

Common Knowledge

Organisational Orthodoxy and the Individual Talent

By Phil Turner & Bernard Spiegel

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Management always concerns the direction or development of a changing situation. Any organisation which denies the reality of change, or seeks to remain static, is suffering decline. Effective organisations are continually evolving and cannot avoid transforming themselves by their own creative activity. The process is gradual and takes effect through a self-recognised capacity for change.

We tend to assume that change only occurs in occasional situations, where particular initiatives or ideas temporarily assert themselves. In such a view, change is seen as something disruptive and short-lived - a process which 'personalises' issues, often to the discomfort of the people involved. This process is generally viewed as a painful but necessary experience to which an organisation subjects itself in order to survive or grow.

The Illusion of Permanency

Such a view is misleading. Organisations are susceptible to change as a continual process, and not merely an occasional feature of their existence. They exist in a continual state of becoming; at once idiomorphic and subject to ceaseless change. They embody conflicting tendencies as well as common ways of working and do not necessarily possess any single unifying principle.

When possibilities of change are being ignored, people are not managing; although they may think they are.

Minor changes and modifications are constantly made in all aspects of normal practice as individuals discover their own ways of achieving results and seek to implement these within their organisation. But at these points they may meet with disproportionate resistance from the people around them: 'There is a sense in which all change is felt as catastrophic even when it is rationally recognised for the better, since it threatens the established and familiar order and requires new attitudes and behaviour, changes in relationships, a move into a comparatively unknown future.' (Isabel Menzies Lyth).

Any situation of changes in our lives - even the most trivial - requires the ability to relinquish former assumptions. This has the power to redirect attention and provoke conflict, drawing apparently unrelated problems to the surface, and revealing areas of contradiction. These are matters of disquietude in any human situation, associated with irrational fears which may be well hidden or repressed. Such problems have no simple recognisable solutions.

Order and Discomfort

As individuals, we find ways of living with these disturbances in our own experience and our awareness of contradiction may become a source of imaginative possibility in our lives. This compares with Keat's 'negative capability' (that is, 'of being in uncertainties,

mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'). Organisational life gives rise to similar disturbances and can endorse the delusion that good order is entirely consistent, rational and fixed. In the false comfort of this view, thought of change arouses the anxieties of abandoning a familiar rationale. These fears of disorder assert themselves most forcefully in an environment dominated by well-established ways of acting. Here, not surprisingly, any prospect of change will conflict with an insistent, all-pervasive sense of what the organisation is and expects of its members.

Patterns of Defence

As an organisation resists change by primitive and elaborate defensive reactions; so it enforces standardised values, powerfully and undramatically, in the minutiae of the day's work. (The inner nature of such practice is inescapably ceremonial.) This process is depersonalising whenever individuals surrender themselves - 'in blind or timid adherence' (T.S. Eliot) - to an overweening tradition.

Effective organisations are flexible enough to balance the benefits of a shared order with scope for individual talent. These mediating efforts take place in an area of common ground established by open internal discourse. This is a source of change and renewal, which challenges prevailing orthodoxy, and is essential to the creative capability of an organisation in its formation of new practices. Bettelheim has remarked: 'Whatever we inherit is not useful to us and is not really our own if we do not, through our own efforts, succeed in making it so.'

Internal Discourse

The efforts of internal discourse are an expression of thought and counter-thought about how things can be done. Discussions which take place here may be dangerous to the existing comfort of the organisation. A free interplay of ideas will always generate open criticism and scepticism about current practice. But the dangers provoked here are necessary ones.

An organisation only fulfils its purpose in practice. This requires it to work at an impersonal level of activity. The forces vital to an organisation's development connect the personal with the impersonal aspects of what it does. These cannot be perfected. A perfect organisation would be entirely impersonal and lack all capacity for change. It would duplicate accepted practice relentlessly, being incapable of innovation. Certain in an uncertain world, it would be indifferent to new possibilities and ultimately fail.

The orthodoxy of organisation is most powerful where least acknowledged. Its conventions form a tacitly shared system for handing down procedures and tradition, as if these were ends in themselves. Orthodoxy is formed out of attitudes which resist change and maintain the continuity of decided opinion. This exerts influence over the expectations of everyone who 'belongs' to an organisation. It silently imposes its own assumptions through pre-established standards and controlled priorities.

The dominance of such influence does not become apparent until attempts are made by individuals to depart from its norms. At such times an organisation's 'ethos' is invoked. Ethos is the psychological aura which surrounds a particular orthodoxy of style. (Manifest in the language, habits and rituals of organisational life, its quasi-mystical

qualities can be invoked whenever its traditions are threatened.) Violation of ethos, as with taboo, questions the health and purpose of the organisation as a whole.

Compromise and Collaboration

When people join an organisation, they form commitments which imply compromise. They attempt to reconcile the organisation's demands for standard, impersonal practice with their own capacity for initiative. Established methods require formal conventions and these are expressed directly in the protocol or ceremonial aspects of the organisation's activities.

'Organisation men' accept unquestioningly their own defined and limited roles. They internalise the orthodoxy and conform to its observances. Relinquishing any true freedom of action, they become invisible as individuals. Their accomplishments are entirely depersonalised.

In contrast, the person of individual talent resists conformity; departs constantly from established practice; challenges conventional assumptions; and seeks to bring about change with a minimum of compromise. Someone like this appears a dangerous impostor within the orthodoxy. In the exercise of talent, innovative practice speaks for itself: it does not belong to the organisation but creates its own idiom within it.

This can only be accommodated organisationally through responsive and exploratory collaboration: activity within the common ground of internal discourse, where both agreement and conflict of ideas are recognised. Creative practice is thereby accepted as the exercise of individual freedom against the defences of an organisation's own orthodoxy.
