

Review

Personal characteristics and social values as factors for (non) - practicing organizational learning

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Abstract

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The contemporary approach to management imposes the need for complete and constructive communication in the business relations. The reality is that there are situations where the communication is mainly based on expressing views, without a possibility for sharing them or for finding common grounds. This results in emergence of conflicts of developed destructive character, having negative impact upon the overall functioning of the organization. The modern approaches that dictate the mode of achieving maximum efficiency and effectiveness of organizations impose the need to treat the humans as a source of intellectual capital, as a benefit which provides safe conditions for permanent organization growth and development, with an opportunity for reaching and maintaining the stage of everlasting youth. One of the ways to achieve such a condition is establishing and applying a dialogue as a form of communicating and a strategy for building up the organizational learning where the ecology of thought, based on healthy mental models and systems thinking are developed by every individual who considers his/her personal mastery as a determination for life.

Key words: Dialogue, ecology of thought, mental models, organizational learning, personal mastery, systems thinking, team learning

INTRODUCTION

The dehumanization of a major share of social systems, especially in the states that are undergoing a transition for a longer period of time, has introduced a system of treating the individual as a means for achieving personal benefits for people declaring efforts to construct the system in a best possible way for all encompassed by it, whereas the truth is that they are directed towards achieving personal benefit and interest. The consistent populist behavior of leaders in a society has resulted in creating conditions where the majority of people have lost their own capability of thinking and are put in a position of accepting the leader's attitude and those of other authorities as their own, without feeling any need to reconsider or correct them, and failing to form their personal opinion about the things. The individual is purposely directed towards, even forced, not to put any thinking but by simply accepting it; this has developed mental models that are not sound, neither for him/her as

an individual, nor for the social system, considered in a given longer period of time. This way of behavior is being reflected upon the organizations governed by the domination of "ill" mental models, whereas the individual who refuses to become a part of such a "family" feels alienated, unsatisfied, frustrated, and demotivated. To put this in another way, such societies or organizations that are constituent parts of provoking psychological intimidation create conditions for treating the intellectual capital as a malignant tissue that ought to be destroyed, which means that the opinion should only represent that of the leading person. Such organizations are in a position of permanent decay or in a stage of falling towards their own demise. A situation like this increases the alarming need for profound changes of awareness.

The first step of that change should be setting up conditions through complete engagement of a good leader to carry out a process that will provide achieving

the “ecology of thought”. If we take into account that our thoughts are created as a consequence of personal and collective memories, we can agree that they are not always just ours, or even if they are our thoughts, then to what extent are they considered our own and which part is influenced by others that provoke them? By realizing this, the individual becomes capable of finding his/her true self in through self-reflection, thus discovering his/her own truth with regards to a certain issue.

Brushing up our thoughts, by means of our inner ecology, a transformation of our notions, or at least the way in which we experience them, is being transformed. As a result of this very difficult and complex process, one manages to leave aside the memories that lay the grounds for perception or awareness development. By developing such an ability, we obtain the power to stand behind the thoughts, to make in-depth analysis of them, and to recognize and perceive them. Once this stage is achieved, it becomes much easier to change our thoughts.

Very often the questions are related to what is the best, but at the same time the simplest way that provides building a capacity for achieving this state is found at the very basis of this theory. It is about a long-lasting and exhaustive process that requires a certain dose of steadiness, knowledge, desire and will on the part of the individual, but also great courage in regards to such systems. Starting with the basics will suffice to alter our expression. Words are means by which we express certain thoughts, through which we present our inner ecology. Changing the way of our expression, we gradually make transformation of our thought. Thus, in the longer run, we become more and more convinced in what we convey. After which in a given moment, we end up changing our way of thinking. This condition gradually influences our consciousness and we become capable to execute in regenerating our own, while at the same time possessing the inner ecology of thought of people around us. This process provides achieving a collective ecology of thoughts. The course of action is created on the basis of sound mental models and systems thinking that are developed and applied in a process of dialogue, and being applicable to team learning as a basis for upgrading the organizational one.

The dialogue as a seat point for developing organizational learning disciplines

Organizational learning is a process resulting from the individual learning of every person in the organizational system, but this should by no means be taken as an unconditional guarantee. “Regardless of whether it is about a research or development, the firm management or any aspect of it holds that it is the people who create the active power. They have their own will, sense, and way of thinking. If the employees are not highly motivated

to *cross swords* for making improvement and attaining the objectives in technological progression, then there would simply be no growth, productivity, nor technological advancement” (1). The leader’s part in this process is to create conditions for upgrading organizational culture where motivated members will develop their own mastery, team learning and mental models – all disciplines upon which the organizational learning builds up. *Au contraire*, the systems lacking this highest form of learning would find themselves in an ever-aging stage, which, in a given moment, will end up in an organizational “death”.

The most prominent determinant of this, as previously stated, is the individual learning through which the individual develops his/her professional and career development, and achieves personal mastery. “When the personal mastery turns into a discipline, the activity that we integrate within our lives, represents a personification of the two movements (directions) deriving from its profundity. First is the permanent thinking about the things that matter. Often, we spend too much time dealing with issues that *accompany* us on our way, which result in completely forgetting why we actually took that particular approach. Thus, we often have an unclear and imprecise attitude about the things that matter” (2). The second segment, or direction, is the learning that avails a more simple apprehension of our reality. Provided we know where we are and where we want to be, the conditions for both individual and organizational development are already created. The very moment we perceive our present and the desired future is when the process of creative tension of the team is set forth. The person working on building up his/her own mastery insists on a permanent development of this tension.

The individual creative tension reaches its peak under conditions of achieved unity and transforms itself into a creative tension of the team. In this level, it represents a point of exchange and an upgrade of individual knowledge and skills, which put them in a function of achieving the aim. In an opposite situation, the team turns out to be simply a sum of individuals heading towards different directions and an aimless waste of energy. If the team manages to overcome this phase, all the individuals take the same directive action in achieving a common shared vision. Every team member strengthens his/her own position, increases his/her own capacities for successful working. There is also an increase in overall strength of the team and creating a process of team learning with a predominant presence of a dialogue; thus enabling creative contradiction to powerful forces in a constant strive to condition and impede the emergence and the development of this learning which represents a single discipline of the organizational one.

The dialogue is a process that provides space for its participants to search for and to find solutions for grave issues that occurs often. The idea of a dialogue is based

on “providing a free circulation of thoughts and energetic research into the collective history of the thought, the personal predispositions, and the character of the individual and common prerequisites” (3). The dialogue is characterized by being concern, demonstrating kindness and fostering a high degree of ethics towards all participants. This type of conversation provides an in-depth understanding, perceptions, new models and pathways that enable reaching the sole truth, or the collective thought. The dialogue is a means of overcoming the suspense and possible problems that the future might hold. At the very start, the participants in the dialogue do not (and should not) have identical stands regarding the issue. This open way of communicating creates stable conditions for a completely equal treatment of every participant, setting the grounds for gradual harmonization of different opinions, and transformation of destructive conflicts into constructive ones. Using this method of communicating, the team comes to a “shared meaning” of the thought and to a “collective identity”, thus creating a rather different approach to perceiving things. Through this process, the group approaches the grand reservoir of unified thinking, which cannot be reached individually. This is the way of achieving the ecology of thought and building up sound mental models.

The mental models represent a way of looking at the world around us. They are the mirrors of our thinking, behaving and acting within our living and working environment. Very often our best ideas do not succeed in practice. No matter how hard we try, we do not manage to transform them into a strategic action plan for accomplishing goals (4). This is by no means resulting from the lack of intention or being hesitant. The reason for the delay comes from the established mental models. By researching in the area, Argyris (5), comes to a notion that our behavior, most often, is a result of our conclusions produced in a process of observation from others as well as from having discussions with others. Making use of the observed contents, we build our own presuppositions, conclusions, beliefs, and we think about the actions we are about to take. Building up “healthy” mental models enables us to bring our own truth to the surface and to lead a productive discussion about the differences in our views. The modern organizations are increasing their common capacity for developing mental models which provides learning new skills for institutionalization of innovations in the behavior. In the newly created learning conditions, the individual realizes the faults of his/her attitudes and opinions, for which s/he was convinced that are true. But, according to Senge, the process of learning does not finish here. It follows a phase in which the person makes a shift in and takes new actions that have resulted from the changes in the mental model.

The organizational systems that are in the stage of “growing” require learning based on directing the

attention towards foreseeing the future on the grounds of the present. What represents a kind of a handicap of the contemporary world and thinking is the fragmented approach to analysis and perceiving of things. System thinking provides a globalist approach to observing and understanding the world, and on the organization as its constituent part. A process of new systems thinking is created and develops a sense of belonging to the whole. An integration of intellect and intuition is achieved. People with developed personal mastery achieve this integration in a spontaneous and natural manner. Developing systems thinking extends the condition of empathy and community. Systems thinking cannot be achieved without well-formed mental models which question the transformation of personal notions into shared vision. The managers possess an innate belief that they are not in a position to change the future. Sadly, they lack the sense and are not aware of the necessity for building up systems thinking. From their part, creative tension is perceived as a burden that cannot be tolerated, whereas the actions required to achieve it are considered as problems violating their peaceful and stable life in the organization.

Empirical researches

The dialogue represents a determinant condition for developing systems thinking. It is a starting point for movement into four fields of development in a form of pathways, which, when taken by the individuals and the group, develop this highest possible positioned thinking, on the basis of ecologically clean thought. Reaching the shared meaning and getting rid of the tension of one’s “own” truths, the person develops skills for formation of sound mental models and creative thinking behavior. In this way the organization achieves organizational learning.

The dialogue, as a form of business communication, is represented as the research topic for the authors of this paper. Theoretical notions have led to a substantial necessity in building the capacity for managing it by means of developing listening, respecting, suspension and speaking skills. Taken from its meaning, and considering the reality in our immediate surrounding, this leads to the fact that this kind of communication is simply used as a “meaningless” terminology without knowing its real meaning, as well as the fact that the majority of individuals have no capacity at all for applying it (a result of the realistic phenomena described in the introductory part of this paper). We took up a research in the direction of determining the ordinary predispositions to conduct it, but also the possibility to make corrections, by exercising in the course of a training. Of course, our expectations as researchers were not unrealistic, which means it was perfectly clear, that within three months it is impossible to achieve skill development and capacity building for

Table 1. Dialogue skills and capacity during the first attempt

FLOW	Active listening	Respect	Suspension	Speaking	Dialogue capacity	Discussion area
1 round	2,13	-0,25	0,38	2,63	1,22	first
2 round	1,25	-0,25	-0,25	1,25	0,53	second
3 round	1,50	0,00	0,00	1,63	0,78	first

Table 2. Dialogue skills and capacity at the end of the training

Flow	Active listening	Respect	Suspension	Speaking	Dialogue capacity	Discussion area
Last round	2,67	2,00	1,38	2,33	2,21	трето

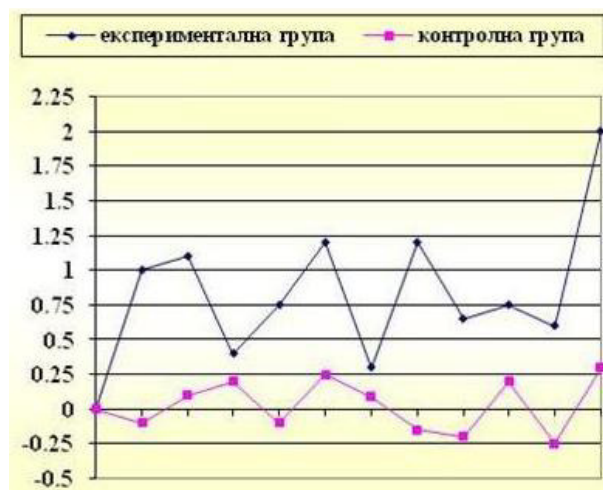


Figure 1. Dialogue capacity development graph

dialogue, based on healthy mental models and established systems thinking. It was also pretty clear that there was a short period of time for achieving the inner ecology of thought that would be practiced even in conditions of everyday activity, not only in well-defined conditions and simulated situations as a constituent part of the training.

Research procedures were based on the qualitative and quantitative paradigm, involving application of: observation method using data observation lists (grades ranging from -5 to +5), as well as the experimental method, producing the need to form experimental and control groups. The former was used to conduct the examination of influence the functional training had on the process of acquiring theoretical and practical notions for developing dialogue skills. On the other hand, the second element of the experimental factor was the influence by the integrator on leading the dialogue through the areas of discussion. All the remaining conditions (structure and number of members per group, as well as the discussion topics) were identical.

At start, the groups were characterized with a low capacity of listening, respecting, suspension and speaking skills. Table 1 shows data related to the

experimental group, with regard to this condition.

The first round shows the group *residing* in the first area of politeness, creating an ostensible condition of highly developed dialogue skills. In the second round, the data show decrease in the above skills, particularly the suspension skill, and the group enters very quickly into the second area of disintegration, with a so-called suspension crisis. Due to the fact that the group is for the first time in a dialogue situation, it failed to surpass the above crisis, resulting in its retrieving back to the first discussion area.

As a result of the training and the created conditions for intensive dialogue capacity building, with the integrator's active participation, the experimental group succeeded to enter the third discussion area. The observation of rendered skill and capacity values is shown in Table 2.

In order to examine the training influence and the need to develop skills in capacity building for dialogue, an observation was conducted on the experimental and the control groups composed of members that have never attended training before. Both groups that we previously mentioned were structurally identical and discussed in the same topics. As the observation was realized, we obtained the data that are shown in Figure 1. It served

as a basis for more confirmation on the fact that building dialogue capacity upon well developed listening, respecting, suspension and speaking skills is considered indispensable.

As the training is completed, the interest of the researchers with regards to the practical application of dialogue of the experimental group did not cease. Namely, after the six months period, we attended several meetings of the members of this group. What was easily noticeable, was the longer period of time that the group spent in the first "area of politeness", where the actual dialogue skills could not be noticed. Shortly after, as a result of the small number of individuals, the group entered the area of disintegration, from whence it was "restored" to the first area again. What was completely visible, is the state of non-provision of conditions for creating the "dialogue seat point", permanently repeating the copy-pasted opinions of the group members and those of their leader, showing an extremely low degree of speaking their own voices as one of the skills for building this kind of capacity. The members who provided grounds for the group to enter the second area, were treated as persons whose attitudes deserve to be scorned, rather than respected. The suspension and the active listening were the components that were not present at all. It was more than obvious that this was a result of the unchanged, "ill" mental models that do not even provide minimal possibility for developing systems thinking and created an image that the organization and its purposeful impeded situation could possibly provide minimal conditions for building up and applying organizational learning.

CONCLUSION

Deliberate fragmentation of sense and intuition that represent the basis for formation of systems thinking is practiced in a rather large number of social and organizational systems. The communication is reduced to conveying accepted authority as "truths" whereas unethical influence is the antagonist for assuring that objectives will be obtained. This results in situations that seriously limit the application of dialogue. Thus, created mental models do not leave space for systems thinking and dialogue. The managers of organizational systems share firmly established opinion, with built-in persuasion that their way of thinking and their attitudes are confirmed

truths, which have to be completely accepted by the subordinates, and without having any second thoughts or analysis whatsoever. The existing ethical, moral and professional norms in general, treat the personal mastery with a certain amount of cynicism and the working environment develops a high degree of resistance towards those who practice this.

The research provided confirmation for our presuppositions, based on our personal experience, both in a professional and in a context of social living. Our work undoubtedly shows that the "Balkan culture" as a *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*, creates a mentality with predominant individualism, criticism, hypocrisy, servile obedience, instead of one prevalent in unity, integrity, democracy and ethics. This creates a climate of uncertainty, absence of respect and lack of will for true cooperation, which technically means lacking preconditions whatsoever for building functional mental models and practicing dialogue as a form of interpersonal understanding and cooperativeness. Also, there is a lack of critical thought, but even worse is that there is no expressed wish to surpass such conditions. Actually, there is a leadership crisis of every level, which is most probably a consequence of the attitude of the society as a whole and the organizations within, according to which the quality of the individual is considered a handicap, rather than a value worthy of respect.

The genesis of such states is to be searched for in the cultural aspect, deriving from the way individuals are taught and educated. There is a necessity to introduce changes in the educational system, in its cycles, as well as in the system values of the society in general, in order to overcome the present situation.

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