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Stream: CMS at Work

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X-factor, empowerment and the cult of the Manager.

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Introduction

How in our work can we open the passage from feeling to meaning? Different ways of seeing, that lead to alternative perspectives, define critical approaches, and the liberal use of metaphor and story pervade my work as a critical scholar and practitioner. This paper will explore the presenter role so beloved of the television series using recent manifestations in the UK media, seeing it as an extension of the cult of the manager. Examples from encounters during the author's working practice will be presented, through use of free writing, to illustrate the individual manager presenting themselves to others as proficient, all-knowing, packaged, slick, having that 'x-factor'. Moreover, that the very working contexts in which they operate seemingly are presented as empowering, creative environments but in many ways reinforce isolation of individuals. This paper will conclude that critical study needs to promote the view of 'selves' being different to 'persons'. The former are much more the constructions of relations whereas the latter are individual bodies. Managers being viewed more as the intersection of multiple relationships, as 'local and immediate manifestations of relational histories.' [McNamee and Gergen 1999].

Why should any of this matter? It is the author's contention that effective practice in trying to work and organise in alternative ways is prohibited by such a view of the manager as 'front person'. This paper concludes by exploring the increasing demand for partnership working within UK public services and the inadequacy of many managers, in the author's experience, to consider operating in different ways.

Managing is often depicted as a singular activity, instrumental and rational, carried out by the manager, which others, their employees, succumb to. Whilst for the employees, being 'managed' can be seen as being '**done to**', rather than 'managing' as a process '**in conjunction with**'. This view of management has been a rich vein of discussion for critical management scholars such as Knights and Wilmott [2000], Alvesson and Wilmott [1998], Watson [1994], Watson and Harris [1999]. This body of work has generated a critical view of both managing, as a technical, neutral process, and management as a potentially destructive force, implicated 'in the unremitting exploitation of nature and human beings' [Alvesson and Wilmott 1998: 39].

The focus of the paper will be three sets of managers from three different sectors who worked, supposedly, in 'empowered' environments. These are embodied subjects, managers with biographies, lives and identity that shape how they learn and manage [Watson 1999]. Moreover, the pressures on them to succeed were enormous as each company strove in its own sector to become more competitive during the period of the research. The following analysis is therefore based on a research study over a four-year period that formed the author's doctoral thesis.

Just as television encourages its stars to be 'up-front' as presenters so the manager is no longer 'out of sight', allowing their ability to draw on and develop those around them. It has become vital to be seen to be LEADING from the front and taking the plaudits. This paper will conclude that critical study needs to promote the view of 'selves' being different to 'persons'. The former are much more the constructions of relations whereas the latter are individual bodies; managers being viewed more as the intersection of multiple relationships, 'local and immediate manifestations of relational histories' [McNamee and Gergen 1999].

McNamee and Gergen [1999] go further by stating that:

'Let us here distinguish selves from persons, viewing the former as constructions of relations and the latter as individual bodies.....given this distinction we can treat persons as the intersection of multiple relationships, local and immediate manifestations of relational histories.'

The puzzle was how to find 'a way in' to explore such constructions of relations, how managers relate to each other, their employees, and others outside of the workplace that impact on their understanding of practice. The stories emerging from experiences in 'Castings' [a manufacturing company], 'Brewing' [a major pub retailer] and the Agency [a national advertising agency] will be set alongside discussion of the presenter role. So, for this paper, the role of presenter in the media will be used as a counterpoint to the practice of the manager.

'Robert Hughes [art critic and social commentator] wrangled with modernism in his series the 'Shock of the New', which ended with a heartfelt plea for art as our means of 'opening the passage from feeling to meaning'.

Peter Conrad, Observer, June 27th 1999.

The following section explores the connections between my work with co-inquirers and their encounters with empowerment rhetoric and the sentiments of the quote above, with particular reference to what can be termed the cult of the manager.

Conrad describes how Hughes 'wrangles' with 'modernism' in his work and I can empathise with these sentiments. A number of metaphors and 'ways of seeing' that may aid the formation of alternative perspectives surrounded this research and, again, I have recourse to metaphor to explain the way in which the 'cult' of the 'presenter', as evoked by Conrad, enables an exploration of the cult of the manager. The use of metaphor here is guided by the work of Czarniawska [1999, 2006] who sees metaphors as 'devices... in order to understand, structure, and interpret stories...collected/manufactured in the field'.

There are connections in the 'passage' analogy of Hughes and this inquiry, as I encountered the feelings the participants attached to their working lives. The nature of the inquiry is the 'passage'. From this we may derive meaning, further understanding of how empowerment rhetoric impacts on participants, guides or disables action and choice, stifles or creates alternative meaning and action. I wish to use the 'cult of the presenter', as evoked by Conrad, to explore the 'cult of the manager'. In this sense, the term 'cult' is used to denote the activity of a group, a sect, of individuals where emotional considerations overwhelm critical thinking.

Conrad could be interpreted differently. He describes the nature of television and how it makes its subject matter understood through

utilising presenters. In this case it is the 'performance' of Matthew Collings as a frontman for a new Channel 4 series on modern art:

'Channel 4 has made critical comprehension fatally easy: if you want to understand modern art, all you have to do is look at Matthew Collings, which has become almost compulsory, since his face gazes at passers-by from billboards throughout London. The book of the series enforces this neat identification. On the cover, the titles captions a portrait of him, with his rumpled shirt and retro sideburns.....'

[Conrad 1999]

Conrad compares Collings with Hughes and finds him a more modern phenomenon when compared to Hughes' former ground breaking series on art, the 'Shock of the New':

'Hughes, despite his combative verbal style, preferred to keep out of sight in the Shock of the New...Today, artists, like everyone else, from chefs to disgraced politicians, want to be stars. Professional aptitude or a sense of vocation has been replaced by careerist self-promotion.'

[Conrad 1999]

Here is Collings, in an interview in 2002, speaking of how his ideas become transformed by the medium of television:

'But then when you start making a TV programme you're working with loads of people so everything gets slightly distorted, and in the end it's not quite what you thought you'd started out with. Maybe

some of it is better, because of the talent of the executive producers and the camera guy and the series-producer. But it probably wasn't in the end all totally accurate to how I actually feel about things. But then there it is on TV and suddenly you're Mr. Art'.

Collings seems to be suggesting that his views are being distorted by the medium he is working within, failing to represent accurately how he feels about things. He adds:

'TV by its nature is a team thing. So those aspects of a tone of voice, individual integrity, and so on, they're the first things that come under attack, basically because no one knows your real wavelength, or wants to get bogged down with thinking about it. They want a presenter because it's a 'voice', which is a TV-plus, in terms of the documentary genre, but everyone wants to control the voice and change it a bit. They're a bit horrified by the real voice. So a lot of my tone of voice, and so on, and the compressions of meanings, when I do those TV commentaries, and the pieces-to-camera, are approximations of myself. I'm trying to compress it, to get it to fit.'

It is my contention that this promotion of the 'frontman' can be likened to a common notion of empowerment. That if we interpret empowerment purely as an individual phenomenon, then the **person** 'becomes the message'. The individual success or failure is the focus as opposed to the support that is offered, the task that is given, or the context in which the

actions are performed. Collings also expresses the nature of compromise that the author also heard from managers in the three companies, where they expressed doubts and insecurities, in confidence, about the actions they were tasked to perform. Such doubts were not for public arenas.

The 'frontman' is also a manifestation of the cult of the manager. This observation can be substantiated with reference to the companies of this inquiry.

The 'Frontman' and Castings

Castings was an engineering company with four plants in the Midlands and Wales. Their major customers were global car manufacturers who imposed ever-increasing quality and cost demands on the plants. It was a harsh environment in both a physical and mental sense for the managers and their employees, with constant pressure for improvements and cost-reductions.

A task discourse, as opposed to the rhetoric of the company development discourse, created a working context whereby managers promoted themselves, and were judged on their ability to 'motivate' and 'deliver the goods'. How they did this was often open to question. The ramifications of not being able to do this seemed also to fly in the face of the simultaneous 'developmental discourse'. The managers in this inquiry indicated an absence of support from others to create suitable spaces for acknowledging the sense of 'not knowing'. The excessive pressure placed on individuals; the reluctance to involve others and communicate

decisions; the disjunction between espoused 'team' philosophy and, in reality, the lack of trust in managers; all of these suggested that managers' worth was not necessarily based on 'professional aptitude' or 'sense of vocation'. Managing is seen more as a singular activity, instrumental and rational carried out by the manager on others. This point is closely allied to Alvesson and Willmott's [1996, p.10] dichotomy of management being seen as mainly a technical activity, the employment of instrumental reason, as opposed to being intricately entwined in the social situation of the managing group. Just as Collings is 'up-front' as a presenter so the manager is no longer 'out of sight', allowing their ability to draw on and develop those around them. It has become vital to be seen to be LEADING from the front and taking the plaudits, the 'action man' of Castings, for example. Or, in my guise as the consultant, being party to and promoting the Continuous Improvement [CI] rhetoric within the company.

This is not a singular activity in its entirety. Others, the followers, witnessed this behaviour with its attendant values of 'at all costs' and '101% commitment', which did not seem to accord with the notions of the development discourse and the empowerment rhetorics of 'team' and 'support'. It appears to represent how work is done and how promotions are attained. It becomes 'the message'. Alternative meanings that could be mooted for this behaviour, and other ways of achieving the same business outcomes, become suffocated by the rhetoric.

Conrad [1999] explores this notion further:

'In the book that Collins writes for the series he proposes that art may offer a route to 'transcendent meanings'. That phrase never made it to the film...television is no longer in the business of purveying 'transcendence'. The epic series 'Civilisation' could not be made today, and that very fact establishes how uncivilised we have become'.

Could it not also be argued that within the organisations in this inquiry their businesses are not 'transcending' meaning - in relation to this inquiry transcendent means going beyond immediate experience of different forms of 'organising', 'managing', 'acting'. Rather, these organisations are characterised by a paring down of a range of meanings that are offered or can be created by employees - the 'lean management' already discussed [Harvey 2004]. Therefore, the ability to interpret situations that they experience day to day in different ways is becoming more and more difficult. This has real social, organisational and personal impact. For example, it becomes 'risky' to go out on a limb; confidence becomes usurped so they look to others to derive solutions; the pressure is still there to 'keep up' so employees resort to firefighting and the long hours syndrome.

So, just as the BBC wants to 'brain up' [Conrad 1999], the organisations in this inquiry seek through their rhetoric to constantly encourage creativity, thought and initiative. Yet, just as modern television cannot cope with deep thought so the organisations may have problems considering what is beyond their established norm – their legitimate thinking. In the television world it is the cult of the presenter that has put

a stop to this. In the case of the company it is the 'cult of the manager' that is equally powerful.

Morgan [1993] in his persuasive phrase of 'imaginization as personal empowerment' suggests that if individuals are committed to change and they act on it then that is the starting point for social movements.

Change, he argues, is an 'individual affair'. However, he underplays the notion of complexity in change. For example, this inquiry has shown the nature of empowerment rhetorics which individuals not only shape but also are shaped by. That by treating empowerment as purely an individualistic notion then the very nature of differing power relations shifting and shaping interaction is not given its due importance [Knights and Wilmott 2000]. Individuals, I contest, following the social constructionist notions of relationship offered earlier, do not exist in isolation, in a 'bubble', but are in *relation to* [Burr 1995]. These points in themselves contest the notion of becoming, in Morgan's terms, our own 'personal theorists'. McNamee and Gergen [1999] go further by stating that:

'Let us here distinguish selves from persons, viewing the former as constructions of relations and the latter as individual bodies.....given this distinction we can treat persons as the intersection of multiple relationships, local and immediate manifestations of relational histories.'

[McNamee and Gergen, 1999: p.22]

Social constructionism emphasises the process of relating as opposed to objects that interact. Certain actions therefore become viable and

understandable within certain relational forms. This is amply illustrated by the following discussion, which depicts an initiative in the Agency seeking to help managers 'deal with pressure'.

The 'Frontman' and the Agency

The Agency was a leading national advertising agency with offices in six cities in the UK. The author coached senior managers, together with designing interventions for encouraging reflective practice amongst creative and management teams. The London group mentioned in the following analysis was one of these teams.

What the companies in this inquiry did to try and arrest the situation, where managers are 'under pressure' to achieve and survive, is of particular interest. According to the participants in the inquiry, the companies failed to notice the individual and the context. Taking the Agency initiative, for example, noticing the down side of excessive workloads, absence and sickness and weekend working was one thing but deciding how to intervene to break this debilitating cycle was quite another. The Agency believed that it had 'dealt with' pressure through its stress management course. The latter had surfaced feelings and predicaments, offered action plans and the participants had returned to their workplace having experienced the facilities of the local Holiday Inn. Therefore, the meanings that may remain hidden behind individual stories of working lives are lost amongst the rigor and outcomes of the programmed intervention led by the 'Consultant' and 'HR': the 'frontmen'.

The ownership of the initiative is labelled as 'X's programme'- they promote it, delivering what the organisation believes to be required – in this way, it was decided by the managing director, the organisation 'looks after its people'. The manager, 'on the programme', is portrayed as the deficient one, not coping, needing assistance to become more robust. This was highlighted in discussion, quite wrongly, by some of the London group speculating that their deficiency was 'the real reason behind the inquiry group'. Empowerment here is being defined, using Willmott's phrase [1997], as 'false charity'. Charity because it:

'seeks to bestow the gift of greater discretion and involvement upon employees and false because it is motivated by a concern to enhance business performance and profitability rather than an attempt to improve the "structural inequalities" that make such gestures possible'. [p. 92-93].

In summary, the power of established meaning and norms of behaviour were powerful within the inquiry groups, whether Castings, Brewing or the Agency. These are reinforced and co-created by the 'cult of the manager'. Its not surprising, therefore, that the initiative designed to offset the negative consequences of such actions is also seen in this same piercing light.

The Frontman and Brewing

The large pub retailer was administering redundancy packages to a number of staff at its headquarters, some of whom the author had been

coaching in the past. They kept in contact and remarked on the difference they now felt towards their company and particularly those teams they had once led. The teamwork within the company had always been lauded as its trump-card over competitors and a great deal of financial investment had been put into induction programmes, as well as management development, incorporating outdoor centres and in-house training. One manager, Steve, on hearing of his redundancy, spoke of how he was now being treated by former team members. Steve said that others' reactions were interesting, even those of his own team who were staying in post. They passed him in the corridor without speaking, heads down.

' they treat you just like a casualty...they look at you in corridors with almost pain and anguish....its like a bereavement...not getting the invite for the meeting or being invited to an event for fear of "not wanting to upset you" '.

The most hurtful action though had been a working party, that he had been an active member of, not inviting him to attend future meetings. All of these instances became part of the same message - he was no longer going to take an active part in the company even though he still had three months of service to complete.

The relational form here is the exiting manager in relation to the survivors. The language of improved efficiency/productivity served to mute the voices of those who were affected by the change. This was compounded by the view expressed at a senior level that all of this had to

happen quickly and be 'carried through', with little time wasted on consultation. This filtered down to staff that remained as the need to 'get on with things'. Consequently, those being made redundant were of the past and not of the emergent future, as described by the new targets and organisational structures outlined by the firm's directors. Another manager, Carl, spoke of the survivor syndrome he observed amongst colleagues:

'Those who have made it through the 'carve-up'....almost demonstrate a newly acquired set of values and behaviours...its almost like the relief factor takes over...whilst they demonstrate the normal platitudes of sympathy one cannot help seeing the almost tangible relief that it is not them and that they have survived'.

All three companies were from the UK private sector. However, the author's recent work with clients in the public sector has brought attention to the need for different ways of working and organising. In order to fulfil the requirements of service level agreements and multi-agency practice in the fields of education, substance misuse and children's services, then the behaviours of managers and their seniors need to be different. However, the same 'frontmen' pervade this sector also. Such positions are rooted in the individual leading and being seen to lead, not always enabling a collaborative discourse of sharing information and joint-working. The sector is awash with talk of partnership working without recognising the need to determine what this actually means and how it might be developed. The performance culture, the author contends, which seeks to

micro-manage so many practices and attempts to measure narrow definitions of effectiveness, has only served to make managers more introspective and ramp-up the pressure to perform. Collaborative working is not served well by individual performance measures.

Alternative forms of working do exist. A manager of a large further education college commented on how seeing her role as *in conjunction with* peers in other faculties was so productive:

‘It has been great to feel that I can go to my equivalent in the other two faculties and share thoughts and concerns over what I am doing. It doesn’t feel like I am any less a manager because of this, I do the same for them....its like over the years you have a support mechanism, we are in different teams so there is no competition ..but there is someone there to talk to, and understand what is going on. We share good ideas and she recognises many of the bits of my job that make life difficult at times’

Such behaviours requires a shedding of individualistic notions and the embracing of mutuality; many managers are consequently struggling, lacking the facilitative skills and understanding of group process to be able to work with the complexity of the service context. To be fair, they often lack support, both from those senior to them and the size of the management development budget. A tough performance culture adds to the perception that ‘there isn’t time to do these things’. Yet, without consideration of the need for appraisal of partnership working, a

recognition of stages of development of such relationships, and attention to evaluation of process as well as task, then these 'frontmen' will continue to struggle.

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