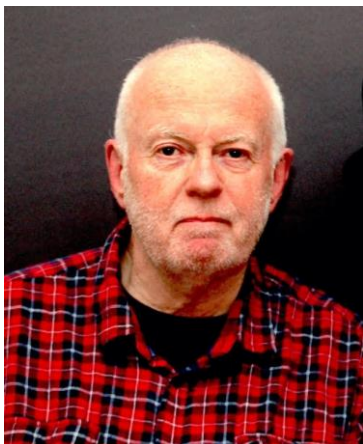


Three ways to manage

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Over the last 130 years or so there has been a burgeoning movement of those less enamoured with the fervour of the Enlightenment – the idea that scientific realism exhausts our ways of talking about our material and social reality. That we have come to believe that science has discovered nature's very own language de-authorises other stories. There is no room for them. Scientific realism has tended to name our observations and experience of the world as if we are using reality's correct words and grammatical sentences – and that we are content to assume that our use of language is somehow non-human. It has led to a view that has elevated 'humankind' above a natural world deemed to be 'other' than ourselves – a world populated with entities, things we have *in-formed* and named. So sure have we been about our god-like sense of universal objectivity that we haven't been noticing the effects of what we have been doing to our environment, to other life-forms and to the material planet.

People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does.

(Michel Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p187)

However the planet is forcefully telling us that we are not separate from her and do not stand above her. The sense that human actions are merely discrete, acultural observations seems to be increasingly, ironically, unrealistic, a little too masculine and certainly unsustainable. We are learning that we, and the 'things' we have named in the world, are more usefully characterised as snapshots, stills in the movie, the ongoing flow of generative processes. Selves, society and, if we take anything from quantum physics, the material world itself are composed of dynamic relationships over space and time rather than fixed, discovered things.

From a determinate world of separate things to an indeterminate world of inseparable flowing processes.

(John Shotter, 2013, p 31)

This shift is reflected in the sentiment 'from ego to eco'. It reflects a concern that we need to give much more attention to a relational sensibility - '*knowing what we do does*'. It is, though, a sensibility not solely confined to our awareness of climate change and environmental desecration – it applies equally to our participation and sense of the social world. We do not discover the social world somehow existing independently of us so much as we actively generate and reproduce it through relationships – our cultural ecologies. These ecologies are not confined to human actors but include and participate the world around us - other life forms, human artefacts and the material world (Blanter, 2021 – this issue). From this sensibility all our knowings, and actions predicated upon them, are political and, in noticing 'what we do does', we are invited to be more aware of who or what is better or worse off – other people, other species, the planet, the landscape etc. etc. It is what Richard Rorty (1991, p 21) recognised as the shift from universal objectivity to solidarity. From 'ego to eco', then, also recognises that we can no longer claim moral authority for our beliefs and actions because they are 'true' (in the abstract) – but rather because we take responsibility for what they generate – what they make happen – a view long held by the American Pragmatists.

Here is an example of a particular situation in a manufacturing organisation. It's offered as a practical way of recognising how we might go on – including how we might manage – from three world views and their successive social era.

Here are three different ways of managing the same event(s) - or perhaps we might say, solving a problem. They reflect and illustrate three different ontological stances. Stances 1 & 2 reflect the philosophy of Realism – single storylines fixed by the manager (the more powerful in the exchange) of the 'other' being 'less than' ideal – in deficit. Stance 3 reflects a poststructural or relational ontology. It rejects the idea that hierarchy is natural and unaccountable for dominating others (othering) and recognises that others' accounts of events are equally legitimate and valuable. Behaviour and identity in this latter view are the product of the dynamics of context, including power– a political ecology.

The first [Stance 1] is from the frame of 'command and control' - where the manager sites 'the problem' as residing within her subordinate Neils. The unadorned rational expectation is that Neils should 'get it right' regardless of the circumstances or any issues Neils is contending with (e.g. being unwell, anxious or distracted). Deviation from desired or expected behaviour can easily be viewed as incompetence or trouble-making. The need for discipline is not an unusual *remedial* approach. Sometimes 'training' is insisted upon as a disciplinary device.

The second example [Stance 2] still positions the problem as an individual failing but is mitigated by recognition of the individual's humanness. This is the frame of 'hearts and minds' (humanism) - that is, an approach to managing and organising that recognises we are all vulnerable, can make mistakes and can be affected, psychologically and emotionally, by the circumstances we experience. People are viewed as generally well-meaning and competent and are recognised as 'being human'. A remedial approach may be characterised by inquiry into Neils' circumstances so as to establish an understanding of the impediments to a better performance and possibly the offer of support. Even so, Neils' behaviour is still cast as in deficit to an ideal and a problem to be overcome.

The third example [Stance 3] is from the frame of ‘dialogue’ or ‘co-production’ and a relational, posthumanist ecology. That is, there is a recognition that the ‘situation’ - the context is shaping the actor’s behaviour. (e.g. the ‘system’, the unspoken expectations, the unchallenged cultural practices, rituals, habits and taken-for-granted ways, ways of talking and non-human actors – like production lines, machines, recording technologies etc. etc. etc). Rather than ‘every dog has his day’ it’s more ‘every day has his dog!’ ‘The problem’ is located in the situation – and the individuals are part of, not separate from, the situation. More, *the manager has the choice to not frame it as a problem*. The approach is not remedial but rather a joint inquiry into how ‘**we** can do things better’ including an examination of systems and procedures, the contribution of non-human actors, how we talk to each other, how we engage cooperatively with each other, what feelings are evoked, what ideas we both/all have for creating better and more helpful conditions. More attention is given to the micro-composition of context, of events and what they make happen and the style of exchange is less authoritative and, rather, more mutually exploratory and invitational. The notion of ‘the ideal’, rather than being deployed as an expression of a (weaponised?) universal reality, is recast as shared imagination to be explored and that requires cooperation for its real-isation.

The event

The [human] actors are Niels and his manager.

This story takes place on the shop floor of an electrical engineering company (they manufacture electronic units for controlling the temperature of mobile phone mast installations). The Manager is trying to track down a recently issued worksheet which will have the effect of changing a procedure for dealing with defective parts cropping up at a critical point in the assembly line (non-human actor - ‘NHA’). She has approached Niels (the Quality Assistant) and asked him if the Worksheet (another NHA) has been taken to the Production Department. Niels, having had previous difficulties with our Manager, is hesitant and counter-inquisitive.

Here we explore the Manager’s encounter with Niels from the point of view of the 3 stances (above). It is assumed that the Manager is institutionally more powerful than Niels.

Stance 1

[focus: the problem created by the gap between the observed behaviour and the desired behaviour]

Manager:	Ah, Niels..., when I asked you about the Worksheet this morning you were less than helpful. I wanted a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. It’s really important that we can communicate well on the shop floor and I would be much happier if you could give me direct answers to my questions. Can you make sure that you can do that in future?
Niels:	Err....., well....
Manager:	...can you?
Niels:	...err, yes.
Manager:	Good, I appreciate that. I’d like to be reassured that you are trying to be helpful.

Stance 2

[focus: the 'problem' behaviour and the way this might be understood through the individual's motivation, feelings and 'psychology' – the 'whole person']

Manager:	Ah, Niels ..., I asked you about the Worksheet this morning we seemed to have some difficulty. Do you agree?
Niels:	... err, I suppose so, yes.
Manager:	Well I came back to let you know that I reacted negatively to what you said – well the whole tone of our conversation actually. The effect it had on me was that I thought you were being deliberately unhelpful and I wanted to check if that was right. How do you feel about it?
Niels:	... I can see how you might have thought that. I wasn't trying to be unhelpful but I was uncertain about what was going on and what you really wanted. I think my uncertainty might have looked like I was being awkward.
Manager:	What was your uncertainty about?
Niels:	... well there's a bit of history between us and I felt defensive because I think you've blamed me before for something that wasn't my fault. It's not straightforward because I also have to do what Jan asks me and he sees things differently from you.
Manager:	I'd like to know more – do you think we can talk about it Niels?

Stance 3

[Focus: No 'problem people' – only difference. Joint enquiry into the context, the conditions and how things can jointly be made better for mutual purposes. Known as '**Feedforward**' rather than feedback]

Manager:	Ah, Niels ..., I managed to locate the worksheet that I asked you about this morning though of course it did take me rather a long time. When we talked I got the impression that it wasn't easy for you – am I right?
Niels:	Yes you are right – thanks for asking.
Manager:	I'd be very interested in talking to you about how we can keep track of Worksheets and know where they are at any one time. Would this be of interest to you?
Niels:	Well I think so – because I'm involved in distributing them and people think I should always know where they are and what's happened to them – but people don't give me that information even though I ask. Actually, no-one even tells me what they are for!
Manager:	That's interesting. I assumed you knew all this. If we were to put our heads together to come up with a better system, would you be up for that?
Niels:	Yes, absolutely.

Manager:	Good. What kinds of issues do you think are involved?
Niels:	... well, like I said, it would be helpful to know what they are for, where they are at any time and who is doing what. I also think that Jan (Head of Quality) doesn't really know how they work – but don't tell him I said that.
Manager:	OK Niels, that's helpful. If you give me a couple of times this week when you could make a short meeting, I'll talk to all the others. Who do you think is involved? Thanks for your insight about Jan – I hadn't thought of that and I won't repeat what you said.

“The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots are all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead.”

(William James, 1890, pp. 255–256, quoted by John Shotter, 2013 p40)

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About Chris

Chris is an independent researcher and practitioner specialising in 'organisational change and learning'. He has a particular interest in participative approaches to organising and has developed many practical methods for effective and swift, inclusive and sustainable decision-making (*'people support what they create'*). These methods are informed by foregrounding local inquiry and an increased sensitivity to the effects of joint and several action – for example participatory action research and dialogic practices.

After 30+ years' experience of working in a variety of public sector and commercial organisations Chris has noticed that many, maybe most, organisations tend to promote discipline and control at the expense of curiosity and inquiry – quite often to their detriment. Informed by this experience Chris has, latterly, become interested in the politics of organising, the effects on employees and the role of organisations in propagating cultural norms in society at large.

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A note about AMED

Sadly, so far, nobody has expressed a willingness to take over from the outgoing AMED Council. So in the circumstances, the EGM on 26 May is likely to confirm that AMED will finally cease to operate as an educational charity by the end of 2022 at the latest.



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

Through AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover at a significant discount, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations to generate synergy and critical mass for change. www.amed.org.uk, or contact **Linda Williams**, our Membership Administrator, E: amedoffice@amed.org.uk, T: 0300 365 1247