

SEDIMENTATION AND TRANSFORMATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: THE CASE OF MANAGEMENT TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to contribute to a more complete understanding of planned change interventions on human processes by presenting a selective interdisciplinary history of management training programmes. Drawing on the simplistic notion of 'homo economicus', training activities often focus on institutional design and the intentional process made by interested parties towards improving effectiveness. This work develops a vision that challenges the application of universal recipes to bring change in organizations and discusses directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Boom periods of ultimately popular planned change interventions are often reported in the academic literature and some examples include total quality management (Zbaracki, 1998), quality circles (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999), team work (Mueller et al., 2000), and business process reengineering (de Cock & Hipkin, 1997). Evidence also suggests that many of these innovations follow a bell-shaped curve with early adoption followed by widespread uptake and an eventual decline in credibility and usage (Goodman, 1980; Mintzberg, 1994). However, can these insights help one to understand the nature, sources, and consequences of change interventions? How did this occur and what implications does it have for the understanding of change in organizations? Aware that inquiry into organizational change has emphasized predominantly minute segments of ongoing innovations, it remains unclear the historical development of techniques for managing organizations and their employees through time.

In this article, the researcher investigates some selective planned change interventions that concentrate on human processes and are grounded on the theory of human rationality (here labeled rational-economic training technologies).

By planned change interventions, it refers to those efforts that are “conscious, deliberate, and intended, at least on the part of one or more agents” – i.e., actors, involved in a management training session (Chin & Benne, 1984: 22). By efforts, it means that the interventions must assist the individual or small group to modify some pattern(s) of practice and must utilize specific methods, instruments or tools, consisting of planned activities and procedures, based on knowledge of human behaviour, individual or social. The labels ‘group’ and ‘team’ will be used interchangeably, recognising that there may be some divergence rather than substantially semantic differences between the two (Kerr & Tindale, 2004). However, we are aware that some scholars allege the existence of two distinct entities (e.g., Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

The theory of human rationality presents human beings as purposive, interested actors, who seek to maximize their unique positions in the world (e.g., to maximize economic well-being, power, reputation, independence, security). The postulate that man acts from reasoning prompts social science philosophers to advance down the idea that a person is guided in his or her actions by figuring out precarious estimates of future happenings and results. Inside the ‘black box of human rationality’ is a rational actor, who can perceive his/her own best interest once it

is revealed to him/her. Any commitment to change and human progress is based on scientific rationality, where the shackles of tradition and ignorance are replaced by knowledge. Changes in patterns of action and practice are just guided by changes in knowledge, information and intellectual rationalities. Accordingly, a change is often proposed by a change agent and adopted by the individual (or group) if it can be rationally justified and the individual (or the group) expect a payoff for agreeing to change. Thus, education appears as the leading vehicle of human progress. This means that when management provides opportunities deemed to extend knowledge, reason and knowledge-based action, change in behaviour is said to be complete.

In view of the paramount importance of education for rational actors' models, it is no wonder that group methods to enhance team effectiveness based on the theory of human rationality is a prevalent approach for decades. Sixty years ago, research and practice in management education and development provided the foundation for the 'socio-technical systems' movement, and 'scientific' endeavours were conceived of as a vehicle for creating healthier organizations. Their proponents rejected the technological determinism in favour of an image of a mutual relationship between the social and technical systems (Pasmore, 1988; Trist, 1993). Accordingly, a priority was to change the context in which people operate as well as to change 'soft' human behaviour in order to have any hope of achieving 'higher order' human needs (e.g., self-actualization) as well as 'higher' organizational interests (e.g., increasing productivity, profitability and performance). A classical exemplification on the socio-technical systems-based interventions is the pioneer work done at the Tavistock Institute, in London (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Rice, 1953; Emery, 1959), although the original principles

have gone through some reformulations within various traditions of systems analysis in organizations (Porras & Bradford, 2004).

Outside the socio-technical systems tradition, other inroads have been made into shaping professional practice in management education. One development in the 1980s, with notable consequences for management development and training in the 1990's, was the increased emphasis on a simple cause and effect perspective for group performance. The typical question that nurtured the movement is 'what predicts team productivity and viability?' By adopting either implicitly or explicitly the mainstream input-process-output framework (McGrath, 1964), the emphasis is on inputs (i.e. group composition) over process and outputs. This trend diverted attention from traditional research on groups to rely heavily on individual psychology and personality theories. Here, the key tools in improving group functioning are assessment, selection, placement and guidance (Belbin, 1981; Belbin, 1993) and the individual contributions to groups can be provided by the different roles each one plays when interacting as a group (Stewart et al., 2005; Stewart et al., 1999).

By the 1990s team training moved the emphasis on group performance from the foundation of team roles to technically oriented knowledge, skills and attitudes, when groups are making decisions or communicating (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 1997, 2000; Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998; Salas et al., 2001). Organizational change and effectiveness were no longer identified primarily with improved interpersonal skills needed in team environment. Instead, group members are now expected to improve specific competencies, in conformity with safety-driven interventions, at the same time that they reduce (or even eliminate) errors in executing critical group tasks (Cannon-Bowers & Bowers, 2011).

This brief historical overview of rational-economic training technologies charts a gradual transformation, elaborated in waves. From a position of great optimism regarding the socio-technical concept, as an opportunity for replacing the prevailing pattern of top-down bureaucracy by non-bureaucratic forms based on discovering the best match between the social and technical systems of an organization, we now confront an instrumental orientation to work that highlights specific competency requirements in work groups. We must ask how this transformation occurred, and what implications it has to understand the future prospects on management training. Should we give up the search for a refinement of a particular Western managerial discourse? Or, should we accept the diversity of practice as itself a positive affirmation of new and more positive ideals of self-regulating work groups in contexts of increasing levels of interdependency, complexity and uncertainty?

The purpose is to study how distinct training technologies emerged and how they gained ground within the domain of organizational change. Simply revising and updating was not possible, because the emphasis in the field has evolved through a number of phases and today its practitioners continue to shape the field with their modifications of some older methods and their attempts to develop something new (e.g. Ilgen et al., 2005). In discussing this evolution, the paper traces some of the major developments in using groups for driving change in organizations. Along the way, it is highlighted important historical milestones and draw conclusions where appropriate. This study differs from previous examinations of management training in organizations (e.g., Cannon-Bowers & Bowers, 2011) in that it is broader in the scope of its subject matter and it evaluates the literatures more

critically. In particular, the paper notes that the literature in this area is somewhat fragmented and attempts to contribute to a more complete understanding of management training. The reflection is intended to be incisive, not comprehensive. Rather, it highlights some of the themes and concepts that are most relevant and informative to deal with the full range of psychological and human problems in organizations (motivation and assumptions about human nature, groups in organizations, group behaviour, and technologies to develop the individual and small groups in organizational settings). This article now selectively discusses three rational-economic training technologies.

SOCIO-TECHNICAL SYSTEMS

Interest in socio-technical systems design began in the 1950s, when scholars started to give more attention to organizational context factors. They focused on the idea of working simultaneously on the issues of technical design and social interactions to introduce organizational change (Pasmore, 1988; Trist, 1993). The former consists of the equipment, tools and methods of operations used to transform raw materials into products or services valued by costumers; the latter includes the work structure that relates people to the technological components and to each other. The aim is to design more efficient organizations. Efforts to bring about an enduring change should give promise of raising both productivity and job satisfaction. This may involve changes in the technical conditions (e.g., equipment, techniques and process layout), the work structure (e.g., work roles and their relationships), or both. The idea is that social and technical dimensions of work influence each other, and that, to be effective, organizations need to discovery the ‘best match’ between employees and technology – something that Emery (1959)

labeled the principle of joint optimization. Implicit in this perspective is the concept of open systems, borrowed from the general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1950), which provides a new way of looking at the dynamic processes within the organization and between the organization and its environment. This means that, beyond matching the requirements of the technical and social systems, organizations must also meet the demands of the task environment – those external elements that challenge the capacity to achieve relevant goals and, in turn, its continuity.

Socio-technical systems typically use the work group rather than the individual jobholder as the basic building block for organizational design. The perspective is to join individuals with interdependent tasks in order to ensure cooperation, personal involvement in the design of their tasks with the minimum of supervision, and opportunities for individuals to meet their needs for growth, learning, social support and recognition. A real outcome of this trend was the promulgation of autonomous work groups (Cummings, 1978) or self-managing work teams (Hackman, 1978) in core business journals and best-sellers management books, creating much awareness of its benefits (Herbst, 1974) but in a potentially biased fashion.

To put it in another way, in pursuing the quest for efficiency, the proponents on social-technical systems tend to use science and engineering to inform their initiatives. Although some scholars have suggested the symbiosis between the issues of technical design and social structures (Pasmore, 1988; Trist, 1993), most have adopted “an analytical orientation – focus on the numbers, focus on the work processes -, not on the human processes” (Porrás & Bradford, 2004: 397). For them, the emphasis was on bottom-line productivity and their energy was used in those areas which would

produce the most visible and quantifiable effects in the organization (Church & Burke, 1995; Greiner & Cummings, 2004). Despite some theoretical differences, those scholars converged on the idea that organizations could be controlled by managing boundaries between ‘subunits’ internal to the total organization and by adjusting the ‘input/output interface’ between the organization and the external environment. This represents, in practice, a complete reversal of early writings, where the later perspective can be seen as a more complete theorization of the scientific management thought. First, the causal interaction between technology and social structures typically emphasised one-way, cause-effect relationship between technology and productivity (Trist, 1993), while the causal power of social system is mediated through major corporate interests (Deetz, 1994). Second, workers were viewed as either passive beings, depersonalised from their feelings and emotions, who mechanically perform the tasks assigned to them, or rational actors, who had a narrow, instrumental attitude towards the work and act on the basis of rational calculation and ‘cognitive decision-making’. Third, efficiency is a matter of means/ends calculations or inducement/contribution ratios (Simon, 1960). Thereby, in the process of planning, organizing, forecasting and controlling (Wehrich & Koontz, 1993), the development and implementation of collaborative work is simply a calculative activity that helps outlining more efficient bureaucratically-organized systems. Accordingly, working in groups requires special qualities that can be provided in a rational manner – training programmes that help workers acquire new knowledge, skills and knowledge-based attitudes.

TEAM-ROLE TRAINING

The 1990's gave rise to a new interest in the use of personality and motivational characteristics on group effectiveness. In general, researchers and practitioners claimed that there is a link between aggregated team-member personality constructs and team performance (Jackson, 1992; Barrick et al., 1998). Specifically, studies suggest that different compositions may be more or less effective. For some researchers and practitioners, it appears that there are some universal constellations (e.g. Belbin, 1981; Margerison & McCann, 1995). For some others, the findings suggest that they depend on the task, the amount of member interaction required for effective group performance or the stage of team development (e.g. Parker, 1990; Barry & Stewart, 1997; Neuman & Wright, 1999; LePine et al., 2000).

Concerns with the inevitable conflict between individual needs and organizational demands are here alleviated through selection instead of training and development – selection of the 'right person for a particular organizational slot'. The emphasis relies on assessing individual differences and matching people to roles and jobs. In this case, difficulties in translating knowledge into practice may be explained by the unfitness of the individual occupying a certain position with his or her job characteristics and demands. There is no attempt to modify either the individual or the organization (Bennis, 1966). There is no recognition that multiple factors influence the fit; neither is the fit a dynamic interaction between people and the organization, with each influencing the other over time.

Relevant to this development is the work conducted at the Administrative Staff College, at Henley, in the UK (Belbin, 1981, 1993). For Belbin, team roles are individual preferences based on

static clusters of personality characteristics. The concept is a psychological value-laden construct; it takes no account of the social construction of human behaviour. For instance, a person might naturally be a good producer of ideas and adopts this role fairly consistently in any group context. Another individual might be good at bringing the group members together, while another might take the lead of challenging the point of equilibrium.

Underlying this perspective, there are several basic assumptions. (1) Personal cognitive abilities and personality are determinant to what the individual achieves and how he or she can contribute to group work. (2) Individual preferences with respect to team roles can be predicted through personality assessments and team-role inventory. (3) The ideal person for a given job does not exist but a group of individuals often does. And, (4) group performance can be predicted through knowledge of team role profiles for each member.

Following this approach, there has been a growing interest and practical guidance in designing and developing ideal groups in terms of their composition. The idea is to identify the right mix of people in terms of ability, preferences and predispositions so that 'high-performing' groups can be created. The important outcome to be reached from this is that attempts to improve team effectiveness are here essentially centred on the areas of assessment, selection, placement and guidance.

It is no coincidence that there has been an explosive growth of taxonomies where people are catalogued in 'boxes' according to their presumed personality. Belbin (1981) describes eight behavioural profiles that positively contribute to group functioning; later the author adds another one (Belbin, 1993). Woodcock (1989) and Woodcock and Francis (1994) identify twelve; Parker (1990) suggests four; Davis

et al. (1992, cited in Partington & Harris, 1999) describe five; Spencer and Pruss (1992, cited in Partington & Harris, 1999) suggest ten; Herriot and Pemberton (1995) identify four; and, Margerison and McCann (1995) propose nine. All advocates state to have observed the proposed profiles in multiple teams in distinct organizations. According to different writers, different team roles can be identified. There is some overlap between different nomenclatures, but some roles seem to be unique to a particular author.

TEAM TRAINING

The increased attention focused on how best to select, train and develop effective groups led to a number of advancements in management education and development. The 1990s onwards have been a time of considerable use of simulation techniques; and, a number of training programmes have been conducted in laboratory settings with ‘artificial’ groups involving essentially the commercial aviation industry and the military arena (Cannon-Bowers & Bowers, 2011). The expression used to refer such methods is often team training (Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992).

This strategy for affecting changes in human systems again aims to improve organizational profitability. However, the rhetoric used tends to be quite subtle as the discourse highlights enhancing safety by reducing errors in executing critical group tasks. Thereby, it focuses on task simulation to help participants develop the kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to make decisions and communicate effectively in critical moments during their group trajectory.

Given the centrality of cognition to individual behaviours, team training programmes are grounded on the knowledge, skills and attitudes framework applied at the individual level. For example, some studies have investigated

the effects of knowledge structures (i.e., mental modes) on group processes and outcomes (Marks et al., 2000; Marks et al., 2002). Others have trained participants to monitor the performance of their group members and to provide constructive feedback (Smith-Jentsch, 2008). And, others have provided generic skills, including planning and task coordination, communication or collaborative problem-solving (Ellis, 2005) – those skills that can be applied in different work groups. However, the field is not free of criticisms. Some doubts focus on delivering group training to individual workers (Moreland et al., 1998), on conducting training programmes outside the organizational settings where work actually occurs (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and on using participants from few environments making difficult any attempt for generalization (Cannon-Bowers & Bowers, 2011).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The historical record of rational-economic training technologies seems to suggest that since World War II at least three reasonably distinct rhetorical waves successively embellished management training. The timing of each new wave appears to be seductive, as it often restores old ideas in a manner that both academics and practitioners found appealing.

Although each approach promises managers greater productivity and profitability, with particular emphasis on efficient use of structures and technologies, it seems safe to say that the processes used to arrive at a certain management training programme are typically fragmented, evolutionary and largely intuitive (Quinn & College, 1978). The measurable quantitative factors are only one building block transmitted in the series of decisions made by key decision makers. Among other things, the psychological, power and behavioural

relationships in decision-making processes provide important insights on discursive processes at any given moment.

This paper addresses these problems by directing attention to value systems and human interests in the study of planned change interventions that concentrate on human processes. It is suggested that the collective beliefs on work motivation are central to the production and diffusion of behavioural knowledge of change (McGregor, 1960, 1967; Schein, 1980). Therefore, it was chosen the ideas derived from the model of rationality that prevails in conventional economic theory – but also in some branches of sociology (Parsons, 1937) and social psychology (e.g., Homans, 1958) – to review some selective training technologies.

Individual action is guided by the attitudes to the relationship of man to his environment; but in the presence of such values, some intentionality can be found. Unfortunately, however, studies have been conducted in settings far removed from the realities of management training. Future research would explore, for example, the relationship between boredom or career needs and management training practices.

In addition, external events, over which management had essential no control, would precipitate piecemeal decisions, which inexorably shape the organization's future management-training strategy. For example, successful companies' stories are often appropriated and promoted by fashion industries populated by gurus, consultants and publishers (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). The biases toward success stories can generate faddish cycles, leading to a collective belief that a particular technique is the 'management secret' responsible for the economic progress. Whenever it happens, paradoxically, companies imitate blindly popular practices even when they are worthless, or near so (Strang & Macy, 2001), because they attend to popularity rather than performance.

But, here again, the decision is conscious and purposeful. Logic dictates that managers proceed flexibly and experimentally from broad values toward specific commitments. This trajectory tends to evolve as internal and external forces flow together to achieve cohesion and identity with new directions. It allows managers to deal with power relations and individual behavioural needs, and permits them to use the best possible informational and analytical inputs in choosing his major course of action.

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