K.E. Weick The Social Psychology of Organizing, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA., 1969

CONSIDERING MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS IN MANAGEMENT TERMS

Organization theory has often been stifled because it has worked on problems that managers thought were problems and has studied them using managerial concepts rather than psychological or sociological ones. The only way in which understanding can be advanced is if the symbols used by practitioners are removed, and the phenomena recast into language that has psychological or sociological meaning. For example, managers talk about line-staff relationships, span of control, the size of departments, cost-efficiency ratios, etc. This is managerial talk and it helps managers get on with their work of managing. But managerial talk carves up the world of the organization in a particular way. It isolates certain phenomena and certain implications. If a psychologist decides to develop empirical laws about "line-staff relationships" he already is at a disadvantage. He tacitly accepts the manager's definition of the problem *and* the relevant components. He takes the phenomenon that the manager points to and his way of pointing to it as the principal arena in which the search for relationships should be conducted. There is little chance that he can gain an understanding of the phenomenon psychologically, or build this understanding into a framework that will have broader relevance. All he can do is tack on selected psychological concepts to a problem with little psychological relevance. For example, a manager might observe that whenever his department contains more than 25 people, morale drops sharply. If a theorist takes this observation at face value, and then proceeds to develop a theory of the effects of size on morale, he is not likely to tell us anything of theoretical importance. The problem has been phrased in managerial, not psychological, terms. If instead of looking at gross changes in size, the investigator were to study the more basic psychological questions, such as what happens to people when they feel crowded, ignored, anonymous, on display, or unmonitored, then the chance of understanding the effects of size would improve. Linkages between size and morale would become more apparent because the psychologist would be exploring psychological states that mediate this effect; the resulting theory would be applicable to a wider variety of settings than those in which the manager operates (e.g., the psychologist could predict what would happen in husband-wife dyads when the husband felt crowded); and the psychologist would be in a better position to link his theory with other theories and move toward unification of knowledge (e.g., the theory might suggest that crowding is an instance of the more general phenomenon of approach-avoidance gradients; Schneirla, 1959). Note that all of these latter benefits can be realized only if the scientist remains faithful to and exploits his discipline's strengths. After all, he is equipped to do what the average layman cannot, namely, to conduct psychological or sociological analyses of everyday phenomena. He abandons most of his tools for doing such analyses if he accepts managerial problems phrased in managerial terms.

An interesting paradox arises. Most scientists want the knowledge they have obtained to be accepted by other people, to make a difference in their lives, and to improve the human condition in some way. They have every right to want this, because they may know something with greater certainty than anyone else does. But generating something acceptable and true is possible only if the scientist first *ignores* the everyday labels with which the phenomenon comes to him, and replaces these labels with symbols he can work with. Only if he does this can he discover truths that deserve acceptance. If the scientist is concerned with acceptability from the start, then the chance that he will produce anything acceptable in the long run is reduced. You have to destroy acceptability in order to produce it.

There is a growing awareness that working within the constraints of managerial language is a severe deterrent to understanding. Pugh makes the following assertion about industrial psychology:

> Their [those in the field of industrial psychology] overwhelming limitation is that almost without exception, they have defined their work in terms of management problems, not psychological ones, and this has turned them from scientists into applied scientists or technologists. . . . It is no criticism to be an applied scientist if there is some science to apply. But applied psychology is a contradiction in terms because there is yet no coherent body of acceptable theory and data which can be drawn upon and applied once we get beyond the level of learning of perceptual and motor skills.[1]

This same argument can also be found in Merton (1963), Krech's excerpt from a talk by Titchener (1968), and Heiskanen (1967).

SIZE AS A CONFOUNDED VARIABLE

Size, whether defined in terms of number of machines, people, relationships, or total output, is an obvious distinguishing property of collectivities, and numerous investigators have given it prominence in their theoretical formulations (e.g., Indik, 1963). However, in spite of the clear variation in size from collectivity to collectivity, it is not apparent that size is a meaningful point of departure to gain an understanding of organizations. In the literature on groups there is a running debate over questions such as "how many is small?", "when does small become large?", and "what is the crucial

[1]From D. S. Pugh, "Modern Organization Theory," *Psychological Bulletin, 66* (1966), p. 243. Reprinted by permission.