Overlooked Psychological Aspects of Organizational Knowledge and Learning

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Unconscious psychological variables influence all aspects of organizational behavior, including organizational knowledge, learning and capabilities. This aspect is generally overlooked and left to analytical psychologists – considered too specialized and esoteric for inclusion in organizational analysis. Yet the body of knowledge, which originated with the famous psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, deserves to be considered. We may well find here the key to a deeper understanding of all aspects of the themes included under the labels of organizational knowledge and knowledge management as well as within the themes of organizational learning and organizational capabilities.

Focus. The focus of the following analysis is the relationship between creativity and the individual. The central idea is that everything, which happens within an organization, originates within the individual. Therefore, events, which are claimed to be explainable in a straightforward manner based on organizational behavior theory or complex organization theory, are more likely due at least in part to reasons, which originate in the unconscious of individuals.

Family Patterns. The individual brings family patterns into the organization, and these are the patterns that determine what happens there. Furthermore it is a well-established theses within analytical psychology that human behavior in any given situation is influenced by self-organizing fields, which have considerable influence on what happens. These are considerations, which would generally not be considered in the analysis of learning organizations. The point here is that interdisciplinary information deserves to be included in discussions of organizational learning, and analytical psychology has considerable insight to offer in this regard.

Need for Analysis. If this is true, as this writer has come to believe then there is a need for far more subtle and insightful analysis than has been the norm for studies of learning organizations. The argument presented here is that such analysis must at least in part be based upon analysis of the individual member of the organization as well as upon the archetypal patterns that characterize the organization being studied. These are unconscious patterns that have profound influence on the thinking of individuals. If this is true then they should be part of a definition of organizational learning, but they are not.

Definitions. In fact the definitions that have been proposed by different scholars do not encourage a focus upon the individual. Fiol and Lyles define organizational learning as

the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding ("Organizational Learning" <u>Academy of Management Review</u>, October 1985).

Huber emphasizes the processing of information and the range of potential behavior change ("Organization Science, February 1991). Lewitt and March on the other hand focus upon the encoding of inferences from history into routines that guide behavior ("Organizational Learning," <u>American Review of Sociology</u>, Vol. 14, 1988).

Argyris sees organizational learning as a process of detecting and correcting error ("Double Loop Learning in Organizations," <u>Harvard Business Review</u>, September-October 1977). Garvin instead proposes that a learning organization is an organization skilled in creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights ("Building a Learning Organization," <u>Harvard Business Review</u>, July-August 1993).

Stata is the one who comes closest to focusing upon the individual. He observes that organizational learning occurs through shared insight, knowledge, and mental models…[and] builds on past knowledge and experience – that is on memory ("Organizational Learning – The Key to Management Innovation," <u>Sloan Management Review</u>, Spring 1989). The focus on mental "models" is problematic. It is not obvious that the essence of creativity can be captured within the context of a model. In trying to do so there is a considerable risk of missing the subtle nuances that are indispensable.

THEORY AND APPLICATION

This paper represents an attempt to assess the relevance of current thinking in analytical psychology within the context of learning theory. The questions of concern are 1) how the thinking may apply, 2) what aspects if any are relevant for organizational knowledge and learning, and 3) how analytical psychology may serve to influence knowledge-management and organizational learning. It should be noted that the ideas presented here are in the formative stage and subject to revision.

It is perfectly understandable that the ideas have been overlooked and ignored. Most of us are inclined to be somewhat biased against positions that are perceived to be outside of empirical analysis. Also, students of organizational knowledge may frequently have been insufficiently trained in analytical psychology to be able to pursue this most subtle and complicated approach. It is furthermore relevant for organizational practitioners, who are inclined to prefer immediate and tangible results, that people who enter into psychological analysis often need to invest considerable time before achieving measurable results. It is important, however, to consider these complicated theoretical concepts, because they are increasingly accepted outside the field of organization theory, and they deserve to be taken seriously because they decisively influence organizational relations.

Archetypes. The prime concept relevant to this analysis is the notion of archetypes, defined by C.G. Jung as patterns of instinctual behavior. (Jung, 1969, p. 44). Technically it has been identified (Conforti, 1999, p. 1) as a preexistent, non-personally acquired informational field in the collective unconscious. It ought not to be necessary, however, to attempt to express the fundamental problem in such technical language. The point is that we are all under the influence of patterns that we have experienced early in life in the first organization that we encounter, which is the family. The patterns that we experienced then follow us into the work situation, where they determine our behavior without our conscious awareness of what is happening. Thus there is a growing awareness that archetypes govern our lives much more than we had previously imagined.

The work by Michael Conforti has helped us realize the importance and empirical significance of such archetypes. The potential for new developments relevant to organizational knowledge and organizational learning is considerable. After all, as Conforti (1999) explains in his recent book patterns are found overall in nature. This very basic fact is widely recognized and an indispensable part of the natural sciences. Yet the fact that such patterns are also present and determine what happens in the psyche was not realized until archetypes were recognized as an important influence on human behavior

Patterns in Nature. The point is that it is not just in the natural sciences that patterns are found. They are also found in human relations at the unconscious level. Patterns of family behavior, for example, are determined by archetypes much more than previously recognized. They are patterns, which remain and move from generation to generation. Organizational culture is similarly characterized by these archetypal patterns.

Thus – to return to the questions posed in the introduction to this paper – we need to look for the archetypal patterns in organizations and to search for explanations that are deeply rooted in the collective unconscious of individual participants in organizations. People do not leave their background behind when they come to work, and the psychology of the individual is always of prime importance.

Organizations and social institutions like families, as well as countries and any other form for human organizations, will be governed by archetypal patterns, and they will over time determine more than anything what happens in the organization or social institution as well as within the individual. While more superficial explanations will sometimes be supported by empirical verification, the in-depth understanding of why, for example, alcoholism runs in families or Nazism and similar collective disasters originate in a society at a given time, requires explanations that cannot be rooted in superficial sociological analysis.

Dominance of Empirical Theory. Perhaps more so in the United States than in Europe, scholars of organizational knowledge and learning have accepted rigid requirements of empirical research sometimes to the exclusion of theory. Survey research is sometimes seen as the only legitimate source of information. As an illustration based upon this author's personal experience the following incident took place a few years ago: A participant at a regional conference in the United States presented a paper, which

contained no data but interesting theoretical arguments. The designated discussant in the session announced that he was trained in empirical survey research and therefore could not respond to a paper that contained only ideas and no data. The session participants were in agreement, and the discussion moved on to an empirical study with little or no theory.

Alternative Methods of Analysis. While survey research continues to provide us with amazing results, it would not be out of place to recognize that the outstanding scholarship and research by C.G. Jung has provided insights that are truly amazing, even if he never applied theoretical statistics in his analysis. This does not mean that his research was not empirical, but his emphasis was on qualitative and historic analysis rather than on the analysis of survey data.

He taught us that the origin of new insight requires a focus on the individual. His empirical work was focused on in-depth analysis of individual patients, something that students, who are committed to survey research, will likely find exotic. However, some of the insights that resulted from this work lead to revolutionary concepts such as synchronicity and archetypes. Synchronicity is beyond the scope of this paper but the concept of archetypes is very relevant. Both concepts represent ideas that could have never emerged as a result of survey research. The reason is that surveys do not focus in any depth on the individual who is the only fundamental source of new knowledge. This fact should not be overlooked when we study organizational variables.

THE TRADITIONAL FOCUS OF LEARNING THEORY

Schools of Thought. There are many outstanding examples of learning theory and the purpose here is not to detract from achievements in the field. A survey of the literature is not required. It will be sufficient to take note of the fact that there are two schools of thought concerning the creation of learning organizations (David Garvin, Harvard Business Review, June 1997, p. 3).

Learning is seen in the one school as a practical matter and the focus is therefore on learning practices and the building of a more successful organization. The other school – the one of interest here – is focused upon learning as a source of human potential.

Garvin's work is within this second school. He sees learning as a way of unleashing the greatness in the people who work in an organization. The literature within this school of thought concerns visions, creativity, listening, and the problems of mastering new skills. As Garvin also notes, however, the difficulty with the approach is that the underlying processes are left totally undeveloped, and the link to business outcomes is also not very clear.

Process and Outcome. At this point in our thinking the focus should be more on the underlying processes than on the link to business outcomes. We need to understand what these processes are before we are ready to consult about business outcomes. This

observation does not take away from Garvin's point that the practical details are the make-or-break of the proper functioning of a successful learning organization. The result of process analysis, however, does not immediately predict the influence on business outcomes, and premature efforts to make a link may well be counterproductive.

Research Settings. We need to remember that one of the most successful research settings of all times – the Bell Laboratories – were famous for ignoring outcomes in favor of basic research. The reason for the success of this organization was likely not only that researchers were left alone to do what they wanted to do, and also not only that they were not the object of bureaucratic hassle or demand for bottom line results. The main reason is likely to be that outstanding researchers were hired in the first place. These were people whose creativity was beyond dispute even before they were hired. With such outstanding researchers it is appropriate to focus on organizational variables. With people who are held back for psychological reasons it is a different matter.

Deeper Issues. If the main problem is in the psychology of the individual it is insufficient to study organizational variables. Furthermore, if we concentrate too much on behavioral improvements it may keep us from getting to the deeper issues. One of these have to do with the mechanisms that account for some people being extremely creative while others – the majority unfortunately – are not. Even in an organization that focuses successfully on being a learning organization there are likely to be some employees who could be much more creative if their creativity could be unlocked. Even one person making creative contributions could make considerable difference in business outcomes.

RELEVANT ASPECTS OF ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Energetic Potential. It is well known that nature is characterized by patterns, which as noted by Conforti, constitute clusters of preexistent information and energetic potential. They exist in formats that are recognizable in nature. (Conforti, 1999). Without a mapping of such patterns neither the natural sciences nor theoretical statistics would be possible. In the social sciences we search endlessly after these patterns, and examples are numerous: Anthropologists will catalogue patterns of cultural rites of passage; students of organizational behavior will study patterns of learning; etc.

Collective and Individual Manifestations. The point that is frequently overlooked is that these patterns can originate both within the individual's subconscious and within the collective subconscious. This latter concept – the collective subconscious – is sometimes not even accepted as an empirical fact, perhaps because it is frequently misunderstood. It refers to archetypes which collectives – groups, organizations, or cultures – have in common.

Whether collective or individual archetypes are the manifestations of patterns within the subconscious. Few would argue that a successful poet does not have a muse. This is the

manifestation of an archetype within the psyche of the individual and perhaps the best evidence of the relationship between the subconscious and creativity.

Archetypal patterns also influence people in organizations. This is particularly the case in the presence of a weak ego structure. (Conforti, 1999). Furthermore, patterns are unique to a specific culture as well as to for example a specific family or business organization. People do not leave behind the patterns they grow up with, when they enter the formal organization where they work, any more than they leave them behind when they enter into any other social setting or relationship.

The Influence of Time. Archetypal patterns become increasingly important and powerful when relations continue over a prolonged period of time. Marriage is a good example. The influence of time can also be considerable in a complex organization where employees have been working for many years. Archetypes influence under such circumstances both organizational learning and that, which at any given time in any given organization is considered valid organizational knowledge. The only reason they are so frequently overlooked is that they are unconscious for anybody who has not had an opportunity for considerable advanced introspection in consultation with a professional. If the patterns prevent creativity either in the organization or in the individual then creativity is not an option.

FIELDS OF INFLUENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

Conforti (1999) points out that pattern recognition is essential for the preservation of life and this is the reason that animals quickly learn to observe and recognize patterns of behavior. Pattern recognition is important in organizational settings as it is in nature, even if life itself may not be at stake all the time. For example, physicians are alert to emerging patterns when they study their patients. They know that the proper diagnosis of relevant patterns is crucial for treatment purposes.

Following Familiar Patterns. There are numerous patterns to be observed not just by physicians and in hospitals but also in other complex organizations. Employees will unconsciously follow known patterns when they encounter another situation that has parallels with such familiar patterns. The mentoring relationship between an older executive and a recently appointed novice in a business organization will likely follow the archetypical relationship between father and son or mother and daughter, which has developed over the ages. These are patterns, which are family and culture specific and for the most part unconscious.

The point is that the behavior of organizational participants will develop and reach almost inevitable conclusions unless the parties in a given relationship make a special effort to become conscious of the relevant patterns. It is usually not consciously understood consciously, for example, why an older male executive will naturally gravitate toward mentoring a young man instead of mentoring a young woman, assuming of course that mentoring is the focus of the relationship.

In this day and age of political correctness it might be explained as a case of discrimination. A much more valid explanation would be that the father-son archetype has taken over and accounts for the development of the relationship without the participants' being aware that their free will is less influential than they might imagine. Organizational learning is clearly in influenced by patterns that in this case facilitate learning through mentoring.

Psychic Energy. Prominent early students of C.G. Jung, notably Marie-Louise von Franz, as well as more recent scholars like Michael Conforti, have noted the presence of psychic energy in the unfolding of events. Like electricity the concept is not easily identified except in its effects. Like electricity the phenomenon must be contained to be useful.

One organizational method of containing this energy is the ritual. The relationship between the individual and a formal organization – or more broadly the collective that the individual belongs to – is maintained, and energy is channeled into constructive use via the ritual. Such patterns also serve the purpose of freeing up the individual organizational participant to focus on – in other words become conscious of – new organizational problems that require new learning and the acquisition of new knowledge.

Poor Use of Energy. To mention a contemporary example, one of the problems with the ever-changing computer technology is that its usage has not yet become ritualized. It therefore requires a disproportionate amount of energy to adjust to the ever changing technology that professionals in this area develop partly for good reason and partly no doubt because they have a vested interest in keeping us all busy within their area of expertise. This is a case of misdirected psychic energy, which otherwise could have been put to creative use. Fortunately the theory behind computer technology is becoming increasingly so advanced that only people trained in theoretical physics have a fighting chance.

Fortunately negative archetypal patterns can be overcome because they are repetitive in nature. This is also the reason that they can be difficult to eliminate. Progress depends upon identifying the relevant archetypal field. It turns out according to scholars in this field of research (Hillman, 1997) that a certain destiny factor is operative and visible even in the earliest movements and influences in life. Assuming that this is correct it does not seem far-fetched to also assume that similar factors are operative and visible within complex organizations.

Underlying Forces. Developments in this area have a profound influence on us all, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that the underlying forces are not only archetypal in nature but also part of the overall design in nature. Like everybody else organizational participants are controlled this way by nature. The control originates with patterns that are established early in life. Their identification is the key to creativity.

DISCUSSION

Knowledge Creating Organizations

The problems associated with the elusiveness of the concepts discussed here are not so much that they cannot be recognized, but that enterprising organizational consultants will be inclined to stereotype the concepts and teach them in a rigid and simplified manner using predetermined categories and systems. The complexity of such archetypal patterns – and in the final analysis the divine or spiritual nature of the human psyche – calls for a humble and respectful attitude. Great scientists in all areas of human knowledge, be it physics, astronomy or organization theory, seem to understand the need to be humble.

Nonaka (1991) suggests that companies that create new knowledge are places where inventing such knowledge is not a specialized activity. Instead he sees it as a way of behaving and a way of being in which everyone is a knowledge worker. It is likely being too idealistic to expect contributions from everyone all the time. In any organization there are people who make contributions in different ways and creativity is only one way.

Research Settings. Universities are a good example. Not all faculty members contribute new knowledge all the time and throughout their career. To expect that would be overly optimistic. However the reasons are not well understood why some faculty members become – sometimes quite suddenly – less productive or creative than they used to be.

Anybody familiar with a university setting and faculty attitudes would likely agree that the reasons are not likely to be due to a desire to do less. Like other members of the middle class, faculty members want the benefit and prestige of being recognized members of their organization and profession.

Bureaucratic Methods. The solution to the question of productivity is therefore not likely to be found in bureaucratic methods. Yet that is the approach taken in most large research universities. High level administrators, who for the most part are recruited from the ranks of faculty, may understand this but the temptation to resort to bureaucratic measures anyway appears to be too much to resist.

The reasons are not difficult to understand. Stakeholder groups put pressure on the administrators. Many of these groups or individuals are people with little or no knowledge about how a university functions. They do not seem to understand that universities are designed in part to be organizations that create knowledge, and that they are for the most part quite successful in this regard.

The lack of understanding makes them focus on bureaucratic measures. Surveys are requested about how faculty members spend their time, how many hours they are present in their office, and other bureaucratically inspired questions. Such proposed bureaucratic

solutions typically take time away from creativity so that exactly the opposites of the intended results are accomplished.

The Creative Individual

The question, which Garvin raises in1999 ought not to be when the stakeholders will know, that the university – or the business organization – has become a learning organization. The question should also not be what concrete changes in behavior are required or what policies and programs must be in place in order for an organization to become a learning organization.

The focus in organizational knowledge research has been on creating the organizational setting for creativity, and we have now established that the key to creativity is at the individual level. There is no reason to assume that professionals employed in business organizations cannot be creative. It is necessary, however, to look at the reasons for human responses.

Deepak Chopra provides an interesting and relevant list of potential responses, starting with the most basic, which are fight or flight responses. The range of interest here covers intuitive responses, creative responses, and visionary responses. (P. 47). Chopra explains that these are stages of human growth, and the world of creativity is seen in this context as a place where innovation and discovery are valued. We are talking here about a state of mind, confirming that the focus must be at least in part on psychological variables. (Deepak Chopra, How to Know God (Random House, New York, 2000.)

Psychological Intervention. If we assume that employees in business organizations are not different from the population at large in the United States, then it is interesting that an estimated 40 to 50 percent of the population seek psychological counseling at some time of their life. It can perhaps also be assumed then that psychological intervention is seen as being helpful. The statistic is of interest because people cannot be expected to be creative, if they are consumed with problems that require use of mental energy for other purposes.

Employees with unsolved problems would fall in this category. The assumption here is, that a fair number of employees are in fact not able to contribute for psychological reasons. They are people who have the educational background as well as the mental capability to be creative, but they are not.

As we have already seen most work concerning organizational knowledge has focused upon behavior, which is not helpful if the problem is to be found in peoples' thoughts. Creativity depends upon thought patterns, and if people are convinced that they cannot contribute constructively then they will also not be able to do so. Unlocking creativity in such cases requires intervention within the thought pattern of the individual.

Self Image. An example will serve to clarify the point. Behavior can be physical, verbal, or psychological. In either case the behavior is preceded by thoughts. Problem solving requires first an intention to solve the problem followed by the creative process itself,

which involves thoughts and constructive use of fantasy. The intention depends in part upon self-image. We cannot proceed if our self-image prevents us from doing so.

So, in the case of the individual it is necessary to be concerned about self-image. If it is not aligned with the desired organizational results, then there will be no contribution from the individual in question. This is where the argument becomes unfortunately very subtle, and it is difficult to explain this most complicated and for the most part sub-conscious process. Yet it is well understood by professional counselors.

Cognitive Dissonance. The psychological fact is that cognitive dissonance will prevent the individual from being creative, if the person is sub-consciously convinced that creativity is not an option. This ties in with the person's self image. If the person is sub-consciously convinced that s/he does not deserve to be successful then it will not happen. Unfortunately self-image is also sub-conscious. We are not conscious about it unless a special effort has been made to become conscious about the influence of self-image on creativity.

CONCLUSION

It would not be unreasonable to deduce from the above discussion that counseling of individual executives is needed to improve results within the context of a learning organization. If that could be done, then it would be worthwhile to identify key executives who might benefit from individual attention. The problem is, however, that we are discussing processes, which cannot be standardized.

Organizational consultants have developed techniques designed to tackle the issues raised here. There is money in selling the idea that such techniques will facilitate the creation of successful learning organizations. This is unfortunate because it is counter-productive. In fact, if attempts are made to standardize such techniques then we can be sure that more psychological damage than gain will be the result. Working with human beings at the unconscious level cannot and should not be downgraded to a question of proper techniques.

It may be true that potentially creative individual can be helped to unleash and transform negative energy into creative energy. It is also true, however, that the individual's ability to contribute in the work situation depends upon variables that are essentially unrelated to organizational variables. They are the result of developments in society that have changed the relationship between family members and business organizations. These patterns must be understood and dealt with at the individual level.

It follows from the discussion in this paper that a focus on organizational variables can at best be a supplement rather than a substitute for a focus on the individual and the idea of individual analysis. The creation of a learning organization requires solution within the psyche of individuals. Problems that are the result of changes in family patterns and the

way society is organized cannot be resolved by the manipulation of organizational variables.

Therefore it does not seem wise to attempt to seek solutions by manipulating organizational variables while disregarding psychic autonomy, the wisdom of nature, and the role of unseen forces in the individual and collective psyche. We are only deceiving ourselves if we claim to have created solutions before we understand much better than we do now the complex unsolved problems of the human psyche.

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