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Deframing organization concepts

Paul Verweel and Bert van Hees (eds.)
Deframing Organization Concepts

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Advances in Organization Studies

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Preface

Professor Cary L. Cooper

This book provides a unique insight into the old adage “if you always do what you always did – you’ll always get what you always got!” In other words, it is important from time to time in the social sciences to reflect on exactly what we are exploring, in this case, the true nature and meaning of our organizational concepts. The Editors in this scholarly volume de-construct the word ‘concept’ into its constituent elements, something that has rarely taken place in our jargon-loaded world of organizational behavior. They contend that a ‘concept’ usually includes: (i) one or more terms, or a categorization or labelling system, (ii) an umbrella construct or theory with sub-concepts; (iii) a clear set of relationships between ‘the concept’ and data, facts, etc., (iv) a way of measuring the relationship between these concepts and facts, either observationally or empirically; (v) a link between concepts which they term hypotheses, which in turn are related to a theory, which can then be tested, and finally, (vi) and these concepts can be related to ‘moral values and objectives’, or some form of ideology.

They then extend this approach to understanding organizational concepts that are currently significant in the broader organizational behavior literature, such as the ‘learning organization’, ‘self-managing teams’, ‘organizational culture and climate’, ‘customer-friendly organizations’, ‘old and new leadership and contingency approaches’, etc. It is in the deframing of these well worn but contemporary concepts that the book comes alive, in exploring the tensions between them and ‘real life’ behavior and attitudes. These journeys help us to understand the conceptualization of the changing nature of work as we enter the 21st Century.

Worklife in the developed world has moved on dramatically since the 1970s, a period of industrial strife, conflict, and retrenchment. The workplace became the battleground between employers and workers, between the middle and working classes, and between liberal and conservative thinking. This was an era about power and control in many developed countries. Out of the turmoil of the 1970s came the ‘enterprise culture’ of the 1980s, a decade of privatisations, legislation constraining industrial relations disputes, mergers, strategic alliances, and globalisation, transforming economies into hot-house, free market environments. By the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the sustained recession, the privatising mentality of the public sector and new technology, laid the groundwork for one of the most profound changes in the workplaces of the developed world

since the industrial revolution, the 'short term contract' culture. Just as organisations were re-engineering themselves to be more flexible and adaptive by outsourcing many of their functions and creating 'the flexible workforce', employees were expected to be open to continual change, adaptable, and aware that jobs were no longer for life. The psychological contract between employer and employee in terms of 'reasonably permanent employment for work well done' was truly being undermined, as more and more employees no longer regarded their employment as secure and began to realise that their career and futures were in their own hands and not in the human resource departments of the large corporates. Indeed, in an ISR (1995) survey of 400 companies, in 17 countries employing over 8 million workers throughout Europe, the employment security of workers significantly declined between 1985 and 1995: UK, from 70 % in 1985 to 48 % in 1995; Germany from 83 % to 55 %; France, from 64 % to 50 %; the Netherlands, from 73 % to 61 %; Belgium, from 60 % to 54 %; and Italy, from 62 % to 57 %.

The movement towards the 'short term contract' culture has also meant a 'longer hours' culture in many companies (Worrall & Cooper, 2001), greater mobility between employers and more portfolio careers. Indeed, in predicting the nature of future corporate life, many experts argue that most organisations will have only a small core of full time, permanent employees, working from a conventional office (Cooper & Jackson, 1997). They will buy most of the skills they need on a contract basis, either from individuals working at home and linked to the company by computers and modems, or by hiring people on short term contracts to do specific jobs or to carry out specific projects. In this way, companies will be able to maintain the flexibility they need to cope with a rapidly changing world.

This movement will actually give employees more control of their working life, but with substantially less security. Sparrow and Cooper (1998) identified four areas that are affected by changing employment relationships at work: (1) what we want out of work and how we maintain individuality in a world where we face a choice between more intense employment or no employment at all; (2) our relationships with other individuals in a work process that can be altered in terms of social interactions, time patterns, and geographical locations; (3) the co-operative and competitive links between different internal and external constituents of the organisation in their new more flexible form; and (4) the relationships between key stakeholders and institutions such as governments, unions, and managers.

This book helps to highlight some of the most important concepts of our time, linked to the changing workplaces of the future, to deconstruct them and provide a better road map for future theory-building and organizational research. The end of our struggle is to ensure that the workplace of the future achieves its potential, or as Studs Terkel hopefully proclaims in his

book WORKING “work should be about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying”.

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The quality of organisation concepts: meaning, context and development

Bert van Hees and Paul Verweel

Over the last decades a large number of organisation concepts has been introduced in the theory and practice of organisation. The ongoing introduction and variation of concepts like culture, learning, quality, competencies, shareholder value, etc. seems to have become more important than the development of new paradigms, theories, frameworks or the improvement of existing ones. The concepts are developed by business schools, large consultancy agencies and disseminated by publishers, the media, and a large network of management training institutions. They find their way into practice at remarkable speed. It has for example taken hardly a decade for organisation culture to develop into a basic element of the daily language of organisations.

The question is, of course, where this proliferation and variation of concepts is taking us, theoretically and practically. What is the value of these concepts? Do they increase our understanding, have they any analytical power and/or are they of practical use?

This book aims to scrutinize the quality of organisation concepts by deframing them, by checking how concepts have been – and are being – defined and constructed, the quality of the frameworks (theories, paradigms) to which they are connected, the quality of the connection itself, and the application of the concept in practice.

Concepts can have all sorts of deficiencies in their definitions or construction, theoretical connections, analytical possibilities, structure, and can have unjustified applications. Some of these limitations can be overcome by using different concepts (or better: concepts connected to different frameworks) side by side, as Bolman and Deal (1991) do in their ‘Deframing organizations’ and in this they apply ideas from Morgan’s book on *Images of organization* (1986): they use 4 different frames or perspectives on organisation and leadership which help them to examine a situation from multiple vantage points and develop a (more) holistic picture. They use a structural

framework (structure), a political (power and coalition), a human resources (growth and collaboration) and a symbolic (meaning and language). Their approach implies a criticism on many an organisation concept which is based on just one framework or perspective. In our book we will see the way in which a concept connects to one (or more) framework(s) (theories, paradigms) as one of the quality criteria.

In this book we will examine a number of concepts in detail: the learning organisation, selfmanaging teams, organisation culture, customer-friendliness, the new manager and the new employee. Before giving summaries of these articles, we will discuss the nature of concepts, their usage and meaning, and we relate this usage to the context of modernity. In modernisation there exists a basic tension between lifeworld and system world and the organisation concepts covered in this book will show various ways to cope with this tension.

As a start, we take a look at the discussion which has taken place on the quality of these concepts.

Taking position

The increase, quality and the functions of organisation concepts have been discussed in several quarters. Authors like Eccles and Nohria (1994), Karsten and Van Veen (1998), Boogaard and Vermeulen (1997), and Ten Bos (2000), have been mainly critical of the development, the proliferation and the value of concepts. For authors like Sennett (2000) and Boogaard and Vermeulen (1997), concepts are mainly constructions of the mind that are part of management rhetoric which have little to contribute to daily practice of organisations. The function and influence of concepts is, in that case, purely political by nature. With the aid of the new concepts, intentionally or unintentionally, suggestions of humanisation (Sennett) or progress (Boogaard and Vermeulen) are made, which, however, cannot be observed in the day-to-day practice of organisation.

In the eyes of Boogaard and Vermeulen they are buzzwords which, under pressure of competition between companies, are meant to reduce the insecurity of managers, and in practice little comes of the promises they bring. Eventually, it is often old wine in new bottles.

Sennett (2000) is pessimistic about the direction in which organisations are developing, and is sceptical about the contribution these new ideas and concepts have to offer for guiding this development. He sees a lot of movement and little progress in the opportunities for development of people in organisations. Concepts like flexibility and client-centeredness, in practice rather increase people's existential insecurity than the opposite, while work and work pressure remain a defining part of existence. In his eyes, not much

has come of the great promise of information and computer technology, which was to bring flexibilisation in the interests of the employee, and greater self-realisation within and without the work organisation.

Ten Bos, on the other hand, suggests that scientists and *practioners* make too little use of a number of characteristics of the hypes driving these concepts. Hypes, or fashions create room for creativity, for new insights, observations or paradigms (Ten Bos 2000).

Eccles and Noriah (1994) see an important discrepancy between the language with which the new concepts provide the managers, and the practical actions that should result from these concepts. In their eyes, however, this language is of importance for organisations and actors to (re)position themselves. And even though the implementation of new concepts remains problematic, they do have a mobilising effect.

Karsten and Van Veen (1998) recognise both the fleetingness of thinking in terms of new concepts and the importance of conceptualisation for the *knowledge community* of managers, consultants and scientists. Knowledge communities are organised around certain concepts. They argue that some of the new concepts, and the usage of language they entail, in fact find their way into practice.

Van Veen (2000) points out the lack of generally accepted knowledge concerning management problems, implicating that there is hardly a mechanism for passing on existing insights to new generations of managers. In addition, much of the knowledge is difficult to put into practice, requires interpretation in local contexts, and needs 'creative translation'. Concepts can help to distribute and (re)generate existing knowledge.

In this book we will consider the content and the influence of concepts more closely, and we shall see that there are varying positive and negative, predictable and unpredictable effects to be taken into account.

Force fields and interpretation frames affect what actors see, expect and appreciate, as well as the nature of the effects that occur. The meaning of concepts used in organisational practice does not only depend on theoretical content. On the one hand, actors give their own meaning to a concept, focus on their own ideas concerning value or use, and the results attached to working with a concept. On the other hand, actors operate in a dynamic force field, and in the process become aware of results and meanings that accrue. They make use of their knowledge of the force field, their own interpretive frames and those of others. Concepts can load a situation with a certain outlook and assessment, while at the same time "the logic in words, decisions and actions is constructed after the fact. We reflect on what happened to determine the what, who and why." (Weick 1995). Results remain unnoticed because they belong to the implicit side (background) of the force field, or because they fall outside the interpretation frames. The results and meaning of working with a concept, the advantages and disadvantages and

the value this has for an actor, is subject to the influence of processes in the force fields. Thus, an *empowering* concept that describes and promotes the increase in power of employee-actors can be used in a force field or practical context in which circumscribing and restricting possibilities for action of employees is a primary concern, and so lead to framing (or reducing) the thinking on all that could be done with that power (Ten Bos 1998: 70–71).

The divergent nature and meaning of concepts

What is a concept? The word ‘concept’ is used in various meanings. On the one hand it refers to an idea, an abstraction from observed events, a representation of a variety of facts, it may contain a number of categories. On the other, it can refer to a point of view, a notion, a theoretical framework or: a collection of ideas about the phenomenon. In the latter meaning, a concept refers to a way of understanding, an interpretation framework, a *frame*. Finally, the word can have the meaning of a plan; a draft, a rough sketch. In the literature on organisational concepts, these meanings are used miscellaneously, and the distinction between concept, theory and framework is blurred. Please note that the concept ‘image’ is likewise multi-faceted.

The nature and content of concepts can diverge substantially. The complexity of a notion can be large or small, there can be more or fewer elements, with many or few interconnections.

One or more of the following elements may be comprised in a concept:

1. one (or more) terms; a concept sometimes contains a categorisation, sometimes only a few labels, whereby the label can be more or less well-defined
2. sometimes there may be a system of concepts, with an umbrella concept (for instance, sociotechnical systems thinking or theory, subsuming the concepts of social system and technical or task system)
3. information on the nature of the relationship between a concept and certain facts, data, observations
4. the link between a concept and the facts referred to, can be created by measurable variables or indicators. These variables or indicators can be given to a greater or lesser extent, as can the links between concepts and variables, between variables and facts
5. a concept can be linked to other concepts and this link or relationship between concepts can be indicated; the link can have the form of (loosely or strictly connected) hypotheses or be less formal. The hypotheses may be connected to a theory, to theoretical foundations and assumptions. This theory can be more or less empirically tested and more or less researched as to its informational content (Opp 2002). The framework (theoretical approach or theory) itself can be sketchy or well-defined,

more or less empirically based, more or less well constructed. So the links between concepts and framework (theory or theoretical approach) can vary from weak to strong.

6. finally, concepts can be related to moral values and objectives, justifications and an ideological programme. Sometimes this moral content is not explicitly indicated, but can be derived from the presentation of the concept: the presentation, arrangements and examples given, can be read so as to make clear what is good and bad, who belongs and who does not, what is desirable and what is not. There can be an implicit message in the concept.

A concept may not only comprise a greater or lesser number of the listed elements (be more or less complex), the quality of the whole can also vary widely. Quality is the degree to which elements are coherent, have been described unambiguously, intersubjectively and empirically, and in which the connections between elements have been logically circumscribed, where references to theories, fitting applications and to research results have been indicated, in such a way that they can be checked, reconstructed, or in certain circumstances, can be repeated. The quality or ambiguity – the reverse of quality – of conceptual elements plays a central role in the use of concepts.

Ambiguity does not only have disadvantages. When concepts are not clearly defined, and leave room for ambiguity, that may be their charm, because it raises questions and is food for thought, while enabling local adaptations of meanings.

Concepts, then, may vary between *low complexity and low quality* to *high complexity (inclusive) and high quality*, with two variants in between, *complex and low quality* and *low complexity and high quality*. Empirical science has a preference for quality, and because of the time and money involved in testing concepts, it will tend to make concessions on the side of complexity. Business sciences, which are closer to daily practice, will more readily employ topical, little-researched concepts, present new relationships in order to do justice to all sorts of developments at a certain cost in quality. In addition, they will sooner give in to the need for presenting concepts with a message or a programme. The task-centred, programmatic and at the same time moralising element can be clearly present in such business concepts, as can be seen for instance in shareholder value models (*Economy and Society*, special issue, February 2000).

Usage and meaning

The concepts are building blocks for ‘definitions of reality’. The organisation is an arena of possible definitions of reality and thus of different con-

cepts. The use of concepts is not just a question of the wealth of the description, of ((un)scientific) consistency and possibilities for application, but also a question of power in the organisation, more especially 'definitional power'. The concepts indicate how practice should be regarded, and how it should be changed. The introduction of concepts in organisations is mainly the prerogative of managers and consultants, highly regarded professionals and trainers, who try to transfer their vision of the organisation, management and function of the organisation to employees and clients by means of the introduction of the concepts. Concepts are not only based on theoretical and empirical descriptions (sometimes hardly so) and explanations of practice, but also on normative ideas and guidelines, on commonsense notions, on references to prestigious persons, projects and organisations, who publish their assumptions on how things should be regarded in day-to-day practice, and how they should be managed. Sometimes they bring kitchen-knowledge: tacit knowledge of top cooks in a business kitchen, made public.

Quite a few organisational concepts voice the desire of managers of reducing complexity and coming to grips with worlds of meaning and the frames employed. Other voices and concepts are welcome in the force fields of organisational networks as long as they support the concepts of the dominant coalition. When they do not do so, they are often qualified as resistance to be tackled with weapons like instruction, training, courses, discussions, assessment and mobility (just to mention a few popular weapons).

By means of concepts, voices and views are (dis)covered, or rival notions blocked. They help to create communities of voices and dialogues. Words and concepts are part of a discourse. A discourse is everything said, written and conveyed about a particular topic within a social network. Although in many cases there is a dominant discourse, there are always alternate discourses, most of which are usually marginalized. The dominant discourse reflects or creates a dominant ideology and is presented as common sense and obvious (hegemonic). Discourses envelop frames and concepts, and they develop around these. They produce words and images that facilitate practices (Tolson 1996).

Context: Modernisation in society and organisation

In discussions of concepts such as the learning organisation and self-managing teams, all sorts of conditions and tendencies are given to explain changing organisational practices, the development of these concepts and the way in which images and concepts can influence organisational practice. Through all these tendencies, developments, and basic conditions of organisational practice, we can distinguish the tendencies of modernisation. These

are briefly described below. In Chapter 9 we shall return to them at greater length.

Society and organisational associations in the Western world are characterised by processes of modernisation.¹ Modernisation is a multiple process in which organisations and societies find themselves continually at the intersection of four forces or processes: structure, culture, person and nature (Van der Loo and Van Reijen 1997: 48):

1. differentiation (characteristic of the development of structure: both task differentiation as in the division of labour, and system differentiation where functions turn into separate institutions like childcare, healthcare, etc.)
2. rationalisation (characteristic of the development of culture: ordering and systemising reality with a view to keeping it predictable and controllable)
3. individualisation (characteristic of the development of individuals: individuals attain ever greater freedom of choice and independence) and
4. domestication (characteristic of the development of relations with nature: “making a world in which we are, finally, at home”: Ten Bos 2000: 119)²

Each of the four aspects mentioned is subject to contradictory developments:

1. The process of differentiation in structure, leads on the one hand to ever-growing specialisation and independence, and on the other to greater mutual dependence of separate parts. Economic activity gets institutionalized in independent enterprises that become dependent on other sectors such as healthcare, infrastructural services, schools. The differentiation of structure is expressed in the development of nation states and political institutions that influence relations between state and citizen (parliamentary democracy, state bureaucracy, welfare state and market economy) (Van Hoof and Ruyssveldt 1996: 24–5).
2. The process of rationalisation, on the one hand supports the ideal of universal communication, consultation and measurability, but also enables individual patterns of choice for actors, and so forms of pluralism. Van Hoof and Ruyssveldt observe the development of a secular culture with a prominent place for science (1996: 25). Through modernisation, organisations have become more rational, but not more manageable or predictable, according to Van der Loo and Van Reijen (1977), Bahlmann and Meesters (1999, the latter with a reference to Boulding, 1956). See also the literature on vicious circles of organisation (for instance Vroom

¹ Some authors prefer to speak of the process of postmodernism in a late modern stage (Koot and Verweel 2000, Frissen 1989).

² Commodification is also regarded as an element of modernisation: even more aspects of human action are subject to market exchange (Van Hoof and Van Ruyssveldt: 173).

1980, who worked this out for bureaucracy, Crozier 1963, Masuch 1985).

3. The process of individualisation reinforces the search for an identity of oneself, but also leads to a development in which organisations (also by their products or services) develop into providers of identity for actors like managers, employees and customers, and this gets stronger as existing ideological movements or frameworks disappear (such as found in churches, trade unions, politics). Individualisation is sometimes paralleled by the rise of an urbanised social pattern (Van Hoof and Ruysseveldt 1996: 24–5).
4. Domestication leads to the control of the natural environment but also to discussion of the boundary between nature and man, and to transgression of the boundary between man and nature, for instance by genetic manipulation. The independent stance toward nature is based on technology, at the same time dependence on technology has grown strongly, it has become a matter of course to deploy technology for solving problems.³

Modernisation was already perceptible in the era of the Enlightenment, when under the influence of rationalisation the transition from a traditional to a modern society took place, and modern forms of organisation developed. The transition was described by a number of scholars in the 19th century. Tönnies introduced the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, communities based on affective ties, strong solidarity, and mutual ties, respectively on economic ties, goal and interest-driven action (Van Hoof and van Ruysseveldt 1996: 135). Durkheim used the well-known pair of concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity, the first based on the fact that people resemble each other, the second on a greater division of labour (Van Hoof and van Ruysseveldt 1996: 117–8). These pairs of concepts indicate a transition to social relationships where the functional aspect is primary, and which are businesslike and rationally calculating, goal-oriented, by nature. This rationalisation or increase of goal rationality, comprises according to Max Weber both cognitive control of reality, and a practical control of reality through a better adaptation of means to goals. The increase in goal rationality – also called instrumental or technical rationality – can be distinguished from value rationality where actions are related to values, for instance the honour of an army, from an affective, emotion-driven rationality, and also from traditional action. Morgan (1986: 37) has remarked that through substantial or value rationality an entire situation can be taken into account, a comprehensive view can be given through the values concerned

³ Gephart (1996) links postmodernism to a form of society in which Nature has been replaced with “technology as the ‘other’ of our society”.

(Van Hoof and Ruysseveldt 1996: 127, Kalberg 1980). The process of rationalisation creates tensions between social, relational, human relations and functional or business relations between people, and the tensions are visible in the development of organisations (Mastenbroek 1981, Bahlmann and Meesters 1999, Verweel 1987 and 2000).

Development: Life world and system world

The relationship between the human as an aim in itself and the human as a means in the framework of goal-driven work, for instance in organisations, has also been referred to as the difference between the logic of the life world and that of the system world (Habermas 1981, Verweel 2000, Bailey 1977). We can distinguish the system world from the life world through the following three criteria:

1. Habermas (Van Hoof and Ruysseveldt 1996: 302 ff.) distinguishes communicative action, aimed at arriving at a shared definition of the situation together with others – to be found in the *life world*, from strategic action aimed at achieving goals – to be found in the *system world*. Actors acting communicatively are in search of a shared definition of the situation and seek agreement on three aspects: *what is true?* (truth: reference to a shared objective reality), *what is normatively valid?* (reference to shared agreements and norms) and *what is sincere?* (Sincerity refers to the subjective world of the speaker, the subjective validity of the expressions of the communicator: there is no lying, no foul play, no tactical play. Sincerity is connected to: Who am I? It asks the question: what is the basis of my actions?) Strategic action is based on goal rationality. Communicative action can be goal rational and value rational, and so comprises various rationality aspects.

2. When applied to human action in a work organisation communicative action means (life world): *making meaningful and giving meaning* to the organisation and by and for participants, and so refers to a *jointly built and shared process of giving meaning*. The latter, in its most sophisticated form, may refer to a system that is entirely constructed by the members of the system. Such a system, then, has four aspects:

1. Delimitation of membership (who are the members).
2. Autonomy of task performance, the autonomy to fulfil tasks in accordance with one's own insights.
3. Autonomy of task design and autonomy of the design of the organisation as a system, including the determination of the aims or goals of the organisation.
4. The right to distribute yields or revenues.

These elements can also be found in ideas concerning radical liberalism, anarchism, and organisational democratisation (and they have connections with, for instance, empowerment, modern sociotechnical systems thinking). They extend the concept of ‘autonomy of workers’ into a fundamentally different view of organising. Of course, there are many ways (and national varieties) to organize the process of creating shared meaning: participation from workplace consultation to codetermination of major company decisions, from functional to structural, from shareholder to stakeholder model⁴.

3. A life world is characterised by the existence of courage and the power of individuals for expressing moral doubts. Autonomous people are people who have the self-confidence to express their moral doubt on actions, events, situations (Ten Bos 1998, p. III), they have the guts to disagree, to express a minority opinion. The presence of autonomous behaviour and the possibility of minority viewpoints are preconditions for the coming into play of life world elements. This autonomy, or courage is about the expression of something essential to a person or to his or her being there.

In this book we analyse organisation concepts in which the tension between life and system world, strategic (or goal) rationality, and rationality aimed at communicative human relations will be visible: learning organisation, self-managing teams, organisation culture, customer-friendly organisation. We also analyse the ‘new images’ of manager and employee, and also in these conceptualizations aspects of these tensions can be recognised.

The analyses are made by Dutch researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds (anthropology, management studies, sociology, economics) and offer insights into the reception of these concepts and changing images of actors in this North-western European country. They also give an overview of the discourses to which the concepts are linked in both university and practitioners communities.

⁴ When we want to establish the presence of shared meaning, we should indicate criteria and this can be done in several ways: we present participants with questions and leave matters to their subjective impressions. We can also take into account the degree to which their voice is heard, and to which they are experienced in giving voice, and meaning, and with being heard. That is why we need a well-founded choice of instrument to determine that “*degree of communicative action – so the extent of giving meaning – in an organisational context*”. Without such a reasoned choice there is little we can say about communicative action or about the boundaries and presence of a life world in human action in a labour organisation.

Since individuals define their life world themselves, it is possible that individuals grow strongly attached to authority (for instance Protestant ethics) in an organisation as an aspect of jointly produced and shared meaning, so as part of their life world, when this relates to their images of social order and the basis of authority and community. The distinction between life world and system world that individuals make, is therefore strongly dependent on their norms and values and the vision of the institutions in which they participate.

Summaries of the articles

In Chapter 2 René ten Bos examines the idea of Learning Organisation or LO. First he traces the origins of the concept. He develops the thesis that LO is a term used in a situation of 'hegemonic disorganisation' which points to the right of high ranking members of organisations to withdraw from reality. He develops four statements on LO: the concept implies learning for the few; it emphasizes not the most natural ways of learning; learning is seen as possible only in a fictitious world; its criticism of centralization and hierarchy is not taken to its conclusion.

In Chapter 3 Peter Leisink shows that the new concept of selfmanaging teams finds its roots in ideas about the humanization of work and sociotechnics. Sociotechnics distinguishes the worlds of work or tasksystem and the life or social system and applied these to the concept of selfmanaging teams. However, recent theoretical developments in Dutch sociotechnics are more directed towards efficiency. A study of selfmanaging teams in a buscompany reveals different value attached to financial targets and efficiency between topmanagement and employees and documents the devolution of selfmanagement into top down control.

In Chapter 4 Jan Boessenkool analyses the most popular organisation concept of the last 20 years, organisation culture, by comparing theoretical debates and research in the USA and the Netherlands. The concept turns out to be inadequate. Instrumentalism, stressing integration and control dominates and there is no place for diversity and fragmentation. Culture is a container concept, necessitating an approach which focuses on the creation of meaning and understanding instead of on 'how to do changing'.

In Chapter 5 Carl Rohde and Hans van der Loo analyse customer-friendliness. They describe the change from target group approaches via life style segmentation towards vision-based narratives developed by socially responsible firms. There is a change from 'logic of utility' to 'logic of sign'. Customers demand more social relations, enjoyment, gain, comfort and community and customer-friendly organisations face the fragmented customer. Creativity is vital in this encounter. Paradoxically the customer revolution in postmodernism goes hand in hand with increased dependency of customers on organisations for the fulfillment of their social needs.

In Chapter 6 Willem Koot analyses the new manager and starts by reviewing old and new leadership and contingency approaches. The new leadership approach contrast transactional and transformational and links leadership with culture and management of meaning. A study of Dutch managers shows the contrast between reality and the idealized images (being heroes, visionaries, hard and soft) coming from the world of popular management books. Managers are forced to front stage images (everything under control) and a back stage feeling of constant uncertainty. The manager is under continuous and ambiguous pressures.

In Chapter 7 Ton Korver analyses the concept of the New Employee. Labour supply is changing from manufacturing to services, primary processes from things to people and symbols, personnel management from 'personnel' to human resource(s), competencies, employability and from 'management' to mobilisation. Diversity initiatives and female parttime employment give an impression of the suboptimal side of the labour market. The new employee is defined not so much by selfdesign or entrepreneurial spirit, but by choicemaking in career, presentation and the balance between work, family, care. When the necessary social networks are absent, choicemaking increases loneliness.

In Chapter 8 Bert van Hees and Paul Verweel explain the criteria for discerning between life, system and partisan worlds and assess the concepts covered in this book in terms of these. They give an overview of the uses to which these concepts are put and functions and outcomes related to their use. The quality of the concepts is considered and linked to the 'industry' which builds them, discerning between production and use circuits of meaning. In the last part the links between the concepts and modernization processes are considered, laying the ground for the last chapter.

In Chapter 9 Bert van Hees and Paul Verweel analyse management and work organisation in the information age. The network-project paradigm of management offers its personal and social costs of networking and the network society changes the place and meaning of work. There are five major tendencies: subjectivation and soft management, 'mediatisation', diversity, financialisation and the interconnectedness of work and private life. The network-project and network society reshapes system, life and partisan worlds to the extent that instrumental empathy takes its place. Liberation is still in question and the authors offer four visions, four ways to enlarge freedom: the humanizing organisation, the individualizing organisation, the compensating organisation and the imploding organisation. In their conclusions they see incoherent and patchwork freedom spots.

Conclusion

Organisation concepts incorporate social and theoretical developments in different ways. They draw the attention of managers to approaches and objects of analysis, they include the answers to questions and insecurities. At the same time they fulfil a number of other functions, such as that of buzzword, part of management rhetoric, organising scientists and practitioners into knowledge communities, they have political meaning, they position and mobilise people in organisations and offer opportunities for (re)using old and new insights in creative ways for particular, local circumstances.

In the following chapters we shall see how concepts are developed and

used, which assumptions determine their form and content, in what force fields they develop, and what the consequences are for theory and practice. We shall also discuss the functions of actual concretisations they have for actors and organisations. In Chapters 2 to 7 the authors have worked out concepts and images in their own ways. This diversity has led to a range of arguments. After Chapter 1, the following chapters contain, consecutively, four images of organisation or organisation aspects and two images of actors: The Learning organisation, Self-managing teams, Organisation culture, Client-friendly organisation, The new images of the manager, The new images of the employee. In Chapter 8 we will draw up the balance of the quality and complexity of the concepts analysed, and in Chapter 9 that of the aspects of modernisation mentioned by the authors. The focus will be on the contrast between the place of life world and system world in the life in organisations, which will yield a number of theoretical questions, also relevant for practice. In conclusion we shall seek to answer the question about ways of achieving emancipation in work, development of the life world in human relations, and communication in the labour organisation.

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The nurseries of the learning organisation

René ten Bos (Schouten & Nelissen)

Introduction: where does the idea of learning organisations originate from?

The general complaint about the learning organisation, even from people who claim to be supporters of this concept, is that it is so badly defined (Garvin, 1995). This is the reason why various authors writing on this subject (Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1990) claim that the journey to the promised land of the learning organisation is more important than one's presence in it. This is logical; there is little to learn in promised lands. Everything necessary for a fruitful and happy life would already appear to have been learnt in such places. On the other hand, others (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1991) have claimed that glimpses of the promised land can be seen, and they therefore hope that those that have had them will write and tell them as much as possible about their own glimpses, so that others will also be able to gain an idea of what the promised land looks like.

But where do ideas about this promised land come from? It is unclear where it exactly originated from in general literature. Some authors claim that the ideas relating to learning in organisations date back at least as far as Mozes, even if they are not, unfortunately, clear about their reasons for supposing this (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1991: 2). Others claim the honor for themselves, and maintain that they were already experimenting with such ideas more than half a century ago. I am not thinking here of Peter Drucker, someone who is known to claim that he was the originator of almost all management ideas. I am thinking, however, of Reg Revans, an almost forgotten name in management literature. I would like to introduce him as the person that coined the term 'learning organisation', although I am not entirely sure that this is the case.

When the elderly Reg Revans (1984) reflects upon his academic career, he cannot resist explaining in detail how, shortly after the Second World War, he was working on what would become known, many years later, as *action learning*, *quality circles*, and *organisational development*. At the same time,

he also claims that it was he, and his colleagues, who initiated the concept of the '*learning community*'. This concept was introduced in 1959, during a lecture (entitled: '*The hospital as an organism*') at a congress that had been organized by *The Institute of Management Sciences* in Paris. Research conducted in the academic hospital in Manchester had revealed that patients being cared for by nurses who found it easy to learn, and were able to obtain information quickly, were discharged earlier than patients whose nurses evidently did not possess such characteristics. Such results were important news in a time of rapidly increasing healthcare costs. If a new idea is not only interesting but also useful, then you're on to something. Revans immediately recognized the relevance of the discovery. In essence, it meant that ...

... we had left behind the idea of a small group as a learning microcosm, and that we had stumbled upon the idea of an entire institute as a learning community; for example, a hospital in which more than two thousand people work ... (Revans, 1984: 10–11)

Thus, if we are to believe Revans, it was at this congress that an already slumbering interest in *learning in organisations* first became a reflection upon a '*learning community*', and, once such a progression has occurred, the idea of a '*learning organisation*' is not far behind. Revans also adds, for that matter, that such revolutionary ideas were ridiculed in 1959, particularly where the idea crucial to the learning organisation was concerned, that is that organisations have a collective will that transcends the will of individuals. If we are to believe Revans, the time was not yet ripe for these kinds of ideas. It would be some years, under the colors of such terms as *organisational development*, before the ideas generated by Revans and his colleagues would gain more acceptance. Revans himself admits that he only published these ideas in 1971, in his book *Designing Effective Managers*.

Revans is probably exaggerating his intellectual solitude. There were, undoubtedly, kindred spirits. Such contemporaries as Michel Polyani (1957) and Cyert and March (1963) have been at least as influential as Revans, if not more so. Polyani, a former chemist, developed the still very popular notion of '*tacit knowledge*', described by him as a type of individual knowledge that is generated by the active creation and organisation of experiences. The ongoing creation of new experiences would later occupy a prominent place in the literature about learning in organisations. Cyert and March, both pupils of Herbert Simon, were pioneers in the field of decision-making theory, and, in a recent article by Silvia Gherardi (1999: 105), are referred to as the actual inventors of the term '*organisational learning*', something that they chiefly understand to mean a continual organisational adjustment process. Other names that one continually encounters in general literature are Simon, (1947), Lindblom (1959), Holt (1964), Weick (1969), Bateson (1972), Duke (1974), and Argyris and Schon (1974), all of whom, with their

ideas on such subjects as ‘limited rationality’, ‘incrementalism’, ‘constructing realities’, ‘loosely coupled systems’, ‘gaming’, ‘learning to learn’ or ‘deutero-learning’, in their own way were to become important sources of inspiration for the literature about learning organisations. Far less numerous are references to the work of pragmatic philosophers such as John Dewey, who, in the nineteen-thirties, wrote a number of books about the educational or edifying character of organisations, or Richard Rorty (1980) who, many years later, would adopt the same theme, even though he was not so much concerned with organisation, but with philosophy (Kolb, 1984; Czarniawska, 1997; Weaver, 1997). In the last section in particular, I will return in detail to the subject of pragmatism as the almost-forgotten source of inspiration in literature about learning in organisations and learning organisations. For the time being, it is sufficient to conclude that a characteristic common to all literature must be sought in a thorough rejection of the rationalistic portrayal of mankind, and the trust in rational planning, based on this, that is typical of much traditional literature about management and organisation.

Nowhere was this rejection of strict, rational planning more clearly expressed than in Michael’s book *Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn* that was published in 1973, and has recently been reprinted (1996). Subjects were described in this book that much later would become essential to such people as De Geus (1988) and Senge (1990): error tolerance, feedback, holism, long-term orientation, environmental awareness, etc. However, whereas the work of De Geus and Senge is characterized by an unconcealed optimism about the ability of organisations to learn, Michael is far more sceptical. Although he does not consider it impossible that companies will one day contribute to social learning processes (*‘civil learning’*), in his preface to the 1996 edition, he warns against too much optimism in this respect (1996: 28–30). It would mean, for example, that companies would have to relinquish their one-sided orientation on shareholders’ interests, or that their knowledge and skills would constantly have to be used for the benefit of society as a whole. And this is now by no means the situation. Therefore, almost quarter of a century after writing his book, Michael concludes that it still refers to a possibly still very distant future, which we can only hope will one day materialize.

It is not surprising, then, that Michael’s work does not focus on organisations as such. Rather, Michael discusses learning processes that occur in society as such (1997: 325). His book particularly concerns the psychological resistance that could thwart such processes. Besides this, no mention is made to learning organisations; while such people as De Geus and Senge assume that learning organisations do exist somewhere in reality, and can and must be studied if we are ever to be able to facilitate perfect learning processes. This is often the way with management concepts: what once

appeared to be a quite innocent heuristic concept ('civil learning' or 'learning in organisations'), used by social scientists in order to be able to construct certain social realities, is converted by consultants and gurus into a term that effortlessly refers to actual organisations, and then sets a standard for more or less anxious followers. In the process, a certain alienation in respect of the original ideas always occurs. The focus is no longer on government policymakers, or social scientists that are interested in the question of how our society should progress from here, just as Michael is, but rather, on managers who have to achieve a profit, but who also want to retain a clear conscience.

Senge (1990: 15) himself makes it quite clear that he was initially not very interested in business management. He agreed with such people as Michael that solutions for the 'Big Issues' should be a particular responsibility of government and the scientific community. At the time, he was particularly inspired by Jay Forrester, a computer scientist who supervised Senge, when he was writing his dissertation about system dynamics, amongst other things. He learned from Forrester that many policymakers did not have a very holistic view of reality, as a result of which they proposed solutions within certain domains that caused all kinds of more serious problems elsewhere. He must somewhere have been disappointed in the possibilities open to public sector policymakers to start thinking differently, because, around 1975, thus approximately three years after Michael's publication, he increasingly places all his hope in those "business leaders" that he meets as a computer scientist at MIT. He describes these people as "thoughtful people, deeply aware of the inadequacies of prevailing ways of managing". They work for such companies as Apple, Hanover Insurance, Polaroid and, of course, also for Shell, where Arie de Geus, a later ally, worked, and where extensive experiments were carried out with scenario planning. Gradually, he realizes that the potential for revolutionary changes should not be sought in the public but in the business sector:

Gradually, I came to realize why business is the locus of innovation in an open society. Despite whatever hold past thinking may have on the business mind, business has a freedom to experiment missing in the public sector and, often, in nonprofit organisations. It also has a clear "bottom line", so that experiments can be evaluated, at least in principle, by objective criteria (1990: 15).

Such ideas as these are also often held by other gurus. Mintzberg (1994), for whom learning capacity is just as crucial as it is for Senge, claims that business managers are pre-eminently able to relieve us of our technological and rationalistic straitjacket. The hope of a better world must not be sought from government or science, but from business, nowhere else. Of course such messages as these are very much welcomed by the business communi-

ty. They contribute to the image of dynamics and flexibility that they like to radiate. Nobody, then, is surprised any more by such professors as Shosana Zuboff, from Harvard, who unblushingly claims that learning is “the new type of labour ... the heart of each production activity” (quoted in: Wooldridge and Micklethwait, 1997: 138–139). This ties in very nicely with the self-marketing that has become so important for companies in the information age. Literature about the learning organisation is perfect for companies wishing to manifest themselves as attractive organisations. They adopt the ideals of those that share Michael’s lack of hope in business.

In other words, idealism is no longer the privilege of groups from the political or religious margins. Idealism has become orthodox in management literature. Senge is the most striking example of this. To begin with (1990: 6), he directs his book towards managers wanting to understand the art of building learning organisations, but then also towards parents wishing to learn something from their children (because children have, as we will see later in the chapter, much to teach parents about learning) and to citizens. As we have seen, quarter of a century ago, Michael was still directing himself towards society as a whole. Such shifts in orientation indicate that the context in which ideas about the learning organisation were able to blossom have now disappeared or changed.

Bill Cooke recently showed (1999) that many popular ideas about organisational changes originate from radical-left circles. Edgar Schein, one of the gurus on the subject of culture management, something that he perceives as a collective learning process, derived his views on the possibility of change and innovation from research that he conducted into the Chinese communist party in the nineteen-fifties. Schein observed that this party had been pre-eminently successful in the realization of behavioral and mental changes. In 1962, Schein wrote frankly that the Chinese methods possibly no longer appear so “mysterious, different or awful when we forget their gruesome communist ideology and just concentrate on their methods” (Quoted in: Cooke, 1999: 95). Cooke (1999: 97) then concludes that the left-wing origin of many ideas is concealed in modern management literature. Where Schein was still aware of the cruelty that accompanied this method, whether or not intentionally, this is concealed in current management literature. I suspect that Cooke’s observations also apply to Senge, even if further historiographical research is necessary. But if this suspicion is correct, Senge must, somewhere in the whole process that led him to write for managers, have hit upon the idea of tempering the left-wing, idealistic and quasi-religious enthusiasm, in order to make it as accessible as possible for business. How better than to portray managers themselves as idealistic innovators?

What is more, his contacts with people from the business community gave him the opportunity to reinforce his belief that learning organisations do exist. He finds, from these personal contacts, that the type of idealistic lead-