



Newton's Laws of Motion for Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS) with the Transformative Magnetism of Moral Courage^{*}

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Abstract

At their core, anti-learning systems that enable systematic abuses of power over time can be thought of as systems that fundamentally refuse to learn and correct themselves even in the wake of causing egregious harms (although they may say otherwise). This discussion illuminates several key qualities of such malignant systems, as well as describes the incipient transdisciplinary science and corresponding emerging movement aimed at Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS). It further explores whether for all the duplicity, dysfunction, and destructiveness characterizing such ecosystems, there may nonetheless be something analogous to laws of nature governing them; if so, there exists potential to harness such forces to engender systemic transformation. The analysis closes by exploring examples of mobilizing the playbook into action.

Keyphrases

Learning health systems, political systems, abuses of power, darvo-mantic corruption.

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Recognizing Anti-Learning Systems

At Guardians 2024, I described observing (as well as advocating for and with survivors of) abuses of power at myriad institutions in society, including the university where I worked and myriad other universities. One clear example involved Armies of Enablers at universities and academic medical centers enabling the mass sexual assault hundreds or even thousands of students and patients; in each instance forming a pattern, the whole system seemed to align to gaslight those being systematically abused as well as to delay truth and justice. Indeed, a 2022 story in The Washington Post about mass sexual predation at UCLA noted, "It is also one of several massive settlements in recent years by universities to resolve sexual abuse complaints against doctors, in many cases with plaintiffs claiming that university officials failed to take action over years. Allegations have rocked schools including the University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University, Ohio State University, Michigan State University and the University of Southern California." As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. noted in his famous 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail, "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."

I have previously argued that mass sexual predation, mistreatment of employees, violations of patients' rights, stifling of free speech, quashing of questioning, condoning campus antisemitism, promoting racism, fostering plagiarism, and other such systemic abuses of power represent similar monsters all surreptitiously wearing the same mask. Of all things, a scandal at my public high school over a quarter century after I gave my valedictorian speech drove home an important point for me: even after all the leadership had changed, the same abuses of power persisted. These were system problems demanding system solutions. In a statement that may be erroneously ascribed to Dr. W. Edwards Deming, "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets".

I had often wondered whether there might be laws of nature that could describe such ecosystems in which abuses of power surreptitiously run unchecked. I questioned whether this phenomenon had to be inevitable. Philosopher and social critic Eric Hoffer once proffered that, "Every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and eventually degenerates into a racket." I had been developing a complementary type of cynicism. At least at universities at the leadership level, I was keeping myself entertained by developing a hypothesis I termed the Seinfeld Rule. It was a comic fusion of what seemed like

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rampant hypocrisy, a lack of self-awareness, and a system of kakistocracy where to quote a movie before my time, "The bottom is loaded with nice people... Only cream and bastards rise." In 2022, a previous University of Michigan (UM) President was fired for violating a rule he introduced just the previous summer. He was so wrapped up in the rule, that he announced a zero tolerance policy for violations of it, likely while he was violating it. Once I saw that pattern, I could not unsee it. So many wielding power at myriad universities were comically surreptitiously antithetical to what they espoused. The sad view would be looking at such a phenomenon as being Orwellian, Kafkaesque, or Randian. But an approach that would engender laughter in the spirit of films such as Idiocracy would be the Seinfeld Rule, finding humor in such paradoxes. It presented a much-needed distraction from the harm caused by this hypocrisy.

For more than a decade and a half, much of my career has been about advancing Learning Health Systems (LHSs), in which people and the system itself share a cultural commitment (and sociotechnical infrastructure) to continuously learn and improve as a consequence of every experience. LHSs are anchored in a set of shared consensus multistakeholder Core Values that bond together the incipient LHSs movement globally. Considering principles that underpin learning systems, I have termed systems that covertly violate such principles (often while paying lip-service to them) to be anti-learning systems. In turn, I see an imperative to bring together the smartest and most passionate people to collaboratively catalyze a multistakeholder movement and a corresponding transdisciplinary science aimed at Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS).

Characteristics of Anti-Learning Systems

At their core, anti-learning systems that enable systematic abuses of power over time can be thought of as systems that fundamentally refuse to learn and correct themselves even in the wake of causing egregious harms (although they may say otherwise).

While far from a perfect framework, seven D-words help categorize such anti-learning systems: • Destructive – Such systems do massive damage and harm to people and institutions, albeit often out of sight for a time. • Dysfunctional – A simple Google search for "dysfunctional" reveals an AI description of a dysfunctional family that applies to such systems as well: "A dysfunctional family is a system where conflict, poor communication, neglect, abuse, or addiction are common, preventing members from feeling safe, heard, and able to thrive, often characterized by unclear boundaries, emotional unavailability, and unhealthy roles (like scapegoat or hero) that create lasting stress and mental health challenges, even if the family seems 'normal' to outsiders." • Demoralizing – Those harmed within the system are left feeling hopeless. One example of the survivors of the Michigan State University doctor who sexually assaulted hundreds of gymnasts and other patients, whose efforts to report were thwarted and undermined, illuminates this problem. • Dehumanizing – Survivors of abuses of power in systems are treated as less than human or at least of lower status than those wielding power and those enabling the abuses. • Delirious – Groupthink, gaslighting, and incentive structures that reward monoculture engender a system in which "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" is covertly and subconsciously normalized. • Duplicious – Those in power frequently utilize gaslighting and double-speak, often paying lip-service to principles that resonate with the Core Values of LHSs while surreptitiously doing the polar opposite; there is a The Wizard of Oz like quality to those wielding power in such systems, and indeed, transforming them requires brains,

hearts, and (moral) courage coupled with pulling back the curtain to expose that the emperor has no clothes. • Doomed – In addition to being destructive, such systems over time are self-destructing; those in power play what I have previously described as a harmful game of "Musical Chairs for Darvomanics" ultimately collapsing the system on itself.

Newton's Laws Applied to Anti-Learning Systems

There is a famous anecdote about Sir Isaac Newton discovering the force of gravity when an apple fell on his head while sitting under an apple tree. At that moment in August 2024 when I was seeking out an opportunity to politely but directly confront the then UM President, contemplating how a potential force of nature (an unlikely tornado) might be needed to shake up the status quo, I wondered whether analogies physical laws could explain any of this. One simplification of Newton's Laws of Motion states: • First Law: A body in motion remains in motion or a body at rest remains at rest, unless acted upon by a force. • Second Law: Force equals mass times acceleration ($F = M * A$). • Third Law: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Thinking about the national and global politics of the day and what I had observed vis-à-vis systemic abuses of power, I formulated the following hypothesis. A draft corollary for Newton's Laws of Motion for Abusers of Power in Anti-Learning Systems could read: • First Law: A power-seeker in motion gathers momentum moving toward an extreme, while thoughtful citizens in the middle seeking healthy collaboration get no rest; together, we still hold the power to be an unstoppable force for civic and human health. • Second Law: $F > M > A$ meaning: Calling one's opponent a fascist rings louder than mocking one's opponent's mass, which in turn rings louder than listening to, learning from, thoughtfully considering, analyzing, and/or respectfully and logically rebutting one's supposed opponent's articulated arguments. • Third Law: For every (often ostensible and often not-so-inclusive) action, there is a disproportionate and opposite overreaction.

This hypothesis is nowhere near as crisp or insightful as Newton's, but makes for helpful heuristics. I was contemplating this in August 2024. Thinking about national and global politics a year later, the Third Law especially seems to ring even more true.

Lights, Camera, Action!

A complementary way of thinking about how to harness these laws of motion can be summed up by the classic phrase: "Lights, camera, action!" In essence, those who wish to do something aimed at Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS), need to call out the problem and shine a light on it (lights), zoom in and zoom out to understand the systemic nature of the problem (camera), and ultimately do something aimed at addressing the problem (action).

In January 2022, the termination of the then President of the University of Michigan (UM) for his own hypocrisy, coupled with further revelations vis-à-vis a recent Provost who had abused his power, as well as a case of mass sexual predation by a faculty doctor, all led me to see systemic abuses of power demanding system solutions. Sadly, this pattern held at other universities (and publica and private institutions) nationwide and worldwide.

A critical first step in even trying to shine a light on the problem is to step back and listen. Listen to anyone willing to share their experiences. Such listening is so critical. Here are several deidentified and

anonymized samples of what I first heard when I reached out to anyone who wanted to share their experiences, and trusted me to share them with: • "... a lot of people saw stuff, said nothing, and just did their jobs, figuring that the big shots knew what they were doing." • "I want to work for an organization in which lowly data entry clerks feel it's okay to ask hard questions about their work environment. I realize that Josh and I are coming at this matter from almost opposite ends of the hierarchy, but that's sort of the point." • "... I have observed instances of bullying and abusive behavior over the years and recently experienced it myself. What became clear in every instance is that there is no real protection or recourse for those that are being bullied and/or abused and because the abusers bring in money, recognition, and rankings their behaviors are tolerated and even supported. Many of those perpetuating this abuse have been doing so for years, are well-funded, and their behavior is common knowledge across campus."

Such active listening transcended hearing from other stakeholders within the university. It initially included connecting with survivors of sexual assault (by faculty doctors) and other systemic abuses of power at UM and at other universities. Two such individuals are UM alum and former professional football player turned activist Jon Vaughn, and former gymnast and survivor of Michigan State University's infamous Dr. Larry Nassar (turned activist), Trinea Gonczar. It also entailed reaching out to and speaking with those proposing potential solutions. For example, in searching for books about organizational culture early on, I came across author Dan Cockerell who rose to high ranks at Disney; his bio states, "His last 9 years with the company, he was successively Vice President of Epcot, Vice president of Disney's Hollywood Studios and eventually Vice President of the Magic Kingdom..." We spoke about transforming organizational cultures and he sent me several of his books including *How's the Culture in Your Kingdom?: Lessons from a Disney Leadership Journey and Hardwiring Magic*.

Internally at UM, as I synthesized what I was learning, I made concerted and repeated efforts to diplomatically reach out to anyone in a position of power who might be able to do something to help, or even who in turn might actively listen to what I had to say and potentially do something positive with it. Coupled with such internal outreach, asking questions and raising different perspectives becomes critical. Too often, however, in anti-learning systems where abuses of power are enabled by Armies of Enablers, questioning is surreptitiously quashed. In an email I sent in October 2025, I noted potential solutions related to this issue. In one paragraph of that email, I wrote the following:

Within our transdisciplinary basic science department, I have previously suggested four complementary approaches to addressing these concerns. First, when offering opportunities for questions (which should be more robust), we should accelerate to the front of the line anyone challenging the perspective shared by the speakers. Second, when assembling a panel of more than several speakers, we should work to ensure genuine diversity of perspectives represented on the panel (and recognize how this differs merely from having people of different intersectional identities or stakeholder types); also, we should bring a parallel approach to who plans and leads/facilitates any such event or initiative from the outset. Third, we should convene more debates as well as more working meetings where people with genuinely different vantage points and experiences both respectfully share their truly diverse perspectives and work collaboratively to find common ground. Fourth, in doing all of this and in facilitating such authentic viewpoint diversity and civic engagement, we should also clearly stand for something and state so (and act/do so) with moral clarity (in the case of our department,

among other things, I turn to the seminal multi-stakeholder consensus Core Values for person-centered Learning Health Systems and the disruptively transformative vision they embody). Further, I note that all of these synergistic and complementary approaches are themselves interconnected with the Learning Health Systems (and Learning X Systems) paradigm and practice.

Acknowledging Prior Work by Others

While I came up with the Newton's Laws of Motion for CAPITALS analogy independently, after the fact, I made a good faith effort to search for previous literature. I sought to identify whether previous scholars had come up with anything similar. The best example I found is from a paper published in Political Science & Politics in late December 2013 by Dr. Craig Leonard Brians. The paper is titled, "Three General Laws of Politics and Government in America (with Apologies to Sir Isaac Newton)".

Dr. Brians, an Associate Professor of Political Science in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences at Virginia Tech at the time, wrote, "Following the structure embodied in Newton's Laws of Motion, I propose three general laws of politics and government in America: (1) political objects in motion tend to stay in motion, (2) the relationship between a candidate and his or her political force is the product of campaign funding and personal likability or appeal to the press, and (3) for every political action, there is an equal and opposite reaction (i.e., 'Craig Leonard Brians Law of Unintended Political Consequences')."

I had hope to reach out to Professor Brians to discuss similarities and differences between our formulations. Sadly, in the process of searching for his contact information, I found some sad news. Professor Brians tragically passed away at age 51 in November 2013, over a month before his thought-provoking paper was (posthumously) published. I would have loved to have met him.

Our Collective Duty for Collaborative Action

Often just as important as listening is being there for the person who is surviving and often persevering through systemic abuses of power. Simply helping some to realize that they are not alone can move mountains. In turn, advocating for and with such individuals mobilizes change and ignites transformation. On this journey I have been privileged to have met and to collaborate with (and to call my friends) some of the most extraordinarily courageous, intelligent, compassionate, and resilient human beings. Indeed, their moral courage is contagious and magnetic. Many through no fault of their own have been put through hell and back, yet their overarching goals become supporting fellow survivors while working tirelessly to ensure that one day nobody has to endure such abuses again (and in the meantime, to ensure that no survivor has to endure such abuses alone). My efforts to empower them and to help make their voices heard have taken us to the halls of US Congress, to executive agencies such as the US Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime, and to venues for reaching future generations from schools to podcasts. I have learned more from such amazing people than I will ever be able to express, but I hope my own efforts have in some way made their voices and their stories heard.

As it was being written, this manuscript evolved into telling a story, or perhaps a number of interconnected stories. As a consequence, it utilizes the word "I" more often than should be the case. However, CAPITALS is a "we" story and not an "I" story. The "I" in capitals is "Ignite" and to do so takes the work of a village not of an individual. A key

challenge related to advancing CAPITALS involves inspiring, mobilizing, and empowering brilliant and passionate individuals to work on this effort together, to collaboratively ignite transformation in anti-learning systems; the problem is that such systems are often designed not to do so.

My mentor, World War II veteran, patriot, entrepreneur, and philanthropist (the late) Joseph H. Kanter was fond of paraphrasing the Talmud; he would say that it is not our responsibility to finish, but it is our responsibility to start. CAPITALS is at its incipient phase. However, with what US President Abraham Lincoln once termed, "the diligent will to persevere," the CAPITALS transdisciplinary science and corresponding fledgling global movement can gather sufficient momentum to become an unstoppable force for system transformation. Harnessing Newton's Laws of Motion for Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS) represents a collective path to building such indefatigable momentum; the transformative magnetism of moral courage can serve as the powerful force propelling such collaborative efforts forward as well as bonding them together.

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