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moving from simplicity to complexity

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how when people are first promoted in management, they often want quick answers to what it is they are supposed to do. The paper suggests that thinking management is easy and straightforward will lead to greater problems than a beginning that embraces complexity. The paper sets out some theoretical ideas of management and then looks at a case study of a consultation.

Lowering the drawbridge of the fortress: moving from simplicity to complexity

This paper is written for people working in and with corporate organisations; it may also be of interest to professionals about to enter into management or consultants working with managers and professionals. The paper emphasises the dilemmas of organisational specialists such as accountants moving into what the writers think of as the next level of context, namely management. This is a time when specialists move from concentrating on the demands of their discipline to also taking on the responsibility of a stronger voice in the organisation, this voice creating different obligations and constraints on their behaviour. The paper describes a case study of systemic practice with a group of newly appointed managers. The managers expressed great confusion on what it meant to be a manager and we describe an intervention which helped not to reduce the confusion but to place it in context and to make it a source for learning and curiosity. Our conclusion highlights the importance of reflexivity in managerial practice: showing the importance of the manager's insight into the context in which they work and how it will affect their behaviour.

One way of describing the responsibility of the manager is that it involves taking responsibility for the context of a relationship: balancing the needs of the organisation with the needs of staff and developing a capability for understanding rights and obligations, of knowing the times when it is helpful to speak with the voice of the organisation and of times when it may be more helpful to join with the anxieties of staff. In corporate environments, there is often a potential opposition between the organisation and its staff and a key player in preventing this dualism occurring is the manager.

In order to bridge these competing needs, managers need a sense of the context they are operating in and a curiosity about it. Lang and McAdam (1996) write that before ‘we act, we develop our understanding of who would be involved, what stories they might be living with’. This may be just as important an act for managers as for therapists. Who are the people with an interest in the work of their team? Whose voice is strongest? The dilemmas that necessitate the job of the manager are the product of many people who relate to them through a variety of stories and interaction. (Lang and McAdam ibid).

To understand the context, the manager needs to understand how she or he relates to that context – how do their stories of management, of power, of the opportunities and difficulties of the organisation impact on the context and how do these stories boomerang back to the manager and end up defining them? If managers take this seriously, their own level of self-awareness increases. Andersen (1992) defines this as a search to understand oneself, and the circumstances in which one is placed and in understanding how to relate to those circumstances the person researches his or her own act of identity. As the complexity of the context increases, each act creates more resonances and becomes a means of how the style and personality of the manager will be characterised.

Shotter (1989) takes this notion forward when he writes that we are active in the process of creating other people’s responses’. This is a particularly useful concept as it encourages the sense that we have some responsibility and some limited control over our acts of identity, so the environment acts not just on us but we have some responsibility for its shaping. This becomes more apparent when staff are promoted

to managerial positions, have a stronger voice in the organisation, responsibilities for delivering the organisation's vision and now have to balance the needs of the organisation with their professional training.

How then does the manager understand the act of promotion and give meaning to it that extends beyond newly acquired status? The first meaning given by managers may be the easiest and could prove to be the most problematic; the exercising of power without understanding the context. New managers may be inclined to demand more from the organisation and its staff without fully understanding their role in shaping both. An example of this could be a young manager who forbids argument and dissent through claiming, 'I am the manager and therefore you must..' and ends up losing authority by relying too much on status. The inelegant claiming of power can actually represent a lack of power (Burr 1995) and a manager acting in this way only expresses unhelpful confusion, (confusion about how power is exercised) which may be mirrored in the people whom they manage.

Bateson (1979) writes that we are trained to go for the simplest solution, we need to reach for more complex answers but we do not have the courage. If we ask for more of the same, (more control, more rules), our recipe for change becomes our problem (Watzalick 74) so continued reliance on inelegant acts results in less authority and less ability to direct rather than more.

To become a manager is to move to another level of context, to require a deeper understanding of difference in people than may have been previously demanded. It means providing a structure so that the differences between people can be

accommodated and the organisation tasks delivered. (Bryman, 1992). This movement cannot be easily explained and if the explanation is too readily given or acquired, it could easily end up as a system of procedures or rules that may or may not fit and could constrain rather than enable.

Management means embracing a level of complexity and of developing ability to view situations from other angles in order to make the best decision when there is no clear means of deciding what constitutes fairness. Teal (1996) helps with the concept of specialists moving to management needing a metalanguage by writing that the manager needs esemplastic imagination. This is the imagination of the poet that brings together disparate elements people and elements together into a unique whole that makes sense both for the organisation and for the people they are managing and creates difference.

Case Study Example

A manager of a team commissioned us to provide a team development event. The team consisted of two senior managers with responsibility for 4 recently appointed managers within one institution in the public sector. Our commission was to work on both management and team development. The creation of another level of hierarchy in the organisation meant many things – it meant that the 2 senior managers, instead of holding the managerial context for all the team, had to learn to become managers of managers. The new managers appointed from amongst their peers had to learn how to deliver strategy and make the organisation work, a great difference from their previous responsibility of making sure that their own work was delivered.

Prior to the event we conducted interviews with all the participants in order to elucidate their views on what they wanted from the programme and to find out what their particular dilemmas were. From these interviews, we hypothesised that the group had been promoted for their brilliance in their specialism rather than their interest in management. We learnt also of their dilemmas in being described as the leading unit in the organisation and while feeling uninfluential and sometimes disapproving of decisions made in the hierarchy that did not always take account of the demands of their professional discipline.

Our design attempted to accommodate the need for individual managerial development and for team development and taking into account the complexities of the organisation setting. The programme began with asking the participants to draw a stakeholder map in order to look at the different demands they faced. Through this, we asked the individual participants to define their system of influence. Who were the people who would be interested in their work? Where were they (at home and at work)? Whose voice was strongest? How did that voice construct their behaviour? Our intent was to show how many people were interested in their work and how their actions would now have a wider impact.

We also shared them with them a vox pop (conducting some quick research, asking people at random their views of the team) conducted by one of the consultants in the organisation in which they worked. This involved asking different voices in the organisation their perception of the team, what they knew of their work. Lang and McAdam (1994) write that ‘our practice is to relate from the position that the situation

that gives cause for concern is a co-creation of many people who are relating through a variety of stories and interactions'. How did the context create opportunities and constraints on their behaviour? . The vox pop provided a medium for bringing the voice of the organisation and their dilemmas into the room. It revealed that the team were not seen as an integrated whole and their work was not understood. This fitted in with their Director's (overall manager) direction that the team needed to work more collaboratively and not just rely on their specialist expertise as a good enough argument in organisational conflict. Through this medium we could begin to hypothesise with the team that their organisational difficulties were co-created and may need complex solutions.

The group struggled with the complexity of working within a matrix organisation (an organisation in which there is joint accountability between managers and is multidisciplinary). Hout and Carter (1996) write that the problem with matrix structures is they push complexity down the organisation, forcing middle managers to make difficult trade-offs between the goals of competing bosses. The managers attending our event reacted to this complexity with a strong feeling that the others in the organisation did not give sufficient recognition to their specialist expertise or to their appointment. Their first solution to this complexity was to embrace coherence, being a team of managers meant to them that each of their staff should receive the same treatment from one another so they could become interchangeable. Observing this, the authors began to think that management exists in episodes in which people bring different abilities and lifescritps and an agenda of pure coherence could end up negating the importance of their appointment. Each manager would enact his or her role by creating some unique difference.

Their notion of the importance of coherence became clear when asked for their image of a team. Shotter (KCC Summer School 1998) suggested that as a means or orienting yourself to strange situations and of characterising vague feelings, to use metaphor and their choice of metaphor certainly highlighted the complexity of their situation. The team described themselves as a ‘fortress’. In playing with the metaphor of the fortress, we both respected and challenged it – seeing the team as a place to retreat to, a place that fortifies and makes stronger but that may be remote and closed off to other influences. If they concentrated on fortifying in both senses of the word, what would that mean for the people they managed and the people in the wider system?

Part of our thinking was to help the new managers move from the simple position of being in a defended fortress to one that saw management as complex, existing in the moment, finding ways to go on and not easily reduced to coherence as they wished. So, systemic working meant looking at the wider context and inviting the group to make sense of it. One task for the group was to find meaning in an interview with the Director – how did the context set by their leader empower them to act? The group came up several times with the idea that the main way forward for them was to be written into the organisation’s rule book (very much a first order level of change). The conversation kept coming back to the idea that they could not act unless the whole system changed.

During the early parts of the process, we felt that the team of managers did not seem to be in a position to create a context for mutual learning but only to express a need

for recognition expressed as the desire to be accorded status in the rule book. They felt that much of the complexity of matrix working would be resolved by a firm statement that they would conduct performance management interviews with their staff. This would make their role explicit – the difficulty in seeing this as the only solution was that it shut out other debates and learning. The meaning of management became one dimensional and unimaginative. Lang and Cronen (1994) write that when we ask for the meaning of an utterance, we ask for an explanation of how to go on in the use of it and this includes how to relate to others in the future and in what contexts it is appropriate'. The meaning of management became restricted, with a limited future: fixed in one dimension, one relationship and one place. Until we moved together with the group to encourage more esemplastic working, the ability to bring together disparate elements into a unique whole, the group could only fix on one context.

One facilitator noticed that she was about to keep a note of this demand for the third time. She felt that in order to resolve their complex situation, they were demanding more of the same. Her reaction was to join completely with the lack of movement from the team and to share with the group that she too was stuck and did not know what to do. In order to move herself from this position, she asked the team to talk amongst themselves whilst she conferred with her colleague on what to do next. This again heeds Shotter's advice (KCC Summer School 1998) to notice feelings and this became one way of introducing a metalanguage. . To effect change is one thing but the need to move out of the impasse required communication: to suggest indirectly that their language was one of closure. Proclaiming this sense of not knowing became a confident demonstration of needing help and of commission and of

teamwork and it also changed the frame. Moving away from the isolation of the fortress to saying, I don't know what to do next but if I stop, reflect and ask, someone else might. Her colleague moved the team into another exercise and this allowed the team to re-energise. The exercise took the team from working at an organisation level to their own individual history of being managed so we moved contexts in inviting them to connect with their own stories in order to find meaning in the situation.

We encouraged the team to explore the meaning of management in the final afternoon. In our programme design, we left this to the final session as the rest of the programme had set the context in which they would act as managers. We invited them to debate the questions based on systemic thinking:

What does it mean to you to be a manager?

What will you lose/gain?

How will you know when you are a manager?

How will others know?

What obligations/duties/rights and responsibilities will it confer?

How will you describe your work to others?

These questions proved the trigger to the most powerful debate that took place throughout the 2 days. The managers seemed more of a team to us when they began to debate the complex and difficult task ahead of them. Most of the session had looked at context setting – the response of the organisation to them, the strategy set by the leader and the questions posed on the last afternoon allowed them to debate their own reactions to the new context. The managers began to debate the loss of their professional identity and for some of them, the tedium of having to grapple with the organisation system, of having to listen to staff needs and sort out complicated personnel problems.

After this discussion, we began to notice a shift in the group from demanding coherence and answers to a more complex understanding of the task and of working in a managerial team. One member of the group had begun the session by saying that we already know each other, there is nothing new to say but at the end of the session, we heard that they had known each other differently and become more intimate (Senge 1996). Another said that they might use the team to share best practice and ideas. To us, this was an emergent understanding that you do not have to be the same in order to be the best but a movement towards what Pearce (1989) describes as co-ordinated when we reach for what is desirable, good and expedient in conjoint action.

Conclusion

In this piece of work, we emphasised a movement from the identity of the specialist to a management identity and sort to encourage the beginning of a story about management. The importance of holding an event for these managers was that it

helped developed new stories of work identities. In doing so, the notion of management became more complex. It meant a paradigm shift, moving from a level of context where they expected recognition and support for their specialist knowledge to one where their job was to structure processes enabling others to gain the recognition they had previously enjoyed. This involved both loss and gain. At the beginning, the consultants were told a story: ‘we have nothing new to say to one another, we know each other very well so there is no more learning for us from another but we must act together to protect ourselves.’ Systemic interventions allowed us to elegantly challenge the idea that there was nothing more to be said; to ask them to take some responsibility for shaping the response of others in the organisation, to invite them to question and challenge their leader as they might be challenged and questioned themselves. Our hypothesis is that this helped develop the key managerial ability of reflexivity and created an ability to articulate the difficulties in enacting their managerial role. The difficulties were not simply out there in the organisation with the easy fix needed of changing the rule book but were also to do with their own struggle in moving from their specialism to join with management. Retreat into the authority of their specialism and their team was their fortress, engaging in complexity and management was the drawbridge that would invite others into dialogue.

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