

Reconciling hierarchy and democracy: The Value of Management

Learning

Biographical Notes

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Abstract

Pluralistic organisations are often argued to have become an indisputable reality for senior managers. In consequence, the role of hierarchy has come under close scrutiny. How can organisations balance the need for congruence, provided through hierarchy, with the need for greater organisational democracy? As yet, the potential for management education and learning to impact on this debate at either an organisational or societal level, has been largely unfulfilled. In this paper we argue that the aspirational values of liberal adult educationalists have a significant contribution to make to the management of contemporary organisations. We position these values alongside the business requisites that shape organisations and examine the motivations of senior managers to apply these ideas in practice. The concept of voluntarism, derived from the field of political philosophy, is proposed as an alternative organisational binding mechanism that alters the rationale for the role of hierarchy. The implications for senior executives and management educationalists are considered.

Key words: adult education, hierarchy, organisational democracy, voluntarism.

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The economic and technological transformations of the past twenty years are believed to have had a profound effect on organisational form (Sparrow and Cooper, 1998, Cohen 1999). It is frequently argued that there has been a movement of power away from the possessors of tangible assets towards power derived from the ownership of knowledge and information (see, for example, Stewart 1997; Child and McGrath 2002). Whether or not these 'new' organisational stakeholders really only serve shareholder interests, as ever, or are 'owners' in their own right, is a secondary question for most practical purposes. The redistribution of power has established pluralistic organisations, where stakeholders hold a diversity of conceptions about organisational purpose, organising and intended outcomes (Huzzard and Östergren 2002), as an indisputable reality for senior managers (Cludts 1999). In these circumstances, the central role of hierarchy in organisations has come under close scrutiny.

This dispersal of power, and the attendant move towards greater organisational democratisation, has required management to reconsider the problem of securing employee commitment (Sparrow and Cooper 1998). Attention has focused in particular on the grand design of organisational vision, values, and culture mechanisms that supposedly operate as binding agents in lieu of hierarchical control. On the face of it, these design features allow empowerment to coexist with unity of organisational purpose. However, the success of such effort to liberalise the work place has been limited in practice (Heller, 1998, Argyris 1998). Some argue that this is because managers are still working from a perspective that values unity and

control over plurality (see for example, Cloke and Goldsmith 2002). But more fundamentally still, initiatives both to liberate and secure commitment through the design of organisational culture appear more like coercion if an individual's ability to 'live the values' is then subject to appraisal and enforcement (Willmott 1993, 2003, Robertson and Swan 2003, Gabriel 1999).

How, then, can organisations balance the need for congruence, in terms of shared work processes and purposes, with the need for greater organisational democracy in which there is 'voice' and the opportunity to act autonomously? For without the latter as prerequisites, the ability to innovate, challenge and respond rapidly are greatly reduced (Ashmos et al 2002). As Child and McGrath point out, reconsidering the centrality of bureaucracy, and hence hierarchy, to organisational form is a fundamental question:

'How can we improve upon, even replace such a painstakingly well developed concept of how human beings collectively best accomplish their objectives?' (2002:1136).

Since organisational design solutions have already received so much attention, as yet with limited outcomes for greater democratisation (Manville and Ober 2003), it is our intention, in this paper, to look elsewhere in addressing the problem of congruence in organisational forms. One alternative starting point is the transformation of attitudes to hierarchical control through management education. Yet the potential for management education and learning₁ to impact on this debate at either an organisational or societal level, has been largely unfulfilled. For Burgoyne and Jackson, leading commentators in the field of management learning (ML), its

effectiveness has been curtailed by a preoccupation with unitary values (1997:54). This has the effect of oversimplifying ML processes by excluding the cognitive, symbolic and political elements of management development activity. In turn, that has led to a situation where many management development initiatives have failed to make an impact on organisation effectiveness because they focus on an idealized notion of what should be happening, rather than factoring in inherent organisational and interpersonal complexities (ibid).

At a societal level, the way in which ML has been moulded has also come under criticism. Despite the aspirations of liberal adult educationalists to foster values of challenge, critique and reform, commentators have pointed to the increasing managerialism (Holman 2000:205), vocationalism (Tight 1998:117) and instrumental rationality (Torres 1996:200) evident in much Western government policy on adult education. These influences have served to limit the scope of management learning by emphasizing a vision of management that denies its social, political and moral aspects. In doing so it reinforces the values of standardisation and formalisation (Holman 2000:207) that lie at the heart of the bureaucratic model of organisation.

In contrast, we will maintain in this paper that such lack of progress may be surmounted, and that ML does indeed have significant potential to reframe the nature of hierarchy in contemporary organisational forms and in doing so enable individuals to exercise greater control over their own work lives (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Our goals are thus emancipatory in design, which as Connell and Nord (1996) observe, is consistent with an increasing acceptance within organisation science of contributions informed by such interests. These writers also note that scholars in this

field are increasingly willing to discuss their values, and we acknowledge our own in this spirit.

We argue that the particular aspirational values of liberal adult educationalists, above all, enlightenment, personal autonomy and emancipation, provide a basis for establishing the kind of organisational mechanisms that can enable senior executives to synthesise the tension between diversity of interests and organisational coherence. However, these values are in themselves but one subset of the very broad educational church (Tight 1996), and at present remain primarily of interest to adult educators and some management learning practitioners alone. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide further voice for these ideas. We intend to articulate a broad agenda that positions the aspirational values of liberal adult education (AE) as having a significant contribution to make to contemporary organisational forms in terms of democratisation and effectiveness. The paper is intended to stimulate debate (Driver 2002) about the values of AE by examining these as the basis for organisational voluntarism. We define organisational voluntarism as a stage of organisational evolution/a marker of organisational form in which managers recognise the need to engage in debate and action in order to pursue matters of individual and organisation concern irrespective of formal position or explicit authority. The original concept is drawn from the field of political philosophy, and explored here as a nascent alternative unifying mechanism to hierarchy. Our intention is to illuminate how the greater adoption of voluntarism as an organizing principle may be facilitated by the application of AE values.

In sympathy with several other authors (see for example, Fox and Grey 2000, Tight 2000), we see considerable gain to be had by greater cross disciplinary discussion in

the area of AE, and as such, we have deliberately tried to provide a broad ranging argument to encourage debate from different constituencies. We begin by briefly summarising the dominant values evident in the liberal subset of AE, positioning them alongside the field of ML and the business requisites that are considered to shape contemporary organisations. Following this, motivations of senior managers to apply these ideas in practice are examined, addressing in particular the self-fulfilling limitations that a hierarchical mindset imposes. The concept of voluntarism is then explored as an alternative binding mechanism to hierarchy in the context of pluralist organisation and the underpinning association with AE values discussed. The paper will conclude with an examination of the implications for senior executives and management educationalists themselves.

Adult Education and Management Learning

AE encompasses many different disciplines, including political science, economics, psychology, history, and sociology, each of which serves to create a rich, yet diverse set of epistemological starting points. A full analysis of the values that inform such a varied field is consequently not possible here, and we summarise only key themes pertinent to the ML agenda. We follow a reformist approach (Thomas 1982) to AE derived from a conflict model of society, where, building on the work of Paulo Freire (1972) and others, the focus for AE is to emancipate individuals by causing them to question the power relationships embedded in socio-economic structures, value systems and cultural norms by which knowledge comes to be taken as granted. From this perspective power is viewed, not simply as a commodity possessed by one group over another, but as a relational characteristic implicit in all social practices. We pursue a reformist position because this perspective has been particularly

influential in the management learning debate (Burgoyne and Reynolds 1997) and because the reformist school of thinking most closely allies with the agenda for revising the role of hierarchy as the primary mechanism of integration, and our aim in this paper is to provide greater voice for this agenda.

From this liberal reformist perspective, AE, in the western world is a tradition that depends on faith in informed free choice, self awareness, emancipation through self understanding, and a capacity for self reflection through rational discourse (Mezirow 2000). Over time much ML activity has come to embody many of these tenets of reformist AE philosophy. For example, key to this tradition in both AE and ML is the belief that learning is constrained by the historical power networks in which it is embedded (Chia 1997, Reynolds 1999, Brookfield 2001). These need to be surfaced if rational discourse is to take place free from domination. Thus in both AE (Mezirow 2000) and ML (Burgoyne and Jackson 1997), commentators are keen to create protected learning environments in which the conditions for fostering greater personal autonomy and self-authorship are possible. For example, Burgoyne and Jackson (1997) put forward a thesis of ML as a pluralist arena where spaces need to be created and protected to encourage debate about organisation purpose and values. The enhanced personal autonomy that this dialogue can provide is considered central to democratic processes at both an organisational (Coopey and Burgoyne 2000, Cunningham and Dawes 1997) and societal level (Warren 1992). For if individuals are more empowered, their experiences will enable them to be more socially responsible, voluntaristic more tolerant, more knowledgeable, and more attentive to their own and others' interests (Warren 1992, Mezirow 2000).

Yet, both also suffer from limited practical impact. AE values are generally accepted in practice, as aspirational and the product of democratic habits of the heart (Bellah 1992). In an ML context Reynolds (2000) and Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997) describe them as utopian but see them as influencing such ML concepts as self-development, self managed learning and teamwork. They point out (ibid), however, that if management is intrinsically associated with the exercise of power, values such as openness and trust may only serve to render people accessible to even greater degrees of control. In contrast, Mezirow, sees these same values as 'a credible response to the post modernist threat that society's power inevitably corrupts critical discourse and rationality' (1997:13). Nevertheless, it is clear that their application in practice remains relatively limited, especially in an organisational setting.

If, therefore, these values have hitherto largely represented an unfulfilled agenda of both adult and ML educationalists, why should they still be considered of relevance to today's organisational members? Our interest in particular lies with senior managers as a social group, because it is this group, who, like it or not, are best placed to institute such organisational reform from their hierarchical vantage point.

Changes in organisational form

There has been much consideration of how the broader shifts in the nature of social institutions are impacting organisational forms (Sparrow and Cooper 1998, Cohen 2003). Gratton and Ghoshal (2003) describe this 'revolution' in terms of a desire for individuals to express their potential, the need for protection from the arbitrary use of power, and involvement in people determining the conditions of their association (2003:1). These types of change are consequently seen to be transforming individual

relationships with institutions and, in consequence, at both social and organisational levels, there are increased pressures for greater democratisation (Patten 2000, Vigoda and Golembiewsky 2001, Vigoda 2002). In this context we define organisational democratisation in terms of the need for enhanced individual autonomy and the legitimisation of processes that enable such individuals to be self reflective - to deliberate, judge, choose and act upon courses of action (Held 1987) as free as possible from unequal power relationships.

At the same time as demands for these democratised organisation forms increase, the competitive business environment forces organisations to be more efficient and responsive, in turn creating loosely coupled and structurally diverse organisations (see for example, Malnight 2001, Schilling and Steensma 2001, Ravasi and Verona 2000) with varied and competing interests (Butcher and Clarke 2002). In such pluralistic settings 'leadership roles are shared, objectives divergent and power diffuse' (Denis et al 2001:809) and sustainable competitive advantage is seen to lie in 'micro assets that are hard to discern and awkward to trade' (Johnson et al 2003:4). These assets are most likely to lie at the edges of organisations in the hands of line managers, such that more people, more often, need to be involved in strategy than ever before (ibid).

Faced with these institutional shifts and competitive pressures, business leaders are therefore being forced to reappraise basic assumptions about the nature of jobs and the design of organisations (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2002, Gratton 2003, Sparrow and Cooper 1998). In particular, they are required to consider the costs and benefits of high trust systems in securing the commitment of such autonomous knowledge assets. To what extent can employers trust employee capabilities to exercise

responsible self direction and self control and to what extent should this self direction be guided by a dominant philosophy of shared values (Sparrow and Cooper 1998)?

Whilst there are divergent views as to the impact of these challenges on organisational form, there appear to be certain common themes emerging: firstly, devolved power and responsibility for many more organisational decisions, leading to smaller, self-organising units (see, for example, Miles et al 1997, Child and McGrath 2002, Ashmos et al 2002); secondly, acceptance of diverse internal and external interests based on power derived from successful relationships rather than hierarchical position (see, for example, Denis et al 2001, Buchanan and Badham 1999, Butcher and Clarke 2002). Lastly, high levels of psychological ownership of organisational activities that depend on individual contribution, knowledge and leadership (Handy 1997, Miles et al 1997, Kim 2002).

Thompson and Davidson (1996) suggest that these themes are merely the product of an anti bureaucratic rhetoric and bear little resemblance to the reality of organisational life. We have some sympathy with this view, for these alleged changes reflect a strongly pluralist/democratic model of organisation to which values of AE have a natural affinity, and in principle should have a profound effect on hierarchy as the central means of maintaining organisational congruence. However, despite the pressure on executives to reconsider the conventions of organisational structure, these emerging operating principles have been argued to create deep organisational tension because they appear so at odds with the bureaucratic mindset (Adler 1999, Child and McGrath 2002). Ghoshal describes this problem as the implementation of third generation strategies, through second generation organisations by first generation managers – ‘whose personal sense of their roles and value added, and

whose personal skills and competencies have all been shaped by an earlier outdated model' (1997:626)

We contend that this 'outdated model' exemplifies how the wider institutions of organisational and social life act as deep influences of action (Giddens 1984). Since hierarchy, is arguably implicit in all forms of organising (Leavitt 2003), it has come to be seen as a process for facilitating dominant bureaucratic values, whereby power focussed at the corporate centre and top down decision making become the 'natural' mechanism of unitary working (Butcher and Atkinson 2001, Cludts 1999, Adler 1999).

Such is the influence of this way of viewing organisations that attempts to empower employees and to create less authoritarian organisation cultures only tend to reinforce unitary approaches to managing (Cludts 1999, Willmott 1993, Weick 1998). This has the effect of creating a gap between the rhetoric of employee participation and the reality of organisational control (Legge 1995, Thompson and Davidson 1996). In turn, this encourages cynicism (Dean et al 1998) and a calculative approach to participation (Cludts 1999). The pre-eminence of this schema also has the effect of diminishing the legitimacy of alternative models of organising, and thus the opportunity for radically reframing the role of participation and its juxtaposition with hierarchy remains under-explored by senior managers (Cludts 1999). It is precisely to redress this bias that AE/ML values can have an impact, and we offer three reasons why, in theory at least, they are worthy of serious consideration by managers.

Challenge and Critique

A key product of AE is the value of critique, especially of power relationships and their impact on how individuals frame and resolve issues (Brookfield 2001). In an organisational setting, encouraging emancipation through heightened awareness of the impact of institutionalised power provides the possibility for revealing how a unitary frame of reference constrains thinking (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). In theory, for those managers already alive to the prospect of greater individual autonomy, this insight might serve to champion organisational pluralism and to challenge the dominance of the hierarchy as a means of ensuring congruence. An ability to appraise the role of hierarchy would be especially important for those executives with responsibility for organisation design, as it would for managers frustrated by institutionalised routines that reflect the centrality of power in organisations (Hales 1999, Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

Working with Plurality of Motives

As organisations fragment into smaller, devolved operating units, effective organisational governance becomes more dependent on satisfying the resultant diversity of interests and claims to (partial) independence. Reconciling these is key to collective organisational endeavour being sustained (Cludts 1999), yet attempting to do so primarily through top down decision-making is not feasible (Ashkenas 1999). Consequently, in recent years management has sought ways to take greater account of local needs and opinions so as to retain corporate-wide commitment to strategic goals. However, there is now substantial evidence that the alternatives of controlled decentralisation or culture management are far from effective, and in the case of the latter, of questionable ethical rigour (see, for example, Willmott 1993, Hope and Hendry 1995, Ackers and Preston 1997, Whinstanley et al 1996).

Notwithstanding these problems, the requirement to address diverse interests inevitably accelerates organisational democratisation. Yet for democratisation to stand as a complimentary unifying mechanism to hierarchy, sectional interests need to have a 'voice', the autonomy and the independence of mind to participate in debate about contested views (Cludts 1999). The presence of AE values of challenge and critique, open discourse, and a willingness to seek voluntary agreement, would strengthen the political processes required for reconciling competing interests inherent in devolved organisation forms.

Protected Environments

Implicit in the notion of reformatory AE is its subversive and irreverent nature, such that 'when AE has a purpose to change society in either radical or reformatory respects, authority is likely to curb it' (Thomas 1982:57). Consequently, as Mezirow points out, adult educators often create 'protected environments' in which to foster learning insights, as free as possible from the influence of unequal power relationships (2000:31). Whilst Mezirow's point is predominantly made to highlight the importance of collaborative learning relationships in AE, the idea is picked up by other authors. For example, Yorks and Marsick (2000) recognise that the questioning and voluntary nature of AE may well be considered threatening by senior management. They argue that organisations need to create space for learning to take place, but point out that because of the unpredictable outcomes from such activities, senior management may be apprehensive about doing so. The possibility of creating protected environments to foster emancipation from hierarchical thinking therefore provides a further application of AE values for organisations. Importantly, it

embodies the reflexivity inherent in liberal AE practice in that it explicitly acknowledges AE's subversive tendencies.

The AE Agenda in ML Practice

These reasons for giving managerial consideration to AE reformist values and practices do not, in themselves, provide the mechanism for resolving the problem of congruence, precisely because they fundamentally recast the relevance of organisational unity and are thus likely to be viewed with suspicion. In practice, the products and consequences of AE will hold varying degrees of legitimacy in managerial eyes. How, then, could ML professionals persuade managers to see these as useful in evolving organisational forms more commensurate with the requirements of the contemporary business environment? We argue there are three possible points of departure for increasing the adoption of AE values.

Top Down

In as much as it is argued there is increasing acceptance of organisational pluralism (Cloke and Goldsmith 2002), top managers may be receptive to an AE agenda. Their efforts to balance local autonomy with corporate imperatives appears to imply as much, as does their recognition that continuous innovation does not come from corporate policies and processes (Sutton 2001), so much as from those who are able to operate outside existing frames of reference. ML activity designed to enhance top management appreciation of the utility of AE values is thus one possible starting point. Its great attraction lies in the organisational redesign that would flow as a

consequence, that is to say, in hierarchical power being harnessed to transform the role of hierarchy.

However, there are two evident limitations to this approach. Firstly, the search for an organisational unifying mechanism more fitting to the contemporary business environment cannot be taken as strong evidence that top management is willing to renounce hierarchical principles. This can be seen in the application of ideas about the Learning Organisation (Senge 1990, Pedlar et al 1991) in which lifelong learning, self critique, emancipation and collaborative learning are all considered key (Easterby Smith 1997). Applied top down as an OD solution to organisation renewal however, this approach has been criticised as an altruistic and unrealisable fad (Tight 1996), as well as functionalist and normative (Easterby-Smith 1997). In effect, values of economic efficiency tend to rationalise attempts to adopt more pluralistic approaches. Secondly, the motivation of ML practitioners to engage top management in the AE values debate is open to question. These professionals may themselves struggle to accept the pluralism that they operate within; moreover, they may lack sufficient hierarchical position to capture top management attention (Butcher et al 2002). In other words, the self-fulfilling quality of a unification based on the mechanism of hierarchy may assert itself despite its increasingly improbable efficacy. Whilst there may be some purchase through a top down approach, it cannot therefore be the central platform of ML activity.

Bottom Up

Introducing AE values from the bottom up is, on face value, a more promising proposition. However, a bottom up approach mandated by top management is

inevitably susceptible to the same censorship tendency noted above. We therefore confine our analysis hereto the notion of bottom up processes existing beyond the reach of top management. Typically these will arise when groups at lower hierarchical levels seek of their own volition to develop voice, independence and autonomy in their activities.

In recent years there has been a greater exploration of bottom up processes of change that reflect efforts to circumvent the concentration of hierarchical power. Much of this stems from communities of practice theory (Brown and Duguid, 1991, 2001, Lave and Wenger 1991) and in particular the work of critical theorists in this area (notably Reynolds 1998, Willmott 1997, Fox 2000). In these communities, learning, innovation and its dissemination take place in both canonical (formal) groups and non-canonical (informal) groups (Brown and Duguid 1991). From a critical perspective, power and knowledge are indivisible from each other and institutional power distributions are a substantial mediating variable in the way learning and change are constrained or exploited (Fox 2000). Because such communities work on voluntary innovations that threaten existing power distributions, they can be perceived as unconventional, and to avoid hierarchical repression, may need to take care to protect themselves (Clarke and Meldrum 1999). This can be achieved through lobbying and securing sponsors at senior organisational levels, and careful boundary management of information (Swan et al 2002).

Unofficial organisational entities of this kind appear naturally to embrace many AE values (Reedy 2003). Community members determine their own agenda, and the voluntary nature of their action implies a level of autonomy and independence of thinking. In generating support they have to take account of alternative points of view,

and seek some level of agreement for their actions if they are to establish organisational legitimacy. Most importantly, because these groups are not formally sanctioned initially and act against the status quo, they implicitly include a critical assessment of existing power relationships, and in consequence, individuals acquire an ability to influence organisational working (Clarke and Meldrum 1999). A community of practice may therefore represent 'space' in which conflicting organisational purposes can be debated, and a process through which a degree of personal emancipation can be achieved (Burgoyne and Jackson 1997).

However, whilst the value of voluntaristic community in learning is now well established as a major precept in both AE and ML canons (Courtney 1992, Reedy 2003, Taylor 2000), there is little evidence to suggest that ML practitioners have embraced this in practice (Burgoyne and Jackson 1997). ML strategy has yet to evolve towards the active search for unsanctioned organisational activity which, once found, is then supported and protected on its own terms. Rather, it would appear that ML practitioners have sought to graft pluralist AE methodologies onto hierarchical value systems that has resulted in the alignment and structuring of communities as a top down managed process (Swan et al 2002, Fox 2000, Reynolds 2000).

Voluntarism as a means of achieving congruence

We therefore argue that neither top down nor bottom up processes provide the senior executive with a vehicle or rationale for adopting AE values in re-conceptualising the problem of congruence. Neither starting point engenders the consideration of AE values as integral to meeting the challenges of managing multiple stakeholders whilst

maintaining essential levels of organisational coherence. For to do so amounts to re-examining our understanding of organisation purpose.

According to agency theory, hierarchy is intended to produce a level of control to ensure economic efficiency in the pursuit of shareholder returns. Because shareholders have a super-ordinate proprietary claim, organisational purpose is associated with one constituent above all others. However, aside from objections on the grounds of political bias, this solution to the problem of ownership is evidently unsustainable in a society where multiple stakeholders are able to assert themselves (Etzioni 1998). If hierarchy now needs to function in a way that reflects the claims of many different constituents, it is because organisational purpose cannot be cast in unitary terms. Instead, purpose is determined either as an outcome of undesired conflict or through the mediation of desired conflict, that is to say, democracy. Reframing the problem of congruence in contemporary organisational forms is thus one of reconciling hierarchy with democracy, of going beyond the notion that more of one necessitates less of the other.

In attempting to address this central organisational issue we have found in the arena of political philosophy a parallel debate that we consider to be instructive, a precedence for which was set by Graham (1991) in conceptualising organisational citizenship with reference to modern political theory. In the political discourse surrounding the basis for a good democratic society, the same polarised tension between top down control and autonomy can be identified. Should society rely on the state to shape good citizens, as social conservatives would have it, or should good citizens be the product of a liberal moral pluralism? Thinkers such as Etzioni (1999, 1995), Putnam (2000), and Verba et al (1995) promote a third, communitarian

approach to tackling this issue that has many parallels for the debate about achieving organisational coherence. From a communitarian perspective, in the good society the moral voice that determines the nature of good citizenship is the product of a diversity of voluntary associations, from membership of societies and clubs at one end of the continuum, to membership of political parties and religious movements at the other. These groups serve to mediate between the private world of individuals and the large institutions of society. The opportunity selectively to participate in associations, free from state influence, is fundamental to the creation and preservation of liberty. However, most importantly, a good society is determined by such voluntary associations implicitly inculcating a level of self control in its members by introducing them to particular values that reinforce individuals' normative commitments to that society. In other words, it is the ability to cultivate a limited set of core values within a framework free from coercion that is the hallmark of a mature democratic society.

We wish to introduce the argument that the concept of voluntarism, and its constituent themes of diversity and self-control provide a plausible alternative integrating mechanism in organisational settings where accommodating plurality of interest is critical, notably for example with knowledge intensive industries (Cunha 2002). In parallel with the concept of the good society, the 'good organisation' would give priority to establishing voluntarism as a principle of organisational design. As democratic systems of governance ensure and protect the right to voluntary association, so hierarchy may serve to legitimise this same principle.

At this point in time, when set against the dominance of the rational mindset and the illegitimacy of alternative approaches, voluntaristic behaviour in organisations can be

best understood as an expression of individual agency. Over time, its wider adoption as a managerial approach will depend upon its efficacy in meeting calls for both greater democratisation and commercial effectiveness. It is important to note however, that we see hierarchy and plurality as always being in tension; they are at one level dialectically opposed, and at another, both essential aspects of organizing (Brunson 2002). As in mature societies, once levels of democracy have been attained, the focus for political discourse is one of expressing preferences about its enactment. We do not suggest, therefore, that voluntarism will resolve this tension in plurality and coherence, but instead that it provides a 'relational synthesis' (Clegg 2003:378) of both.

This perspective is congruent with the emerging discourses on co evolution and complexity, (Lewin and Volberda 1999, Brown and Eisenhardt 1997, Boisot and Child 1999) which take as their point of departure the idea that organisation change and evolution are a reflection of multi level and multi directional causalities in inter and intra firm interdependencies. This perspective thus gives close attention to the plurality of interests at play in organisations. Weick (1998), Kamoche and Cunha (2001) and others have employed a jazz metaphor to understand the resulting evolutionary process in which organizing is viewed as the embellishment of small structures, individual action and the negotiation of 'a shared sense of beat' (Weick 1998:550). In knowledge intensive industries in particular, a few simple organising rules or semi structures (Brown and Eisenhardt 1997, Okhuysen and Eisenhardt 2002) are argued to enable individual action in the interests of organisation effectiveness.

In this context, organisation voluntarism may constitute one such simple rule and we thus define voluntarism as a stage of organisational evolution/a marker of organisational form in which managers recognise the need to engage in debate and action in order to pursue matters of individual and organisation concern irrespective of formal position or explicit authority. The principle of voluntarism predicts that unofficially constituted groups in organisational settings are able to provide the level of self-control necessary for the maintenance of congruence (Ashmos et al 2002); a multiplicity of stakeholder agendas does not necessarily create organisational incoherence (Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003, Thietart and Forgues 1997). Further, that such groups are more likely to do so when they can express voice and contest views about which organisational values are important to them (Cludts 1999). As with voluntary associations, organisational arrangements of this type would bring people together to pursue interests through collective action, serve to distribute power, and mediate between individuals and the organisation, thereby creating a sense of involvement. Crucially, they would voluntarily facilitate the flow of information between different groups and the organisational connectivity required to stimulate innovation (Ashmos et al 2002).

The role for hierarchy would then become one of seeking to encourage voluntary groups to develop their own identity. This may take the form of praise, reward or support, whilst avoiding coercion towards centrally determined priorities, in order that groups themselves influence the establishment of organisational core values.

Extending the parallel with democratic governance, the role of hierarchy would also be to mediate between deserving causes, challenging constituents to justify the significance of their agendas and their demands for resource. The role of top management would remain to provide fundamental organisational framing, but by

taking into consideration many voices, and by satisfactorily justifying their conclusions and actions to their constituents.

Organisational leadership thus comes to reflect a collective phenomenon (Barker 1997) in which the representation of different organisational constituencies, by a wide range of individuals assumes a greater significance. This representative role is essential to ensure that participation does not become enforced and thus merely provide a more sophisticated form of control (Robertson and Swan 2003). In practice this means that politics, as with its counterpart in a political institutional setting, is a necessary and logical process by which diverse interests and stakeholders are reconciled (Butcher and Clarke 2002, Held 1987). Indeed, as with the political institutional model, significant interest groups serve to check the power invested in formal hierarchy. Therefore, far from politics being an irrational organisational response (Stone 1997), such activity becomes a judicious way of managing inevitable differences. The legitimate pursuit of agendas also provides greater opportunities for individuals to negotiate self and work identities and thus provides choices regarding identification with wider organisational priorities. In this way communities become arenas for the 'politics of difference' (Reynolds 2000:71). This differs from traditional communitarian and much co evolutionary thinking, which often fail to take account of asymmetries of power and social difference (ibid 2000).

Arguably, nascent elements of the 'good' organisation, which highlight the individual and organisational benefits of voluntarism, have long been discernible.

A recent coevolutionary study by Galunic and Eisenhardt (2001) reveals how senior managers have crafted an organisational form where diversity and autonomy of action is greatly encouraged, but an appropriate degree of alignment is still achieved.

This culture and architecture are the result of a decentralised and self organised behaviour. Divisions are free to shape their own portfolios, including the warrant to contest other divisions for control of different products and markets. In response, senior managers reward winners and good corporate citizenship but also help losers to improve. Most importantly, such decisions are guided by social considerations about fairness as well as economic imperatives for profit and growth. However, in this study, as with much of the coevolutionary discourse, the role of power, remains under explored.

In contrast, Denis et al (2001), in their study of leadership and strategic change in the pluralistic setting of hospital administration, note how the use of power through constructive political activity, in terms of compromise, lobbying, alliances and collaborative solutions are central to the leadership process. In a situation where power is diffuse and objectives divergent, levels of coherence are achieved by constellations of leaders who are sensitive to the needs of different constituencies in order to gain credibility and support. In particular, Denis et al note the role of 'creative individuals and committed unified groups in proactively moving to make change happen' (2001:834) in situations where the legitimacy of change initiatives cannot be taken for granted. The same conclusions are reached by Clarke and Meldrum (1999) in their study of bottom up change and Lipman Blumen and Leavitt's (1999) exploration of 'hot groups' reflects similar aspects of unofficial behaviour.

Evidence of the way in which such communities can stimulate change and innovation is also provided by Swan et al (2002) who demonstrate how radical innovation in the health care sector was achieved against a backdrop of diverse professional interests and uneven power relations. Coherence in approach was achieved through a

discursive strategy, reflective of Reynolds 'politics of difference' (2000:71), that sought to align the competing interests and agendas in the innovation process through the rhetoric of community *and* engagement with the diverse interests that constituted that community. Also, similar to the Galunic and Eisenhardt case, the management team were able to balance commercial interests with the broader values of other groups by sublimating purely economic considerations in the cause of community building. Research by Ashmos et al (2002) suggests that this type of engagement helps to generate multiple perspectives of the environment, In turn, this alters an organisation's predisposition to new challenges and opportunities, thus stimulating innovation and continual adaptation. Similar conclusions are reached by Ravasi and Verona (2001) in their analysis of the Danish company Oticon. In Oticon innovation is sustained by structural ambiguity and voluntary project initiatives, and strategic coherence the product of continual negotiation amongst a plurality of coordinating groups and roles.

Whilst these studies sometimes reflect different epistemological starting points, common to each are high levels of structural ambiguity and thus the opportunity for groups to initiate activity and influence outcomes irrespective of formal authority. In the work of Denis et al (ibid)), this was largely the result of individual agency, whilst in the studies of Ravasi and Verona (ibid) and Galunic and Eisenhardt (ibid) this activity had become an accepted cultural norm. In the study by Swan et al, the creation of a community was used as a device deliberately to overcome unequal power distributions.

Towards an agenda for ML professionals

In positioning voluntarism as a nascent approach to resolving the tensions of organisational plurality and coherence, we therefore argue that the principles of AE represent a vehicle for encouraging this transformation by surfacing the vested interests of the bureaucratic model. Voluntarism is predicated on an acknowledgement of the value of plurality, and without the capabilities of challenge and critique, voluntary groups will be unable to engage in debate with that diversity of interests in a way that takes account of institutionalised power relationships evident in the rational mindset. Nor will voluntary groups be able to participate in non-conventional activity unless they are able to protect themselves from traditional hierarchical control.

We believe that the application of these principles can be promoted on the basis that voluntarism responds to calls for both responsive and agile organisations and more democratic organisation forms. In knowledge intensive industries, where plurality of interests are often at their most pronounced, the concept of voluntarism provides a framework for capitalising on diversity in the pursuit of innovation. Local communities, being at the interface of the organisation and its environment are seen to be a rich source of innovation (Brown and Duguid 1991, 2001). Research by Ashmos et al (2002) and Ravasi and Verona (2001) highlights how participation helps to generate multiple perspectives that in turn alters an organisation's predisposition to new challenges and opportunities, thus potentially stimulating innovation.

Our own early research in this area (Clarke 2004) suggests that working with a voluntaristic mindset also enables opportunities for enhancing individual autonomy. Voluntarism requires managers to work with a wide variety of constituencies promoting a plurality of discourses about the nature of organising, and thus extends

the opportunities for identity formation in ways that challenge institutionalised definitions (Alvesson and Willmott 2002 Robertson and Swan 2003, Knights and McCabe 2003). In doing so, managers are able to establish levels of micro emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott 1996, 2002) very much in keeping with traditional AE values.

Despite these supportive findings, we are nevertheless left with the central question of why senior management would be willing to embrace this transition. The evidence we have is hardly sufficient for ML professionals to challenge deeply embedded beliefs about rational organisation, whether this is on the ground of organisational effectiveness or ethical governance. More encouragingly, it may be argued that as pluralism becomes undeniable, so too does the pressure on executives to find workable alternative organisational arrangements, for example, that enhance attracting and retaining talented employees. However, there is little to suggest that manifest transformation of the social context of organisations represents the impelling educational force necessary to produce a corresponding cognitive and affective shift in managers, the faltering of the empowerment imperative over the past quarter century being a case in point (Argyris1998).

If ML professionals have been largely impotent in introducing AE values from the starting point of either the top down or bottom up, it seems improbable that they will be able to make a cogent argument for introducing the principle of voluntarism and AE values as an alternative means of accomplishing coherence. The same preoccupation with unitary thinking, whether organisationally or self-imposed is likely to prevail. As Reynolds (2000) notes, whilst there are some glimpses of ML/AE principles being applied in practice, it is hard to identify management education

practice that clearly reflects the 'politics of difference'. Yet in as much as ML professionals identify with AE values, they probably represent the greatest single repository of understanding of the significance of those values for organisations. If this insight cannot be brought to bear directly, then the ML professional's task can only be one of brokering the required independent intellectual critique and educational process necessary to elucidate the significance of the AE agenda, and of creating the organisational exposure for this to be possible. The natural candidate for this intervention is the academic community, most particularly business schools, since their intellectual sovereignty should provide not only critique, but also the protected environment necessary to consider AE values.

However, the proposition that business schools deliver intellectual independence is a matter of considerable controversy. At the centre of this debate has been the concern that business schools have become unduly responsive to institutional pressures for greater vocationalism and for the professionalisation of management that takes insufficient account of the social, political and ethical aspects of managing (Reed and Anthony 1992, Willmott 1994, Holman 2000, Reynolds 2000). One effect of this is that managers may only 'surface learn' and be unable to engage with the deep level processing required to grasp the significance of AE values in practice (Watson 1996:461). As Burrell (1989) puts it, they learn with their beliefs rather than about their beliefs. Furthermore, because the intellectual heritage of many business school faculty leads them to emphasise the cerebral rather than the emotional domain of learning, the developmental agenda implicit in AE values is rarely part of the curriculum (Willmott 1994). Case studies and analytical models are the established currency, not in-depth personal development (Mintzberg 1992). This raises the

question as to the likely motivation of business schools to respond to a call from ML specialists to pursue a reformist AE agenda.

The most compelling reason is the very need for relevance sought by management in their struggle to reconcile unitary organisational principles with the reality of pluralistic purpose. Furthermore, because business education has become big business, the business schools are now subject to unprecedented global media attention which has the power to transform them destructively from substance to image, but also constructively towards creating substance of greater worth (Gioia and Corley, 2002). Amongst other effects, this growing transparency has revealed that there is little evidence of business school research influencing management practice, calling into question the professional relevance of management scholarship (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). In other words, the conditions are increasingly conducive to demand relevance from the business schools, and ML professionals are organisationally well placed to do so. If in responding, the business schools can establish the true intellectual independence they claim to possess, then they will offer the protected environment necessary for management to consider the significance of AE values for their organisations.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper has been to contribute to the debate about the role of AE and ML principles in the democratisation of organisations, with the problem of congruence in mind. We have taken as our starting point the idea that without principles and practices for encouraging and channelling commitment genuinely unfettered by tacit or implicit coercion, organisations are unlikely now to be able to

operate effectively (Manville and Ober 2003). Whilst pronouncements on ‘the end of management’ (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2002) may be premature, reconfiguring the role of hierarchy is clearly a central consideration. Here we have sought to introduce the idea that this is dependent upon management appreciating the value of voluntarism in both valuing stakeholder diversity and maintaining levels of strategic coherence.

However, evidently this is no easy task. If democracy is rooted in free discourse, the requisite level of voluntarism can only be achieved if managers themselves are confident to challenge and critique existing power relationships, and able to resolve the apparent contradiction presented by a plurality of motives. When informed by reformist adult education values, management learning provides perhaps the only arena to debate these issues, and create the profound effect of raising consciousness of self identity and autonomy (Habermas 1975, cited in Warren 1992).

In applying these principles, both executives and management learning professionals would be extending the possibilities for greater organisational democracy. In so doing, voluntarism, challenge and critique could be legitimised as central tenets of both organisational design and executive development. If organisational democracy is at least in part dependent on critical and accountable processes of education, then the application of the adult education values we have described here may be one further step toward achieving that.

Note

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1. Clarifying the definitions of management education, management development, organisational learning and related terms has become an endeavour in its own right and does not warrant detailed

exploration here. From this point on we use the term management learning (ML) to indicate those activities that reflect the domains of both management development and management education practice. Adult education (AE), on the other hand, refers to educational activities that are (in theory at least) open to all adults, and management learning is one subset of these.

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Reconciling hierarchy and democracy: the value of management learning

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