

PLEASANTLY SURPRISED..... TO DISCOVER THESE TWO WORKS TOGETHER

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Two books that have at first glance no significant relationship will be discussed here in conjunction: Helga Hohn's *Playing, Leadership and Team Development in Innovative Teams* and *The Eleven Conspirators* by Marianne and Ann Frederiksson. Should we be surprised to find these two books associated with each other? In the following review I will reiterate the content of these books separately and then comment on both. I will particularly focus on their value of application to organisational consulting and training.

Playing, Leadership and Team Development in Innovative Teams

Teams, especially innovative ones, seem to be a 'must' for organisations that are performance driven, learning focussed, result oriented or just want to be 'better'. In her research, Helga Hohn (2000) gives a central place to innovative teams by focussing on four main theoretical topics:

- * the role of play in learning and development
- * group dynamics of small groups and teams
- * the creative climate within an organisation or a team
- * leadership.

The aim of the book is to answer the question: "What are the conditions a successful innovative team requires on the relational-process level and what is the kind of leadership that is needed in a successful innovative team?" (Hohn, 2000, p.2).

The role of playing in learning and development

"If the team leader cannot play he or she might not be fit for the job" (p.43), is one of Hohn's claims. The chapter *Playing in learning and development* describes learning in innovative teams by asserting that these teams must find a shared meaning for new situations together. On the other hand individual team members need to have basic trust in themselves. Basic trust is necessary because it enables the 'capacity to be alone' (p.42) which is essential for developing personal opinions and viewpoints. Shared meaning can be developed in innovative teams through a process that is enabled by metaphors, an '*intermediate area of experience*' and by cognitive conflict.

Hohn builds her claims on fifteen theses that are richly supported by the theoretical concepts of Piaget, Erik and Joan Erikson and Donald Winnicott.

The basic ideas on learning are adopted from Piaget. They refer to the continuous interaction between accommodation and assimilation: a continuing stream between 'new findings' and 'integration'. One can compare the learning process to walking up a staircase: you go up to discover new things but on the way you need to rest in order to integrate the new before moving up to the next step. The idea that learning is a linear process proceeding from '*ist*' (the present state) to '*soll*' (the state to be) is discarded by Piaget's stepwise basic theory.

Erik and Joan Erikson are known for their theory of psychosocial life stages. A healthy personality needs the strength of basic trust in the first stage of life. This becomes the foundation for the seven next stages, strengths or virtues as Erikson calls them.

In Winnicott's view, play is integrally related to learning and development. Play originally referred to the playing of children, often with '*transitional objects*' (a security blanket or teddy bear) within the 'intermediate area of experience, which is a free playing field, a refuge. We all recognise the serious play with a teddy bear who is scolded after the toddler has been reprimanded by his

mother. Winnicott also emphasises the importance of basic trust in the development of a person's independence.

Group Dynamics in Small Groups and Teams

The chapter *Group Dynamics in Small Groups and Teams* identifies the most important theoretical streams of group dynamic theory in small groups and teams in the period of 1898-1998. Hohn gives a profound historical overview of both fields and concludes that scientific research and laboratory experiments dealing with small groups (Lewin, Cohn, Bion) have resulted in important findings. Yet these are scarcely used in the current literature about autonomous teams and business units within organisations. She demonstrates how much the theories of work groups and the practice of teams have diverted (p. 72). Little explanation is offered about the assumptions and concepts which lie behind the recipes which are given by successful authors and organisational consultants. This makes it difficult for team members to really understand, develop and integrate process knowledge and skills and limits them to working by rote procedures to achieve results. In the long term, this will not be satisfying. Hohn asks us to consider five theoretical concepts when thinking about contemporary group dynamics in teams and explores these on a scientific basis. These five concepts are:

1. *Trust formation* as an important element in group development. This is the development of basic trust between group members. Attention is given to the finding that a major change in a group moves its members one or more steps backward in the group's development and in their capacity to 'take in' information (p.74).
2. *Developmental Phases of Group Life*. Here, attention is given to the group phases of Tuckman and the beginning of trust building in small work groups.
3. *Leadership*. In the current team literature, there is much interest in leadership and contingency theories within group processes (Yukl). The elements of playing, creation and inspiration need attention and application.
4. *Selection of team members*; i.e. the allocation of team roles. Hohn refers to the popular instrument of Belbin; which she finds too one-sided and limiting when used alone.
5. *Boundary management versus openness in context*. Variation, idiosyncrasy and open and closed space are discussed.

The Creative Climate of an Organisation or Team

A third theoretical stream for innovative teams is the creative climate and more generally the social 'atmosphere' in the group. A good group climate enables creativity and innovation. Different definitions of creativity and innovation are viewed, including outside pressure by the environment. Inventories and questionnaires for the measurement of the creative climate in organisations and teams are described. Results of research concerning stimulating and restricting factors on creativity are viewed. For instance, Amabile (p.93) showed a positive link between innovation and autonomy. Some creativity stimulating procedures and techniques are reviewed such as: brainstorming, synectics and specific leadership skills and attitudes. When employees are given freedom and are encouraged to take the initiative, they experience the climate as supportive to their ideas and will risk working in an innovative and creative way (p.104). In summary, the importance of creativity in teams is highlighted by four core concepts:

- acceptance of variety
- support by and enabling from the organisation
- personal autonomy and freedom
- challenge and risk taking.

Leadership and Team Development in Innovative Teams

Relevant theories about leadership have been discussed in various chapters: the importance of

leadership in groups; the significance of play in the psychodynamic influence of leaders and the impact of leadership on the creative climate in groups.

This chapter about leadership offers the results of the PhD research of Hohn. We find eight explorations that have been contained in 45 statements given to different professional groups (amongst others innovation managers, organisational consultants and scientists).

These practitioners were asked to respond to these statements and give their experience as senior leaders of innovative teams by giving a 'true' or 'false' indication about the statements. Two examples of the presented results.

That *playing has an important role in successful innovative teams* is agreed upon by 94% of the 75 respondents, which coincides with theory.

The statement *a creative team has more viability when destructive thoughts and words are allowed* is also in line with theory; 95 % of the respondents agree with the statement.

The Eleven Conspirators

The Eleven Conspirators (2000) can be read as a written role-play. Marianne Fredriksson, a Swedish novelist, is in her role as a practitioner confronted with the rise and fall of a group process. She asked how a team working with synergy and achieving high performance can land in a destructive process and how this can be changed for the better. For answers she consulted her daughter Ann Fredriksson, a psychologist and professional consultant. Together they analysed and described the psychological circumstances of Department Five, an administrative department within a larger organisation. They searched for the hidden pattern (Fredriksson, 2000, p.30).

The vulnerable balance of Department Five, which is more idyll than reality, appears to have a high level of group pressure and a large quantity of unconscious rules. These can be summarized as: go along with the rules or you will be left out in the cold. When this fragile balance was shaken Arnold, the computer nerd, was the first to be sacrificed. Bluntly said, the group got rid of him. How this could come about can be understood in the first analysis which exposes seven psychological factors. Amongst others, it includes the personality of the various group members, their expectations, the expectations of the organisation, implicit and explicit norms and, above all, the 'history' of the group. "So the real power can be found in the unwritten rules nobody speaks about and which are known only unconsciously. When threats increase you can displace them onto someone assigned to be the scapegoat" (p. 29).

The exposure of the hidden pattern in the group can be read in a discussion between both the authors. It becomes clear that at present Department Five has a deputy head. The real head of the department, Iris, is ill at home. In the chapter about the department's secretary Siv, we learn that she is probably the most frightened of all of them because her technical competence is close to zero. She obtained a 'mother role' in the team. Siv also has a specialty: she can, with a few words, 'nail' someone to the floor. At an unexpected moment, she says of the ill department head Iris: 'we froze her out.' Siv also thinks, that Kristina is the real person in power. Siv begins to be dangerous and is taken out to lunch. Lunch is followed by "The Meeting", where the roles of the eleven group members and their place on the 'pecking order' is assigned and revealed. Casting roles as the product of individual projections (p.55) can become a burden for the 'players'. So individual variation is seriously limited. On top of that, the one who dares to reject this burden spoils the play.

In the following discussion, the psychological background of the scapegoat mechanism is explained. Next to the role attribution, the authors identify six different group phases based on Scott Peck and Tuckman. The story of the (by now ill and resigned) head of the department shows how Iris started ambitiously with a strategy to 'reorganise Department Five' and how resistance and sabotage (and later on dizziness) were her fate. Thus, before Arnold, the computer nerd, filled

the part of scapegoat, *war das Spiel bereits im Gang* (Palazolli, 1984; p.13). The play had already begun with Iris as the head of the department. The authors show how collaboration problems disturb the work and slow down development. The challenges and paradoxes (Hohn, 2000, p.183) which leaders and their co-workers have to deal with are illustrated very well. One of the paradoxes can be described as *the leader has to be fought and overcome* on the one hand while at the same time *the group wants to be part of the power and strength of the leader*.

With an intuitive utterance of group member Elsje: “What’s wrong with us that we consume our department heads all the time?” a first reflection of self is showing. She immediately quashes and rationalises this thought “it is because they give us one incompetent department head after another”. Eventually there is more reflection, but a change of perspective - a mental leap - is still needed. The transformation follows after an ugly conflict that began with a small incident. In the analysis of this, the combined processes of group pressure, scapegoat mechanisms and defence systems are outlined. You will read here two of the three *basic assumption modes* of Wilfred Bion. A second conflict, brought about by a whistleblower begins the real dismantling of the developmental blockade of Department Five. The CEO, who failed to give meaning and inspiration to the group and was misunderstood by the members had an important role in this. The group members had an enormous need for trust and acceptance, especially when innovative risks were to be taken. In short, it concerns all the basic points of a good leadership attitude in (innovative) teams.

Then the analysis and dismantling goes one level deeper. By analysing the CEO’s behaviour – in fact the lack of it – the authors uncover a dysfunctional pattern within the organisational structure and pinpoint out the moments when necessary interventions were missed. In terms of problem solution they point out different options: for instance delineate the problems with the help of an instrument called a ‘psychosocial employee scan’ or use a mentor to coach new leaders who have innovative tasks. Finally, there is a description of a solution from the perspective of an organisational consultant.

My assessment: the illustration and the background

The Eleven Conspirators is a page turner, well written with intuition and spirit. The structure is sometimes somewhat baroque. I wondered at times: who is meant to be ‘I’ in this passage? Marianne or Ann Frederiksson? The employee? Or one of the actors of Department Five? But this is merely a detail in a ‘dramatised documentary’ that hits various social psychological nails exactly on their heads.

Playing Leadership and Team Development in Innovative Teams is written discursively. The results emerge in the confrontation between the theoretical material and Hohn’s conversations with the ‘practitioners’. This dialogue between literature and professionals results in profound conclusions and some ten recommendations for successful innovative teams. These come from a passionate researcher who also draws from her solid experience as a manager and consultant and who is not easily satisfied with simple answers and trendy content. It is Hohn’s wish that social psychological knowledge should be taken seriously and should be applied within and by teams. Reading the conclusions and recommendations I feel a bit weary: “Oh, were all people wise and did they well, the world would be a paradise, now it is often hell”. Regrettably, the following quote from C.G. Jung is often true: “You do not become a more enlightened being by imagining light, but by becoming conscious of the dark. However, this last method is rather unpleasant and therefore not very popular” (Frederiksson, 2000: p.6). These days we can run away less and less from our dark sides. They materialise especially in team collaboration and change projects. During processes of self reflection and coaching, which are often started when stagnation or crisis have set in, possibilities arise to experiment intentionally (Hohn would say: *play*) and walk unknown paths in order to eliminate the need for unconscious *games*. As the Frederikssons show, the provocation for such a course is often a hidden (conflicting) interaction pattern within the team. Hohn gives a

multitude of building blocks for the transition from social-emotional conflicts towards functional intersubjectivity (Hohn, 2000: p 185) and for development in the true sense of the word.

Ideal

Both books complement each other well. The rise and fall of Department Five, as described in *The Eleven Conspirators*, can be easily studied by teams in 'stagnation' and by social-psychological amateurs. Consultants, coaches and teachers who are asked for help on these issues will find the needed depth in Hohn's book. The examples found below show which page the problematic experiences of *The Eleven Conspirators* have their theoretical foundation in *Playing, Leadership and Team Development in Innovative Teams*:

- Ψ Stepwise and non-linear learning processes as formulated by Piaget (Hohn, 2000: p.23).
- Ψ How a lack of independence or initiative empowerment can induce scapegoat effects in groups (p.35-37).
- Ψ The importance of 'intermediate spaces' and shared meaning. And what happens when this is neglected, as in Department Five (p.45).
- Ψ The role of destruction and conflict in all innovative processes. Mary Parker Follett has, as early as 1925, lectured on the constructive aspects of conflicts which she called 'constructive friction' (p.47, p.175).
- Ψ Bion's theory of the three modes of *basic assumptions* in groups that deal with anxiety and insecurity. (p.55-57).
- Ψ The leader being inspiring, participating, playful and creative (p.63, p.77, p.102, p.149, p.179).
- Ψ The role of trust in oneself and the acceptance of other group members; In particular, the impact this has on reorganisations (p.74).
- Ψ Instruments to measure team creativity; *The Eleven Conspirators* only mention a 'psycho-social employee scan', (p.93, p.101).
- Ψ The working of paradoxes, i.e. in the two sides of leadership: managing and controlling on the one hand while, on the other, encouraging freedom and thriving on creativity (p.173, p.182).

Thus, I was *pleasantly surprised to discover these two works together* as both books complement each other brilliantly.

Literature

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