

EXTENDING DISCURSIVE SPACE: TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ONLINE INFORMATION SYSTEM FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTING AND MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Modern business in Russia, being a new phenomenon in cultural traditions, is characterized by a lot of special features due to the recency of its ascendance within the new economic, social and political conditions. Many of these features seriously prevent the further development of organizations and are anyhow realized by agents of business activity.

In this context, Tepfer (2000) identifies characteristic features like placing collective values above personal values, concentration of authority onto the chief executive, insufficient delegation of authority, and an inefficiency of discussions between people at different hierarchical levels in the organization (See also Humphreys and Nappelbaum, 1997). Forms of inter-organizational communications, such as business clubs, are not developed in a proper way. Within Russian organizations, problem handling is more likely to search for «the guilty ones» rather than to conduct a scrupulous analysis of allowed mistakes: representations of problems and the phenomena involved have a primarily emotional character.

Direct communication, both inside an organization and in relations between different organizations, is complicated by virtue of the dominance of competitive relations, the cultural norms prevalent in Russian business, and absence of a supportive environment in which such communications might be realized.

ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE IN RUSSIA

Culture, as collective representation of reality, is reproduced in discourse which is understood as the communicative event occurring between speaking and listening (the observer etc.) in a certain temporary, spatial context, etc. (Habermas, 1984, Humphreys, 1998). This communicative action may consist of speech, be written or audiovisual form, have verbal and nonverbal constituents and so forth. We also use the term «discourse» for a designation of a particular social generality, culture and system of an authority which is what «organization» is (Van Dijk, 1998). We do not make any attempt to reduce the analysis of organizational culture to the analysis of discourses (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) - the culture is expressed and reproduced not only by means of texts and conversations (Morgan, 1997).

However, discourse takes special place in comparison with the majority of social practices and semiotic codes of property, because text, speech and audiovisual forms of communication allow us to formulate and express abstract cultural and ideological beliefs: telling, and showing by the meaning of the most direct image (Humphreys, Lorac and Ramella, 2000). Thus, the concept of discourse is seen as especially relevant for the analysis of organizational communications, and the problem of absence of an environment in which both vertical and the horizontal organizational communications might be realized, may be formulated as absence of an appropriate discursive space or arena (Habermas, 1987; Kieser, 1997).

Today it is possible to argue that in Russia, with its obvious or latent pre-suppositions about the nature of organization and organizational relations characteristic of the «scientific management» school, two types of discourse dominate. The first is related to management-centrism, stemming from the pre-suppositions of «scientific management». The second concerns disciplining practices related to school of human relations.

Taylorist «scientific management» discourse maintains the provision whereby the process of decision making can be viewed as one of the sources of an authority in the organization (Guillen, 1994). The decision-maker, with the purpose of maintaining the centrality of his or her subject position in the organizational control hierarchy (i.e., of domination / subordination) is motivated to control all three phases of process: (1) representation of the problems; (2) process of the decision-making; (3) realization of the decision (Vari & Vecsenyi, 1984; Humphreys, 1998).

The character of the kind of personnel management, which has been developing in Russia in recent years, can be related to rudiments management practices proposed by the school of human relations. In terms of Fuko's «I» technology, these practices can be seen as an adjunct to asymmetric system of distribution of authority in the organization (Humphreys and Nappelbaum, 1997; Binar, Humphreys and Nappelbaum, 1998): The «human relations» approach to management designs the worker as the disciplined subject, whose motives and purposes ideally coincide with the purpose of the enterprise (Rose, 1989, 1992; Humphreys, Berkeley and Jovchelovitch, 1996). Thus subjectivity is built in the system in terms of authority defined by management (Jaques, 1989).

A consequence of this is that an important, though not explicit, purpose of the manager in this kind of control system is to secure the reproduction of his authority and position in the system of organization, rather than focus on decisions addressing problems of optimum existence in relation to the organisation's external social and business environment (Datsuk, 1998).

Meanwhile, intensification of cultural exchange inside and outside of the organization has become a condition of survival in modern society. Gergen (1992) invokes Bakhtin's concept of «heteroglossia» in organizational analysis designed to enrich organizational culture, in order to incorporate and make an exchange with different cultures inside and outside of the organization. Such interchange serves to reorient the efforts of the organization from maintaining a rigid lead to maintaining a constant reflection on issues to which the organization or department is open. Authority is then constituted and dispersed through a wider social network.

The result is the prevention of hegemony of departments, integration of the organization into environmental social environment, instead of modernist concept where allocation happens in independent self-sufficient system. Local organizational realities are shifted in public sphere. In particular, obviously there is strategically important to strengthen the function of «public relations» which in Russia for the present is understood only narrowly as an adjunct to advertising activity.

THE INTERNET ENVIRONMENT

From our point of view, the Internet is the new medium that can be considered as the cyber-version of Habermas' (1987) «public sphere» where representation problems of management and their discussion may be realized in a new fashion. Habermas' work on the theory of communicative action is, in our opinion, directly relevant to today's networked communities. Habermas appreciated that the technology may have negative effect, because can suppress the

original, face to face communications between individuals and communities. Nevertheless, we believe that new information technologies and computer networks, when linked with a support infrastructure for face-to-face communication in multimedia, may be used for consolidation of communities and may recover the «lifeworld» instead of promulgating its usurpation by technology (Humphreys, Lorac and Ramella, 2000). Moreover, the Internet is the ideal environment in which Habermas' model of public sphere may be realized in its «cyber» version.

The Internet offers a decentralized paradigm of knowledge production and communication «from many to many» against the widespread centralized and hierarchical stream of the information «from one to many». Thus, in the Internet environment, the process of decision making may be not limited to interference power-holders. From here the subject position of the participant (c.f. Moore, 1994) in Internet communications is defined not by system of authority of the organization, but by equal subjects that allow him to be more open to experience of others and to express his or her opinions on various questions in a direct way (c.f., Gramsci, 1966; Clegg, 1989). Obviously, all these factors influence problem representation and decision-making processes.

AN INFORMATION SYSTEM FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTING AND MANAGEMENT

Without going into technical details, we claim that the existence of organization through such communicative space is possible to achieve on the basis of an open information system which would combine in itself functions of the Internet - forum, online-consultations, electronic library and a database, deciding, thus, some problems:

- peer consultations,
- expert appraisals,
- jointly developed business solutions,
- indexing and storing these and other data in digital formats,
- exchange and enhancement of productions in multimedia between organizational participants (as composers, producers, actors, innovators).

The system is addressed particularly to middle-level managers who, in the current Russian context, have greater access to the Internet in comparison with other social and economic groups, who have sufficient media-literacy and knowledge of information technologies, and who are motivated in the professional communications in comparison with the senior colleagues and chiefs.

Also, besides its online knowledge base functions, the system could serve as a powerful tool for permanent monitoring of management-related problems in Russia, gathering and categorizing wide amount of information across different geographical regions and spheres of business which can be used in further research and analytic activities.

A pilot version of this system is currently being implemented to support the activities of the organizational research and consulting group at Novosibirsk State University, with plans for wide dissemination and local validation.

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