

Holacracy & Co.: A question of autonomy, teamwork, cooperation and, above all, leadership

7.3.2018

So here comes the new panacea, the miracle solution that will revolutionize management.

For decades now, companies and institutions in different parts of the world have been testing/applying different forms of organization, management and leadership, involving more or less authority, autonomy, employee responsibility and cooperation.

It is important to pay close attention to new trends. History has a lot to teach us. New developments, new approaches certainly don't wipe away the past and all the good things it has brought us. The main thing is to take what is best from each period, each experience, and combine them wisely to meet the present needs of the company, the market and people as individuals.

Of these "new" trends, the one attracting most attention at the present time (according to Wikipedia) is holacracy. A system of organization and governance, based on the formalized application of collective intelligence. Operationally, it is a way of disseminating decision-making mechanisms via the fractal organization of self-organized teams.

In recent months, I have read several articles, seen a number of videos and taken part in conferences on these new approaches. If we look around us and analyse the experiments currently taking place, it is clear that there are various factors we need to take into account in each case: the degree of autonomy of the people concerned, the maturity of the company involved, the cooperation within and between teams, and the strength of the leadership.

Not surprisingly, in all this complexity some companies are back-tracking, taking a breather or redefining their approach. Let's try and understand why?

Autonomy

Autonomy has to do with individuality, personality. Not everyone can or wants to be autonomous. While most of the employees of a specialist IT company will tend to desire a high level of autonomy, those working for a production company will be less concerned about their scope for independent action.

Some people do not want to have to take decisions, or are not prepared to bear the possible consequences.

Establishing structures and procedures whereby decisions are taken collectively may simply shift the problem elsewhere and can lead to personal disengagement (buck-passing) when mistakes are made: "This is what we decided!"

This issue of personal responsibility should not be underestimated.

In two concrete cases recently, senior managers have told me that a process of "natural selection" took place and people who did not fit into the new system left the company. Some 15% of the staff involved chose to resign.

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But don't we have a social responsibility to support our employees, whether to enhance their autonomy or to enable those less able to act autonomously to continue in their jobs? This is an issue of ethics and leadership!

Maturity of the company

These new approaches take time to implement and cannot be introduced at the drop of a hat. They need to be prepared for. There is a process to be gone through, and in this process, there needs to be a guide, a motivator. Leadership, too, is essential.

In actual fact, the maturity of a company depends on its vision, a clearly defined vision that is understood and shared. The company needs to have established values that are in accord with this vision. These values have to be translated into clearly observable principles of behaviour and management. The structures put in place, the processes and tools, must be appropriate and take all this into account. This ensures consistency and congruence.

As a result, there is a clearly defined framework within which employees can experience greater autonomy. The maturity we are talking about needs to be matched by exemplary conduct on the part of the managers and executives. They must practise what they preach, i.e. have integrity. This is the principal pre-condition for introducing a new corporate culture.

Teamwork and cooperation among different teams (partnership)

Even though in some companies "functions" are abolished and replaced by "roles", individual people are still human beings, with all their emotions, fears, affinities, uniqueness, interpretations and expectations.

So, at a time when digitalization is all the rage, I would make two claims:

Firstly, no one really knows what "digitalization" means for their enterprise or institution, and this is true at all levels. I have run a number of workshops with the managements of both large companies and SMEs, and no one really knew what it would mean for them.

Secondly, only companies which aim for cooperation within and between their different teams (teamwork and partnership) can expect to succeed. The strength created in this way, the cohesion, solidarity, and confidence, will enable them to solve the problems that arise, when the time comes.

Therefore, focus on cooperation among your different teams, on trust and sharing. Break down barriers and silo structures. You will be laying the foundations for future success.

Leadership

Finally, it is clear that we are moving further and further away from the old idea of "the boss" and thinking increasingly in terms of "leaders".

Self-organizing teams are fine, but in what direction should they be going, who is guiding them, who is providing them with an accurate compass to point the way forward (vision), who is inspiring them (setting an example), who is establishing a framework (values, rules: trust/control)?

Personally, I love the work of guiding, developing, supporting, stimulating, inspiring and generating momentum!

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Just to remind you, my definition of leadership is as follows: the capacity to create momentum, to move people towards a common objective, an attractive vision, via a stimulating, creative and inspiring framework. The legitimate use of power (authority).

And I know many CEOs and company executives who share similar values and ideas. They are a source of inspiration for their employees, who are very happy to be caught up in this momentum, have a part in this story, this journey.

Thus we can establish a clearly defined framework, but without having to draw up a complex “constitution” that no one will read. Let’s try to keep it simple and make sure that everyone understands, so that they can take it on board at all levels.

Moreover, by delegating we can satisfy our employees’ needs for autonomy, depending on their level and desire to take on more responsibility. This is what is known as “situational management”. In delegating, let’s always take into account the dimensions of “tasks”, “skills” and “responsibilities”. Let’s be consistent.

For example, when deciding on the purchase of a new office chair, do you as a senior manager or executive need to sign the purchase order, and do other people need to have seen the paperwork beforehand? Or do you give the employee concerned room for manoeuvre, so that they can take the decision to make a purchase worth less than, say, 500 francs on their own initiative?

It is interesting to see the effect that little details like this can have within a company. Employees will not purchase the most expensive chair, but the most suitable. As well as making savings, you will strengthen your employees’ trust, commitment and sense of belonging.

Prepare your company for future challenges. Put the emphasis on leadership and cooperation among your teams, on teamwork and the strength it brings. Give a sense of direction and enjoy what you are doing.

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