing organizations is that it instills leadership. Ironically, this also may be the easiest point to refute.

By any definition of the term, leadership requires being the first to step forward or step up.

In line-up after line-up, one of the most persistent characteristics of the ones where I was a participant was that the first person who voiced any opposition or reluctance was punished the most severely.

In other words, instead of teaching people to step up, we were being taught to sit down and shut up. Instead of exercising and growing our leadership, pledging became a six-month Whack-A-Mole game where we were the pummeled rodents.

## RESPECT

It has been long held that we cherish and value those things that we work hardest for. For example, Thomas Paine, a political activist, philosopher, political theorist, revolutionary, and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America, once observed, "What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly."

A case can be made that we cherish and value those things for which we work the hardest, a concept referred to as "justification of effort" by psychologists. This idea refers to the phenomenon by which, when we are subjected to a traumatic experience, our minds seek to justify that experience by saying the experience itself fulfilled a larger purpose.

For example, "I went through some truly awful hazing, which means my membership in that organization is truly special."

It is clear that this type of respect for the organization may be effective but flawed.

And what about respect for the older members of the

organization?

In my experience, the greatest proponents of hazing also were the ones who almost exclusively were the least involved in the day-to-day operations of the organization. I cannot tell you how many older members I met for the first time at line-ups and during Hell Week, or how many of those I never saw again once the Hell Week events were over.

## FILTER

If your organization cannot attract the best and brightest, and has to rely on hazing to either eliminate weaker new members or strengthen those who choose to join, doesn't that point to a larger problem about the quality of your organization?

In addition, the field of psychology suggests that some of the critical factors involved in hazing not only limit an organization's ability to build up its members but may in fact turn them to a darker path. According to Philip Zimbardo in his book, *The Lucifer Effect*, there are five factors that compel average, ordinary people to do evil things. It is not a coincidence that all five also are present in most hazing organizations, given how damaging and even deadly hazing has been for so many people.

**Authority:** A separation of new members and older members according to an arbitrary set of roles and rules. Example: Pledge rules.

**Deindividuation:** Costumes, darkness, or other devices that maintain the anonymity of the perpetrator. Example: Dimming of lights during hazing activities, or wearing identity-concealing masks

**Dehumanization:** The minimization of a victim's humanity. Example: Referring to pledges as "wops." When asked what a "wop" was, the answer was that it was the sound of a 200-pound sack of shit being thrown out of the window.

**Sleep deprivation and time perspective:** The disruption of sleep, and imposition of tedious activities, which limits the ability of the victim to maintain a sense of identity beyond the current setting. Example: Playing Johnny Cash's *Ring of Fire* at a high volume on

repeat throughout the night.

**Social approval:** A need for acceptance, and to be a team player. Example: Lifting up as exemplars the pledges who followed the rules, kept their mouths shut, and maintained a low profile.

By addressing each of these factors at individual, peer, group, institutional, community, and societal levels, we can effectively push back and prevent a culture of hazing.

On each of these five levels, from the intrapersonal level to the societal level, we must tackle issues such as authority, deindividuation, dehumanization, time perspective, and social approval in our efforts to prevent hazing.

Similarly, strategies must include prevention, early intervention, and response elements. So, in addition to responding to an incident or injury, initiatives must include efforts for intervening early in hazing behaviors and for stopping hazing behaviors altogether.

Prevention efforts can create safer environments and target underlying causes, and early intervention efforts can empower us to speak up about “little h’s” before they become “big H’s”.

These prevention strategies require people who believe there is a better way, and who are empowered and equipped to deliver those strategies.

This is our escape plan.

### SUMMARY

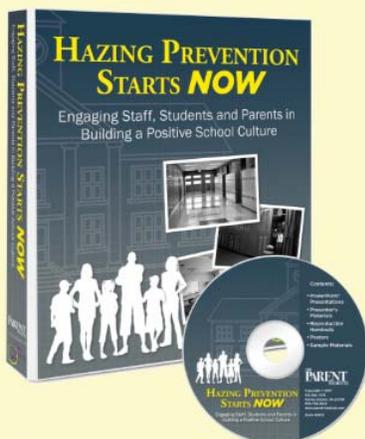
Hazing, and its supporters, make some very big promises that it cannot fulfill. Hazing promises to create the strongest bonds for members of our organizations, to instill discipline, to provide opportunities to prove one’s self, to demonstrate respect for the organization, and also to ensure that only the best become members of our organizations. In each and every case, hazing falls short.

**Chad Ellsworth** is a board-certified Coach through his company *Caped Coaching* ([capedcoaching.com](http://capedcoaching.com)). Chad believes there is a hero in all of us, and by stepping out of our average, ordinary lives, any of us can have an extraordinary impact on our world. He is also a Career Coach in the Undergraduate Business Career Center at the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. He formerly served as President of the Board of Directors for *HazingPrevention.Org*.

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