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EXPLORING LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS: ENACTING MENTAL MODELS - THE POWER OF THE ROSENTHAL STAGE©

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ABSTRACT

The only true source of sustainable competitive advantage seems to be by building learning organizations. In order to ensure the survival of their organizations, managers need to focus on individual and organizational learning, the development of a shared vision, an awareness of the internal environment and the external context. A key requirement in this process is the ability to surface and test the mental models of people throughout the organization. One of the ways of testing mental models is within the context of action. The exploration of effective action is examined using the Rosenthal Stage. In this paper we will build on the work of Senge (1992), Moreno (1953) and Williams (1991). This application is an action-based method using a miniature stage. The Rosenthal Stage involves a five step process of surfacing, externalising, reflecting, revealing, and active dialogue of peoples' perceptions of their organization. A case study will be presented which demonstrates the surfacing of a mental model of a senior manager in a multi-national communications organization. The power of the Rosenthal Stage enabled this manger, after one session, to gain contextual insight into the breath of his organization, and the value of his contribution.

Key Words: Learning Organizations - Mental Models - Rosenthal Stage

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INTRODUCTION

It is becoming more difficult for organizations to survive in today's turbulent and complex environment. Learning and innovation are essential for survival in continually changing and competitive environments (de Geus, 1988; Nonaka, 1991; Schein, 1993). The only true source of sustainable competitive advantage seems to be by building learning Organizations (Garvin, 1993; Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1991; Senge, 1992; Stata, 1989). In order to ensure the survival of their organizations, managers need to focus on individual and organizational learning, the development of a shared vision, an awareness of the internal environment and the external context. Effective change management involves managing psychological processes. In order for organizational change to take place there needs to be change in behaviour. This change in individual behaviour occurs through a change in peoples' mental models A key requirement in this process is the ability to surface and test these mental models in a climate which is conducive to learning. One of the ways of testing mental models is within the context of action. Senge (1991 in Training and Development, October, p.39) states that "learning cannot exist apart from action. Learning is the process of enhancing our capacity for effective action." The exploration of effective action is examined using the Rosenthal Stage.

THE ROSENTHAL STAGE

The Rosenthal Stage engages the thinking process through five action steps. These are based on Moreno's theory of spontaneity (1953) and Williams (1989) strategic action group method that "Action incarnates all the factors in a system so that they become a living presence. ...The aim is new information in meaning and action" (Williams 1991 in Forbidden Agendas: Strategic Action in Groups, p.111) Both Moreno and Williams are talking about new learnings to bring about change through action methods. The Rosenthal Stage aims to extend Moreno's and Williams' notion of action, learning and change by introducing another dimension, that of miniaturisation and object identification.

Description

The Rosenthal Stage is a miniature psychodrama stage based upon action method principles. It is an adaptation of Jacob Moreno's (1953) initial stage, where he developed psychodrama and sociodrama to be implemented on a full size stage. On Moreno's Stage (see Marineau, 1989, p. 83) people re-enacted and enacted life stories life issues struggles and ambiguities. The Rosenthal Stage provides a similar process but makes use of objects rather than using individuals and groups for psychodramatic or sociodramtic exploration. These objects are chosen, placed and given a dialogue by the protagonist, (such as a manager or work team, seeking to examine, influence or enhance productivity).

The choice, placement and dialogue with objects acting as symbols representing intrinsic or extrinsic aspects of the problem or issue being examined. This enables the protagonist to achieve, view and experience their mental models from a different perspective, allowing stated goals to be achieved. This process can occur individually or in a group with a Rosenthal Stage trained facilitator.

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How does it work?

It is an interaction between the physical space of the stage, the objects and the person. With the help of the facilitator/coach, the person chooses appropriate objects for the issue at hand and places them on the stage space. On the stage are enacted stories, problems and ambiguities. The space and objects are used to represent the aspects of issues needed to be explored. This is action in miniaturisation.

Why does it work?

When a person works with the stage for the first time, what she sees is a small space. When she is asked to focus on the space and imagine what occurs there, she gives the space her own meaning. When this happens and she is asked to choose an object to represent this meaning, the space paradoxically seems larger. She tells her story, her problems and ambiguities and there is engagement. She is helped to focus on the issue, interacting with the objects and is then able to view the issue from a different perspective. At this stage of the process insight is often gained so that the person can choose future action. This process works because a microworld is invented upon which learning and clarification occurs. Microworlds create a 'practice field' which enables people to surface and improve their mental models, reflect about the way they interact with other team members and enhance their capacity for action (Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts and Kleiner, 1994, p. 530).

The five step process using the Rosenthal Stage:

1. **Surfacing** occurs as the person looks at the empty stage, gives her own meaning to it, and discusses this briefly.

2. **Externalising** occurs when this brief discussion becomes focused on the issue needed to be explored, objects are chosen and placed on the stage, using the different levels and three-dimensions to depict the quality of the issue, such as a work team and management meeting with people (as objects placed strategically on the stage according to work relationship criteria).

3. **Reflecting** The person is asked to role play and depict the situation in an expanded manner during which time she reflects the quality of the relationships and the issue becomes alive for her. There is time at this point, for internalising and reflecting upon this role play and role reversal process where the intervention of the coach/facilitator is minimal.

4. **Revealing** What occurs in this time is the magic moment of insight when the stage is full of chosen objects, roles have been given and the person takes another look at the space.

5. **Systems Thinking** After the moment of insight, action in the context of the workplace is planned, during which time the thinking becomes broad, clarified and conscious.

The Rosenthal Stage process enables people to express their mental models so that they can learn and take effective action. The Stage offers a way of integrating Senge's idea of surfacing mental models and to extend the idea of learning for effective action by adding a paradoxical component of miniaturisation and object identification.

MENTAL MODELS

Mental models affect what people see, in organizational terms, they relate to peoples' perceptions about what can or cannot be achieved. To move towards a learning organization, management teams need to share their mental models, i.e. share their ideas and perceptions about their organization, markets and competitors (deGeus, 1988). Kim (1993) sees mental models as representing "... a person's view of the world both explicit and implicit understandings. Mental models represent the context in which to view and interpret new materials and they determine how stored information is relevant to a given situation. They represent more than a collection of ideas, memories, and experiences..." (Kim, 1993, p.10). According to Senge (1992) a change in mental models is the most significant learning that can take place in an organization. He says that "...the discipline of managing mental models -surfacing, testing, and improving our internal pictures of how the world works -promises to be a major breakthrough for building learning organizations" (Senge, 1992, p.174). However, many of the best ideas in oganizations never get put into practice. This is because new insights often conflict with established mental models (Senge, 1992, p. 174).

What practical tools can be used to achieve this sharing of assumptions, values and beliefs so that a shared vision of the organization can be developed? One method which has begun to be utilised successfully in learning organizations is the Rosenthal Stage. Senge (1992) proposes five disciplines, which if practised and integrated should result in an organization able to create the future it desires. The five disciplines are Shared Vision, Mental Models, Team Learning, Personal Mastery and Systems Thinking.

SHARED VISION

Surfacing

There needs to be a genuine vision so that people become capable of excellent achievement levels. Learning organizations cannot exist without shared vision. Individual visions are not enough, shared visions give a real sense of purpose, they promote focus and long term commitment to organizational effectiveness and survival. Using action methods the Rosenthal Stage is a method by which the idea of having an individual vision can be expressed and symbolised as a group vision.

A shared vision gives all members of an organization a reference point so they can play their part in realising the shared vision. Senge (1992) sees shared vision as being "Not an idea...It is rather a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power...vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning." (Senge, 1992, p.206). The Rosenthal Stage provides a space which is flexible and enables the "force in people's hearts" to be fully enacted. Moreno (calls space on a stage a "methodology of freedom" (Moreno, 1991, p.109). In this miniture theatre, the Rosenthal Stage can create a vision for the moment of action. It is this action and the awareness that produces the energy for learning.

Externalisation

The extension of the thinking about the shared vision is illustrated by the objects being placed on the Rosenthal Stage. This step enables a sustained energy for learning. Externalisation is a euphamism for "concretisation" in action method application. Externalisation of a shared vision begins in creating a new definition by each participant.

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When this vision is externalised, the participants have already begun to own the vision as an externalised description of the shared vision. To test the sustainability of the shared vison there are two questions that can be asked of the participants. One, what feeds the Vision? Two, what starves the vision? This may be over simplifying the testing of the sustainability of the vision, but using the Rosenthal Stage in this way will enable a powerful response to occur from the participants. Externalisation used in this way, enables people to objectify their personal vision and transform it into the shared vision.

TEAM LEARNING

From the action learning stance, team learning works via "elasticising of restraints on descriptions that people bring almost ready-made, to the group" Williams (1991, p.38). This elasticising is a level of spontaneity which the leader enables the team member to call forth when moving into the direction of new learning. Action through the Rosenthal Stage enables this process to occur via choosing objects, placing them strategically on the stage and having the group member engage in an initial narrative about the objects and their purpose. Team learning creates the framework for the development of shared vision and personal mastery. People need each other to achieve objectives, teams are the key learning group of organizations. Senge (1992) sees team learning as "...the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. For Senge (1992), talented teams are made up of talented individuals and it is team learning, not individual learning, that adds to organizational learning. He sees team learning as a microcosm for organizational learning. The Rosenthal Stage gives the microcosm reality.

PERSONAL MASTERY

Personal mastery relates to a special level of proficiency achieved through a commitment to life-long learning. Senge (1992) sees personal mastery as a key characteristic of the development of the learning organization. Senge (1992) sees a clear connection between individual development and organizational learning, and comments upon the human capabilities to understand mastery and innovation that a learning organization must possess. The connection is then made of Senge's view of the organizational world and Moreno's view (1953) in his description of spontanaity in which personal mastery and innovation can occur. Moreno (1953) describes spontaniety as "An energy which emergies and which is spent in a moment." Conserving this energy and enacting from this energy gives rise to the seeds of innovation and personal mastery.

The Rosenthal Stage, through active dialogue, revealing and reflecting, enables that unconserved energy (spontaniety) to be transformed. The learning organization is able to be based on this ongoing transformation. Williams (1991) builds on Moreno's notion of spontaniety "that life itself sets the boundaries...action methods move the boundary posts...they do not throw them away." (Williams, 1991, p.165)

Personal mastery is more than achieving a set of competencies and skills, the essence of personal mastery is focusing on ultimate desires, approaching life from a creative, rather than a reactive viewpoint (Senge,1992). Without personal mastery, individuals and organizations will be unable to continue to learn how to create. Personal mastery is based upon a commitment to truth about current reality.

Using the Rosenthal Stage, personal mastery is achieved through dialogue between objects and the group member through an understanding of issues initially raised at the warm-up and revealing

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section of the group learning interaction process. This leads the group into an understanding of the idea that there is a system and there is a systems thinking process beyond the individual or the group. Each individual plays a part in making a difference to the organization's learning process.

SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems thinking gives people the necessary framework so that they can focus on patterns and interrelationships. Systems thinking widens people's perspectives about their own organization and the world as a whole, and is the cornerstone of how organizations see the world. Systems thinking requires people to view the structural aspects of organizational performance rather than individual performance. Systemic thinking involves adopting a holistic approach to problem solving and involves the ability to see connections between issues, events and information as a whole or as patterns, rather than a series of unconnected parts. Instead of breaking up a problem into individual pieces, a systems perspective focuses on trying to understand how relevant factors collectively interact to produce the problem.

Systems thinking and the Rosenthal Stage enables the group member to set up the system three-dimensionally, visually and spontaneously. When the system is set up on the Rosenthal Stage, there is an opportunity to learn that the system is manageable, is not overwhelming and can be changed. The miniaturisation and the use of objects engenders spontaneity and engages the group members into moving beyond the constraints of their own mental models and into the organization's vision and new and ongoing learning.

A CASE STUDY - USING THE ROSENTHAL STAGE AS A PROBLEM SOLVING METHOD TO SURFACE MENTAL MODELS

Steve, (not his real name), is a 56 years old a senior manager of a multi-national communications organization and is responsible for international and national accounts. His background is in communications engineering. For the past ten years he instigated and developed a new system which was adopted by his organization and sold world wide. As a creative communications engineer he was then given the role of senior manager and was responsible for managing the innovation process. A problem of role conflict arose when he was faced with ambiguity with his role of manger and his creative output. At the same time there was a dramatic change in the business environment. This led to a reduction in material and human resources.

To give a place for mental models, I postulated a physical space to act as a neutral, yet universal environment for him. This environment is a three-dimensional miniature stage setting with three concentric smaller stages, a balcony and two hidden stairways. Small objects are placed close by, which he can choose.

INFERRED ISSUES:

1. Role conflict
2. Insufficient material and human resources
3. Prioritising difficulties
4. Constant interruptions

He wanted to gain some clarity into the confused state that he was in. He knew that magically, resources would not be forthcoming so there needed to be another avenue for him to explore.

He asked " what flexibility is there in my work scene to allow change to occur given that I am under-resourced? I feel it is beyond my brief. All I can do is flag the issue. My hands are tied." The facilitator asked him to describe a morning in his workplace.

In terms of the Rosenthal Stage process, the description asked for is a prerequisite to enable him to engage in the warm-up process.

At this point, in describing a morning in his workplace, the facilitator begun his engagement with the process. He is already able to visualise his workplace, what he does and how it is done. Together with this, the facilitator, was able to gauge the kinds of dynamics which are potentially problematic to him. His description made available to him an entry point where he can stop analysing and start thinking in action terms.

During the description, what emanates are the constant interruptions, the inability to complete one task and his difficulty in prioritising. He feels that the constant stop start and change process disempowers his ability to provide excellent management to his team and to his external clients.

He presented a lot of material. To enable him not to get overloaded as he does in his workplace, the facilitator asked him to say it as a story and would interrupt him from time to time with such things as " Now let's use the stage to depict the state of your work place."

"As you have told me the story, I would like you to choose objects to represent your office. Set it up using all the levels of the stage and the hidden stairways.

He chose small wooden figures to represent his work team on the lower stage space, while on the balcony he placed blocks and wheels to represent management and clients. As he was doing this the facilitator asked him to say what he could observe from this vantage point. He said he recognised that on his desk (represented by a block), was a very high pile of unfinished projects, some of which were highly prioritised and some were not.

The facilitator then asked him to see if he could prioritise them. What he did was an insight for him. He placed some projects on the stairway hidden from his view. To him this was an important revealing action because it was giving him a symbol that not everything had to be done at once. This gave him room for reflection and time to engage with his team and his executive managers.

Testing his mental model through the Rosenthal Stage enabled him to engage in Senge's (1992) Five Disciplines as follows:

SHARED VISION - Surfacing and Externalisation

Surfacing of his confusion and externalising of the separate issues occurred when he began his story about the possible role conflict, insufficient resources, inability to prioritise and having constant interruptions. He focused on the Stage while telling his story, enabling him to reveal the beginnings of a shared vision.

The deepening of this vision is expanded when he chose and placed objects depicting the quality of the story and the setting of the issues (in this instance, it was his work place).

STATED MENTAL MODEL

The facilitator asked him to role play a typical situation on a morning at his workplace, using the objects and the space of the stage. This enabled him to recollect and deepen his involvement with the objects on the stage so that he could see by which mental model he was operating. He believed that he was operating from a reactive and disempowering mindset. When he began to role play with the objects he engaged more readily with the stage, enabling him to see that he was in fact an empowering and creative manager despite his initial confusion.

TEAM LEARNING

On completion of the role play with the objects he reflected on the issues. Which enabled him to clarify his role as manager and the importance of his individual learning and his contribution to team learning.

He needed to prioritise to the best of his ability and empower his team while communicating clearly and succinctly to his executive managers about the state of his team's completed or near completed projects.

PERSONAL MASTERY

In developing an understanding of the process of individual and team learning, managers stand in readiness to become fulcrums. The fulcrum, is presented to the manager as personal mastery. It is this personal mastery which balances team learning and the global view. In this case, Steve gained an understanding of himself as a skilled person, and as a manager able to balance all these aspects, given the environmental and extrinsic organisational limitations.

SYSTEMS THINKING

Observing his stage setting and the role play which he instigated, provided him with insights into how he manages, where he sees himself in relation to his team and to the whole organization, including internal and external clients. This gave him a powerful sense of a globally conscious manager.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in the case study, clarification and insight into mental models within the context of a learning organization occurred. During the session using the Rosenthal Stage, a focus on individual and organizational learning was gained by the linking the Rosenthal Stage method and Senge's Five Disciplines.

Untested mental models block people's ability to learn. Being able to manage these mental models is a critical factor in building learning organizations. This paper is proposing a method of testing mental models as proposed by Senge (1992). The Rosenthal Stage provides a personal platform for valuing where people perceive themselves in relation to their organizations' mental model. The Rosenthal Stage also creates a sense of ownership and gives unique value to an individual's contribution to the organization's shared vision. We propose that the Rosenthal Stage is a viable contribution to the study of learning organizations.

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This paper has attempted to introduce a new facet of learning in organizations, from the individual point of view, incorporating action learning from the Moreno, Williams and Senge perspectives. It has introduced a new method of engaging people in understanding and acting upon their own learning, through using the Rosenthal Stage system. It is hoped that this paper will engender dialogue and further research into action learning methods using miniaturisation and object identification.

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