Psychopathic Communicative Performance in organizations

An approach to malfunctioning language and communication in organisations exemplified by psychopathic communicative performance.

Professor Tor Claussen

Abstract. In this contribution psychopathic communicative performance are addressed as communicative action characterizing an organizational system of interacting individuals. Psychopathic communicative performance is assumed to be relational/communicative practices (Habermas 1981) embedded in organizational systems (Luhmann 2000 and 1997, Maciejewski eds. 1973) making possible a holistic conceptualizations of formal and informal communicative performances. Empirical case material is to support the theoretical analyses and critical discussions have been collected by the author of this paper.

Keywords: organisational system, malfunctioning communication in organisations, psychopathic communication, organisational theory, philosophy, social science

1. Issues to be dealt with

The paper addresses different approaches that can contribute to uncover hidden structures and organisational systems where psychopathic organisational communication is embedded. Psychological approaches are critically examined in this respect.

The paper focuses on communicative performances in organisational systems in order to understand hidden structures regarding psychopathic communication. Empirical case material is utilised in order to illuminate theoretical analyses and considerations made. Cases are constructed in order to depersonalise actors, arenas and contexts. Critical reflections regarding the present state of affair in modern work life finalises the paper.

The paper starts by presenting a narrative in order to enter the scene of psychopathic communication.

2. Entering the scene[1]

Frank is sitting restless in his office. He is unable to concentrate on anything. Some time ago he applied for internal grants. His consultant company offers grants in order to create an opportunity for individual employees to upgrade and renew their knowledge base and competencies. Frank had applied knowing that he was a very strong candidate. The evaluation committee was attended by senior specialists from outside the company in order to secure neutrality in the process. This committee acted upon presentations of potential candidates by the company. Usually each department would promote their own candidates, as this was a possibility to position the department in the overall company as well. The bosses of each department made some prior consideration regarding the list of candidates in order to come up with candidates that had the

---

[1] The scene and actors are inspired by Babiak & Hare (2006). Actors themselves are reinvented and changed. Cases presented in this paper are mainly based on the author's empirical material and personal experiences. These experiences consists of many years of applied research in enterprise development, mainly in private sector companies in the Norwegian oil and gas industry on the West Coast of Norway, as indicated in Claussen 2004.

greatest potentials in making beneficial use of grants. They were not supposed to rank each candidate and the decision making process of the committee was supposed to be highly confidential.

Frank had been to an interview with the evaluation committee two weeks ago. He was informed about the committee's decision by the secretary this morning. The committee had made the ranking of candidates the previous day. Frank was informed that he had not been ranked among the most valued candidates.

In a way he already had a feeling that this could be the outcome. A majority of his colleges in the department had forwarded a critical memo regarding his boss's behavior. The critical memo had been forwarded to the Human Resource department a couple of months earlier. Frank was one of the employees who had signed this memo. His boss was accused of harassment, intolerable behaviour, collaborative problems, mismanagement, etc. on several occasions. The union, as well as health, safety and environmental (HSE) representatives, were also involved in planning actions to get Frank's boss removed from his current position.

Frank heard a firm knock on the door. He knew that his boss, Dave, would be entering as he answered. Dave came in with an anxious and serious look on his face. He looked at Frank, then glanced out of the window and asked if Frank had received any information about the decision made by the evaluation committee. Frank was well prepared for this situation. He smiled back to Dave and informed him that he was still waiting and anxious to know the outcome. Frank knew that his boss was not in the position to pass on information from the evaluation committee. Formally he was to be prevented from knowing the outcome before it was officially announced. Prior to announcement the outcome was supposed to be confidential, even to his boss. But Frank knew that Dave already possessed information about the outcome, which was also the prime concern regarding Dave's visit to Frank's office.

Dave looked bewildered and confused regarding this answer from Frank. He seemed to have been prepared for something quite different. Frank expected that Dave already knew the outcome and was eager to play the game of expressing his passion and comforting behavior as if the outcome was a disappointing surprise also to him. On Frank's response Dave made a blurred statement about the great competition and many well qualified candidates that they had to consider in this year's evaluation, as he left Frank's room. Dave was clearly puzzle, looked stressed and disappointed regarding Frank's response. Frank on the other hand set back in his chair, at least satisfied with the fact that he had not given his boss the chance to act with the usual fatherly passion and paternalism towards his employees. It was exactly this paternalism and intimate comforting that was part of the accusation and intolerable behavior stated in the memo forwarded to the Human Resource department by the employees in the department.

This situation is intended to illustrate some features of what could be phrased as behaviour of a psychopath. In this situation Dave plays a game in order to position himself as a fatherly boss toward his employees. By maneuvering into this position, Dave tries to acquire the role of intimacy with the opportunity to comfort and support Franks defeat. In this drama it is as if Dave wishes to express his great sympathy and offering his empathy with Frank. Behind the front stage of this scene on the other hand, Dave is the initial cause of Frank's defeat. Dave invested quite some effort in order to orchestrate this situation with Frank, both as revenge, but also as an opportunity to (re) establish and reinforce his patron client relations to his employees. Does this effort in order to orchestrate the situation with Frank, indicate that Dave is a psychopath?

3. What makes a psychopath?

Psychopaths can be identified along two major dimensions. *First* they can be identified along what could be termed *aggressive narcissism*. Aggressive narcissism is characterized by superficial charm. Psychopaths lack sense of guilt, express shallow affect and lack of empathy. They can act *as if* they express these feelings[2]. Unpredictedness and lack of reliability is created through this "as if" communication that fosters tension in the organization among employees, as was the case with Frank.

A *social deviant life style* is a *second* dimension often associated with psychopathy. Constant need to control the environment, but exhibiting poor behavioral control, is one of the characteristics of this

---

[2] Bateson (1973) uses the term double bind for similar paradoxical communication in family relations.

dimension. Identifications of misbehaviour can be build on predominance of characteristics such as those found in the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (see PCL-R, Hare 2003, Babiak & Hare 2006);

Interpersonal – the person is	**Affective** – the person
Superficial	Lacks remorse
Grandiose	Lacks empathy
Deceitful	Doesn't accept responsibility
Lifestyle – the person	**Antisocial** – the person has a history of
Is impulsive	Poor behavior control
Lacks goals	Adolescent antisocial behavior
Is irresponsible	Adult antisocial behavior

These characteristics identify individual behavior patterns. Is Dave such an individual? Is the individualized psychiatry/psychology (psycholinguistic) stated more or less explicitly in the approach above not catching the whole story?

4. Personal disorder the whole story?

Dave's and Frank's behaviour could be considered the product of interactional incidents produced in specific context as a continuous construction process in face to face situations (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Face work, the look in their eyes, ways of knocking on doors, bodily gesture, etc. are all impressions people make upon each other as impression management (Goffman 1981). We are dealing with speech acts (Searle 1969) in specific context considered as language games following rules that take place on different arenas (Wittgenstein 1945).

In a modern corporation the organisation is point of departure for networks of communication, both internally and externally. Organisational performance is shaped by individuals interacting. On the other hand past and existing performance is framing the conditions, possibilities and obstacles for individual interactions. Psychopaths interact with colleagues, customers and suppliers. These interactional partners are all pawns in the processes of actively shaping, as well as being framed, in communication processes. In these processes communication and language brings about the performances, structures and outcome. This takes place in processes where the past brings about features in the present that anticipates future possibilities (Luhmann 2000).

The whole context of social interaction is the corporate organisation, which also brings about corporate performance. Individual psychopaths involved in language games might alternatively be viewed as ways that corporate performance is created and creates interactions among present actors. Language, codes of conduct and utterances can be identified as psychopathic both on an individual level, as social interactions and on a corporate level. To the extent that psychopathy is diagnosed as disorderly behaviour, we could be talking about a whole organisation, determined as corporate misbehaviour.

5. A single individual psychopath or corporate misbehavior?

Most colleagues in Dave's department are gathered for a common meeting among staff. There is great tension. A memo produced by the staff has been forwarded to the human resource officer. Additionally one of the spokesmen for the staff (Peter) has asked for a place on the agenda for the regular Friday lunch meeting at the department, to discuss the memo.

As usual Dave arrives late. He starts out by gripping the memo composed by the staff. With the memo in his hand he starts crying in front of everybody. Dave starts uttering complaints about the disloyalty, deceitfulness and ungratefulness expressed by the staff towards him.

When Dave finishes his performance, staff was ready to defend their so-called accusations and challenge Dave's defence. Then, before anyone enters the stage, a sudden shift takes place. One of the major spokesmen of the staff, John, grabs the attention of everyone. He puts forward his great appreciation of

Dave's explication and clarification. In a warm and appreciative tone, John states that; "You should have told us before, Dave". The whole staff is paralysed by this sudden manoeuvre. John, a spokesman of the staff, shifts to a sudden defensive move on behalf of Dave.

What does this story tell us about psychopathic behaviour in organisations?

Dave (and John) are not lonely performers in the organisation. They have supporters and collaborators on which they build informal power and positions.

Decisions are based and legitimised through the informal communication of rumours and reputation building. Dave distributed resources and possibilities through his loyal "sergeant", John. John reinforces his relations with his loyal companions, when he gives them priority to fulfil their obligations as collaborators. His loyal companions pay their tribute to John by being close associates and devoted supports whenever needed. This structure of power in interactions in current the organisational system is illustrated below;

Resources are scarce in organisations. It is important to be somebody prioritised as collaborators in projects and the acquisition of resources coming through. John's key collaborators are persons with whom mutual friendship is important to cultivate. The reputations that these key persons communicate build the
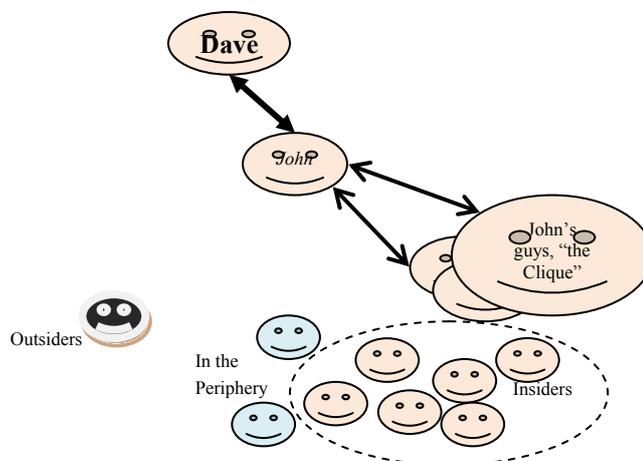
bases for success. Friendship, reputation and social interaction with John's clique determine preferences made and legitimatized when resources are distributed. It makes up the preconditions for the overall individual success in the organisation. Those not treated as insiders by this nucleus or "clique" (Luhmann 2000) will acquire bad reputation. Coming in conflict with these guys can be equivalent to organisational suicide. Anxiety and insecurity is reinforced on informal arenas.

6. Managing the knowledge creating company

Psychopathic behavior can be identified as individual maladaptive appearance. Behavior patterns can be measured by psychopathic checklists, like PCL R (see previously presented table). Although indicative, these measures are linked to individual malfunctioning and performance. The point made in this paper is that this is not the whole story. Additionally one has to identify psychopathic communication structured between people interacting in specific context. Another feature to consider is the structure of interrelations acted out in specific context as the dynamics of organizational systems.

What is the significance of this discussion to the present state of affair in modern work life?

Babiak & Hare (2006) emphasizes several aspects that bring attention to the causes of psychopathic behavior. First some core psychopathic behavior can mistakenly be regarded as favorable talents attractive in job applicants and actually contribute to psychopaths success in being hired. They are often charming and talented in impression management. Secondly, and closely linked attributions of leadership competence might mistakenly be associated with psychopathic behavior or visa versa. Risk taking, decidedness and guidance of others can be leadership qualities, as well as attributes of psychopathic behavior patterns. Third the nature of business itself is changing. Change and dynamics are features regarded as distinctiveness of modern learning organizations (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). Networking, egalitarian structure, knowledge intensive, manipulative, constructivist and other mode 2 features (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons 2001) are

producing the present organizational challenges that can foster psychopathic behavior in modern organizations. Fourth modern more flexible organization might encourage manipulative and conning behavior of which psychopaths are specifically talented.

Instability, insecurity and anxiety can be viewed as something significant in modern organization. The new knowledge creating society makes employees more articulated, ambitious, carrier seeking and eager to engage in decision making. Employees can then become more manipulative, more strategic and instrumental, as well as behaving less organized and with less solidarity. This state of affair can produce "lack of organization" and/or "lack of leadership". Employees in this situation might be seeking strong, decisive and confident leaders. Supports for such statements are found in empirical investigations (Andersen 2002). This could be an indication of the way modern organizations are composed that stimulates the growth of psychopathic behavior patterns. More so, in our context it paves the way for psychopathic communication to grow and structure itself in modern organizational systems.

Managing knowledge intensive organizations with highly competent and skilled employees can contribute additionally to the psychopathic communication patterns exemplified in this paper. When highly talented employees are to be managed, there is a risk that they are more competent knowledge actors than their bosses. This can be the case both regarding their professional competences/experiences, as well as the employees knowledge and experiences regarding crucial decision making contributions to the change and development of the overall organizational performance. In such an environment the boss and managers can come to feel inferior to their employees. To gain superiority they might be forced to play and manipulate the organization, as demonstrated in our examples. They thereby seem encouraged to develop psychopathic communicative strategies in order to survive and execute superior impression management.

7. References

[1] L. Andersen. *Underorganisering*. Gyldendal, 2002.

[2] P. Babiak and R.D. Hare. *Snakes in Suits. When Psychopaths go to Work*. Regan Books, 2006

[3] G. Bateson. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Paladin, 1973

[4] P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. N. Y., 1966.

[5] T.Claussen. Participation and enterprise networks within a regional context: Examples from South West Norway in W.Fricke, and P. Totterdill. *Action Research in Workplace Innovation and Regional Development*. John Benjamins, 2004.

[6] S. Clegg, et al (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies*. Second Edition, 2006

[7] E. Goffman. *Forms of Talk*. Oxford, London : Basil Blackwell, 1981.

[8] J. Habermas. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Bind 1 og 2. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1981.

[9] R. D. Hare. *Manual for the Revised Psychopathy Checklist*. Multi-Health Systems Inc. Toronto. 2003.

[10] N. Luhmann. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Teilband 1 und 2, Suhrkamp, 1997.

[11] N. Luhmann. *Organisation und Entscheidung*. Westdeutcher Verlag, 2000.

[12] F. Maciejewski (eds) *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*. Suhrkamp. Band I und II, 1973.

[13] I. Nonaka and H. Takeuchi. *The knowledge-creating company : how Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

[14] H. Nowotny, P. Scott, M. Gibbons. *Re Thinking Science*. Polity, 2001.

[15] J.R. Searle. *Speech acts : an essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1969.

[16] L. Wittgenstein. *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1945.