

Fit for Teamwork: Modern and Postmodern Organisational Environments

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Abstract

My personal experience with teamwork, convinces me that what actually happens does not necessarily fit with theories about teams (Tuckman 1965, Borgatti 1996). Anecdotes relayed from working students, and subsequent research evidenced 'misfit-tings' between organisational theories (ideals) and organisational practice (reality) of teamwork (Ovretveit 1993, Kemp, 2002). In an attempt to make sense of any fit between theory and practice, the thesis is that differing approaches to organisation, identified as modern and postmodern, impact on the performance of an organisational team (Bauman 1992, Hassard and Parker 1993, Clark et al 1994). The modern version of organisation is of one version that fits for all time, and thus one version of teamwork is the reality. A postmodern perspective supports multiple versions of organisation, offering many realities of teamwork. The conclusion is an appreciation of modernism and postmodernism contributes an understanding of organisational team.

Paper

Many years ago, I began a quest for information into the 'best' way of performing in organisations. As recommended, I read organisational literature where the job of management was revealed as ever more complex; 'we admit the problem by filling our libraries with how-to books for him' (Dalton 1959, p 107). 'How-to' books, examples included *The One Minute Manager* (Blanchard 1983) and *The Shorter MBA* (Pearson and Thomas 1991), simplified complexity into 'quick fit' approaches. Hassard and Holliday (1998, p 10) condemn such reading matter as 'airport management guide (s)', likening them to the 'airport novel' - 'trashy, lightweight fantasy to be read on a plane trip, then discarded'. Probably true, but busy employees are exhorted to read, digest and use the principles of such literature.

Attendance on training courses contributed further information about performing in organisations, this time through participation in team exercises, e.g. 'Lost at Sea' or 'Lost in the Desert'. The meta-theory of teamwork was constructed during the training i.e. that teamwork is the best 'fit' or 'the right' organisational model. Meta-theory meaning the 'big', main or all consuming theory that is not questioned (Grant and Osrick 1996). Underpinning this meta-theory of teamwork are various beliefs:

1. A team is synergistic - the team is greater than the sum of its parts. 'Teamworking is achieving the more successful completion of a task by working together, than the separate individuals would have done by working alone' (Leith 1995, p 802).
2. The 'right' decision is made by teams owing to communication between those involved (Barker 1999).

3. Teams replay the message of democracy where all are deemed to be born equal and therefore have equal voices (Tannen 1995).
4. A traditional hierarchical organisation has been displaced by teams of equals (Webb and Hobdell 1980).
5. The benefits of teamwork arise from the cooperation, close working and communication between team members (Mayo 1949, Belbin 1981, Harvey Jones 1994).

I do propose however, there may sometimes be an 'unfit' between what is prescribed as the way to do things in organisational literature, and embedded in training, and the multiple realities of organisational contexts. For example, although the team games described above were purportedly based on military exercises, there never was any discussion about the appropriateness of a military training exercise for other organisational contexts. Ovretveit states (1993) that 'cooperation does not just happen by telling people they are in a team'. As Symonds (1997) suggests, encouragement is needed for teamwork to take place because of the tensions and conflicts between team members. In fact, teamwork when practiced maybe a discomfort to players, when their working knowledge of it in situ differs somewhat to how it is supposed to be (Albrow 2001). Research by Miller in the NHS (1994, p 225), found that teams were not necessarily considered the best way of organising, 'everyone thought teamwork was an unsatisfactory term... it implied more cohesiveness within health care practice than really exists'.

I offer here an example from my own teaching to part-time students, who were also healthcare employees; the situation indicates that what is prescribed through organisational theory, is not necessarily replicated in the practical work environment: I prepared and presented lectures on organisational structure (Kemp lectures - 1996/1997), which were followed by discussions about the organisational structures within which the students worked. Although students worked for one organisation, the National Health Service (NHS), and indeed in one particular sector, primary health care, they laboured within an array of organisational structures. Some of the students were employed by the community health services, but were separated in the organisational structure by the roles they performed as health visitors, midwives, school nurses and district nurses. All were located in organisational structures, separated from each other by organisational and professional boundaries.

In all examples, given by students, their organisational structures were described as a hierarchy, a hierarchy represented on organisational charts. Personnel were placed at various levels in the hierarchy depending on their responsibilities. Managers/team leaders or General Practitioners were placed at higher levels with nurses 'under' them. In turn the Nurses reported up to those who were placed at a higher level in the organisation. The students also talked of 'their team' as being their professional team of nurses rather than a team with any other. Although all were part of one primary health care service and, according to the literature, were in a Primary Health Care Team (Ovretveit 1993), there was no indication of that team on the organisational charts. The teamwork model becomes somewhat of a myth when it is assumed that 'differences among members do not exist - because they are now a "team"' (Moss Kanter

1985, p 262). How does this fit with the vision of teamwork needed for organisational effectiveness in today's organisational environment?

In an attempt to make sense of the fit of teamwork in organisational life, modern and postmodern perspectives of organisations can be explored (Bauman 1992, Hassard and Parker 1993, Clark et al 1994). The Modern schema of the organisation involves belief in the 'one right way' to organisational 'truth', modelled in the approach of scientific logical, objective rationality to organisational operations (Brown 1996, Scambler 1996). The one truth of the Modern organisation is found to be symbolised in the organisational chart that fixes the organisation in time and space (Koehler et al 1976).

Indicative of the modern world, Weber (1947; Wang 2000, p 1, Pugh 1984) points to an "iron cage of control", and thus we see in the modernist construct, that hierarchy is the rigid structure that controls people at work (Lewis 1999, Rosenau 1992). A hierarchy was noted as representative of 'the modern' by Boje and Dennehy (April 2000, p 9.), it being a metaphorical pyramid representing organisational people at differing levels (Gibbins and Reimer 1999, Boje and Dennehy (April 2000, p 9), that forms a 'differentiating system' for the organisation (Ovretveit 1993). For employees, the advantage of organisational layers constructed through the hierarchy is that it offers promotional opportunities (Gillespie 1997, Harrison and Pollitt 1994). For those at higher levels, the hierarchy beloved of the Modern organisation also offers benefits, "all managers some of the time, and many managers all the time, yearn for more definition and structure" (Burns and Stalker 1961; Clark et al 1994, p 334).

The Modern metaphor of organisation is machine, and we see employees adhering to the rules to keep the machine in operation (Burns and Stalker (1961). Employees then keep to the organisational rules about team, leading to the modernist stance that the metaphor 'team' is 'the' panacea for all of the ills in the system' (Stanley and Hatcher 1992; Spencer 1997, p 2). Consequently a team maybe called a 'team', but is actually an amalgamation of peoples constrained by hierarchy and boundaries, which causes the totality of the team to be undermined (Zerubavel 1979). How does this rigidity fit with the vision of teamwork needed for organisational effectiveness in today's changing environment?

I have started with a literature review that indicates that the Modern organisation focuses on continuities through a rational and logical view based on science (Albrow 1970, Richman and Goldthorpe 1977, Giddens 1996, Drucker Sept/Oct 1998). The modernist 'one best way' to organisational success turns to a postmodernist appreciation and celebration of differences (Harvey 1990). As Clegg (1990a, p 162) considers, an effective postmodern organisation is one that realises 'there is no one best way of doing'. In a postmodern debate the discussion is about discontinuities and irrationality in the organisation (Clark et al 1994). Postmodernism luxuriates in irrationality, in a belief in a multifaceted approach to organisational truths (Bauman 1992). The literature on postmodern organisation considers that they are often irrational and can be uncoordinated (Brown 1995). As an organisation develops and adapts to its environment, a metaphor of organism is judged to be more conducive with postmodernism (Burns and Stalker 1961, Morgan 1986).

A postmodern metaphor of organisation as organism also fits with the notion of teamwork, as the team can adapt to the environment. Empowerment and the delayering of

the organisation is evident of 'a growing interest in alternative ways of motivating staff and securing their commitment' (Hughes 1996, p 292). Thus teamwork fits where decision-making is empowered to local levels and there is a 'flattening' of the organisational hierarchy (Boje 1998). Postmodernism is more attuned to flexibility and the acceptance of the uncontrollable (Harvey 1990, Heydebrand p 3; Parker 1992). A 'dissolving' of boundaries between roles, reminiscent of postmodernism, can be seen as team roles flex and adapt to changing needs. Communication becomes a network, as members of a team come together at meetings, across physical sites and professional boundaries (Bush and Frohman 1991). In postmodernism, the organisation is ever changing, and therefore it does not conform to pre set plans such as that depicted as a hierarchy on an organisational chart (Traynor 1996). Modernist control continues as most organisation is still depicted in this way, but in postmodern organisations, boundaries flow and hierarchy is more flexible to enable teamwork to prosper (Clark et al 1994). The dichotomy for organisations is whether to keep the traditional modernist practices, 'the one best way' (title; Kanigel 1997), or to accept that there is "no one best way of organising" (Woodward; Rose 1988, p 216, Dawson 1996). How does this fit with the vision of teamwork needed for organisational effectiveness in the future of organisational environments?

In the modern world, control is through systems, in a postmodern world control is through the people, 'people are always both objects and agents of social and organisational processes' (Hoggett 1991, p 247). It is possible to have modern systemised working in a postmodern world, but the important element is to understand that there will be many interpretations of this (Cooper and Burrell 1987 cited in Boje June 25 1999). A postmodern understanding can be gained that there are many teams with many ways and that a model of an organisational team offers "no optimum type of management system" (Burns and Stalker 1961; Clark et al 1994, p 335). As long as one does not have to objectify 'team' and rather is sensitive to many views of reality then perhaps 'team' can be understood (Gergen 2000). Following this perspective, the notion of team can adapt, flex and fit with current and future organisational environments that incorporates both modern and postmodern tendencies.

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