The seven organisational levels of discourse

(The hidden rules and regulations within organisational systems)
- A reference framework for managing relationship interactions within organisations -

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Summary

This paper describes a tool for thinking and developing consciousness about the epistemology contained and revealed in our discourse about psychology and complexity theory. It is concerned with knowledge, with how we can know and with how we can sensibly speak about knowing.

The model is not intended to express any values in itself and it sets no hierarchies of value either. Originally, the model offered simply a category sorting tool for thinking of the implications and ramifications of each level in terms of clarifying and preventing the kind of logical fallacies which the Oxford philosopher Ryle (1966) identified as category errors. Essentially it is phenomenological in the sense that it makes provision for the description of differentiated domains of discourse avoiding common category errors. Discourse is here defined as text or talk and discourse analysis is not so much a tool to get at empirical truths but rather a different way of conceptualising talk - "a new perspective". (Silverman 1992) The model provides a simultaneous implication of different domains of human existence alongside the different modes of discourse used and the different narratives involved.

In thinking and talking about complexity, we are faced with the challenge of perceiving and discoursing upon the different domains of discourse that are involved in the attempt to capture and circumscribe the field in question. Frequently it is observed that misunderstandings are not necessarily due to intrinsic differences, but occur as result of category errors when the different truth values which apply in different domains are used indiscriminately across the various levels of discourse.

No one work about complexity is complete, and the field of complexity seems to be self-organising. Different concepts emerge from within the field and at the same time, different domains of knowledge are providing a constant supply to the new formation of useful and illuminatory concepts from outside. In this vein, the paper will use as examples simultaneous categorisation of complexity concepts across the different epistemological levels (or domains). We will do that by giving examples of notions of complexity across the seven domains of discourse or experience, as well as specific examples occurring in organisational settings so that a perception can be formed of how the epistemology of complexity can lead to the creation of an useable layout of the discourses involved.

In summary, the model provides a classificatory tool for identifying and separating out different layers of knowledge, different epistemological areas and the various realms of discourse and methodology concerning truth values appropriate to each.

Introduction

The difference between Leadership and Management:

Leadership is one of the animal kindom's natural survival fundamentals of group cognitive behaviour, while **management** is typical human.

Leadership needs followers and is the driving force for the normative.
Proper management needs understanding of all seven organisational levels of discourse.

The seven level model

Level 1 – Physiological

This level contains the 'heartbeat' of the organisation, the assimilation and 'metabolism' of its resources and the discharge of its (by)products.

The physiological/perceptual

This is the realm of sensory experience, the part perceived by the organisation as a legal entity with its own rights of functional existence, the natural behaviour of a group of interrelating individuals (5 elements relationship model) (Kloprogge et al. 2007). The sources of knowledge on this level are the objects and events perceived through intelligence and also the proprioceptive experience of phenomena within the system. It concerns systemic processes such as relationship forming, teamwork, internal communications, departmental segmentation, drive and support, leadership, management, psychoplogical entanglements, natural cohesions, physical conditions of decane, the physical manifestation of anxiety and stress.

Example:

Complexity is associated with the intricate inter-twining and inter-connectivity of elements within a system and between a system and its environment. Complexity theory as developed, has been really an attempt to capture and appreciate the changes in our ways of thinking and the ways the organisations are consequently affected. People working in organisations have been undoubtedly influenced by the changing conditions around them. The environment around the organisations has become complex beyond our previous experience, and in response to that, the various management initiatives that are employed in an attempt to make organisations more efficient in the face of changes, have all been influencing how people feel inside organisations. Many organisations have been complaining about increased levels of stress and have been consequently unable to change along the paths that would be most beneficial for all involved and as a concequence not being able to develop full potential or even been wiped out all together.

Epistemological truth value/ methodology:

Physiological processes can be "measured" in some instances such as staff turnnovers, but it is impossible to perceive exact causes of staff changes in an ever internal and external changing environment, to ever know whether some staff changes influences collective system sensations of the individual, collective, systematic or authoritative choice. Perception, as stress, is irretrievably subjective and individually as well as collectively embodied.

Level 2 - Emotional

This level captures Maslow's hierargy of humanistic needs and survival translated for organisations. It represents the natural form of organisational (organic) existence, based on human cognitive group behaviour, striving for homeostasis.

Domain 2: The affective/emotional

Description of talk appropriate to this domain:

Every organisation, is an emotional place. It is an emotional place because it is a human invention, serving human purposes and dependent on human beings to function. And human beings are emotional animals: subject to anger, fear, surprise, disgust, happiness or joy, ease and unease.

By the same token, organisations are inter-personal places and so necessarily arouse those more complex emotional constellations that shadow all inter-personal relations: love and hate, envy and gratitude, shame and guilt, contempt and pride.

Emotions and subjective feelings pervade organisational existence, and even the smallest possible segments of corporate perceptions carry an 'emotional colour'. Emotions are the subjective feelings which arise as response to one or another stimulus events.

What one organisation experiences as distress, another may experience as pleasurable excitement at the unfolding of creative potentials of chaos. It has been convincingly demonstrated and argued that there is always an emotional layer or sub-text to any communication - even if it is the acknowledgement other individuals, departments or other business relationships.

Example:

The complex conditions inside the organisation, which respond to the increased complexity from the environment outside, create increased levels of demand for performance on behalf of the employees; people are required to perform at high levels, to different tasks and across different domains at the same time. There is a great amount of pressure put on people to perform and this competition creates fear of being caught out, when people are asked to perform tasks that they are not really very knowledgeable about. This creates what de Geus (1997) has called a sense of fear and terror 'in the boardroom', sometimes resembling what has been termed the 'Achilles syndrome'. (Clarkson, 1994) Yet this is frequently not spoken, what is said concerns "downsizing", recession, or a multiple of other words which conceal rather than reveal the often turbulent feelings and emotions which drives us all.

Epistemological truth value/ methodology:

Emotions are essentially subjective, experiential and felt states, whereas our knowledge about them seems to be existential, phenomenological and unique. Many organisations and male-dominated cultures lack useful and efficient ways of processing the emotional layers of their relationships, their cultures and their communications, yet psychologically there exist many tools, techniques and approaches which can identify and facilitate the emotional shadow of the organisations.

Level 3 – The Nominative (linguistic)

This level concerns the business language of image, the competition, the tendencies to express, including the marketing aspects. It captures the actions and re-actions implemented with or resulting from internal and external communcation channels.

Domain 3: The nominative

Description:

This level comprises naming through words, a process which rests on division into classes and categories and precedes complex abstract thinking. (This model is a level three discourse itself.) This is the area of objective nominalism, when objects are placed together on the basis of certain resemblances. Linguistic identity is established through the repetition of a unique sound which supports the development of an objective reality outside the self. Name giving implies reflective shared experience, the basis of human culture. Within any common set of language rules the fact that certain kinds of words are known to stand for certain kinds of objects, can be agreed, debated or disputed. Philosophically it represents the realm which the phenomenologists such as Merleau Pointy (1998) posited as a third way between idealism and positivism.

Example:

In terms of complexity, there are implications associated with the naming of the different concepts and ideas to be found in the field. For example, people might be confusing the notions of 'complex' and 'complicated' when they are thinking about complexity. Battram (1998), distinguishes between the two by using the example of a television, a very complicated system, but not a complex system, in that the vast number of parts out of which the television set is comprised are connected in simple, pre-determined ways. Similarly, we need all the time to define and redefine concepts such as self-organised criticality, complex adaptive systems, emergence, autopoiesis. The LSE (London School of Economics) project on developing a lexicon for complexity reflects exactly the need for finding and articulating some kind of nominative agreement (about the words we use and what they mean) which reflects common understandings within this community of practice. The request to provide this paper is another.

Epistemological truth value /methodology:

In this realm of discourse there can be some agreement or disagreement within or between groups, within dialect or language or disciplinary groups eg. "what things are called". Within any common set of language rules the fact that certain kinds of words are known to stand for certain kinds of objects or phenomena can be agreed, debated or disputed. Without clarity of definition (or discourse about such definitions) words such as "autopoeisis" or "emergence" or "love" are often used idiosyncratically, whimsically or arbitrarily. Teubner recently gave an example of a contract which was concluded on the basis of an agreement between two parties in terms of so many thousands of franc. However, the one party was using Belgian franc and the other French. (Two language communities attaching different numerical values to an apparently identical nominator.) The dispute was eventually resolved by reference to the laws of country in which the agreement was made (Switzerland) . In this way Teubner's example demonstrates the work of separating the nominative domain from the social or legal epistemological domain.

Level 4 – The Norminative (socio-cultural)

Level 4 concerns the internal and external organisational or corporate culture(s). It refers to corporate norms, shared values, collective belief systems, societal expectations (CSR – corporate social responsibilities) of all inter-relationships.

Domain 4: The normative

Brief description:

The normative level comprises the attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of an organisation. It has been defined as "the specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organisation and that control the way they interact with each other and with stakeholders outside the organisation. Organisational values are beliefs and ideas about what kinds of goals members of an organisation should pursue and ideas about the appropriate kinds or standards of behavior organisational members should use to achieve these goals. From organisational values develop organisational norms, guidelines or expectations that prescribe appropriate kinds of behavior by employees in particular situations and control the behaviour of organisational members towards one another"

Example:

As philosophers since the earliest times to the ethicists of today have pointed out, everything that we say (or not say) implicates issues of value, ethical preference - explicit or imbedded cultural constructions which privilege certain discourses or certain voices. Since Oppenheimer and Nagasaki, few scientists still claim that science is “value free” or neutral. The very fact that we are engaging in the study of complexity means that there are other areas of enquiry which we are choosing, consciously or not, to ignore, neglect or refuse. In any organisation the implicit values and norms - the socalled organisational culture - is both much more difficult to identify that the manufacturing process and also a major target for consultancy interventions in terms of “culture change”.

Epistemological truth value/ methodology:

Values, morals, ethics are not always subject to logical tests of truth or statistical rationality - it is a different realm of questioning and knowing. Norms provide containment and limitation, security and meaning, a sense of belonging or exclusion. The normative tends to support homeostasis and resistance to change - unless change becomes the norm or the “the organisational culture”.

Level 5 – The Rational

This level represents the layer of knowledge and activity that includes thinking, making sense of things, examination of cause and effect, frames of reference and information, probabilities, statistical significances, working with facts and in-formation, and reading skills.

Domain 5: The rational, logical:

Indicative description:

This is the level of facts, the logical-rational dimension of testable statements, where causal relations can be clearly established. The rational permits clear positivistic principles of

verification, it operates with that which can be objectively identified, defined and proved - for that time and that culture. Facts in this realm exist not as subjective feelings, mere words or shared beliefs, but as rational conclusions derived in a repeatable form from a body of well established empirical data. This layer of knowledge and activity includes thinking, making sense of things, examination of cause and effect, working with facts and information of the time and place. It covers science, logic, statistical probabilities, provable facts, verifiability according to Popper (1992), established 'truth' statements and consensually observable phenomena.

Example:

There is only little consensus on facts as far as complexity is concerned. It is an open proposition, that basically what we probably can claim to be 'the' fact about complexity is that it is a self-organising concept and this is what researchers and practitioners alike attempt to untangle and explain.

At the same time, all the activity on a pragmatic level that deals with experimenting with complexity ideas, such as computer simulation, the experiments at the Santa Fe institute, as well as the Complexity Game at the LSE (London School of Economics) are to be found inside this domain.

Epistemological truth value/methodology

It is characteristic of all level five discourse that it is possible to establish truth values by consensual practices of that time and that culture. That is, it is the only realm of discourse where dispute can be settled by reference to external tests resembling what is commonly understood as the modern scientific method. If there is disagreement about a "fact" within a particular knowledge community, it is a misnomer and does not belong within this realm of discourse.

Level 6 – The Theoretical (narrative)

This level concerns organisational communication in arena of narration, expressing themselves through association, symbolism and metaphor.

Domain 6: The theoretical/metaphorical

Indicative description:

The theoretical level attends to explanations, metaphors, the stories that are told to show how things have come about, narratives and metaphors. They are the means by which we make sense of the world; they do not establish the 'Truth' but remain some of the possible versions that when verified or negated pass from theory to the factual domain (5). Within the sixth domain there are the hypotheses, explanations, metaphors and stories that the medias have created in order to explain why things are they way they are and why organisations behave in a certain way. Theory that is not underpinned by the rationality of domain 5 tends to rely on the belief structures of level 4.

Example:

Almost all of the complexity 'stories', 'narratives' and 'theories' fall into this category, basically trying to explain domain 1 reactions, such as being upset or excited about such concepts. At this domain, there has been an attempt to create a multiple 'narratives' of complexity so as to accommodate its diversity and the Mitleton-Kelly paper examining three different approaches to the theory of complexity is an example of work at this level.

Epistemological truth value/methodology

When a theory, narrative or hypothesis is "proved" true, it belongs to the domains of facts and logical or statistical probabilities. Until this becomes the case, such notions belong to the narrative or theoretical ontological and epistemological domain. However, there are criteria for judging whether a particular theory is better or worse. Such criteria help us to choose or prefer some theories or explanations or hypotheses over others. The criteria for evaluating such theories usually include dimensions such as validity, reliability, coherence, lack of internal contradictions, elegance, utility, economy of explanation (eg. Occam's razor), 'fit' with surrounding theories and already proven facts. In other words, when multiple competing theories are equal in other respects, the principle recommends selecting the theory that introduces the fewest assumptions and postulates the fewest entities.

Level 7 – The Transpersonal

Level 7 covers organisational (sub)conscious and intelligence that goes beyond individual contributions. Although not understood, but perceived as existend, this level concerns the extra ordinary strengths, synchronic and synergetic force that evolves from a natural urge for (relationship) homeostasis as an ultimate goal.

Domain 7: The transpersonal or currently inexplicable

Indicative description:

The transpersonal level attends to the unexplained areas of relationship interaction and experience. It arises within an inner locus of evaluation and experience which appears to connect with the universal and is distinct from the outer locus of evaluation, which is group norm related. This domain refers to the epistemological area or universe of discourse concerned with organisations as natural 'spiritual' conglomerates of individual beings, or for those who want to use another nomination - with the organisational soul. It is beyond rationality, facts and theories and concerns the paradoxical, the unpredictable and the inexplicable. It is a region of unknowability, a horizon that has to be left open for the development of future areas of discourse and reference for these currently unknown conditions. In this domain, we could present complexity as those aspects of autopoiesis which are still mysterious, 'physis' or the life-force (see Heraclitus and Heidegger) which makes systems and organisms emerge and self-develop out of unpredictable circumstances - autopoetic emergence itself.

Example:

There are many ways one can develop a discourse about such concepts, although one does not have to accept any of these given terms for talking about the 'unexplained' or the currently inexplicable. Most human beings have experienced awe or wonder or synchronistic encounters, or sudden flashes of intuition or creativity which are not circumscribed in the other realms

discussed so far. This is the realm for them - until we can sensibly speak about them when they become appropriate to other levels. It is characteristic of the seventh domain that it is silent or wordless and that we lack vocabulary which can truly represent what we know (or sense) at this level. In the oriental tradition it is said that the Tao which can be described is not the Tao; in the occidental tradition Wittgenstein advises: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should be silent."

Epistemological truth value/methodology

It is characteristic of experience in this domain that people are convinced by "direct experience" which feels impossible to articulate or effectively communicate to others who have not shared similar direct experience - or who come to do so. It is the knowledge of the mystic, the "peak experience' or the quantum physicist who marvels at the beauty of our universe and concludes that "God does not play dice."

The recent exploitation of the "Organisational Constellation" (Kloprogge et al.) phenomenon can be experienced as a translation technique of a 'group conscious' tuning into the transpersonal or rather transorganisational level is a way to make personal sense of 'what has not been said' or narrated (level 6).

Acknowledgement:

First created and developed by Petruska Clarkson (1947 – 2006) and later translated for modern businesses by Dr Eddy Kloprogge and Peter Gleeson, the seven organisational levels of discource has been written for organisations to clarify their thinking and their communication of knowledge and practice, and offered to them as a possible tool to facilitate mutual understanding and greater fruitfulness in their discourses and discoveries about complexity.

"I developed the seven level model some 21 years ago as an attempt to construct a thinking tool or organising matrix (or conceptual protractor) for myself and my psychology students. My aim was to provide a meaningful reference framework which could help us to deal more manageably with the explosion of knowledge and the resounding increase in the complexity of experience and physiological, philosophical and epistomological worlds which are bombarding us". (Clarkson 1992)

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