Chapter 7.5
Facilitating and Improving Organisational Community Life

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INTRODUCTION: A CHANGE OF PARADIGM

The growth in importance of communities within organisational settings is a sign of a change in paradigm. When management and organisational theory introduce the critical notion of communities, in parallel to the concepts of collaborative work and of knowledge sharing, there is an internal revolution going on. Therefore, communities of practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Brown & Duguid, 1991) has a critical role to play in today's development of management and organisation theory.

At a broader level, there is an ongoing metamorphosis that is highly visible through the vertiginous development of technology, the globalisation of markets, and the acceleration of the increase in complexity. Equally important are the less visible, and thus harder to acknowledge, changes in the way we think, reason, communicate, and construct our image of ourselves and of the world.

The changes brought by the knowledge society of the information age (Kearmally, 1999) triggered the development of theoretical approaches to management. Among these, knowledge management and organisational learning have developed. These theories have acknowledged the importance of information and communication technology within organisations, and have explored alternative insights into mainstream management approaches. The knowledge management and organisational learning sub-disciplines represent an innovation effort that affect areas of organisational life which had been marginalised or ignored under traditional management theory. Communities of practice is the single most important example. Therefore, communities of practice represent a critical aspect of the present understanding of the complexity of organisational life.

Within the broad and varied development of organisational theories, semiotic learning emerges as a particular approach to organisational learning. Semiotic learning may be described as a dynamic practice. It incorporates theoretical contributions from social philosophy and adapts them to a specific approach to facilitate learning at the organisational level. It is a learning and development tool for action at the organisational level. The central aspect of the semiotic learning approach is the focus on the quality of community life at the organisational level.

Through a semiotic learning approach to organisational learning and development, it is possible to intensify and to unleash the true potential of current challenges at personal, organisational, and societal levels. By focusing on the social practices, structures, and processes which underlay human interaction, and by calling attention to the way we construct ourselves and our image of the world through those interactions, it enables the development of a rationale that supports collaborative as well as transformative forms of work and learning.

BACKGROUND: SUBTLE AND HIDDEN NEEDS

The contribution of the semiotic learning approach to the fields of organisational learning, knowledge management, and communities of practice is that it offers an integrative theoretical approach. The organisational learning, knowledge management, and communities of practice theories deal with issues which they cannot themselves explain, or rather with issues which they cannot yet explain. The call for a greater depth and breadth in terms of theoretical grounding may be achieved by the semiotic learning perspective. This approach consists of an organisational design and organisational development instrument to be implemented in parallel with other existing initiatives. The rationale is simple and direct: it aims

at recovering the balance between the necessary functionalistic efforts, and the subtle and hidden needs of the organisation's community life. It is the projection of powerful insights arising from philosophy mediated, translated, and adapted to organisational reality. It is based on both theory and practice, as it is through its application that it becomes reified. The theory, the description, the narrative is just a means to an end, an end which is an action-based and action-led organisation.

The semiotic learning approach rests on three broad groups of theories: social semiotics, critical realism, and action theory. The semiotic learning approach works as a cascade, so that within social semiotics, it includes Bakhtin Circle's social theory of discourse; within critical realism, it takes a pragmatic perspective; and within action theory, it questions current epistemological positions and recovers an ontological and hermeneutic perspective. The breadth of theory is directed at informing and illustrating how rich and diverse the universe of options is in terms of approaches that directly answer to the 'subtle and hidden' needs of organisational life. This diversity could even be extended, never reduced. It is this diversity which expands our thought horizons so that it becomes a kind of didactic or pedagogic process, thus the word "learning" in semiotic learning. This corresponds to the "thought-possibilities" and "action-possibilities" that Jaspers explored.

Heidegger's disciple, Karl Jaspers, explored thought-possibilities and action-possibilities following the guide of Max Weber's approach as an historian:

...in order to grasp reality, we must see the possibilities...Weber employs the category of 'objective possibility' in his historical appraisal of past situations. The historian considers a situation. His knowledge enables him to construct the possibilities of the day. By these constructions he first measures the possibilities of which protagonists were aware. And then, by the possibilities, he measures what really happened, in order to ask: for what

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