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Readings in Global Organization Design
2005 Conference Proceedings

Changing Managerial Behaviour – the Whole Person at Work

by John C. Bryan

Article #05-08-10-S4-1

Global Requisite Organization Conference: The Work of Elliott Jaques
8 - 11 August 2005, Bank of Montreal Training Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Introduction to Session on: Changing Managerial Behaviour – The Whole Person at Work
For presentation August 10, by John C. Bryan, edited 29 July 2005

The Context

There was a time when Organisational Psychologists, OD Practitioners, etc. were convinced that the keys to organisation effectiveness (if not the only keys, then the most important ones) were:
• Group Dynamics (team building)
• Interpersonal communication and conflict management skills
• Personal development (mental health and hygiene and management style)

Foundational Proposition

Elliott Jaques' response was to conclude that psychological analysis, human relations and psychotherapy (individual or group) were not the keys to organization effectiveness. He hypothesized that the organization was the key to organization effectiveness and began to look for ways to examine and measure organizations. **His foundational proposition is that it is the organization itself that is key to organizational effectiveness: the structures and processes of the organization**. His work then turned to identifying those structures and processes and to asking what was required in the way of organizational structures and processes to achieve and maintain effectiveness.

People in organizations

In rejecting the traditional mental health paradigm for understanding organizations, Elliott appeared to ignore, neglect or disparage the human dimension of organization effectiveness. However, in my conversations with him, we agreed that no matter what else might be true of organizations they were all staffed with people. Now, some think that Elliott had a negative view of people, but I found the contrary. He had a very high view of people. He thought all people were capable (though variably so when it came to cognitive abilities, knowledge, skill sets, etc.) and that all were well intended; that given the proper environment, all people would function as well as they were able. If you will, a bit like a golf handicap, believing not that one could achieve one's average performance, but rather that one could achieve one's best performance.

At this point, I wish to bring the philosopher Immanuel Kant's perspective to the conversation. In his little book "A Critique of Practical Reason" (not to be confused with his "A Critique of Pure Reason", Kant said that what is unique about the human species is that all of us have a conscience, that is a desire to think well of ourselves and to be thought well of by those around us. As a reformed theologian, I believe people have yet a third equally insatiable desire: a desire to achieve a purpose in the living of their lives that they deem worthy.

The presence of Evil

Where Elliott and I disagreed is in the recognition of, or presence of, evil. As regards organizations, I am concerned about two expressions of evil that lie at the heart of capitalism: greed and selfishness (or self-centeredness). In legal parlance, it is called self-interest. Theologically, this self-centeredness is called idolatry. The problem with all self-made men and women is the seemingly irresistible urge they have to worship their maker (i.e., themselves).

When I was first introduced to Elliott Jaques' organizational theories (by George Harding), George began his presentation by asking, "What is work?" (I was a guest at an Imperial Oil staff training session.) No one else seemed to have an answer, so I said, "Work is the curse of Adam." George did not write that down. Thinking George might be Lutheran or perhaps Roman Catholic, I offered an alternative definition: "Work is the power to co-create, a gift of God." George did not write that down either. He shared Elliott's definition of work, and I found it helpful. Indeed, I have found all of Elliott's efforts to bring definition, clarity and rigor to organization studies very helpful. However, Elliott was not a theologian, and he was seeking to direct the thinking of the field of organization studies from psychoanalysis to systems analysis of organizations themselves.

Human effectiveness is a key to Organization effectiveness

If it is true, as I believe it is, that evil exists and tempts us humans to accumulate wealth beyond our needs and to think of our own selves to the exclusion of others, then certain human factors (attitudes and abilities) are indeed essential for organization effectiveness. These would be:
• self awareness,
• sensitivity to others and their needs and
• the ability to interact and relate well with others
These human abilities and ways of thinking are not natural. We are not born with them. Elliott said to me once, "People are not born little bundles of pure innocence. They are born selfish, self-centered and destructive. Our survival as a species requires that we teach them to behave differently." Our urges require that we learn restraint and our desires for organization effectiveness require that we learn these skills and attitudes:
self awareness, sensitivity and human interaction. My disagreement with Elliott was not that either of us thought the human factor was unimportant. It was Elliot's belief that getting the structures and processes requisite was sufficient.

I believe that organization effectiveness requires that we attend to a complex human dilemma and to our urges to behave in destructive ways. I have a colleague who works with one of the major consultancies. His area of practice is corporate ethics. He is fond of saying, "You cannot have an ethical dilemma unless you first have an ethic." Assuming that Immanuel Kant was right about the uniqueness of the human species, that we do indeed have a conscience, then our ethics are not innate. They are not born within us but grow out of our self awareness, our

awareness of and sensitivity to others and their needs, and our ability to negotiate the tension between our desire for autonomy and for community. It is here that Kant and Freud meet. Both would say that a basic human need (and dilemma) is to reconcile the tension between needing and wanting to be a unique and authentic individual and at the same time to be accepted by and belong to a community of others – to feel good about myself and to be thought well of by those around me - and, all the while, earning a living and doing something we believe to be worthwhile. This is what it means to be human, to live with this dilemma, and this is one of the things that organization effectiveness requires: that we attend to the human beings who staff them, to their complex dilemma, and to their human relating attitudes and skills.

Follow-up comment for use as a conclusion:

In future, not in my life time, but soon enough, you will see western democracies enacting legislation that will require all employers, as a condition of having the right to have employees, to ensure that every employee will be as employable at the conclusion of their term of employment as they were at its beginning.

One way to summarize what we are about (executives, managers and those of us who advise and consult with them) is:
• taking everything we know about human beings and what they require,
• taking everything we know about the work at hand and what it requires,
• and putting the people and the work together in such a way that the work gets done effectively and efficiently and the people come out whole and healthy.

The title of this session is Changing Managerial Behaviour. I believe that title is misleading and causes not only problems but also failure of much of our management development efforts. The assumptions behind 'changing managerial behaviour' might best be summed up in the phrase: "Come here. Let me straighten you out." To assume that managers need to be straightened out we are declaring that they are bent or crooked – and that we are not. Therein lies the problem.

The issue is not changing managerial behaviour but specifying required managerial performance and providing managers the resources necessary to achieve that performance (including clear standards, timely feedback, and any training and support they need to achieve the required performance).

Providing managers with clear performance standards, timely feedback and any needed training and support will lead to changes in managerial behaviour. However, the issue – and the focus of our development efforts - is not changing managers'

behaviour. The issue is organisation effectiveness and enabling managers to achieve it while retaining their capabilities to continue to achieve. Whatever else you might say about managers, organisation effectiveness requires that we recognize that they are human beings and so are we.

We have no right to change managers, to straighten them out. We have a moral obligation to provide them all the support necessary for achieving the performance that is required of them.

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The Global Organization Design Society is a not-for-profit corporation registered in Ontario, Canada to promote the following objective:

The establishment and operation of a world-wide society of academics, business users and consultants interested in science-based management to improve organizational effectiveness for the purposes of:

Promoting among existing users increased awareness, understanding and skilled knowledge in applying concepts of Levels of Work Complexity, Levels of Human Capability, Accountability, and other concepts included in Requisite Organization and/or Stratified Systems Theory.

Promoting among potential users of the methods, appreciation of the variety of uses and benefits of science-based management, and access to resources.

CONTACT US

Global Organization Design Society
32 Victor Avenue
Toronto, Ontario,Canada M4K 1A8
Phone: +1 (416) 463-0423
Fax: +1 (416) 463-7827
E-mail: Info@GlobalRO.org
URL: www.GlobalRO.org

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