

Choosing between control and self-control

Caught in a paradox

Attention to sentiment, awareness and spirituality in organizations is greater than ever. Still, ratio, control, and top-down techniques are dominating the workplace. How is that possible? And what can managers do to find a balance between rational control and space for self-control?

Antonie van Nistelrooij and his colleagues did a research under more than 100 CEO's and come with some assumptions for breaking through this kind of paradoxes.

The assumptions we introduce in this white paper are in fact a prepublication of an upcoming book on this subject. In the original chapter the assumptions are a bedrock for an intervention approach. For the whole story, including the reflection on the personal assumptions of the interventionist, we have to wait for the publication of the upcoming book.

As recently became apparent with the establishment of an organization of Innovation and Business Spirituality in Nyenrode a Dutch Business University, sentiment, awareness and spirituality in organizations are more than ever in the interest. This trend has been going on now for several years, and is, in our view, counterproductive to the typical Taylorist way in which many managers still manage change processes. From recent research among more than one hundred CEO's, ratio, control and top-down techniques are still the norm. How does it happen that despite all trends, managers continue to manage this way? And what can managers do to find more balance between rational control on

the one hand and space for self-control on the other hand?

A national research conducted by the VU University of Amsterdam in collaboration with one of the leading Dutch Consultancy firms, show that the respondents manage change in a typical Tayloristic way. Which means that they are focusing on 1) the content, instead of the process or context; 2) are more design-oriented than development-oriented; and 3) augmenting the change in a rational and persuasive way, instead of giving space for sense-giving, meaning and sentiment processes.

What is the paradox?

Indeed, the surveyed CEO's themselves said that they had less attention for 'reflection', 'feedback loops' and 'adaptability' (Figure 1). Afterwards they confirmed the relevance of these aspects for creating change. Also on the open question at the end of the interview about what one would like to do different next time, the majority of the respondents mentioned these same aspects – as learning point. Mostly

combined with the outspoken intention to attend more to the involvement of employees. 'Designing changes at the top of the company evidently doesn't work', as one of the respondents cried out. The question is why managers want to reflect and want to involve employees but do not do it. Is it all social wishfulness without any real commitment? Or has it something to do with a lack of experience with other forms of management or change leadership? Or are they, as one of the top executives in the research, expressed it 'all narcissists without any reflection?'

It is the task of a manager to direct the actions of other organization members and to give direction to development of knowledge, resources and human "ability" to achieve the stated strategic goals. In general, it is taught to plan actions of people, to differentiate work in order to gain more control and efficiency and to manage based on 'objective' measurable data. The question is whether the nature of the work performed can be decomposed in a set of measurable factors and allowed to be controlled from above. Measurable factors such as time and profit have little meaning for fellow workers in their contact with the customer.

In Unbalance

As American philosopher Richard Rorty (2006) states, "Do not dominate, be not emotional and rely on your arguments." Managers seem to be ingrained with the adagio that once you choose an intervention tool or model for your approach, you need to

argue it rationally and explicitly, until everyone accepts it. However, it is also known that in persuasion, your message had to focus on emotions, all the while maintaining a balance between ratio and feelings. Ratio and emotion are the two elements that make for perfect persuasion. We can be persuasive using only ratio, but the effect will be short-term and unbalanced.

Regime of Reason

The atmosphere of reasonableness that comes along with augmenting rationally makes it accepted as the common way of managing within many Western organizations. This atmosphere of reasonableness creates a regime where employees feel stuck between the apparent 'fairness' and the fact that there is no space for their own values, feelings and emotions. And the longer this situation persists, the less initiative employees will take to make the intended changes work. Pursuing one reality as if being the one and only 'objective' reality diminishes not only the initiatives and pro-activity mindsets of people but makes it also less easy to realize collaboratively the set out strategic goals. Moreover, it polarizes the working conditions, creating a 'we versus a 'them' 'while things get more and more ambiguous. When things get more ambiguous, employees themselves are in need of more security and clarity provided by management. In the same way that managers expect from employees that they take their responsibility and do what is expected from them. Moreover, when giving

space for bottom-up initiatives, employees will pick this up as yet more ambiguity. By that time the circle is around and the organization is entangled in a paradox between control and self-control. Managers often lack the insight into employee experience, and employees lack the insight into the organization as a whole.

Some assumptions to approach this kind of paradoxes

We introduce three assumptions and how these can be integrated with some typical dialogue principles. After this, we use these insights as key elements, as the bedrock, for dialogue sessions organized with LGIs.

they are all based on the following pivotal assumptions:

- 1) objective reality is elusive for people, and, to the extent that a reality exists, it is a social construction;
- 2) knowledge is historically and culturally specific, and therefore contextual;
- 3) knowledge arises from human interaction.

1. There is no objective reality “outthere”

The first assumption tells us that people construct meaning among themselves because of day-to-day interaction to understand the organization surrounding them. In this regard, the daily practice is not an objective reality “out there” that is out of the reach of the participants but an inter-subjective one—it is what we make of it among ourselves. Therefore, change in the

daily routine is something that only can be realized through the direct participation and full involvement of the participants themselves. This is also true for everything that comes with it, including the way people perceive their surroundings, the way they interact and with whom they interact. So start with a differential diagnosis – which engages all stakeholders who have something to do with realizing the change.

2. Change starts with ‘Context’

The second assumption suggest that change is not only about content (the aspect of the organization that must change) and process (the trajectory, phases and sequence of interventions) but is mainly about context – the total social setting or social whole. In short, humans and their actions do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in the context of wider social wholes. Context plays intermediary role, and can be defined as “the social cohesion within which interaction takes place, and which is reproduced through interaction itself, and thus is itself content that has been established in an earlier phase of the process.” Context is also about exchanging personal knowledge (*externalizing or disclosing*), reifying (*objectifying or explicating*), and socializing (*internalizing or integrating*). In short, it has two meanings:

- a) the total social setting – in a more physical sense – within which we interact and are part of and
- b) in a more psychological sense, the whole of meanings that is represented with and is inherent in the composition

of this social setting, which gives participants and their behavior meaning.

3. Change needs interaction

The third assumption tells us that quality of knowledge is related to the quality of the interaction process. This is where the concepts of dialogue, action learning and role taking come in. Change is in the making when a person's daily context is changing, because the people we interact with bring in other perspectives of the same social

context. It is amazing how quickly and easily language, gestures and opinions shift with even a slight enlargement of the bounded rationality people are in. This starts when people, while interacting, become conscious of the importance of their own stake in, and the dependency of others on, their performance. This mutually constructed image of reality is strongly bound by the context or social system wherein the interactions take place. In other words, it is strongly bound by the people engaged in the interaction and their perceptions.