Beyond Strategy - What is the role of values in organisations

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The questions I wish to address include:

What do we think we are doing when we write down values?

Why do people in organisations think they have to 'do' values?

Is there such a thing as an organisational value?

Is it the need to understand the search for individual and collective meaning?

What do we think we are doing when we write down values?

Inclusion or exclusion from the group or team is a powerful driver of behaviour, just as the process of shame is an effective form of social control. Is this the reason we write down values? The forces of togetherness and separateness are biologically rooted. Without them we would not have evolved as we survive by being together as a group in organisations.   Forces apply to keeping an organisation a cohesive unit such as values, rules, and notions of how we do things in life. This becomes the imprint of the culture of the organisation.

Why do people in organisations think they have to 'do' values?

Ideology can also be a critical shaping force of group behaviour. We need to understand these interactions and how they play out in the everyday actions of an organisation to truly grasp organisational behaviour. Is it that if you employ people with the 'right' skills and capabilities, get 'buy-in' from them through vision, mission, value statements, and with the creation of the 'right' culture and provide leadership skills accompanied by 'feedback' in the form of direct and anonymous feedback then you have all the hallmarks for a successful organisation that will achieve 'alignment' culminating in financial and organisational success?

One particular development I am concerned with is that of anonymous feedback people receive in organisations through such devises as 360 degree feedback instruments. These instruments, in my view, can be devices that have as its purpose control and compliance to "the way we do things around here" rather than instruments to give feedback for performance improvement.

Is there such a thing as an organisational value?

Value and value commitment arise in values of self-formation, which is an integral part of the self. Values are not absolutes contingent on a particular situation but take on the form of idealisations, imaginative constructions as a whole to which we subscribe to. They are higher purposes we are creating. Values give us a feeling of fulfilment, which makes us feel like living and is the motivation for doing the work we do. Values open up options for action whereas norms close them down.

Values and norms are paradoxical. They are the basis of ideology. A cult is where values and norms are applied rigidly without any consideration.

The notion that leaders can choose the values for an organisation could be considered absurd. No one is able to say 'these' are going to be the values.

I believe it is an illusion to think that you might be able to manufacture a value, however you may be able to manufacture a norm. You demonstrate through behaviour and interactions with others what your values are, as you can't instruct someone to have a voluntary compulsion – a value.

Is it the need to understand the search for individual and collective meaning?

The forces of separateness are the forces that differentiates and is in opposition to the forces of togetherness. Jung called this individuation (1971 p.119-121) *"In general, it is the process by which individuals beings are formed and differentiated…"* and this is also akin to Maslows' self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970) The need for self-actualisation is *"the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming"* and autonomy to be on our own and do things self sufficiently. Bowen (1978 p.472) claims that we can be autonomous but still not differentiated because of the family of origin or in relationships with close family others, which I believe resonates also within organisations.

Difficulties arise between the forces of togetherness, which subdues anxiety to maintain the balance, and the forces of separateness where anxiety increases.

Leadership is something that someone, or a group of someone's, does at a particular time that, for a while, enhances the combined efforts of a particular group of people for the betterment of that group of people as a whole, and to those associated either directly or indirectly to the decision that has been implemented. Leadership therefore must have purpose and must have meaning attribution attached to it.

Goals can also play a positive part in an organisation provided they do not impose a cult characteristic on an individual. James Ogilvy in his 1995 book *'Living without a Goal'* makes the point that it is the *"Grand Goals that enslave us by using capital letters to mock their pretensions to personal destinies"*. He argues that *"we have mastered the art of living with goals and what has it gotten us? More commitments, more obligations – and much less time to be playful, loving and alive. What if we could let go of our goals – and our belief that without them we are nothing – and open ourselves to even more productive and fulfilling experiences?"*

Given the plethora of courses, models, tools and leadership techniques available to enhance organisational effectiveness one could be forgiven in thinking that if you invested in these the successful operation of an organisation would be relatively easy.

This said, from my observation, there are very few organisations today that don't do any, if not all, of the above but still fail to achieve the outcomes expected.

It is for these reasons that this paper is meant to be more of a conversation piece about the possible linkages between futures thinking and leadership methodology and as an introductory exploration of this thinking rather than a claim to any 'great' breakthrough.

The paper argues that although the methods outlined above can be very useful without a relational foundation and a clear focus on meaning and purpose for a preferred future they fall short in achieving the outcomes they were designed to achieve.

Anticipatory Action Research, Action Learning and Futures Studies provide an appropriate framework from which to implement a more meaningful educational methodology, to address the 'strategy tragedy' by applied futures thinking beyond strategy.

Nihilism, that branch of philosophy that denies that human existence has any significance at all is all to often played out in the day-to-day functioning of organisational life as humans have been reduced, or to some executives, perhaps elevated, as resources to occupy synergisms with other organisational resources such as capital resources, computers and other equipment resources and natural resources. These may have come about as a result of action learning where experientially, as a KPI (Key Performance Indicator), this made sense to those who like to measure and control organisations by manipulations of its 'resources' in response to market trends and, as a result, the use of their 'power'.

Viewed from this perspective KPIs based purely on financial returns could also stand for 'Keep People Ignorant' as the many discourses necessary in human interactions in organisational life are determinant on power relating between one or many individuals on multiple levels of communication all happening at the same time, be it past, present or future time, and this goes far beyond the fetish organisations have with financial numerical measurement as the sole determinate of relevance.

Anticipatory action learning, as I am arguing it, refers to conscience, the primordial part of our consciousness that reminds us of our potential for living 'authentically'. These two worlds, that is the world of action learning and the world of anticipatory action learning, I describe as having a dialectical tension where having contradictory traits produces this tension as a process by which these two contradictory forces of themes or memes (experientially now and meaningful future) could lead to a resolution or synthesis, that being our need for relationships in the here-and-now.

Conclusion

As humans, our intentions are always emerging with our negotiations and interactions with each other, as the foundation of knowledge is empathy. Often this is implicit empathy (non-rational) and through critical futures studies, we can be more in touch with the "feeling of being" and with the notion of opening up possibilities of choice and more effective communication.

Communicative interactions are the different views of what it means to be human involving our psychology and sociology. Rational (explicit) or cognitive psychology has to do with models and mental models of which the sender/receiver model of communication is the dominant model from which the meaning in the spoken word is taken together with response from another both consciously and subconsciously.

The basic assumption of the 'cult of performance' (Burke, 2004), which is the current organisational paradigm, is based on systems thinking particularly that field of systems thinking that assumes that human systems are cybernetic systems and it is on this assumption that policy is built on. This has lead to the current organisational belief that has trapped us into thinking we can't say anything about performance through the contesting of different ways of thinking. When this does happen, however, it is usually the result of what has been called the 'shadow organisation', which is an important process that occurs in every organisation that challenges the concept of control in organisations. Planning, therefore, can be part of a fantasy we call control, a myth we call being strategic.

The history of education has been largely based on rationality, models and explicit knowledge. Understanding oneself in ones own life, however, is the basis of our existence. This reflects on how we feel towards our education, our work and asks the question who am I, and how have I come to be who I am?

The 'practice' of futures studies with executives in the corporate and public world is centered on the concept of leadership. Action learning, action research and futures brings an interesting perspective linked with psychotherapy, particularly organisational group psychotherapy, to the notion that the present moment is all we have and to the notion that the future is something we need to create – to also have, within ourselves, in the present moment – as something that is preferred, obtainable and meaningful – a hope, a vision, an inspiration.

Why the need?
Strategic plans often fail. It is estimated that only 5 – 10% of strategic plans are ever implemented.

What is the difference?
Generally strategic planning is a logical abstraction reached through linear processing based on the "problem" (problem in the sense that the outcome or future being planned is uncertain) leading to 'solutions' planned through actions of cause and effect within the existing 'systems' paradigm.

'Beyond Strategy' is about conversations about the 'problem' behind the problem behind the problem, where often the problem itself is seen as the problem. That is about the recognisable but unknowable future where thinking, choosing, and deciding could be analysed as private behaviours with characteristic causal relations to overt behaviour and as subject to the basic principles of operant conditioning reached through layered conversations based on the meaning and purpose of the organisations existence.

It is my hope that through futures studies, action learning, action research and human psychology we can move towards a better future which is inclusive for all and all the many ways of knowing.

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