



COMMENTARY

Effective workplace culture: the attributes, enabling factors and consequences of a new concept

'Towards a *complexified* notion of workplace culture'

Theo Niessen

Let me state first and foremost that the paper 'Effective workplace culture: the attributes, enabling factors and consequences of a new concept' is an eloquently written manuscript focusing on relevant elements that play a role at the micro level facing transformational processes. Latour (1987) would have been proud of this piece of writing. The authors were able to guide me quite smoothly along their thinking trail. Before I knew it, I finished reading the paper for the first time saying out loud: 'This is true!' But is it?

This paper makes a very relevant contribution within the practice development field, not only stating the evidence that the micro context is of paramount importance to change agents, but also, as already mentioned, flashing out of the different elements of effective workplace culture that seem to play a role. Elements that surely ring a bell on a common sense level but which now have been sorted out in a more robust manner.

Within my comments to this paper the developed framework will be my 'black box'; a taken for granted backdrop against which I would pose the next relevant question: 'And now?' My comments will focus on a quite subtle incongruence. It seems to me that this incongruence is related to different ontological assumptions that are identifiable in this article. These different ontological assumptions, I believe, are ultimately pitched on an unclear definition of complexity. I hope that pointing out this issue and pulling it within an enactivist viewpoint will help in sharpening the discussion to what might be the next question: 'And now?'

Process of framework formation

Firestone (1987), already in the eighties of the previous century, recalled that the choice for a methodology within research and the accompanying language that is used, reveals cues about one's epistemological and ontological stance. The elements of methodology, epistemology and ontology should also be congruent within research to be felt credible by peers (Niessen et al., 2000).

Looking at the manuscript, as an anthropologist like Latour (1987) would, the sound and thorough four stage structure to develop the framework, is turning a provisional concept progressively into a black box with each of the four steps that are taken. The authors are keen enough to mention that the framework is preliminary and in need of more attunement; however this statement also strengthens the belief we are dealing with a potential black box. Put in other words the method and language used to develop the framework reifies the framework into a less malleable/dialogical construct. In doing so a positivist/realist tendency come into view that states; a true understanding

of reality i.e. the necessary relevant elements in obtaining a effective workplace culture is – through stops and fits – attainable.

However, within the same manuscript, I read phrases that connote less to a reified world; for example when talking about effecting change within practice towards an effective workplace culture. Here, the tone is much more fluid. Terms that are used in this respect are ‘enabling’ and not being prescriptive. This connotes to a more relativist, relational ontology in which an effective workplace culture is a path made while being walked.

There seems to be discrepancy between these descriptions. On the one hand the process formation of the framework suggests a realist/positivist ontology. An ontology that is also evident in the goal setting of the framework i.e. the framework provides *necessary* elements that *all* should be taken into account for an effective workplace to come into view. On the other hand, when talking about the process of facilitating change, that is typified in less prescriptive terms denoting a more attuned, fluid, and flexible ontology.

Complexity

It is worth reflecting on the concept of complexity to look at this incongruence a bit more deeply. Complexity may mean different things. Sometimes the term complexity is used but what is actually meant is complicatedness. Within a complicated world the particles of which the world consists are identifiable, as are the processes that make them work together. On the other hand there is also a definition that states that complexity is an ongoing responsive process of humans (human systems) relating to local situations. In the latter sense the manageability of an innovation may be an illusion, since the relevant elements of an effective work context may be the (each time different) emergent properties of the collision between humans (human systems) and other systems. The two ontological viewpoints I read within this article may be related to these different notions of complexity.

And now? – part one

In the article I’ve not positioned myself clearly. I will now do so to sharpen the dialogue to what may be repercussions to what is attainable to the framework developed (the ‘And now?’ question). In doing so I will draw on the work of enactivists (Varela et al., 1997; Niessen et al., 2008). Although I use this stream of thought generally here, there are in fact different shades identifiable. In short, enactivists state that ground and figure appear simultaneously; they co-emerge. This means that there is no separation between a context and a cognitive agent. As a result of this an effective workplace culture evolves in a complex fabric of relations between agents (human systems) and enactments by agents related to daily choices. The focus must therefore be directed to subtle particularities of ‘context’, that is constantly shifting as a result of the interactional dynamics and the relations among these particularities. What an effective workplace culture is or creates thus leaks out of individual attempts to attend to and control it. According to enactivists we should be cautious against the assumption that the determinants of an effective workplace culture are or will necessarily be transferable to the next. This so-called ‘receptive context’ for creating an effective workplace culture has no universal formula to (implicitly or explicitly independent) ‘factors’ or ‘elements’ that are absolutely necessary.

And now? – part two

There remains, and there always will remain, a need to retranslate research and theoretical evidence into pragmatic managerial processes and tactics that leave space to incorporate the unique emergent properties of a (effective) workplace culture. From an enactivist point of view it is not so much to focus on the (whether or not necessary) elements or components of an effective workplace culture, but on the relationships binding them together into new complex unities. Creating an

effective workplace becomes more of a continual process of focused trial and error. Knowing or facilitating an effective workplace culture becomes fluid and located in activity. Although there is more to say about the question to what, in principle, a change agent is able to accomplish with the information from an enactivist standpoint, I wonder as a final question to the authors how they relate to the highlighted complexity issue, their more explicit choice and underlying ontological suggestions, and the ultimate consequences to what is in principle possible.

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