Interpreting corporate language and practice

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To promote discussion and an open-ended debate, we pose a fairly strong position on corporate language and practice. Our intention is to raise issues for closer scrutiny and stimulate responses and other ideas. Thus, we have tried to paint the ideas raised in bold relief. The workshop discussion, on the one hand, could explore the sub-questions that would need to be asked to verify the position we put forward here. On the other hand, the discussion could challenge some or all of the assumptions implicit in this position and clarify other positions. Either or both approaches should, we hope, generate useful information for the consideration of this topic area in the forthcoming conference.

I. Themes in the Dominant Culture of Corporate Language and Practice

Our focus is on the culture of business or commerce in the typically first world, "western" context. This is because it plays a significant and determining role in the decision-making and socialisation processes driving the South African economy and affects political and public sector financing and management. Four assumptions, orientations or themes driving this culture were immediately evident to us.

A. Seeking adversarial competitive advantage

Discourse analysis of corporate language and practice suggests a fundamental underlying assumption. The dominant ethos of all relationships within the commercial sphere is that of "seeking adversarial competitive advantage" within a free market economy. This ethos pervades all levels of relationship:

- that of the individual with others in the work context—one competes with colleagues to "climb the corporate ladder,"
- that of companies with other companies—so that only the "fittest" survive the "zero-sum game" of the free market, and
- that of the private sector with the public sector—where commercial interests are so often seen as in opposition to the "do good," wasteful and inefficient proposals and practices of government.

The conventional language of business is well seasoned with, for example, metaphors of adversarialism, be it derived from war or games. A quick sample of vocabulary reveals everyday operating terms such as "competitor analysis," "frontal attack," "gaining a market share point," and winning "buy-in," all of which evidence an attitude of competition for scarch resources, opposition, attack, and conquest at the expense of an opponent. The free market perspective is one of a hostile, environment in which only those win who outwit and best the others who are also competing to acquire scarce resources. Ultimately, it is a zero-sum game, where some lose in order for others to win. Organisations are structured into hierarchies and the objective is to "climb the corporate ladder" so as to get to the next level and ultimately arrive at the "top."

Even where negotiation strategies advocate collaborative, win-win solutions, these are invariably only one dimension within a greater strategy of seeking competitive advantage, whether it is for personal career prospects, winning business deals, or seeking alliances with the public sector.

B. The autonomous individual—"One against the odds."

Implicit within this discourse is the assumption of the autonomous individual—it is only the fittest person that both survives and triumphs. This assumption seems to grant respect to individual freedom of choice and foster individual development. However, it functions to allow only certain kinds of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours to characterise the role of an individual in the workplace—one must be assertive, focused, hard working, self-motivated, self-initiating, able to be a "team player" and so forth in order to "play the game," compete well and win. Sadly, successfully playing this role can exclude major aspects of each individual’s life (e.g. religion, family, community) from the conventional discourse and consciousness of the workplace. A person’s other roles such as parent, partner, religious congregant and community participant are characterised by different kinds of beliefs and attitudes such as being nurturing, compassionate, charitable, vulnerable, self-sacrificing and collaborative. Successful behaviour in these contexts is not competitive, but collaborative. When these kinds of orientations and practices are excluded from the workplace discourse the individual is fragmented in the course of daily life.

C. The individual as a material, not a spiritually-based being

Which leads us to a related point: conventional corporate discourse assumes a fragmented, linear, causal and mechanistic view of the world. Just as organizations and business deals are separated into diverse functional areas (such as marketing, finance, manufacturing and information systems), so too are individuals expected to separate parts of their life. When they "clock into" work they are one person, and another emerges when they "clock out." This social institutionalisation of a fragmented self obstructs the individual’s efforts to create balanced, authentic connections between work and personal life. The destructiveness of such a dissociation of the work role from other aspects of life can be seen in the concept of "workaholism." (Kofodimos) This refers to when people, often in white-collar, managerial jobs, are disfunctionally imbalanced in their relationships with the workplace. They are so absorbed with the work role that they seek to have it pervade all aspects of their waking time to the exclusion of healthy relationships with family and others. A workaholic’s absorption with and expertise in the work role typically leads to spiraling ineptness in and self-exclusion from other roles and aspects of life, instead of leading to an enhanced human competency in all facets of living.

Implicit in this fragmentation of the self is the emphasis placed in corporate discourse on the empirical measurement of value and output. The emphasis placed on visible performance measures and on tangible results can be extreme. Merit can too easily be based solely on effects without consideration of the how they were achieved; on what a person does, and not on how or why. Intangible personal qualities like relationship skills and reflective abilities are not rewarded to the same extent and can even be derided as inefficient or expendable in the pursuit of tangible ends. A pervasive sense of "job dissatisfaction" and workplace malaise can result from a person being denied validation of development of inner qualities as well as of outer performance. Fundamentally, corporate discourse militates against a healthy, holism that incorporates a religious or spiritual dimension as part and parcel of the individual’s identity in organisational life. It is critical to query the extent to which corporate discourse explicitly and implicitly militates against recognition and discussion of the personal and religious reality of the individual.

D. A distortion of the masculine dimension and suppression of the feminine

A dimension underlying the previous three aspects of the corporate discourse is that they represent a distorted or exaggeratedly masculine approach to functioning. We believe people have both masculine and feminine capacities and that both are positive components of human diversity. It is the absence or suppression of the feminine aspects of human thinking and functioning in the life of the workplace and corporations that we find problematic.

The exclusion extends to those domains of human experience which are fundamental to religion and spirituality. Much of that which is emotional, visionary, transcendent but intangible and unverifiable in the human experience is marginalised by the rational and objective ethos of current corporate discourse. We therefore question whether this predominantly "male" ethos of corporate language and practice could allow for a public language of religion and spirituality in the corporate workplace, and thus, a fuller expression of
human potential and experience.

II. Themes in an emerging discourse based on new science, chaos and complexity theory

Nevertheless, internationally and in South Africa, there has been a recent trend towards what seems to be a more "feminised" or balanced workplace discourse that not only allows for, but also positively encourages, conversation around issues of community, religion and "soul" in business. There is a growing source of literature, speakers and development programmes that, under the banner of "leadership," promote a discourse that appears completely counter-cultural to the discourse identified at the start of this paper. (April) Advocates of "servant-leadership" (Greenleaf), conversation and dialogue (Senge), relationships and communities of practice (Wheatley ) are increasing in popularity and major corporations are incorporating their ideas into their discourse on organizational transformation. These thinkers draw from the fields of chaos theory, complexity theory, and the "new science" emerging from fields such as evolution biology, quantum mechanics, and field theory. The discourse is based on seeing corporations as whole systems that are comprised of interdependent individuals and that are themselves parts of broader systems. This shifts the focus away from autonomy to interdependency, and from the pursuit of short-term empirical results to creating processes with the flexibility and adaptiveness to address complexity. (April and Macdonald)

Whilst this trend is developing, the language and practices need to be scrutinised carefully. Why are so many of these new "gurus" men? Why the emphasis on leadership which still has an autonomous, hierarchical flavour, and not on a more organic, interactive modus operandi and goal such as the "facilitation" of system progress? Does it matter that this new approach is still justified by popular speakers as ensuring increased competitive advantage and hence, profitability? More fundamentally, is the pursuit of competitive advantage or profits in dissonance with religiosity or spirituality, or does religion alter the nature of the goal and/or its pursuit?

Locally, the growth of corporate interest in the concept of Ubuntu poses an interesting contribution to business language and practice. Is Ubuntu a fundamentally new way of relating within and between businesses? Or is it old wine in a politically correct bottle? Again, does the philosophy of Ubuntu challenge a predominantly male-worked view? How correctly has the reality of Ubuntu been conceptualised and conveyed by the management guru industry or has it too been "colonised" so as to serve the dominant culture’s ends?

Are these new trends in corporate language capturing an interim stage in an international paradigm shift in consciousness? Are we dealing here with a fundamental groundswell shift to a more public religious discourse, possibly even the basis for a more spiritual ethos in business practices – or is it a cynical exploitation of new language and fads?

References


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