Chapter 99
Using Soft Systems Ideas within Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Recent research adds support to the view that the way that individuals act as part of a virtual group is different from behavior in face-to-face meetings. Specifically researchers have discovered that conflicts are more prevalent within virtual teams as opposed to face to face teams. This is because research has shown that participants are more likely to change their initial points of view (shaped by personal values, biases and experience) when discussions are held in a face to face environment rather than through virtual means. This insight raises doubts upon the effectiveness of CMCs as an instrument of organizational cohesion. In this paper we reflect upon this position and attempt to discover if these concerns can be overcome through the employment of Systems methods used in organizational inquiry. We do this through an evaluation of the results of a preliminary study between Curry College in Boston, Massachusetts, USA and Richmond University in London, UK.

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In this chapter we explore the use of a method of inquiry based on soft systems thinking as a means of ameliorating the effects of conflict in synchronous virtual teams (Stowell & Welch, 2012 pp116-117; Champion & Stowell, 2001). We describe the results of an Action Research (AR) project undertaken between two educational institutions geographically separated by several thousand miles who share a common language and intent, as a means of gaining understanding of synchronous virtual communication. The authors add to synchronous virtual team research and systems literature through the lessons learnt from an investigation of the feasibility of using a soft method of inquiry within a synchronous virtual environment. The approach was adopted as a means of creating shared understanding and managing

conflicts. The lessons learnt from the study are relevant in the light of the rising use of virtual teams in various sectors including IT project development, education and business management.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Seeking Understanding of a Situation of Interest

In order to explore the communal impact of CMC's compared to face-to-face communication it is prudent to reflect upon the setting in which it exists; namely an organization.

Arriving at a definition of an organization is not an easy task. From an observer's point of view a social grouping of any kind will be recognised by something that gives it a meaning for *them,* which they could describe as an organization. For example, supporters of a soccer team are affiliates of both the soccer club itself and to a wider social grouping. For the observer an organisation is a recognisable entity. In short, everyone has a general, uninspected, idea of what an organization means; consequently it is exceptionally difficult to pin down a sharp definition. Yet if we are to intervene into an organization we need a model that allows us to gain understanding. Lessons learnt from extensive research into organizations undertaken at the University of Lancaster over 30 years (See Checkland, 1999) showed that an ontological notion of organization was flawed. The research demonstrated that each organization is unique which led to the conclusion that such positivist notions should be abandoned in favour of an epistemological approach. That is to say that each organizational intervention had to be understood afresh.

We argue that each organization is unique and those that make up the organization may not share the view of it as espoused by its executive. Checkland and Holwell (1998, p8) point out an organization is not "...simply a rational machine whose members willingly combine together to pursue organizational goals". Gudykunst, (1997) and Hofstede, (1980) refer to individualistic and collectivist cultures, a view that has much in common with the sociologist Tönnies whose ideas about social groups, or organizations, he conceptualized through the notions of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. Gemeinschaft, he advised, is achieved through morals, conformism and social control whereas Gesellschaft achieves stability through police and laws; Rules within Gemeinschaft are implicit whilst Gesellschaft are explicit written laws, but even so Tönnies argued that nothing happens in Gesellschaft that is more important for the individuals wider group than it is for themselves..." (Truzzi,1971). Harris (2009, p52) is more explicit and suggests that everyone is out for themselves and "...living in a state of tension against everyone else".

If we accept the view that an organisational member's first concern is for their own security and position then we must also question what affect such attitudes might have upon the way the organization operates, particularly when parts are linked through virtual communication technologies. As a means of understanding this challenge we incorporated the notion of commodity as a means of 'managing' potential discord. Stowell [1989] suggested that the metaphor of 'a commodity' embodying power could be helpful in gaining understanding of these tensions. He suggested that the expression of power through the idea of a metaphor could provide a practical means of addressing its management. This idea has proved useful because of the difficulty in defining power and, as a consequence, when intervening in an organisation we can be left with impressions of power rather than something that can be explained to others. 'Commodity' was chosen in an attempt to provide a neutral account of perceived inputs of individuals and groups in which attempts are made to translate a situation into something else.

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