



Organization Relations Development – A Critical Approach to Organizational Change

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James Latham
School of Management,
RMIT University, Australia
Email: james.latham@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

The consultant's brief of an OD project carried out in a local government authority to assist the directors of the LGA to develop and implement strategies based on a 'triple bottom line' vision document devised by the shire council. In this paper a number of OD initiatives are examined, in particular those that reflect a postmodern turn in their principles. OD research technologies were tried out, information workshops were presented, question and answer meetings were held and a number of information gathering instruments were developed and administered. The outcome was the development and implementation of HR and operational initiatives in an attempt to include the marginalized and invisible based the postmodern notions of complexity and undecidability.



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Introduction

It is proposed in this paper that the application of postmodern ideas can directly assist SMEs to successfully manage change. Like larger organizations, SMEs have struggled with implementing changes to meet the demands of globalisation, connectivity and technological change. One of the major reasons for this struggle has been the mindset or worldview adopted when managing organizations. Most SME owners and managers adopt what is called a 'systemic' (Cooper & Burrell, 1988) approach to managing, an approach based on modernist, positivist principles. However, history has shown that this approach is limited in its ability to identify constraints (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000a) placed on decision making that hinders sustained change in organizations. In particular systemic management has resulted in the marginalisation and the making invisible of many key features of individual capacity. While not easy, the adoption of alternative perspectives to systemic management provides SME managers with a wider more flexible body of organizational and management knowledge that can guide the organization through chaotic and complex times (Gergen, 1992; Gergen, 1998). This paper describes an organizational development project that adopted a postmodern research perspective (Gergen, 1998) that identified the constraints managers and staff faced, and the proposed initiatives to overcome them.

The limitations placed on this paper make it impossible to cover all the project elements in details, so evidence is presented to show how the nature of identified constraints within the organization directly impacted on the organizational member's ability to learn and subsequently adapt to changes. Of particular interest is the impact that such constraints have on the relationships within the organization. This is significant because organizations operating in an ever, increasing complex environment, need to become adaptive in the face of increasing complexity (Stacey, 1992, 1995, 1996b, 1996a, 2001, 2003; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2002). In short, managers will need to become familiar with the nature of any constraints that hinder effective, more flexible, relationships within the organization and thus impede sustainable change (Whiteley & McCabe, 2001).

The paper will examine the initiatives and strategies put in place in response to the organizational constraints that were identified. Underpinning the relationship aspects of the project was a body of theory drawn from the critical, postmodern and complexity areas of the academy. This paper will briefly look at the theory in relation to critical management and postmodern research. Secondly, it will examine those constraints and strategies that emerged, based on the reviewed theory, particularly focussing on the understanding of complex relationships and the development of initiatives in response to action research iterations. Finally it will discuss the implications of this approach for managing change in small and medium enterprises (SME). The implications for management, organizational development and learning are clear. If satisfactory relationships are established based on overcoming identified constraints to managing organizations, then this will create a working climate that encourages creativity and innovation.

Theoretical Background

One of the problems with the implementation of sustainable change in SMEs is the lack of innovative strategies to achieve satisfactory and sustainable change. There is a growing belief among some writers that management is limited in its capacity to think in new and novel ways. For example (Cummins, 2002) in relation to the history of management, (Cooper,



1990) in terms of object and process boundary, (Cooper & Law, 1995) with distal and proximal analysis (Stacy, Griffin, & Shaw, 2002) with systems and procedures and (Stacey, 2001) and knowledge management. Yet these and others argue that to achieve sustainable adaptation to new modes of organising, new or alternative ways of thinking and working need to be adopted. Recent research has found that complex relationships are formed in work organizations, but are not utilized because of modern organizations' historical need for simple (systemic) relationships as defined by the formal organization (Latham, 2002). It is this shift from the simple to the complex that needs to be made if meaningful development and learning is to be made.

However, this is not a simple matter. Previous attempts to implement changes have often foundered resulting in a return to previous ways of working and relating. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) have argued for a critical approach to management research, one that identifies barriers and constraints to change. This approach does not advocate a hostile deconstruction of management practices or is anti capitalist, but tries to identify those factors that "lead to less successful organizational functioning and less mutually satisfying decisions" (Alvesson & Deetz 2000:16).

To assist in this transition is the development and application of a less well-recognised aspect of organisational effectiveness that of the particular relationship within and across discourse boundaries (Cooper 1990). Cooper (1990) and Cooper and Law (1995)'s work is closely linked to the work of Stacey (2001; 2003) and (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2002) who recognise that relationships within organisations are central to the development of alternative ways of thinking. Further, they all describe the relationship as being fractal and complex. Latham (2002) has developed a heuristic model to represent the fractal and complex nature of relationships. This model shows the relationship process in terms of weak and strong and argues that the more formal the relationship, the weaker it is, see figure 1 below. This has implications for knowledge generation and management practices (Stacey 2001).

Identifying the invisible and marginalised.

Each person in any relationship brings to it a complex range of experiences, thoughts and feelings. For example, each individual brings to a conversation the multiple roles a person has to play in their life, together with the multiple experiences this has created for them.

In systemic (organizational) terms, the identities required by the participants tend to be simple in definition and is demonstrated when one looks at personal specifications in organisational recruitment processes (Nankervis, Compton, & Baird, 2002). Most organisations ignore the complex identities of individuals and seek control through precise definition of organisational roles and personal characteristics. What is not required is made invisible by discourse regulations (Davies & Mitchell, 1994) and the complex person is marginalised. From a human-resource-management perspective the process is to define the subject (self) in organisational terms, so when an individual participates in an organisational discourse he or she is participating as a constituted self (Gabriel, 1996). Initially, what individuals bring to any organisational discourse is, symmetric, equivalent and equivocal (Cooper & Law 1995; Cooper 1990). What is heard is a product or an effect of production, through precise definition processes (an ascribed self) (Cooper & Law 1995). This effect defines the role and the process affects the multi-identities of the individuals. Much of this defined role finds its way into legislation, codes of practice and behavioural parameters.

The result is a relationship in which a significant individual (SI) is defined that embodies those factors that make up the needs of the organisation and are identified by the 'organisational identity'. This person brings to the conversation a defined range of assumptions, behaviours, and precise response definitions, and because of the power

differential within the relationship this person ‘calls the tune’. Many of the factors are embedded or institutionalised and rarely challenged (Powell & DiMaggio, 1990, 1991), which makes it difficult to change current worldviews.

The significant other (SO) is the respondent in the relationship and refers to individuals reflecting on discourse with significant individuals (SI). He or she also brings to a conversation a complex range of factors that influence the self with the potential of influencing the other (Cooper 1992). However, like the significant individual, only a limited number of factors are asked for in a working relationship. Figures 1 and 2, below illustrate a complex boundary in terms of a weak and strong relationship.

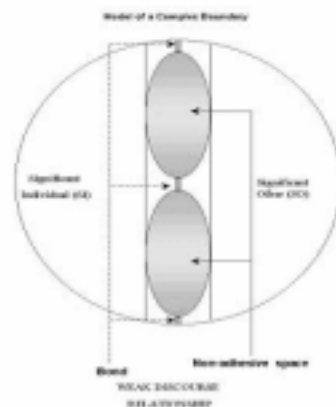


Figure 1: weak or fragile relationship

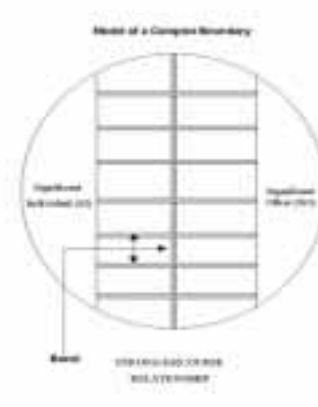


Figure 2: strong discourse relationship

In terms of discourse relationships, the bond is seen as the ‘mediator’, it mediates between ‘parts and wholes’ (Cooper & Law 1995). In organisational terms, where the content and terms of the discourse are defined by the management, the mediation process is often strained and unstable resulting in the bond being under continuous stress (tension). To counter this, adhesives are used to make the bond stronger. In terms of the relationship model, the weaker the unity the more power (adhesive) is needed to maintain the bond. The stronger the unity, the less adhesive is required. For example, a weak relationship will require more adhesive in the form of rules, regulations, policies and procedures.

The first model (Figure1) shows the elements of a boundary and their relationship to the participants in a particularly weak discourse relationship. The second model (Figure2) shows the same elements of a boundary as the previous figures but in terms of a particularly strong or robust relationship.

It is this notion of a complex discourse boundary (CDB) that informed the OD project described below.

The Study

For some time the local government authority of The Shire of Jennybrook (a pseudonym) had been going through some major changes and restructuring in response to the findings of a commission brought in to bring the authority back on track. This resulted in the appointment of a new management team with the clear remit of restoring the appropriate processes and procedures to operate with an elected council of community representatives.

This writer was appointed, as a consultant, to assist the directorate to implement a strategic vision plan based on the triple bottom line criteria of community, environment and



economics. This vision plan was developed by the elected members of the shire council in response to feedback from members of the community. Of particular concern to the directorate was the climate within the organization as a result of the recent changes. It was felt that many organizational members were unsettled and nervous of the new management team. It was felt that the new management team would inject more adhesive in terms of stricter rules, and procedures. In effect the reverse was the case. The director group's desire was to reduce the adhesive rules and regulations and to build strong relationships based on trust, respect and identity.

The consultant's approach was based on (Eldon, 1979) notion that interventions should be devised in such a way so that organizational members can identify, develop and implement change strategies and initiatives that most suite their own and the organizational needs. To achieve this a methodology based on an action research model (McNiff, 2002) was devised.

Method

Research within the critical and postmodern genre is interpretative with its main proponents being (Foucault, 1978, 1979; Foucault, 1982) and Derrida, (1982). Foucault saw all research as interpretation, which was a continuation of previous interpretations (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000b; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). How these interpretations are produced are the products of meanings that have been created and imposed by other people, not by the nature of the things themselves. This "groundlessness" means that everything is open to arbitrary interpretation with the only limits being those "arbitrarily imposed" by some agent (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982:107). It is the task of the researcher to seek and identify those limits.

Alvesson and Deetz (2000a) say that the critical researcher's role is one of enabling a more open discourse among organizational members and between external stakeholders. This is achieved through the offering of alternative perspectives to dominant ideals and understandings. With this in mind, a critical management perspective was adopted. However, a difficulty faced was that of how to avoid the traditional, somewhat modernist-in-nature conventions of research reporting (Orton, 1997). Solutions for this dilemma were not readily available, but Gergen (1998) supported the notion that empirical technologies were not what was being criticised by critical and postmodernist researchers, merely the truth claims placed on the descriptions and analysis of the data.

Taking Gergen (1998)'s claim, the research process took the form of a number of iterative cycles, each one triggering reflexive insight, critique and transformative redefinition (Alvesson & Deetz 2000a). Some of the action cycles took the form of:

1. Information sharing presentations and meetings – Usually took the form of breakfast meetings open to all staff.
2. Individual and team consultations – Took place on a 'as needs' basis and varied in duration.
3. Information gathering instruments – Devised to generate quick responses to questions.
4. Construct generation devices – Devised to encourage tacit responses in the form of metaphor.



There were four major directorates within the organization:

1. Executive – Headed by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO).
2. Corporate Services – Director
3. Planning and environment – Director
4. Operations – Director

Subsumed within the directorates were all the functions necessary to operate and administer the authority.

There was no linear schedule attached to the project, but an, 'as you go' process where some activities and meetings were planned while others were spontaneous.

Findings

Because development was ongoing, the following is only a sample of the constraints identified as a result of the action iterations described above. It will describe the outcomes, reflection and proposed action for each.

Information Presentations – In all there were four information presentations delivered. Each one was devised to build on the previous presentation and to stimulate thought outside the 'normal' organizational paradigm. Discussion about team and individual development was stimulated, which resulted in a number of invitations to team meeting being made. Of particular interest was the notion of the complex boundary and how relationships based on this concept can affect organizational behaviour. From these meetings general agreement was forthcoming to work on improving working relationships between, councillors, managers and staff. Several team members from various across the directorates reported that they felt marginalised and often invisible.

Individual and team consultations – Invitations from team members to attend team meetings were accepted, with the consultant assisting team members to recognise key processes of their development. From these meetings came the realisation that an integrated approach to service delivery was required. This meant that the teams should use the service delivery plan development process as a means of developing improved relationships.

Employee perceptions of the Organization in terms of product and service delivery.

This was a management information gathering initiative to gauge the overall perception of the organization by the employees. The instrument rated employees perceptions in terms of:

- Human Resource Management
- Teambuilding
- Communication Processes
- Customer Focus

This instrument was used to identify organizational constraints and included:

Human Resource Management - Overall, there is strong agreement with self-assessment items, for example team members consistently meet and/or exceed organizational standards, but there is reduced agreement with items relating to the effectiveness of systems and processes.



Teambuilding and teamwork - The perception in this section is that there is strong agreement that individual team members' work well together, but weaker agreement about formal team building systems and processes.

Communication processes - This section provides a good indication of the constraints within the organization. That is the link between the levels in the organization. It is about 'acts and omissions'. The information that is provided is job related and not of the wider issue type. Equally employees feel free to speak up candidly, but once again this seems to be job or task related

Customer focus - The responses in this section indicate a willingness by respondents to working within customer driven processes. The constraints seem to be in the quantity and quality of customer related information available.

Employees Perceptions of Directors:

This was a second management initiative to gauge employee perceptions of:

- Their own director.
- The directors other than their own.
- The CEO.

The criteria on which the directors were rated on were:

- a. Interpersonal Relations
- b. Communications
- c. Leadership
- d. Team Building
- e. General impression

Overall it was found that:

- All directorates produced a positive rating about their own director.
- All directorates indicated an uncertain rating about directors other than their own.
- Similarly, all directorates indicated an uncertain rating about the CEO.

Discussion

A joint analysis of the findings above produced a list of constraints that were seen to be hindering the development of strong relationships and a flexible workforce.

Identified Management Constraints:

Elected Councillors were constrained by:

- The provisions of the Local Government Act.
- The views, values and attitudes of their electorate.
- The views, values and attitudes of the wider community.
- The views, values and attitudes of the family and friends.



The CEO was constrained by:

- The provisions of the Local Government Act.
- The requirements of the recent Commissioners report.
- The views, values and attitudes of the councillors.
- Traditional systemic management principles.
- The views, values and attitudes of the wider community.
- The views, values and attitudes of the family and friends.
- The views, values and attitudes of their electorate.

The Director – Corporate Services was constrained by:

- The views, values and attitudes of the wider community.
- The views, values and attitudes of the family and friends.
- The views, values and attitudes of their electorate.
- The provisions of the Local Government Act.
- Traditional systemic management principles.
- Financial and accounting protocols.
- Library services protocols.
- Information management protocols.
- Ranger services protocols.
- Record keeping protocols.
- Leisure centre management protocols.
- State award protocols.

The Director – Planning, Environment and Health was constrained by:

- The views, values and attitudes of the wider community.
- The views, values and attitudes of the family and friends.
- The views, values and attitudes of their electorate.
- The provisions of the Local Government Act.
- Traditional systemic management principles.
- Town planning protocols.
- Environmental health protocols.
- Building protocols.
- Civil engineering protocols.
- Record keeping protocols.
- State award protocols.



The Director – Operations was constrained by:

- The views, values and attitudes of the wider community.
- The views, values and attitudes of the family and friends.
- The views, values and attitudes of their electorate.
- The provisions of the Local Government Act.
- Traditional systemic management principles.
- Road traffic control protocols.
- Civil engineering protocols.
- Waste management protocols
- Vehicle fleet management protocols.
- State award protocols.

Senior managers are severely constrained by the number of statutes, codes of practice and protocols, particularly from external sources. Equally, more junior managers and non-management staff experience the same constraints. This would account for the organizational responses that suggested a lack of formal systems and processes in the relevant areas, to cope with the constraints.

The number of constraints and protocols also hindered the director's ability to work across the directorates as a unit. Yet this was a highly desirable outcome of the directorate team. The responses from the director perception survey strongly indicated this trend.

Feedback from the team meetings showed a tendency to identify with their own section, but not with other functions or services. In one case there was a damaging interpersonal conflict between two members of staff based on their own perceptions of who should manage what processes. The outcome was for senior management to mediate the writing of a relationship agreement, which clearly defined how these two individuals should work together and build a more cooperative relationship.

One outcome of the information sessions was the recognition of key personnel who were enthusiastically committed to what senior management were trying to achieve. They had informally taken on the role of mentor to some of the other members of staff in their section. One further finding was that many of the staff and managers employed in the LGA were also residents of the shire, some long term and some active in the community. This is almost paradoxical in nature as these individuals have to marginalize their community self in order to work in the LGA role.

It is clear that this relatively small organization has significant constraints placed on its operations, yet it attempts to offer so many high quality products and services. It has been realised by the senior management that the offering of these products and services cannot be achieved within the traditional management framework. The identified constraints need to be addressed and responsibility for achieving the expected outcomes be placed with organizational members other than senior management. To achieve this, time and a significant in-house human resource development program will need to be undertaken.

This project has demonstrated that with the adoption of a critical perspective, new and different aspects of an organization emerge. Through the processes of questioning, critique, combining ideas and challenging the status quo richer pictures of the reality and complexity of situations will emerge.



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