Rationalizing the promotion of non-rational behaviors in organizations

Peter A.C. Smith and Meenakshi Sharma

The authors

Peter A.C. Smith is President of The Leadership Alliance, Ontario, Canada.
Meenakshi Sharma is a Consultant with Sharma Consulting, Stroud, UK.

Abstract

Contends that organizations designed according to current theories require that traits of leadership and personal responsibility be developed in employees at all levels of the organization, not just the formal leaders. Asserts that to develop these traits, organizations must strike an adequate balance between rationality/technical efficiency and non-rational factors such as emotion. States that organizations currently operate with a facade of rationality, ignoring emotional reality. Argues that leverage for such change lies in working at team/group level meetings, changing the quality of interactions to enhance authenticity and create emotional openness. Maintains that action learning has so far proven the best vehicle for releasing emotional energy into the workplace if facilitators are utilized who can enrich the action learning process with skills drawn from disciplines such as counseling, Gestalt, psychodynamics, and psychoanalysis. Claims that familiarity with the principles of Eastern philosophies is also helpful.

Introduction

If current experts in the field of organizational design have it right (for example Senge, 1990), and we believe that they do, then organizations must become high-alignment/high-autonomy environments if they are to remain viable (Smith and Saint-Onge, 1996; Smith and Sharma, 2002). Such a shift implies that it will be critical for all employees, not just its formal leaders, to take responsibility for shaping the organization and its resultant performance. In this sense employee leadership is a matter of taking personal responsibility for trying to fulfill all the various needs of the community, rather than a social-influence process emphasizing direction-setting and authority.

The means by which organizations can operationalize this notion of leadership and personal responsibility for all employees have been detailed elsewhere, together with an identification of issues related to these contexts (Smith and Sharma, 2002). This paper deals specifically with a very important non-logical factor that must be addressed if this concept of leadership and personal responsibility at all levels is to be realized; namely emotion (or more typically its suppression) in the workplace.

Emotion in the workplace

In 1973 Egan wrote: "Emotional repression is undoubtedly still a far greater problem than emotional overindulgence" (Egan, 1973, p. 61), and 30 years later this statement is as true as ever; society still equates emotional maturity with the control or repression of feelings, continuing to use the word "emotional" in a derogatory sense. Indeed, those who are guarded in their feelings prefer others to behave in the same way: "It is thought uncivil, rude, unconventional, unwarranted, and even obscene to express feelings toward others. Emotional insulation parades under such euphemisms as 'respect for others' and 'the dignity of privacy'" (Egan, 1973, p. 64).

There is still a strong tendency for society in general to discourage emotionalism, and organizations routinely operate with a façade of rationality that over-emphasizes the goal-orientation that drives them, whilst under-valuing the expressive arenas of life; this, in spite of a large influx of women into the workforce. Organizational emphasis continues to be on the production of tangible

"evidence" such as vision and mission statements, action plans, tools, skills, and the like; emotion is seen as antithetical to performance. Lutz summed it up well: "In addition to treating emotion as a physiological state, people regard emotion as a value-laden concept which is often treated as 'inappropriate' for organizational life. In particular, emotional reactions are often seen as 'disruptive', 'illogical', 'biased' and 'weak'. Emotion, then, becomes a deviation from what is seen as intelligent" (Putnam and Mumby, 1993; p. 36; attributed to Lutz, 1988; p. 62).

A growing issue is that so much interpersonal communication is no longer face-to-face but "second-hand" – mediated through technology, e.g. e-mail, and "Technology makes it easy to fake authenticity, to manipulate it, to have encounters that seem authentic but are not" (Lukensmeyer and Parlett, 1997, p. 7). Such virtual encounters have become the norm for those currently joining the workforce who unfortunately lack awareness of anything lost or distorted.

In addition, group experiences that proliferated in the 1970s focusing on feelings, emotions, touch, sensory awareness and the like, often operated in an irresponsible manner. The derogatory term "touchy-feely" then became associated with all initiatives dealing with non-rational phenomena. Based on myths borne of this era, perhaps there is a fear in organizations that focusing on emotional energy leads to loss of control; this is not the case:

> Organizations do not need to abandon instrumental goals, productivity, or rationality to develop alternative modes of discourse. Emphasizing work feelings calls for including what is currently ignored or marginalized in organizational life. Rationality is not an objective, immutable state. Rather it is socially constructed and cast as the dominant mode of organizing. Rationality and technical efficiency, however, should be embedded in a larger system of community and interrelatedness. Perhaps organizations of the future could offer society a new alternative, one shaped by emotionally-connected creativity and mutual understanding as necessary elements for human growth (Putnam and Mumby, 1993, p. 55).

The rational/emotional balance: the way forward

Social systems are highly complex and there is no guarantee that a particular, seemingly desirable, starting condition will result in a desirable end-state. We do believe though that a step in the right direction would be to redirect the emotional labour that employees currently expend in subverting authoritarianism and emotional control, and channel it such that they display leadership in, and take personal responsibility for, shaping their own self-organizing system. "Here, ideally, people would give up some of their uniqueness to help build the edifice or common system, rather than clamoring for more power for their system, which then gets experienced as power over other people" (Lukensmeyer and Parlett, 1997, p. 13).

Furthermore, human nature being what it is, we do not believe that it is possible to build a paradise where an organization will fully succeed in dealing appropriately with all the complexities of the interactions within its social systems. We do believe however that an organization can strike an adequate balance between rationality/technical efficiency and non-rational factors, such that each field contributes to, and supports the other in, optimizing performance (Smith and Sharma, 2002).

As noted above, in our view suppression of emotional reality engages energy that could be diverted more productively to shaping a culture promoting personal responsibility and leadership. We believe that a natural place to start to change the emotional culture is in the various formal and informal group settings in which all employees meet.

Organizations run on meetings and for good reason. This is by and large how human beings like to work and interact – people are social animals. These meetings do not need to be face-to-face, but this is typically the case, because people like it that way. If they are run appropriately such meetings provide a natural systemic way to shape the quality of interpersonal relationships through self-reflection, self-disclosure, and emotion, whilst energizing individuals to act. The outcome of this holisitic approach is that members feel a valued part of the organisation, connected internally with their own needs and externally to the needs of others. Shortcomings introduced when employees communicate to a large degree via technology, e.g. e-mail, were highlighted earlier and may need to be addressed, e.g. by actually encouraging face-to-face meetings.

Note that we are not in general advocating more meetings, but rather a change in the tone. At most meetings attendees talk without "meeting" each other at all. Meetings are

often held to protect people's positions and interests, rather than to increase understanding, and the last thing they want is to "really" meet, become emotional, or be forced to reveal their anxieties, concerns, and lack of knowledge or understanding.

Organizations do attempt to enhance interpersonal and communication skills. Unfortunately, although self-disclosure is a skill that can be learned, it appears frightening to people when presented as an end in itself, or when the risks are not addressed. These skills are also often developed via short courses with titles such as "Running effective meetings". Here people learn the techniques and rituals of meetings, rather than becoming more adept at understanding, or opening up to one another. Indeed, in our experience the converse is the norm.

Recognising the benefits of developing good interpersonal relationships is of course welcome, but such techniques are often used to manipulate situations/others unless linked to a more holistic approach. One promising approach to enhancing the quality of the communications is to modify the words that individuals use in representing their feelings and attitudes (Kegan and Lahey, 2000). Such a change would lead to people "meeting at their boundary" (Nevis, 1987, p.178).

When people "meet at their boundary" they are aware of their own needs and are willing to articulate them to others, giving freedom to their passions, hopes, desires and fears, moving away from "the façade of rationality", and becoming attentive to the psychic needs of others. Every individual has their own boundary; " ... a psychological marker that that creates a space within which people can take up their roles with some degree of certainty knowing who they are and what they are accountable for" (Goldstein, 1992, p. 21).

In an organizational setting, individuals generally create their own boundaries based on the needs that can be met in that setting, and the relationships (s)he can develop with others around them. Clearly the organisational culture is a key influence (Schein, 1997). If the situation changes, an individual makes a choice regarding where to reset the boundaries within the new context. The absence of boundaries is counterproductive, since individuals internalize the business chaos around them, feeling they are being made responsible for activities and outcomes beyond their control, thus becoming more rigid and resistant to showing the emotions.

People make real contact with one another in organizational life when they are self-aware of their own boundaries, the limitations they set on those boundaries, and are attentive to the boundaries of others. It is the awareness and attentiveness that is the essence of good contact. A meeting with the right tone is one where people make this real contact with each other, and where individuals and groups demonstrate the following qualities that Zinker attributes to the happy couple/family (Zinker, 1998, pp. 114).

- hear each other;
- own their feelings and ideas;
- exchange ideas so that a good fit is achieved;
- ask each other questions, rather than making assumptions;
- disagree and accept differences without fear;
- accommodate each other;
- fight for what feels "right" and "good" for each other;
- start, develop, and finish a discussion or event and then let it go;
- share pains, curiosities, regrets, resentments, tenderness – a variety of needs and wants;
- learn to accept a "yes" gratefully and a "no" graciously without holding onto resentment;
- move from one experience to another without getting stuck;
- let go of wanting something that is hopelessly unavailable;
- laugh at themselves;
- influence each other;
- support each other's interest and projects;
- show pride and compassion for each other's accomplishments and setbacks;
- respect each other's privacy and, at the same time, intrude when another withdraws in pain;
- "mind each other's business" when it comes to important matters;
- tolerate strange and novel ideas from each other and dream together.

The fruits of such encounters, whether in group meetings or one-to-one, are clearly rich and varied. These behaviours are in marked contrast to the traditional lack of understanding and sensitivity for the reality of others' existence prevalent in most organizations.

Different ways that communications may be interrupted or blocked (Zinker, 1998, pp. 119-24) are listed below:

- *Desensitization* – people look at each other with little concentration, scan each other's language superficially or do not bother listening at all, avoid touching

each other or block "full entry", feel bored, uninvolved.

- *Projection* – make assumptions about each other, guess what the other is feeling or thinking without asking questions to check if the assumption is right, little lively debate.
- *Introjection* – the solution is forced onto others without investment of energy in fully "chewing over", no investment in getting everyone on board.
- *Retroflection* – people turn inwards and do to themselves what they want and need from others, everyone feels isolated and at the same time safe in their inner struggle, no help if asked for or given.
- *Deflection* – people shift focus contact to some other topic to avoid connection, voices travel "over each" other, at extreme people talk all at once and no-one feels a sense of belonging or being understood.
- *Confluence* – disregards differences, jumps to conclusions or actions without really discussing fully. There is fear of letting go or losing each others support.

A critical pre-requisite to embedding such behaviours in everyday meetings is an appreciation of "awareness". Awareness involves more than the perception of environment, and entails being conscious of, and comprehending, the environment through the use of senses. It means that something has become figural out of the many sensations or events that go on simultaneously. The aim of awareness is to enlarge and enrich potentials in the background, so that what matters – what becomes figural – will stand out as fresh, clear and engaging (Nevis, 1987). Thus an employee demonstrating responsibility and leadership traits takes in and processes all the information related to his/her environment plus his/her relationship with it, while keeping hold of what is the key issue. Awareness in itself is not sufficient; it requires feeding back into the system the fruits of the awareness, re-engaging with the environment and others, to articulate what is thought and felt in relation to oneself and others. This act of re-engaging means that one becomes present for both oneself and others, behaving and being authentic in the moment. This precludes the game-playing prevalent in most meetings.

Action learning and self-disclosure

Some of the self-disclosure skills and the "mode of being" required for becoming authentic are akin to those demonstrated in action learning (Revans, 1982). Action learning is the only structured development approach carried out in an organizational setting that formally includes personal reflection. Action learning provides the safe environment or "practice field" for reflective learning to occur, whilst recognizing that real responsibility lies with the participants who must own the business outcomes. This is a very important concept that is considered essential to learning (Senge, 1990) and well-being in psychoanalytical practice. For example, Winnicott termed it a "transitional space" (Phillips, 1988, p. 5); a place that "both joins and separates the baby and the mother" (Phillips, 1988, p. 28). By promoting reflection and insightful inquiry with a small group of perceptive partners in a protected situation where solutions are not always obvious, and by leaving responsibility for implementation of the solution in the participant's hands, action learning is particularly suited to enhancing traits of authencity. In addition, the "storytelling" nature of the action learning process is well suited to the analysis of organizational emotion as described by Gabriel (2000).

On the face of it then, action learning should provide an excellent vehicle for individuals to practice skills of self-disclosure and to explore the use and impact of emotion in their daily work contexts. Unfortunately, action learning as it is traditionally practiced encourages the avoidance or suppression of emotional issues. Although its originator Reg Revans seems to have intended otherwise (Smith, 1998), action learning is typically utilized as an analytical problem solving process, with heavy emphasis on the cognitive dimensions, and little or no acknowledgment of the systemic emotional issues or undercurrents involved. Also helpful are simple self-assessment questionnaires, and "dialogs with one's self". The shortcoming is best remedied however, as shown below, when facilitators are utilized who can enrich the action learning process by drawing on skills of disciplines such as counseling (Egan, 1986), Gestalt (Nevis, 1987), psychodynamics (Hirschhorn, 1990), and psychoanalysis (Gabriel *et al.*, 1999). Familiarity with the principles of Eastern philosophies such as Taoism, and Hinduism will also be useful (Capra, 1976; Smith and Sharma, 2002).

Utilizing an enriched action learning approach

The four questions that are central to action learning are:
(1) What am I/we trying to accomplish here?
(2) What helps me/us?
(3) What hinders me/us?
(4) What am I/are we going to do to fix the situation?

These four questions, and indeed the five traditional steps of action learning (Smith, 1997) equate naturally with the three phases of Egan's counseling model (Reddy, 1987; Summerfield and Oudtshoorn, 1995):
(1) understanding;
(2) challenging; and
(3) resourcing.

The stages of the Gestalt consulting cycle (Nevis, 1987) also map well over these other two approaches.

Facilitators are commonly used by action learning groups. Employing facilitators familiar with Gestalt or counseling models vastly enriches the action learning sessions and indeed does enable emotional factors to be appropriately highlighted and addressed. When the facilitator is familiar with psychodynamic and psychoanalytic process consultation principles, the opportunity for group members to explore all aspects of emotion is even further expanded. Familiarity with Eastern-based philosophies such as Taoism and Hinduism that have endured for many hundreds of years is also useful in providing sound practical guidelines for the development of authenticity in this setting.

Most importantly, meetings of almost any kind can be operated on the principles of action learning, and therefore meetings in general can indeed become "real meetings". Meetings then run to serve both the emotional needs of the individuals and the task/performance needs of the group. It becomes commonplace, for example, that where people would previously have taken "comfort breaks" when physical discomfort emerged or as a means to avoid exploration of emotional issues, they would also henceforth contract to have "health breaks" where they have permission to explore "how they feel about what is going on".

We contend that by adopting this approach the quality of work and work life of the organization will be vastly enhanced over time, and the ground will be well prepared for general adoption of traits of leadership and personal responsibility at all employee levels.

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