

Meaningful work: the individual-organizational nexus

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This paper explores the interface between two work perspectives: the organization's, through its structure, role definitions and managerial practices, and the individual's, with his/her own psychodynamic history and structure. Until the post modern era, humans were little more than parts of the production machine, and while motivation as a method of enhancing productivity was a key topic, the intrinsic satisfaction and personal meaning of work was mostly left to a few philosophical or humanistic oriented theorists. Psychoanalysts and therapists treated some of the more dramatic casualties of these systems, but the impact of organization structure and management practices on the individual psyches was not a major concern of either management or mental health professionals.

Winston Churchill, while discussing architecture, reflected that first we shape our buildings, then our buildings shape us. Years later, Hirschhorn, in the aptly titled "Workplace Within", reminded us of the reciprocal interaction and influence between internalized family and interpersonal objects and the new relationships encountered in the workplace. The management systems and structures, however, are also drawn in and internally represented, but it is difficult to understand how the management practices and organizational structure impacted the internalized objects, as we had few viable concepts that bridged the gap between human experience and management structure and practice. True, everyone could agree that abuse or gross incompetence was "bad management", but other than dealing with a "bad or abusive" person-situation, there was little left to say apart from the personalities involved. Managers could improve by being fair and considerate, but how and why a given managerial authority structure was created, and how that impacted the employee's perceptions and internalizations was difficult to consider. The cognitive capability of employees was completely undefined (other than the managerially useless concept of "intelligence"), and structure (in terms of layers of authority or work) was equally intuitive and un-articulated. How authority was vested and exercised was largely left to chance and style, or transformed into the ultimate weasel phrase, "reports to". Accountability was encountered only post hoc, where it became synonymous with blame. Employees would clearly balk at driving over a rickety, poorly constructed bridge to get to work, but once there, they would thoughtlessly enter an equally rickety organization.

Two things are different now. We are squarely in the post modern era of organizations with its more sophisticated consideration of internalized authority and working relations, and Elliot Jaques has given us a basic vocabulary to understand corporate and managerial structure in human terms. We now have the linguistic-conceptual systems to explore how the structure and management of organizations is reflected in the internalized world of the inhabitants of those organizations. The language of Jaques' Requisite Organization (1) allows us to articulate a human and economically optimal organizational structure and the

rich tradition of psychoanalytic and object relations theory provides the language to understand the internalized representations in the individual. Both are extraordinarily interesting and complex systems, and while exploring the interface precludes us from going into either in depth, we can draw satisfaction from expanding a bridge that has the potential to become an absolutely necessary highway to the psychoanalytic understanding of people in organizations, and the design of the organizations of the future.

Our thesis evolves from the historical and evolutionary perspective that during the industrial revolution and the ensuing "production revolution" years, organizations focused almost exclusively on the mechanistic and production aspects: quantity and efficiency of production were the supreme dictators of design, and the needs, desires, feelings, and often the health and safety of the human beings were of little or minor consideration. Management was command and control, quality was achieved through overproduction and scrap. Work was delegated observable activity, dictated and controlled by one's boss.

This simple definition was heartily endorsed by the new generation of behavioral based psychologists, joined by "objective" based managers and legal specialists, eager to have simple, observable, behavioral descriptions. At its worst, work as "delegated activity" contributed to the lack of personal meaningfulness and satisfaction, eloquently described and criticized by Sievers (2). Individuals in these bleak situations sought to find personal meaning in their work, but since their needs and aspirations were at best tangential to the design of the organization, the only route to "success" was blind compliance. The erstwhile scientists seeking to increase the output of the human side of the equation became enamored with motivation, since numerous human and animal studies confirmed that it was an excellent regulator of activity. Meaning, as derived from the work itself was never even considered. Even Freud opined that "Most human beings work only because they are forced to do it, and the most difficult social problems arise from this natural aversion to work". He clearly sensed that something was wrong, but he incorrectly surmised that the problem was in the people. It was not. It was in the institutions we created, the workplaces themselves.

The search for personal meaning in work continued however, and often took the form of collectivism and unionization, literally attempting to find meaning through the sentient association of others sharing the plight. The Quality movement emerged as an early attempt to induce some humanity through pride of workmanship, obtaining quality by focus and precision, not overproduction, and giving workers both the authority and the opportunity to participate in production decisions. Suddenly we found ourselves in what Hirschhorn calls the "post modern organization", one in which the human beings in the organization were much more affluent (due, in part, to their parents' economic success in the old, dehumanized production systems), and were not willing to work in systems that did not recognize and respect their basic humanity, and their willingness to question and challenge authority. In addition, the output and nature of work itself changed, with much more emphasis on customer relations, service oriented outputs, and demands for rapid changes and flexibility. The "humanistic" side saw the now reified hierarchy as their enemy, and attempted to eliminate (or at least minimize it) through self directed teams and empowerment. While the ideals were excellent, these systems ignored the economic and business survival needs of organizations. In the same manner that communism and extreme socialism failed to stand

the competitive economic challenge, the lack of structure and directed authority made all of these attempts miserable failures.

It seems we now had two competing systems, one focused on brutally efficient production that ground up the humans, the other that glorified the humans but could not meet the production and economic challenges. We were between a rock and a “soft” place. What was needed was a new system of organization and management that met both challenges, but was sustainable from an economic and social standpoint. This new theory was to come not from an economist, humanist, or a production specialist, but from a psychoanalyst, Elliot Jaques.

And The bridge is Work

Jaques began, as any good scientist or philosopher would do, at the beginning, with a new, richly human definition of work. His simple but powerful definition of work as "the application of skills, knowledge, and discretion to complete a task by a specified time (and within specified limits)" speaks directly to the types of work encountered in the post modern organization. Work was NOT an observable delegated activity, it was cognitive activity, and hence not directly observable. Jaques however, offered much more: a complete theory of structuring and managing organizations based on how human beings relate to and perform work as a cognitive activity, tied to the authority-accountability relationships needed to produce tangible outputs. Production and management systems should be designed around the capabilities of human beings to perform cognitive activities, and to respect the basic human need to fully utilize one's abilities, be treated fairly, and differentially compensated. His "Requisite" organization is so called because it is "required by the nature of humanity". Work, so defined, is its own motivation, and only required fair compensation for the employee's skills, work, and time.

Expectations in the post modern organization

In the modern world (perhaps the post modern world?) people in civilized, developed countries reasonably expect the following in an employment system where they are paid a salary for their time, work, and skills:

1. Fair, humane treatment by managers who add value to the employee's work, and who support and regard the employee as a respected, fellow human being.
2. Challenging and interesting work that requires commitment and provides meaning to the individual, regardless of the type or level of work.
3. Differential but fair compensation based on the level of work performed.

While these expectations are not always articulated, they none-the-less exist as part of the implicit psychological contract employees bring with them when they enter post modern organizations. When these working conditions are violated (usually from ignorance or misinformation rather than malevolence), or perceived to be violated, a psychic "dissonance" is induced. Literally, "things are not as they should be", and the employee uses a variety of psychological mechanisms to reduce the discrepancy. These can range

from common sense ("this job sucks, I'm going to find a better one") to purely cognitive, as represented in the literature on cognitive dissonance and attribution. These simple mechanisms are, however, de facto inadequate to deal with the now internalized object world that includes the boss, subordinates, and coworkers along with mother, dad, and siblings. Managing these internalized representations requires psychological mechanisms (defenses)--projection, splitting-- literally, the entire repertoire discovered from the analysis of development and object relations.

When work is requisitely structured, it is primarily a **cognitive** activity, with its own internal motivation. Emotion enters of course, as we are all human, but it takes the form of excitement, commitment, and perhaps some sublimatory gratification. The workplace and its relationships is internalized, of course, but it is a healthy, minimally distorted internalized workplace, much like a healthy friendship, close relationship, or marriage. A healthy and requisitely structured workplace allows for healthy internalizations. Any subsequent distortions that impact work are due to the psychopathology or developmental problems of the individual, and can be dealt with as "personal" or individual problems. A poorly designed, unhealthy (non-requisite) workplace, is also internalized, but necessitates the use of defenses and coping mechanisms to deal with the dissonant, unhealthy object relations that are incorporated from the workplace, produced by the non-requisite structures. Pathology that may appear as personal is in fact induced and necessitated by the unhealthy working relationships. Like any defence or coping mechanism, it comes about from an attempt to cope with a painful or even intolerable internalized situation. These working relationships (typically emerging from authority relationships) were not created out of malevolence or exploitation, and often came into being for the most benign reasons. They were often created ad hoc, driven by production-management needs and opportunities and an ignorance of how to properly design organizations. The principles from which the machines and production processes operate were known. The rules and principles that governed the behavior of the people in the system, however, were either unknown or incorrect.

If you build it (right), they will work

Requisite Organization (RO) utilizes a set of principles and structural arrangements, based around the ideal of providing employees at all levels the opportunity to fully employ their cognitive resources and skills in the context of fair and humane management and fair but differential compensation. It is often extremely difficult for individuals trained in psychological or analytic systems where "there are no rules" to understand that, in fact, there may be rules in hierarchical employment systems whose violations incur predictable work as well as intrapsychic consequences. This has led to Jaques' work being criticized as "rigid" and even fascist. The relationship of requisite principles to organizational structure is like that of engineering to architecture: there are many pathways to beauty and functionality, but if you violate basic engineering principles, the building will crumble. Poorly designed organizations create distrustful, unmotivated, paranoid people and uncommitted workers. It is the systems that make organizations difficult, not the people.

An analogy may help convey this point. The projective hypothesis, for example, implies that while there will be some differences in interpretation of the content of a simple, clear,

photograph, it takes a considerably distorted psychic system to report the experience of a significantly different, perhaps bizarre picture. An inkblot, however, can elicit major differences in content (due to personal projections) in mentally healthy individuals, and produce paranoid interpretations in disturbed individuals. A requisitely structured organization is perceived more like a photograph, and through its structure (cognitive differentiation of work), clarity and transparency (of authority-accountability relationships) in conjunction with its felt-fair compensation system, minimizes the need for dissonance reducing or coping mechanisms, and fosters mature, trust-based, healthy work relationships. A poorly (non-requisitely) constructed or managed work situation- more like the inkblot- literally elicits psychic defenses and projections which are often required in mentally healthy individuals just to cope with the situation. Work in a RO is sensed (perceived) as challenging, legitimate, necessary, and important to the overall success of the organization. It can be discussed, revised or otherwise dealt with by purely cognitive means because it is an attempt to represent and communicate reality and requires no cognitive or psychic distortion. Departures from RO, on the other hand, tend to induce dissonances which create the need to utilize psychological mechanisms to somehow internally "account" for a situation. It is non-requisite management structure and practices that produce psychologically unhealthy and destructive workplaces. Structure and manage the enterprise correctly, and the people will work and thrive.

A requisitely constructed role will present an employee with the optimal working situation, with little or no need to distort or defend. A poor or abusive managerial style will, of course, require coping from subordinates, but this is readily observable by most parties, and can be corrected by conscious means or the individual can be removed from his/her role. A non-requisitely structured role, on the other hand, cannot be transcended by even the healthiest, most caring, and humane of managers.

The relations between organizational structural and their intrapsychic representational consequences is, of course, infinitely complex, but we can illustrate our basic point by examining one of the basic principles of RO namely, that a manager should be capable of, and in fact, working at one cognitive level above his/her subordinates. Let's call that the 1SD principle, for "one cognitive strata difference".

The details of stratified cognitive levels, are, of course, presented in Jaques' work, but a quick introduction will (hopefully) suffice here. Levels of work exist as levels of complexity, ie, bigger pieces of work, require the individual to possess the cognitive ability to work with greater levels of abstraction as gauged by greater time spans of organizational discretion. Executives seem to appreciate this difference, often echoed in terms of questions like "is he/she big enough for the job?". Each level requires different and unique modes (paradigms) of cognitive operations or processing to be successful. A plant manager, for example, must manage a group of parallel, complex processes, including production systems, quality systems, training systems, and even inventory systems. Each of these systems is managed by a separate manager, working with a smaller "piece" of the action, and at a lower time span but feeding into the overall work of the plant manager. The plant manager may have a three year program to implement (Level IV work, ie, with three levels of work-management beneath it), but each of her subordinates will have projects that take

no longer than one year (one level of complexity below, Level III work), and it is her job to balance their processes, assign their work, and deliver the completed three year project to her boss, who holds her accountable for the output of her subordinates. She must be capable of working at one cognitive level above her subordinates, and of course, possess the requisite skills, value the work, and be accorded the requisite authority.

In the post modern era, employees enter managerial relationships expecting that their boss will have superior cognitive capabilities to their own, and will have legitimate organizational authority, and will exercise that authority in a rational, fair, and discussable manner. In managerial terms, this translates into an implicit psychological contract that includes a value added (boss working at a higher level than the employee), legitimate organizational authority (where authority is accompanied by accountability), and sensible, agreed upon accountabilities and authority. Employees typically enter the workplace with a desire to be like the boss, perhaps linked to the employee's ego ideal. Present also, however, is a natural desire to "surpass the boss, to defeat the boss, or to resist the boss." (Hirschhorn, 4, p8). Indeed, it may be that the richest and most valuable work offerings are born from the natural admixture of destructive rage and constructive energy, and emerge as both a challenge and a contribution. The contributions of Bion as well as the group relations writers have confirmed this idea, and it is now a part of the implicit knowledge of modern management theory. The one strata cognitive differential serves as a partially conscious but absolutely real "barrier" in the testing of authority and ideas, allowing vigorous challenges, without, however, the triggering the threat of potentially psychotic or devastating anxiety attendant on actually (in reality) destroying or defeating the boss. And from the boss's perspective, he/she can encounter the challenges from a position of benign (not arrogant, defensive, or sadistic) superiority, and when handled artfully, produces a healthy blend of enticing strength tempered with nurturance and acceptance, the essence of a healthy context for employee development. The boss no longer has to be "right" all the time to protect his/her image of authority, can learn from the employees, and incorporate their valuable input while still preserving the role.

The 1SD principle presents to all concerned an easily understood working related differential from the common sense, cognitive, and intellectual perspectives. Work at lower levels of complexity to fit into larger strategic objectives, and from the human perspective, allows employees matched correctly with their level of capability to work "flat out", releasing the internal challenges of work, and allowing for maximum satisfaction when completed. When this is NOT the case, as in most of our extant organizations, an uncomfortable dissonance is introduced in both the employee and the boss.

An example-illustration

Let us hypothesize that an engineering manager (Sam) is subordinate to the plant manager (Sarah), but is also capable of working at the same level of complexity as his boss. That is, they can both understand and conceptualize solutions that span a three year time period (Level IV organizational work), while Sam's actual delegated work (from Sarah) only requires that he work on projects of less than one year (Level III). The basic principle of

one strata difference between manager and subordinate has been violated. Sam's potential is being wasted. Or worse, soured.

From the viewpoint of the engineering manager, he sees his boss as adding little or no value to his work. In fact, he is rather bored with his work, and wants to deal with a larger context and bigger issues. In reality, both are capable of creating a solution that would successfully manage the plant over the three year horizon, but only she has the authority to make the decisions. Sam does brilliant engineering work, but wants to change the inventory and training systems to accommodate his new ideas. Sam prefers his solutions to hers, and when he discusses his ideas informally with his colleagues (all working at level III), they recognize his potential, probably referred to as "brightness". Sam is constantly frustrated in plant team meetings, as Sarah's strategy is clearly different from his, and she (not Sam) has the ear and attention of her boss, the CEO. From the organizational design perspective, we are wasting resources (his capability is under-utilized), but more importantly, from Sam the engineering manager's perspective, we have, through our inadvertent and non-Requisite structuring of the organization, produced a psychic dissonance in Sam, and this dissonance opens the door to defence, projection, and distortion. How does Sam explain this difference? Why are his ideas not heard and recognized? At the simplest level, he could understand that she is the boss, and he is the subordinate, and that is that. But even given this understanding, he will never be fully satisfied with his work, much like a race horse that never gets to run full speed. Less healthy, but superficially, Sam may decide that even though she may have a few skills that he does not (but could readily acquire), she got her job because she is a woman, and not because of her individual merits. At a more personal level, he may see Sara as his sibling who was always favored by his father, and that explains why she is the boss, as the CEO is prone to her seductions. And that's a pity, as Sam initially had great respect for the CEO, and enjoyed the one special project he was asked to do for senior management. If he only had a boss like that, his work would be worthwhile. Sam is literally deprived of the opportunity to relate or link to his boss through his ego-ideal: he doesn't want to be like the boss, he wants to be the boss, a somewhat more threatening situation! And the external reality is that he could be the boss. At this point, depending on Sam's ego strength the door now opens to more paranoid, idiosyncratic projections. He doesn't trust her, and counsels his colleagues to beware of her authority. Work is not much fun, and even his friend, Ed the production manager, seems to not understand the situation. Sam spends his weekends on Monster.com and bought some books on how to prepare resumes. He and Sarah are aware of the issue, and the company hired some counselors who met with them both, gave them some tests, and talked with them about their communication styles, and family history. Sam thought this was interesting and useful, but upset them all when he wanted to share how his plan for the integration of the facility was actually superior to Sarah's. They seemed to feel that he didn't "get it".

Now, consider this issue from the perspective of Ed, a production manager, who is fully capable of doing his job that requires working at Level III (One to two years). Ed is not bored with his job, and finds that he has to fully apply his skills and capabilities to meet his goals and accountabilities. It is a good feeling, and he enjoys the challenge. He and Sam both had sisters who were favored by their father, and shared "sister stories" over beers after work. Ed aspires to be a plant manager some day, but when he sees the issues and struggles

confronting Sarah, he wonders if he is yet ready. He enjoys his meetings with Sarah, and while tempted to see her as the seductive sister, he finds that she is fair, and is often quite helpful in helping him understand his work. She has a knack for helping him find solutions, but doesn't micromanage, and leaves it up to him to find the eventual pathway. She is supportive of his work, and quite receptive to his ideas about how production management fits into the overall picture. He and Sam had some mild disagreements over Sarah, and he decided that Sam seems to have some kind of a problem with women in authority.

Sarah now emerges from another frustrating meeting with Sam. Sam's subordinates are starting to complain that he is difficult to communicate with, and has a somewhat cavalier attitude toward their work, and tends to tell them what to do rather than help them solve their problems. She dreads taking these issues up with Sam, who is certainly likely to dismiss them as trivial. The frustrating part of dealing with Sam is that his ideas are quite good, and she's even been tempted to implement a few, but resisted because she feared that others would see Sam as running the plant, and that she was but a female figurehead. She felt very uncomfortable at this, as she had always highly valued input and collaboration. And when she saw Sam having coffee with her boss, her insecurity festered, and she wondered if he was complaining, or trying to undermine her plans for the plant. She found herself spending an inordinate amount of time worrying about Sam, and how he would react to her ideas and visions for the plant. At times, she really enjoyed their discussions, and had to remind herself that she was talking to her subordinate, and not a colleague. She didn't like these kinds of distinctions, but worried that if she did not exert her authority, Sam would see her as weak and vulnerable.

Let me reiterate the key point: the "jam up" between Sarah and Sam was the structural defect in the design of the organization that produced the dynamics in the individuals that also entered the group process (through the association of Sam and Ed). The structural defect was an open wound, inviting the infection that followed. And once the process begins, the reciprocal, internalized representations of both parties is altered, introducing further un-realities, and necessitating further coping mechanisms. In the most virulent cases, this resembles a system that enters a "death spiral" of negative feedback, resulting in an impossible and unstoppable course ending in managerial failure, "attitude or personal problems", as well as business and personnel losses to the employing organization.

At this point, let me interject a phrase used by therapists and analysts all over the world: "We have to stop now, our time is up for today". Indulge me, however, with a brief un-analytic summary of what I have tried to present. The premise is simple, the implications are complex. In the post modern era we have the opportunity to construct organizations that are both economically sustainable and meet people's expectations of fair treatment and the opportunity to fully employ their potential. It is well accepted now that workers internalize their workplace, but a poorly designed workplace requires extensive psychic coping mechanisms, that once used, can further negatively impact the working relationships. Structural deficiencies produce (or elicit) individual psychopathology, whereas properly (Requisitely) built and managed organizations allow people to work to their full potential, with jobs that are personally rewarding and managerial relationships that are rational and healthy.

Building economically sustainable organizations based on an understanding of how these organizations impact the internal lives of its inhabitants is of crucial importance at a societal level. By participating in the design (or the correction of structural defects) we as consultants and analysts must also be prepared to accept a greater role. No longer is treating the casualties sufficient, we can make a unique contribution to the pro-active construction of one of society's most essential institutions, the workplace, the "organization". One can only imagine the horrendous interpersonal working conditions in areas designated as "emerging markets". No doubt they are beginning to use the most advanced product planning, scheduling, and production systems to supply cheap goods. And no doubt they are giving no consideration what-so-ever to the internal lives of those who produce the goods. Is that sustainable?

The eminent economist and social philosopher John Kenneth Galbraith believes that "...economics will deal increasingly with...the internal dynamics of the large firm...as it organizes the experience and intelligence of its workers." "The future theory of the firm," he continues, "if it is to have relevance, will of necessity be a theory primarily of bureaucratic structure and organization." (Galbraith, 5) The psychoanalytic study of the nexus between people and organizations should have much to say in this area. If we leave this work solely to economists, we may not have learned much from history.

Postlude

When an individual is appropriately matched with his/her level of potential, meaning and pride naturally arises from the work itself. It's easy to criticize organizations as exploiting or abusing workers, particularly when those workers perform absolutely essential but often backbreaking, messy jobs. But there are companies that provide opportunities for people at all levels to work to their full potential, while being treated and compensated fairly. Consider Edwardo (the name is changed to protect his and his family's privacy), a long term employee of the Wyatt Company. CEO Deborah Beatty and Chairman Everett Beatty (their names are not changed to afford them some recognition) are not practitioners of any particular management theory except that of using common sense in the context of humane treatment. Their company is profitable, has a friendly family atmosphere, and employs many poorly educated but dedicated workers.

Edwardo suffered from terminal lung cancer, but received excellent treatment because of his health insurance from Wyatt. Near the end of the week, Edwardo requested an extra clean and pressed Wyatt uniform, a somewhat unusual request, but one that was granted with little discussion. Edwardo's work was neither abstract nor conceptual. He sweated, and got dirty in the Texas summer, welding and fabricating large metallic structures for railroads and bridges. Jaques would classify it as definitely Level I work. Edwardo, I'm sure wouldn't care: he liked his work, appreciated having the opportunities it provided, and was quite proud of his contributions.

Early last Valentine weekend, the Beatty's received a call from Edwardo's family informing them that he was in the intensive care unit and had entered the terminal phase of his lung

cancer. There was no hope, and the family wanted someone from Wyatt to be present. Some of his co-workers had already arrived, and the Beatty's canceled their plans and spent the weekend at the hospital. They remained with the family through the removal of Edwardo's life support system, and the distinctively Hispanic anguish and grief that followed. They arranged, at their own expense, to have Edwardo's body flown to Mexico, so that he could be buried with his family. The extra uniform? Edwardo left instructions that he be buried wearing it.

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