Collective Organizational Action

A social constructionist approach of working with large groups

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According to some, management studies are an academic idyll in which theory and practice go together. There, theories about organizing and changing go hand in hand with practical acting aimed at improving the functioning of organizations. In managerial practice this means building a bridge between forming theories and actually intervening during a process of organizational change. In the present research an attempt at this has been undertaken by integrating existing theoretical approaches on the one hand, and on the other by linking it with a method of intervention related to the implementation and development of team based organizations.

Team Based Organizations

A team based organization is characterized by an organization-form that is transparent and flow-oriented in which work is carried out on the basis of entrepreneurship, decentralized competences and more or less autonomous work units or teams. Simplifying the organization and making it more transparent, makes it possible to control processes more effectively and taking advantage of changes in the environment with greater alertness. The extent to which competences can be decentralized is restricted, however, by the organization structure employed. Besides,

working in teams requires a completely different approach to cooperation, communication, management and rewarding. When one introduces teams, not only an adaptation of organization structure is required, but an adaptation of behaviour and a development of current cultural practice as well. During the process of change attention will both have to be paid to the design and the implementation of a new organization structure and to the development of a cultural practice in which autonomous behaviour and working in teams are encouraged .

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The outline of the dissertation

In this dissertation the attempt to merge theory and practice, where implementation and development of team based organizations are concerned, has roughly been divided into two sections. The first section of this dissertation, a social-constructionist managerial perspective of organizations and organizational change, has been developed. As a starting point the Dutch socio - technical approach of the subject, that is principally aimed at the structuring of an organization and the development during a process of change has been looked at. On the basis of change management shortcomings in this approach that have been ascertained, a second approach has been looked at : social - constructionism .This is a sociological movement that combines theoretical points of view from both psychology and sociology and which is mostly aimed at individual interpretation processes and collective learning processes. In the second part of this dissertation association has been sought with a method of intervention with which, on the basis of the socio - constructionist managerial perspective, a link has been laid with the change management practice of introducing and developing team based organizations. Finally the link between theory - the socio-constructionist perspective, and the method of intervention - the conference approach - has been complemented by action research that has been carried out in an electricity company.

The socio-technical system design (STSD) approach

An integral approach that, in the fifties, formed the basis for the principle of team based organization, is the socio-technical system design (STSD) approach. STSD is an originally British approach that finds worldwide implementation in organizational change processes and currently has an Australian, Scandinavian, Dutch and American variant. The Dutch variant is a structure approach by definition with emphasis on the design and implementation of a team based organizational structure. Therefore the Dutch variant does not only imply a concept for the structure of a team based organization, but a concept for a change management approach to implement such a structure as well. The change management approach is based on the view in which the existence of a cultural practice is not denied, but that it is supposed to change as a result of the introduction of a new team based structure design. This dissertation proposes to demonstrate that the Dutch variant, as an organizational

theory, has been thoroughly developed but that its change management approach meets with many problems in practice to which it seems to have insufficient answer. This issue has been divided into two parts: the problems related to the small-scale implementation of a team based organization on the one hand and the problems stemming from the development of a matching cultural practice on the other.

From the many studies that are based on the socio-technical practice of organizational change it appears that the greater part of the employees is represented in the design groups but that actually only a relatively small number of people are directly involved in the changing process. Because of this operating procedure the changing process takes place parallel to daily practice without being an integral part of it. Such a small-scale approach, which is unrelated to daily practice appears to encourage insufficient reporting, and consequently unclear and conflicting conceptualization arise in the company. The Dutch variant of STSD is a practical design approach with an incompletely worked-out change management theory and a change management approach which, in some respects, is retricted and as far as methods are concerned requires expansion.

A social-constructionist' approach

In addition to the Dutch design approach, a management perspective of organizations and organizational change has been elaborated in this dissertation, that is based on social constructionism. In this social scientific movement, interpretation and conceptualization are at the forefront, and viewpoints from sociology and psychology are combined. The basic principles that have been formulated on the basis of a scientific theoretical positioning, emphasize the importance of a pluriform and process directed approach, which intervenes directly in cultural practice. These basic principles are: 1) respect for the current pluriformity of an organization; 2) an organization is an intersubjective entity, and 3) a constant process of (de- and re-) construction. On the basis of these principles the cultural practices are considered from the social-constructionist point of view on the one hand, as a social reality which is brought about and maintained in interaction by those concerned, and on the other hand as a context which gives direction to those interactions and in which the conceptualization of those concerned is influenced and maintained. The social constructionist approach respects the unique reality of each actor, pays attention to the context, emphasizes mutual relations

between the actors, and accentuates the importance of a collective organizing process in which meanings are (re-)produced on the basis of an ongoing dialogue.

The social-constructionist perspective

This perspective aims at linking up with the existing complexity and speed at which changes take place, that many companies are confronted with. The cultural practice is the focal point and the following notions are central in this context: knowledge about, and knowledge (with)in organizations is always relational, the quality of the dialogue determines in how far there is room for the exchange of meanings. Moreover this dissertation adds to this that arriving at a communal conceptualization as a starting point is a necessary condition for joint action. Undertaking joint action is related to a timely contribution of the collective, a feeling of co-ownership of the final result, namely the new team based structure, and joint responsibility for the development of the cultural practices to match this. Maximal commitment is not considered essential from the social-constructionist perspective. A balanced representation demands an intervention method that is based on working with a large group which is a reflection of the whole company.

Large Group Interventions

The desire to combine the Dutch socio-technical structure approach with the social-constructionist perspective makes certain demands of the intervention method through which the connection is made with the change management practice. That is to say that the intervention method should match the socio-technical system approach, phasing method and design principles on the one hand and the social constructionist change principles on the other.

During the changing process the entire system, or a critical mass from it- as one large group- is involved in the changing process by means of various large- scale meetings. The conference approach applied in the action research belongs to the American socio- technical variant in which insights are applied from amongst others: 'search conferences' (Emery and Trist), the 'future search' (Weisbord), the 'preferred future' technique (Lippit) and the 'confrontation meeting' method (Beckhard and Harris).These are all methods that have been developed on the basis of insights described in this dissertation from the Lewin process approach, group- therapeutical psycho-dynamics and the American socio-technical variant. The result is an intervention method which in its main

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features distinguishes itself by a rigidly controlled program of change with many creative operating methods, an extensive preparation with a group of people from all sections of the organization and several conference-like meetings of several days with a large group. The participants in the conferences are given the opportunity to contribute in a direct and active way to the realization of the basic ideas of a team based structure design and the cultural practice to go with it. From the research it has also appeared that working with large groups entails quite a different dynamic and therefore demands a different role interpretation from the action researcher.

Action research

As illustrative material experience gained within the framework of action research with the electricity concern ENW Amstelland Gooi has been incorporated in this dissertation. The action research with the electricity concern covered a period of somewhat more than one year. After a period of preparation, planning and leadership alignment, the complete program of change was gone through with the entire system in a period of four months. This happened with the help of three conferences: a vision , an analysis and a design conference. All employees were given the opportunity to take part in one or more of the conferences and have thus been able to contribute directly and actively to the final result. In the months after the last conference the design was further completed with details and the teams were then introduced without any significant objections.

The immediate and concrete result of the program of change was a structure design that , in broad outline, was widely accepted . Moreover the members of the organization also reported an increased insight in the own and other people=s processes, tasks and motives. Furthermore one may conclude that by having people exchange their own meanings, step by step and in phases, in an ongoing dialogue, a shared image is developed; an unambiguous image regarding all kinds of aspects within the cultural practice that one would like to get rid of, or that one would like to keep or even develop. The indirect result is an anticipatory group of employees who have become aware of any shortcomings in their cultural practice and who know what the changes will mean for them and what is the desired behaviour that goes with working in teams.

Conclusions and recommendations

In spite of the fact that appealing findings have resulted from the action research, that does not mean that working with conferences as intervention method, always has an answer to every objection or obstruction that might occur in a program of change. Consequently one should not only take into account the direct and timely involvement of large groups of people from the organization, but also the importance of good communications, direct integration in the cultural practice and especially the importance of a feeling of responsibility and leadership of the top management. One may conclude that both working with large groups and intervening on the basis of social- constructionist change management principles, are a welcome addition to the socio-technical 'toolbox' and its change management vision and change management basic assumptions. Future research will have to make clear in how far the socio- constructionist perspective elaborated in this dissertation is indeed an effective approach of organizations and organizational change.