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MECHANISTIC AND ORGANIC APPROACHES TO ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

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GRAHAM ELKIN
Associate Professor
Department of Management
University of Otago
PO Box 56
Dunedin
New Zealand
Email: gelkin@business.otago.ac.nz

PAVEL STRACH
Department of Business Administration
University of Economics
Prague
Czech Republic
Email: starch@fm.vse.cz
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Graham Elkin
Associate Professor,
Department of Management,
University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand,
Tel. +64-3-479 8189; Fax: +64-3-479 8173,
email: gelkin@business.otago.ac.nz

Pavel Štrach
Researcher,
Department of Business Administration,
University of Economics, Prague, Czech Republic
Tel. +420-384 417 240; Fax: +420-384 417 177;
email: strach@fm.vse.cz
MECHANISTIC AND ORGANIC APPROACHES TO MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION: EMERGING INDIGENOUS EVIDENCE

ABSTRACT

There are two common sets of underlying assumptions about organizations and their management - Mechanistic and Organic. The mechanistic paradigm has led to the adoption of a scientific rationality which makes whole human beings marginal to an enterprise, and regards people as interchangeable, replaceable parts of a structured system. This implies the treatment of employees as less than fully human, in terms of skills and the full extent of mind, body and spirit. The reduction of employees to roles and tasks may affect not only their working life but mental wellness and perception of personal fulfillment. This paper argues for the adoption of an organic view of organizations focused on complete human beings at work. It sees organizations as existing through networks of whole people in relationship with one another. The indigenous evidence presented here suggests the adoption of the organic paradigm has been more common in less industrialized settings. The turbulent world may increasingly require organic approaches in order to achieve competitive advantage.

INTRODUCTION

The assumptions we make about organizations have an impact on the practice of management. Morgan (1996) popularized the use of analogies to understand organizations and the people within them. The Western underlying assumption that business organizations are rational, ordered and predictable systems has carried significant consequences. Organizations are seen if they were value free; disconnected from the vagaries and subjectivity of human beings. Therefore, the organizational assumptions and practices can be generalized to any country and virtually every type of setting.

This scientific management approach owes its modern birth to the work of Fredrick Taylor who suggested that each part of a task be studied scientifically to develop the best way to perform it. Workers would be carefully selected, trained and managed to carry out the tasks in the best way. Whole human beings became peripheral to an enterprise and labeled as just one of several resources. People can be regarded as interchangeable, replaceable parts of a machine like system. This implies only a limited interest in parts of human beings and some of human capacity. People at work may be treated as if they were less than fully human beings with minds, bodies, emotions and spirits. Such assumptions affect individuals, not only at work but their mental wellness and personal fulfillment in the whole of their lives.
In the past, the economically rational view of organizations proved practical and successful in the delivery of goods and services to customers through the division of labor, standardization and the provision of returns to shareholders. However, if the unintended consequences of this way of organizing are too costly for individuals and society in terms of stress, mental sickness, alienation and disillusionment with work or if the supply of people to enter the workplace becomes scarce enough or resistance to this way of working rises, then we may need to think again - either to modify the day to day management of the mechanistic model or to seek a new model and way of operating. This paper presents a viewpoint and argues for a new model.

Triandis (2002) defines a collectivistic society as one comprising individuals who are willing to give priority to the goals of the collective over their own personal goals. Individualistic societies are those in which members see themselves as independent and motivated by their own preferences, needs and desires. The majority of industrialized countries are individualistic. It may be that western mechanistic organizations are embedded within the cultural paradigm of individualism. The rest of the world is steadily heading towards the assumptions of individualism (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Individualism is seen in many traditional societies such as Indian, African or Maori as selfishness, a lack of concern for others, or a dislike of group discipline. It has profoundly negative connotations for personal identity and communal life.

The mechanistic model largely relies on a belief in the value of individual achievement and effort. Rugged individuality, independence and individual success are highly prized and often rewarded both formally and informally. To rise from farm boy to be the president is a (American) cultural dream. This success should not depend on birth, wealth or connections. Efficacy may come from being a self-made person who to quote the Sinatra song ‘did it my way.’ Overcoming the odds and making it despite all the challenges is to be admired. It is possible for individuals to be satisfied by this even at the expense of some unused capacities, emotional, and spiritual stunting. This can be argued to have come from a particular protestant set of ideas popularized by Max Weber who identified the individual duty to work leading to the accumulation of capital and control over organizations.

Attempts to manage organizations within these mechanistic assumptions have been exported by business publishing, education and spread to the developing world through the economic dominance and through the increasing presence of multinationals. Jackson (2004) writes with respect to Africa that “the hegemony of Western management ideas is a heavy burden, not least under the influence of multilateral agencies. There is a long way to go to realize the potential of an African renaissance in the area of management” (p. xi). And he continues by saying that “the dominance of a colonial power before independence, gave rise to the disparaging of indigenous value, belief and knowledge systems and created education based on a Western model. Since the Second World War the dominance of American economic influence has led to a proliferation of MBA programmes, textbooks and American management practice” (p. 43). However, reflections on indigenous evidence in the western world seem to be largely missing from the organizational map.
This paper argues for an organic view of organisations as networks of whole persons in relationship with one another. By organic we mean similar to living organisms or plants. Contrary to the mechanistic assumptions, organizations are largely formed, developed and reproduced in less than perfectly predictable ways. An organization is the synergy between whole human beings engaged in multiple relationships with a common purpose. This organic view is of interest in the developing world but also in the West where unease about the mechanistic assumptions grows. Adopting this view may lead to actions that allow whole human beings to be central to organizations. The dysfunctionality of work for individuals may reduce and allow more of individuals’ inherent capability to be developed and used. Stronger and faster relationships within and outside organizations may develop to allow faster and more creative responses to changing environments. Competitive advantage through people in relationship may occur.

As suggested by Gupta (2002), Jackson (2004) and others, this paper will reflect on societies where scientific management is traditionally less common. Evidence is presented from Maori, African, and Indian societies to develop an argument for the alternative organic framework. There may be an increasing need for the West to amend its assumptions about people and organisations in Western organisations by learning from indigenous ideas as much as the indigenous societies are learning from the West. We critique the Western model and discuss the effects of the model on individuals at work and general mental wellness. The growth of interpersonal networks and organic structures are described. A definition of an organic organisation is developed and illustrated. Indigenous ideas from Maori society, African humanism and Indian organisational life are presented and discussed with respect to the place of whole individuals in organisations and the cultural setting. These ideas are then illustrated by some brief examples from African and Indian settings to show the reality of the different model. Finally it is suggested that changing our view so that we put individuals in the centre of our understanding and explore behaving in ways that maximize humanity would be a wise endeavor. Future research is suggested.

THE MECHANISTIC MODEL

McLennan et al. (1987) describe a typical mechanistically treated worker quite profusely: “One need only observe a production-line worker to realize that extent to which they are not involved in their work. The movement of his body is limited to a few simple operations that are repeated in a relatively fixed time cycle. Social contact is limited to his immediate work neighbours or a periodic visit from a superior. Their facial expressions, his gestures and his posture appear mesmerised by the repetitiveness of a work cycle that engages their physical self while neglecting his emotional and cognitive sides of an individual’s capacity” (p. 61).
The mechanistic approach assumes that there is only one best way which is written down in detailed job descriptions. These form a cascading hierarchy of precise expectations and job tasks much like the original linking pin idea of (Likert, 1961). Authority flows down, obedience flows up. Action is predictable and responsibility defined. Pride is taken in the impersonality of just doing the job and denying personal feelings. Problems outside of work are expected not to intrude on the workplace. Any development of an individual through using more of their innate ability at work can be slowed down or prevented by role descriptions.

Employees are carefully selected to be amenable and to comply with organizational practice. There is an implicit belief that people are similar enough to be molded and to be treated identically (Welch, 1997). For instance, during the selection process some employees are being excluded for lack of qualification, others for being over qualified, and some for possessing different qualifications or attributes. At work, the ubiquitous job description provides the basis for assessment, further training and disciplinary action. It is assumed that it is more efficient to use only a small, supposedly specialized, part of someone’s capacity and to clearly block off the more challenging and discretionary parts of oneself. Employees are like one-like-another cogs with their similarities fitting into each others and turning the wheel of organizational outputs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A mechanistic organization: People as cogs

Source: McLennan et al. (1987), p.60
Another analogy might be looking at organizations as structures built with Lego bricks. Although the bricks are sometimes different in color, they are the same base shape and size (or at least multiples of size). They are smooth edged and can only be held together by the level above. At best they rub together on the horizontal level but are not engaged. The vertical dimension is the essence of being one organization. Idiosyncratic bricks pose a problem and do not fit in. If one Lego brick detaches itself breaks or changes shape it is easily replaced from a supply of identical bricks.

Both the cogs and the Lego brick analogies suggest people at work are replaceable, interchangeable parts of an organization. Human idiosyncrasies, emotions, other skills are not reflected and sometimes not even desirable. Business organizations are often focused on task completion and outputs. Integration takes place between people on the vertical level. Overall, it is a concern for human activity and not human beings. Mechanistic organizations make neither real use of the whole depth and range of individual capacities nor are truly concerned what multiple relationships can achieve.

This picture of mechanized labor has become less common in some industries such as knowledge industries. However, routine mass assembly has largely been reinvented through managerial movements such as quality initiatives, commitment to excellence, re-engineering, briefing groups, or team leadership. Those approaches have masked the effects of the technology by allowing the expression of more than the physical parts of people. It could be argued that this does still not address the central engagement of the whole person. The division of jobs and specialization has increased in several areas: the spread of call centers has been a major example where tasks are circumscribed and routinized ritually. The outsourcing of routine computer processing and other clerical tasks has led to new impoverished experiences of work wherever this work is done - offshore or at home. The fragmentation and specialization of work has led emergence of a class of fringe employees who work temporarily for several companies. This may be dignified by the term portfolio worker, but in practice it condemns many to work with less meaning. Although enhancing efficiencies, such trends have resulted in further reduction of people to task-doers.

However, people seriously want the opportunity to realize their full potential as human beings on and off the job (Mitroff, 2003). They report being extremely tired and frustrated with having to leave part of them and pretend they can do so successfully their job. Most people in Mitroff’s study reported they can only bring their brains to work and not their feelings and emotions, let alone their souls. This is in direct contrast to strive of utilizing full employees’ creativity and to emphasize true employees’ personal development. Mitroff also contends that most organizations, which we term mechanistic, are a hazard to our mental health. He calls them “first degree black belts in the humiliation and destruction of people” (p. 375). Organizations beat up and humiliate people for some 40 hours a week expecting individuals to recover in their own time and come back to work for more of the same. It is not surprising that mental health problems grow. For individuals the consequences of the machine-like model (Morgan, 1996) can be very destructive.
Pransky (n.d.) suggests mental health should imply that a person is “seldom bothered or upset, gets over his reactions easily when he gets bothered or upset, is graceful in his low moods, has a consistently warm feeling towards others, even when others are exhibiting maladaptive behavior” (p. 3). Mentally healthy individual would be expected to demonstrate peace of mind, compassion, joy, light-hearted, emotional buoyancy, creativity and responsiveness. Instead, the academic literature reports on rising work-related stress (e.g., Siu and Cooper, 1998; Jamal, 1999) mainly in industrialized countries (Dollard and Winefield, 1996). Work activities may be so limited in scope or so intense there is no space to develop relationships and use the other parts of self. These qualities may even threaten the social order and those who are conditioned to the self denying role behaviors. This can lead to what Pransky calls the distressed mind. While he write as a clinical psychologist about people who are considered sick, much of what is seen in extreme cases merely highlights what is true to a lesser extent in those who are not categorized as sick. In contrast, it has become clear even in mechanistic organizations that the success is related to human qualities long ignored and regarded as of little significance. A prime example is the emphasis placed relatively recently on emotional intelligence by Goleman (1995) and others and the role of relationships within firms.

The way to get things done in many organizations is to know the right person rather than to understand the formal organizational chart. The very phrase ‘who we know’ is itself informative. Some organizations can spend much time and effort trying to force behavior into the bureaucratic and mechanistic mould (Morgan, 1996). Organizational reality might not be about roles but about how we interact with people. It is about more complete people in relationship. It is as if things get done despite the organization. In many mechanistic organizations, informal networks emerge obscuring the formal set of roles and relationships (see Figure 2). These informal relational webs grow with and across the formal organization, sometimes to completely overwhelm the formal system. The informal network becomes a source to what will contemplated as an organic organization.

Figure 2. An informal organization growing across a formal organization

ORGANIC ORGANIZATIONS

These informally structured organizations are living, changing and constantly adapting to the environment. Such spontaneous organizations are networks of whole persons endowed with mind, body, emotion, soul and spirit, sharing and creating webs of relationship and meaning. Organic organizations are built on and around interpersonal relationships. Traditional definitions of organisation often highlight the planned co-ordination of people to achieve a common purpose by dividing the tasks and functions and having an hierarchy of authority and responsibility (Schein, 1965). However we see organizations as interpersonal networks of complete human beings, albeit with some sense of common purpose, but reliant on individual characteristics, capabilities, skills, and qualifications as well as feelings and emotions. This emerging alternative notion of organization takes out the managerial might and goes back to people not as a resource but as the central phenomenon and reason for organizational existence.

When two human beings encounter each other a relationship emerges. The relationship immediately begins to affect both parties as it grows. As Zephyr (1982) suggested this situation can be compared to a couple who conceive a child. The child is not either of the parents: it has some characteristics of both parents. The relationship has an impact on all of the individuals in relationship and how they relate. She called these relations that arise, non-material or spiritual children. Fig 3 shows the relationships between people in a small organization without and with spiritual children. In some cases the child is a great help to the parents and develops the ability to trust and take risks for the organization. The relationship validates the identity of the individuals and because it is between whole human beings allows the expression of a range of emotional and even spiritual characteristics, otherwise hidden from sight of a traditional mechanistic organization. In managerial terms, spiritual children may increase the number of organizational members and allow for greater synergies. Zephyr suggests there is inevitability about the conception and there are no contraceptives.

Figure 3. Relationships and spiritual children

To give a few examples, an increase in trust may affect the willingness of individuals to make fast responses without formal authority, to take a risk without seeking coverage for the activity from someone else with more status. Successful risk taking with other people may increase the willingness to take bigger risks. Increasing the range and intensity of a relationship may enhance the sharing of corporate knowledge and build mutual understanding. Trust also leads to the willingness to be truthful about potential weakness. As a result weakness can be addressed, help given or activities moved around. This can be done in the context of the whole individual being valued for themselves and not just their task responsibilities. Willingness to do new things in response to environmental change may lead to a gradual changing set of activities for individuals and a change in the shape of the organization and its growth.

EMERGING INDIGENOUS EVIDENCE

By examining areas of the world where Western assumptions about people are not widespread we found evidence that the machine model or organisations would sit uneasily at best. An emphasis on isolated individuals, being cut off from other individuals and from home, family and local identity is at variance with the identity and expectations of many non-Western groups. The emphasis on specialization and individual responsibility makes it more difficulty. We illustrate the truth of this in the cases of Maori (New Zealand) who are a significant part of organisational life in New Zealand, indigenous African ideas and Indian conceptions of people and organizations.

MAORI

Maori have a saying What is it that matters? It is people, it is people, it is people! This highlights the concern with people and not individuals. The saying is not It is the role people play, it is the role they play; it is the role they play. The identity of Maori is in other people. Personal identity is communal. New Zealand Maori society is communal. The good of the whole group, be it whanau (extended family), Marae (communal meeting place) or iwi (sub-tribe), is of more significance than individual desires. Mana (status or recognition) is given by others not self-made or personally achieved. Mana is accorded for age, wisdom, family birth and special gifts. It belongs to the group and is not personal. Maori find the idea of the isolated individual to be nonsensical, especially when it denies the communal nature of identity. A self-made individual is even more perplexing.

An interesting facet of Maori society is that leadership is given for particular purposes such as projects, skills or circumstances. As circumstances change so does the leadership. Some leaders (kamatua) are given leadership positions that do not change. These tend to be older men. Generally being a kamatua is not a full time role. Individuals who are leaders in one circumstance will be followers in the area of expertise of others. All are significant and of equal value because all are connected. The history of individuals (whakapapa) and the history of the group over generations are significant in daily life, somewhat like a continuing organic corporate culture.
The un-adapted Western model sits uncomfortably with Maori who find the division of self very difficult. Maori ideas emphasize the relationships and history in the contemporary responses to everyday life. For instance, Wakatu Corporation, a tribally based business organization, draws not only a formal organizational chart but also a chart of Maori values. Organization values are aligned with traditional Maori values and that helps individuals to identify themselves with the organization. Interestingly, both Maori and non-Maori employees seem to appreciate this double structure which is halfway between what was termed earlier mechanistic and organic assumptions.

AFRICAN UBUNTU

Humanity can only be defined through interaction. Boon (1996) identifies a widespread African belief that person becomes human through other people (umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu). This suggests that whole people and relationships should be the key to organizations. Ubuntu is another cultural concept that pervades African society. Boon (1996) describes Ubuntu as morality, humaneness, compassion, care, understanding and empathy that lead to giving and receiving in relationship. Ubuntu provides meaning. It is not empirical — it arises in relationship and through the interaction of people. It comes from the good things people do for one another unthinkingly. It is a belief that the group is as important as the individual and the individual’s most effective behavior is with others in a group. All efforts working towards this common good are praised and encouraged, as are all acts of kindness, compassion and care. All contribute to human dignity, self respect and integrity. Interaction that is limited to a narrow role makes humanity less than whole. Mainstream management and organization texts will list hierarchy as one of the signs of organization. Rank means nothing to Africans unless one’s spirit and humanity are of the same stature. Differentiation is for function and by the value of a person.

Mutabazi (2002) describes a company in Rwanda that developed an approach to employment that trained up work substitutes from family and friends in the local community. This had the effect of recognizing the place of the organization as an open system consisting of far more than the individuals at work. It also drew more people into the life of the organization and integrated it into the wider community. This solution showed an understanding of the relationship between community/family life and work life.

Another example might be Cashbuild (Visser, 1997) which is a major building supplies company operating in five southern African countries. It bases rewards on a belief that people do not work purely for money, and that the need for dignity, pride, belonging and freedom should be fulfilled first. The business is involved in all the local communities. Every time a store is opened, local schools are given the materials to build eight to ten classrooms. Locals are sold cement to make bricks and they are bought by Cashbuild. The company lends money to allow local people to buy donkeys and carts for deliveries. In 2006, Cashbuild has given a 10% stake to an employee trust. It provides communally negotiated Funeral Policies, Housing loans and Educational Assistance. Absence levels,
which were 15% under a western management, dropped below one percent once the company start putting a red mark against the names of those absent on a public list. The influence of the peer group in judging an individual has traditionally been powerful in African society. At Cashbuild, decision making processes are undertaken a communal nature – during three days of the Great Indaba (annual communal gathering) every employee is given the opportunity to make his or her views on Cashbuild known. This gathering makes key decisions such as salary increases.

INDIA

British, US and Japanese models of management are unlikely to be successful in different settings as they require a universalistic faith. Formal thinking on organizations and management has largely been universalistic under the hegemony of American thought and has been implanted in India through the establishment of two national institutions of management in collaboration with the Harvard Business School and the Sloan School of Management (Gupta, 2002). However, in the Indian psyche the secular work organization does not have a place of much significance. The Indian will draw meaning from the state of the familial relationship not the workplace. The idea of integrating the familial self and an organization through a formal contract that focuses on explicit detailed roles and tasks separate from the interests of the junior employee and his family would be difficult for Indians. Performance based rewards and punishments would be out of line from what is expected from seniors in the familial system.

Given the low level of identification with the work place, Indians act out any frustrations or lack of fulfillment in the family setting. It is challenging to find a way to make relationships meaningful at work and to increase the emotional identification with the organization. Gupta (2002) suggests recognizing the familial self and the special interpersonal emotional expectations Indians bring to the hierarchical relations at work. They come with expectations of being nurtured and even indulged. Another major difficulty is the neglect of the spiritual or transcendental dimension of the Indian psyche which treats human beings as just part of who they are.

Another example is cited by Chaturvedi (1987) who mentions a serious employee accident. On receiving the news, two persons from the company immediately went to the house of the worker who was injured and broke the news to his wife. They told her that her presence was needed more by her husband and that the company itself would arrange for someone to look after her children and the house and transportation arranged at company expense. The importance of relationships outside the business was clearly recognized as a priority.

CONCLUSION

The models of mechanistic and organic organisations are helpful as ideal types, which do not wholly exist anywhere. There is a tendency for Western organisations to exhibit signs of being more mechanistic and unhealthy for individuals. However, every organization
would have some organic characteristics such as informal networks and search of human beings for their recognition. Some organizations will contrive programmes to humanize the relationships at work, while retaining the mindset that people are just another resource which can be treated as a spare part, cog or a Lego brick. Such mindset should be regarded as dehumanizing, although has been continuously and insidiously spreading in the bandwagon of industrialization and globalization.

Recently, some of the indigenous world has challenged or even rejected this mindset with inclination towards the organic paradigm. The organic view starts with the centrality of whole individuals in organizations. By whole human beings we mean people with mental, physical, emotional and spiritual capacity. Individuals grow in relationship with other people. In the organic view, people are what the organization is. In the cited examples, the concern for people was shown. The organic approach can make it possible for us to be whole human beings at work, to use more of our human capacities at work, be affirmed and grow in our identity and be economically more responsive and productive at work.

If the change is useful in indigenous organisations, it may also be useful elsewhere. The adoption of this perspective could change mechanistic organizations radically, using all of our minds, bodies and spirits at work, speeding change by making people not just task-doers but developers, and by emphasizing the social aspect of work. The challenge remains how to introduce practices that will achieve this change. We have set out to suggest a change in attitude and express a viewpoint. That achieved we may then begin to find ways to bring about the change, to operationalize and further research the construct.

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