HUMAN-CENTRIC ORGANISATIONS AND THE CULTURE OF WORK IN A COMPLEX WORLD

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Key drivers for the futures of organisations

- Increasing complexity of the world
- Environmental and social problems
- The need to find inner meaning
Theoretical background

- Distributed leadership (Bolden 2011)
- Organisation as a computational system (Hutchins 1995)
- Levels of information processing in a cognitive system (Marr 1982)
- Layers of organisational culture (Schein 1985)

Previous research on group based foresight


Primary case: Reaktor

Finnish IT-consultancy organisation Reaktor: three months of non-participatory ethnographic observation from March 2015 to June 2015, six thematic interviews with members of the organisation during the same timeframe

Founded in 2000. In 2016 employed appr. 350 people
Turnover of around 43 million euros (2015).
The company has offices in Finland, the US and Japan.

- Leading organizational principle has been to create the best possible workplace for its employees.
- A collegial network organization
- Hierarchy is minimized, where employee freedom and power to decide over projects is maximized, and where all jobs are as challenging and occupationally motivating as possible.
- Close collaboration with the client organization, and teams mainly work on-site. All Reaktor projects are based on an agile project model.

Supporting case: Buurtzorg, a Dutch home care organisation

Eight employees and founders were interviewed in either individual or pairwise thematic interviews during one week in May 2016. The Buurtzorg data is complemented by an exhaustive literature review of extant research on the organisation (Laloux 2014, Nandram ).

Founded in 2006 by Jos de Blok
Employs appr. 10 000 nurses in the Netherlands
Active in 24 countries
One of the fastest growing organizations in the Netherlands ever, has been voted the best employer in the country each year since 2011

- Buurtzorg was created and built around the idea that the organization exists in order to meet the client’s needs
- Nurses must be made free to make the best possible use of their expertise to look after the client.
- This means, among other things, that nurses decide independently on their working methods and working hours.
Supporting case II (ongoing research): Patagonia, an American outdoor apparel company

So far data consists of thematic interviews of the VP Environmental Initiatives and Special Media Projects, Retail Shop vendor, and Marketing Director. These are combined with a literature survey and observation at the Patagonia campus in Ventura, CA.

Founded in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard
Revenue 209,09 (2017 estimate)
Employs 1000 people
- Patagonia’s distinctive ethos is its commitment to environmental conservation and sustainable development goals
- Company’s mission statement is: “Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis”.
- Mission is present throughout the organization’s practices: all choices of materials and all transport and subcontracting decisions are made with a view to ecological sustainability.

Culture at Reaktor

At Reaktor the success is based on trust among the Reaktorians throughout the organisation:
- Low threshold of contacting anyone in the organisation
- Personal, informal relations among the workers
- Honest feedback and generous information sharing
- The teams are not fixed, but members can be interchanged
- The teams have control over their work, but need to give rational justification for their actions. The whole team needs to be able to stand behind the decisions made in the team (does not however require consensus about everything).
- The employees at Reaktor see a direct correlation with the success of the firm and the success of all the employees: through bonuses for everyone based on profit-making, but also on a more universal level (“we want to still be around after 200 years, and we are the group who is going to make it happen”). Ownership also gradually offered to all the employees (previously owned by around 10 senior founders).
Culture at Buurtzorg

- Seamless and personal links with social services, medical doctors and other healthcare professionals.
- *Buurtzorg*’s organization is built around local self-organized teams. One team may have a maximum of 12 nurses.
- Teams are supported by an easy-to-use information system via which nurses can access all relevant information about their clients.
- Each team is free to decide on its own way of working.
- All nurses working for Buurtzorg are required to have nursing qualifications, but there are no other recruitment criteria.
- Buurtzorg’s operation is based on a comprehensive assessment of client needs, a personal care plan and the client’s social circle is closely involved in supporting client rehabilitation.
- Aim is to find solutions that will allow them to lead as independent and normal a life as possible.

Culture at Patagonia

- Patagonia’s workplace culture relies heavily on teamworking and internal team autonomy.
- However, all employees have their own clearly defined job titles, and units have their appointed directors
- The company invests heavily in its employees’ personal growth and development.
- Described by the employees as tribe- or family like rather than an industrial organization. There is an honest, open and laidback atmosphere in the company.
- High level of employee commitment
- Loyal relationship between the company and its clients.
- Every employee may dedicate a certain amount of time each year to work for the environment.
- Anyone sentenced for an environmental activism offence will be entitled to full pay for the duration of their prison term!
Self-managed teams at Reaktor and Buurtzorg

• A team is a small group of individuals with complementary skills, committed to a common goal and a shared way of working. A team considers itself jointly responsible for the outcome of the performance.
• A team is considered to be self-managed when it possesses the ability to plan, perform, oversee, and assess its own functioning.
• A central requirement for self-management is that the team as a collective needs to create a model for shared/distributed leadership, where the members of the team agree on being lead by each other, and each member also commits to providing leadership to others.
• Groups create social rules that enable the organizing of work in the team.

Purpose as defining organisations

• Purpose expresses the organization’s intentions and endeavours to change the world.
• Patagonia and Buurtzorg organise around their defining purpose (environmental protection / nursing).
• The world is viewed through the lens of the purpose, and it directs how the organisation grows and changes its operations (e.g. Patagonia has started to sell food in order to address more complex environmental issues effectively, Buurtzorg has started to provide nursing homes for some of the clients who need more extensive care).
Case organisations

The significance of purpose in defining organizational direction setting

The amount of self-management

- Patagonia
- Buurtzorg
- (traditional organisation)
- Reaktor

Common features among the organisations

1) human-centric organisational principles,
2) horizontal organisational culture, and
3) systemic approach to their environment.

It is argued that a combination of a culture that **promotes individual empowerment** within the community, and **entails a systemic understanding of how the organisation affects its environment**, results in the organisation becoming a conscious agent of change.
Core elements of anticipation in human-centric organisations

Team-based work: emphasis on communication, giving out advice, questioning practices, and other views.

Desire to affect surrounding system for the better.

Psychological safety: no sanctions for correcting others.

Futures orientation: e.g. a 200 year vision "what are the new things, what could work" as basis for organisational development.

References