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The Shadow of Managerial Logic

ABSTRACT
This article discusses the shadow of managerial logic, when it makes the lived experiences of people in an organization subservient to its own agenda. Appreciative Inquiry can successfully act as a counterbalance between this managerial and experiential logic, and the AI practitioner can deliberately choose a position 'in-between'.

With regard to the literature on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a shadow process, three varieties of AI−shadow relationships are introduced:

1. AI as generating shadow through both its "light" and the censoring impact of polarizing norms;

2. AI as an intervention into the shadow; and

3. AI itself as a shadow process (Fitzgerald et al, 2010).

This article describes as well a fourth relationship: that AI may perpetuate shadow which already exists in an organization, thereby failing to become a countervailing power.

In an attempt to create extraordinary patient care in a hospital, I facilitated an AI process. The goal was to improve the hospital's score with regard to other academic hospitals in the Netherlands within two years. The AI process was successful and resulted in many small and large changes. But it did not generate the sustainable social innovations that AI originally was intended for: to become a vehicle for human development and social-organizational transformation, and support the emergence of a more egalitarian "post-bureaucratic" form of organization (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

'Managerial logic' versus 'mysteries to be embraced'
When AI is applied in organizations, it can become part of what I call "managerial logic". A main feature of this logic is that organisations are "problems to be solved" instead of "mysteries to be embraced". Some other important features of this logic are:

- Emphasizing purpose, goals and results;

[Managers] navigate a virtual world by means of plans, visions, milestones and key performance indicators.

- Regarding people as individual agents who act upon their environment in order to produce results;

- Approaching people and objects as equipment used for production;

- Taking place mostly as a mental activity instead of an experiential one.

Room for mystery

The mysteries referred to in AI do not tend to lie in this managerial logic. They cannot, because managers typically design, build and try to control the building process as much as possible. They navigate a virtual world by means of plans, visions, milestones and key performance indicators characterised by linearity and predictability, with not much room left for mystery.

In the hospital case mentioned above, this kind of logic was palpable, casting its shadow over the AI approach. We inquired into many topics, came up with beautiful stories and developed attractive visions. In the design phase some provocative proposals were developed and realised. But the activities happened within this managerial logic that directed, selected, resourced and supported it with the consequence of expelling mystery. Here is an example of one of the many stories collected, this one from a nurse:

"One time there was no time to move a dying patient to a more quiet room. The wife of the patient was present as well as a couple of doctors and nurses. It was a strange situation: everybody was there and nobody knew exactly what to do. It is a strange thing to wait for somebody to die. I sat beside the wife of the patient, put my arm around her and told her how sorry I felt for her. Afterwards, she returned and told me how much she had appreciated what I did. I felt glad that I did what I did."

A different kind of logic

This story is an example of a different kind of logic, which I call lived experience or practical logic. It is not an example of the technical competence of the nurse, but of an ethical sensitivity for what felt right for her in that particular moment. There was no goal to reach, she did not act on her environment but, as she was immersed in it, acted out of it and her movements were embodied and heartfelt. No one could have prepared her for this situation, because it fell outside her routine repertoire.

This example of a highpoint is unlikely to be appreciated from a managerial point of view, because the event is not designed and cannot be controlled. But experiences like these are important for many, because these extraordinary moments of embodied practice have their roots in personal values and habits, and act as continuous attunements to the environments in which people function. People do not try to fulfil some ideal in the future, to live up to certain organizational values, or to meet key performance indicators. Instead, they tend to express themselves in daily activities; to respond as best they can to the situation at hand without a predetermined goal.

The living core of organizations

Embracing mystery in organizations is, in my opinion, inquiry into the lived experiences of daily organizing. Every appreciative story is incomplete and thereby full of potential; it shows ambiguity, especially at moments when our taken-for-granted worlds break down. We bring these extraordinary moments

Generativity is to be found outside the domain of managerial logic.

into our awareness and learn as individuals and groups. Most importantly, this lived experience is non-productive in the managerial sense, but it is complementary to managerial logic in an important way: it is habituated, embodied, non-intellectual and a condition for effective daily actions. It generates and is the source for engagement, passion and compassion and is the stuff that makes the living core of organizations.

The nurse's illustrative story told showed great potential for development of attention and compassion between patients, nurses and doctors in learning how to cope with these kinds of situations. But unfortunately, this particular story disappeared as the AI process went on, while other stories were included and stayed in the process until the end.

So, how can we, as AI practitioners, prevent becoming entangled by the shadow workings of this managerial logic, emphasizing organizational goals at the cost of daily experiences, human connections, emotions and personal values? I do not have a definitive answer, but some thoughts to consider:

1. Generativity is to be found outside the domain of managerial logic. Should we intend to transform social arrangements within organizations, we have to work deliberately from the domain of practical logic.

2. Appreciation and inquiry are also about "breakdown" moments where we become aware of our habitual, taken-for-granted routines and customs. I see these moments as important leverage points for social innovation. These moments may not be regarded as "best" moments, but actually they are.

3. We should be cautious in our use of managerial language with words such as "design", "build", "deliver" etc., and instead find words that are more in the experience domain, such as "dialogue", "develop" and "dwell".

4. Our inquiry and appreciation should persist up to the point that people, especially managers, become immersed in the domain of daily practice.

J. M. W. Turner: Snowstorm (1842)

He struggled to depict the ... emotional involvement of real experience.

Let me give one last compelling example of this practice-based logic. Before Joseph Mallord William Turner painted his famous painting of a snowstorm[1] in 1842, he strapped himself on the mast of The Ariel and experienced for himself the chaos and turbulence of being out at sea in a storm. He struggled to depict the actual ambiguities and emotional involvement of real experience; the struggle for coherence, the fear, the hesitations and the sense of being overwhelmed by a larger force beyond human comprehension and pragmatic control (Chia and Holt, 2009).

Isn't this a shining example for embracing shadow and of appreciating lived experience in organizational life?

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