



A REVIEW OF THEODORE TAPTIKLIS'S *Unmanaging: Opening Up The Organization To Its Own Unspoken Knowledge*

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A couple of years ago, David Boje and I started using the term “post-Newtonian” to refer to the worldview that has been emerging from many of the scientific breakthroughs of the 20th Century, most notably quantum mechanics, neurobiology, and complexity sciences (Boje & Baskin, 2010). Rather than the Newtonian deterministic world of distinct things, composed of “dead” matter, bumping into each other and behaving deterministically according to Universal Laws, the post-Newtonian world is one in which coherent energy storage phenomena interconnected at many levels of scale, respond to each other, causing systemic cascades of co-evolutionary change. Nobel Laureate in Physics Robert Laughlin (2005) has written about this as an “Emergent,” as opposed to the Newtonian “Reductionist,” worldview.

What I’ve since discovered is that, starting in the late 20th Century, a variety of thinkers began examining their subjects in a post-Newtonian manner. These pioneers, writing in the 1960s and 70s, included Eldredge and Gould, whose punctuated equilibria reframed the discussion of evolution (Gould, 2002); Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy in his dynamic family therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1985); and Gerhard Mensch and his cyclic theory of innovation and depression in economics (1979). More recently, work by such thinkers as Karen Barad (2007) in philosophy, Bruno Latour (1988; 2005) in sociology, and David Christian (2004) in history have pushed a post-Newtonian way of thinking further into the social sciences.

For readers of *E:CO*, a post-Newtonian understanding of organizations and how people in them interact is among the most valuable applications of this worldview. That understanding is still evolving—in Boje’s concepts of antenarrative (2001) and

the storytelling organization (2008); the work of Ralph Stacey (2001, for instance) and his school; or the concept of the quantum organization (see, for example, Kilmann, 2011), not to mention the many works applying complexity studies to organizations.

Four years ago, Theodore Taptiklis, now a Managing Partner at Storymaker Partners, published *Unmanaging: Opening up the Organization to its own Unspoken Knowledge*, one of the most intriguing foundational texts for examining the post-Newtonian organization. What makes this book unique is that it approaches the issue from three directions—personal, works of others, and a post-Newtonian application.

Conflict of interest warning: I've known and worked with Taptiklis since about 2006. I sincerely hope that hasn't prejudiced me against him.

Getting back to the book, in the first part, Taptiklis explores his personal journey leading to a non-traditional understanding of organizations. Beginning with McKinsey and Company in 1975, he was immersed in its linear, Newtonian approach to organizational problem solving. What he would discover in his six years with McKinsey was that the company's mechanical, one-size-fits-all approach didn't work. Taptiklis describes McKinsey's current vision this way: "Through truly heroic efforts of command and control, messy and complex human reality—where people struggle to establish ways to collaborate and to work towards common solutions—will be replaced by a perfectly tidy and efficient machine. . ." (33). Organizations, like life, he found, were simply too messy, and McKinsey's mechanical model ultimately trapped people in the past. He concludes this part of the book with a list of the principles that he discovered to replace McKinsey's Newtonian outlook.

The second part of the book examines a series of sources on which Taptiklis's approach—to begin "with who and what we are as human persons" and only then move to "what we can do and produce together" (72)—draws. In four chapters, he highlights the work of:

- Patricia Brenner and Hubert Dreyfus on how expertise depends on being immersed in a practice about which one cares
- John Shotter and Ludwig Wittgenstein on how we become what we are and take current action as part of a social context in which we participate and are emotionally, as well as intellectually, engaged
- David Boje and Mikhail Bakhtin on how we are continually building our realities through storytelling and how we can become imprisoned by those stories

- Ralph Stacey and Norbert Elias on how organizations are not “containers,” but collections of people in constant interaction with each other, where new response can emerge, especially to unexpected circumstances.

These thinkers “are all encouraging us towards a world in which we can move beyond the distracting fantasies, idealizations and isolating tendencies of our past,” and “put out collective energies and knowledge to work for all of the various purposes that galvanize us” (131). To run an organization this way, one must “unmanage,” encouraging the self-organization that expresses “the essence of organization as a moving conversation” (214).

The final part of the book Taptiklis describes a technique he uses to help people “imaginatively sense the pattern and feel the possibility for ourselves of movement towards a new perspective” (143). In his exercise, Taptiklis records a conversation among a group of participants and chooses an excerpt to play back for all those who were present. After that, he asks the group what they heard in the excerpt; discussion follows. Then, he plays the recorded piece a second time and asks for responses. This procedure is repeated again. I was present for one of his sessions (portions of which are in his book), and the process is surprisingly powerful. With each playback, people in the group are able to hear elements of the dialogue—emotional tone, personal responses, or buried intent—that had not been evident earlier. And because this is a group exercise, people can get the benefit of hearing the way other group members are responding.

Our conversations, it turns out, are deeper, more meaningful, and, perhaps, wiser than we generally realize, often informed by feelings and thoughts of which we may not be aware. There is, he notes in his conclusion, “a whole world of human communicative exchange and connection that is waiting to be noticed and taken account of in our dealings with others” (223). And, Taptiklis believes, tapping into that depth can help our organizations be more successfully “unmanaged.”

But as valuable as it is for those who want to “unmanage” their organizations, this book is perhaps even more valuable for those of us struggling on the journey to understand organizations in a post-Newtonian fashion, providing both summaries of some of the most provocative seminal thinkers and a vision of applying that thought. It is an excellent place to start, refresh or deepen one’s understanding on this long, not very well mapped journey.

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