

From the Editor-in-Chief's Desk: Returning to the Quest for Critical Reflection

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Organisational members may often find themselves in tense, discomfoting or sensitive situations at work, without necessarily having the experience, knowledge or information they need to guide them to a successful outcome. Coping with such scenarios might perhaps involve rationalising their response in the name of economic imperatives. We know that organisational life is a place that has long been recognised to sustain these dominant, and often unhelpful, forms of reason and that such approaches can also operate to sideline particular groups of people (Cunliffe and Linstead 2009). For many employees, the uncritical and unthinking following of uncritical policies, procedures and practices may serve to create and foster ongoing tensions, including those which might also exacerbate associated experiences of pain and trauma for people at work. Unfortunately, we also know that the discomfort, grief, pain and loss that surrounds workers in organisations as they go about their work is often trivialised and poorly responded to (Frost 1999, 2003; Dutton 2003; Dutton *et al.* 2006; Vickers 2005, 2006, 2009).

So, what might we do to more positively and helpfully respond? When thinking about the inevitable tensions that face all of us in our workplaces, one approach might be to find ways to engender enhanced understanding via thought and reflection, while also offering ways to produce meaningful, critical insights into the problem(s) at hand (Gray 2007). Reflection is traditionally defined as the mirror image. The idea incorporates the modernist view that there is an original we can think about, categorize and explain. Reflection is a systematic thought process concerned with simplifying experience by searching for patterns, logic, and order (Cunliffe 2002). Reflections are also a critical means to engage organisational actors in the process of challenging unexamined assumptions so that they can become receptive to alternative representations of meaning and experience, including new ways of thinking and behaving (Raelin 2001; Gray 2007). When organisational actors start to critically reflect on their own or another's experiences, that process will—on its own—provide insight into those behaviours, ideally resulting in more reasoned, sensitive and sensible responses. Reflections like these can be a useful bridge between experience and learning, and crucially should involve both thoughts and feelings (Boud *et al.* 1985; Gray 2007).

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Learning by organisational members can also be enhanced by proactive critical reflection, through this surfacing and critiquing of tacit or taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs (Gray 2007)—even when we learn that those assumptions and beliefs, and those of others, might be less than ideal. The best way to respond reasonably and positively is to know what we are dealing with; what we and those around us are thinking, assuming, judging, valuing and, ultimately, acting upon. Conversely, it is wise to note that non-learning can also take place if the reaction to such reflections produces a reaction of mental or physical discomfort that is so strong that it hinders, rather than helps, that critical reflection (Gray 2007).

Facilitating this kind of learning within the organisational context can also accrue from the use of reflective journaling, and the facilitation of reflective dialogues (See Boud *et al.* 1985; Argyris 1990; Schon 1991; Gray 2007; Cunliffe 2002, 2009; Cunliffe and Linstead 2009; Ramsey 2005). A reflective journal is a personal and unstructured product of reflective writing (Bolton 2001; Gray 2007) and, as such, might contain descriptions of work-related problems or dilemmas. However, a reflective journal is more than just a log of events; it should also contain reference to specific events that have taken place, as well as the associated hopes, fears, memories and ideas that inevitably emerge during these critical reflections (Gray 2007). A reflective journal might also contain useful thoughts and responses specifically pertaining to practice, especially those that have emerged from this critical and reflective process (Gray 2007).

Reflective journals can be undertaken by anyone, at pretty much any time, and will most likely be done differently by different individual organisational members (Bolton 2001; Gray 2007). Different audiences and different narrators reference different endpoints and outcomes, rendering different sense-making actions and responses (Ramsey 2005). It is perfectly possible for a narrative (such as a reflective journal) to have multiple themes and endings for the different characters that might be represented (Ramsey 2005). Encouraging organisational members to write their own reflective journals will enable them to examine and reflect upon their own reactions and possible discomfort in a non-threatening forum. It will also assist them in learning the limits of their knowledge, what their experiences and thoughts with regard to their colleagues might be, and their likely actions and reactions in response to the circumstances presented. This is learning that will enable organisational actors to move towards more considered responses by vivifying and exposing potential conflicts, stereotypes, uninformed reactions and flawed assumptions, and responding accordingly.

A further valuable outcome of reflective journals is that subsequent discussion of their content may offer yet another avenue to enable organisational members to raise issues of concern in a non-threatening context. Asking organisational members to think about who, what, where and why other actors might be involved in, or responsible for, a particular incident or outcome, and what their stake in and perspective on the situation might be, is a useful starting point for subsequent discussion and learning. Talking about things provides a means to learn from and engage in critical reflection. Dialogue has recently been recognised to lie at the core of organisational learning. Without dialogue, individuals and groups cannot effectively exchange ideas, nor can they develop shared understanding (Mazutis and Slawinski 2008). Reflective dialogues provide organisational members with the opportunity to critically examine the underlying assumptions behind their thinking, making assumptions and mental models (flawed and otherwise) visible enabling more collaborative and positive responses to commence. Reflective conversations also constitute reflection-in-action (Schon 1991) with such conversations being recognised and valued as being potentially unique and uncertain (Gray 2007). Critical reflection and discussion of unveiled assumptions and mental models also allows for the emergence of new or re-shaped mental models (Gray

2007) which may then assist in enabling the offering of a more informed and helpful response. Remember also that reflection is chiefly a modernist activity where actors try and make sense of and reflect upon their circumstances, while trying to find a solution. If organisational learning is fundamentally a process of change and reconciliation of difference that requires individuals being open to new ideas (Mazutis and Slawinski 2008), then finding ways to expose other truths and other perspectives is a crucial quest for those of us who seek better ways of being and doing in organisational life. A word of caution though: without these discussions being *authentic* dialogues—that is, dialogue that is transparent, open, honest, and subject to public reflection—organisational learning cannot take place (Mazutis and Slawinski 2008; my emphasis).

Organisations still frequently operate with a culture of competition and win/lose dynamics where individuals tend to avoid or distance themselves from organisational difficulties, and certainly refrain from writing or speaking about them publically, perhaps because they fear losing control over the situation, or punitive organisational response. Such organisational dynamics are characterised by defensiveness, conflict-avoidance, and self-protection (Mazutis and Slawinski 2008). Critical management theorists have, for decades, focused on the problems created by these and other unhelpful systems of power relations and modes of domination that contribute to such workspaces, offering arguments and theory intended to move organisations away from routinised avoidance and defence, towards becoming more democratic, humanistic, emancipatory and socially responsible (see, for examples, Cunliffe and Linstead 2009; Box 2005; Clegg 1989; Clegg and Dunkerley 1980; Foucault 1977; Marcuse 1964). If we are to usefully respond to the continuing tensions and challenges of employee and employer rights and responsibilities, we must remind ourselves of the value of the quest for critical thought and critical reflection, and how useful it might be. I challenge you to return to this modernist quest for critical reflection. I welcome manuscripts whose creators have chosen to return to this task, as well as those of you who might wish to grow a special issue around these ideas, or any others, that will assist in contemplating and working with ideas and learning that might engender better workplaces. I look forward to hearing from you. Please enjoy the September Issue.

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