Neofeudalism and surveillance in coaching supervision and mentoring?

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Globalisation has brought us 'neofeudalism', a society where power over the many is held by a few (Shearing, 2001). This is driven by rules and an assumption of compliance and therefore, control. Arguably the modern workplace seeks control through surveillance processes to extract compliance - i.e. appraisal and PDRs, performance management, 360° feedback and perhaps coaching (Nielsen & Nørreklit, 2009).

Professional bodies claim that supervision, as one of their rules, reassures potential clients or sponsors and ensures quality control. Is this a form of neofeudalistic surveillance? With coaching and mentoring's roots in person centred humanism, is there a paradox? If so, how can we move forward?

Keywords

Coaching, mentoring, supervision, neofeudalism, surveillance, control, professionalism, professionalisation, business, ethics, future, change, society

Introduction

One way of understanding human activity is through a close examination of the language employed within social groups. It is fairly easy to dismiss a study of language as simply semantics or playing with words. However, as Fairclough (1992:23) states:

> *'Linguistic phenomena are social in the sense that whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects.'*

It is the 'social effects' that are of interest here because, as Webster (1980:206) states: *'Language is the primary motor of a culture'*. This means that cultures are shaped by the language that is used within them. It is also important to appreciate that language is often attached to power positions and it can be used to shape and organise and extract certain behaviours. For example, the language of management employs codes in redundancy situations to minimise the human impact - 'downsize', 'right size' or 'let someone go', or in the military, with terms like 'collateral damage', 'insurgents' or enemy soldiers as 'targets', people become dehumanised (Bauman, 1989). It is the persistent and regular use of these codes which creates a discourse; a collection of codes which express certain meanings, and these meanings become a dominating discourse that shapes human behaviour.

Change discourse as social engineering?

One such discourse found in management is the discourse of change. Many argue that the pace of change has accelerated and slogans abound in this change discourse that 'change is the only constant' (a curious oxymoron!) or more sinister 'change, change or be changed'. Certainly, it could be argued that technological advances and political initiatives changed the lives of individuals and organisations. It has brought an increase in competition, for example, and the pressures for people to perform has created the need for people who are able to be innovative and creative, be flexible and adaptive, to learn quickly and apply their knowledge to a range of situations. This has brought both challenge and opportunity.

It could also be argued that the change discourse is simply a way to add pressure on people - to manipulate people and scare them into compliance. In this sense, the change discourse becomes a piece of social engineering aimed at achieving control and giving increased power to the owners of the discourse.

Neofeudalism

Shearing (2001) argues that this discourse is a function of globalisation and has brought us corporatised 'neofeudalism'. Rather like the Barons of medieval times, those who control the discourse create localised 'fiefdoms' in which rules are enforced and powerbases established. The Barons go for a land grab and we have the new 21st century leadership model – the powerful and greedy model of leadership. Lasch (1995) described these new elites in the global economy as having abdicated fundamental social or political responsibility within the societies they inhabit. They have dubious loyalties and temporarily commit to the highest bidder. These leaders hold the power and control dominant discourse in their influence on governments and social and economic policy. They threaten to 'leave' the country if government doesn't pander to them and they call for deregulation and freedom at the same time as imposing greater regulation of those they control (Saul, 1997).

It is no accident, for example, that in the UK we now have a distinction between the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor' and, I quote the current UK Prime Minister when he talks of 'hardworking families', the subtext being the rest are not! No mention of the few who control what goes on and the ever widening poverty gap! This is all part of a dominating and controlling discourse.

In the workplace the controlling and neofeudalistic discourse seeps through into the increasing employment of normative frameworks or rules and surveillance in the form of appraisal systems, performance management systems, 360◦ feedback, the use of psychometrics, target setting, zero hours contracting and performance related pay. 'Scientific' method applied to organisational life has become a dominant preoccupation of neofeudalistic managers.

Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching (see Nielsen & Nørreklit, 2009) and mentoring (see Carden, 1990) are not immune from all this and they too could be viewed as instruments of surveillance, aimed at extracting compliance under the discourse of learning, 'risk' reduction or performance improvement. With the advent of numerous professional bodies, we have seen an increase in the neofeudalistic tendencies applied to the coaching world in particular and, in the case of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), mentoring.

Coaching

In the coaching world, for example, the sloganising of the expression 'the wild west of coaching' has generated a particular and strong discourse aimed are justifying professionalisation or perhaps the establishment of a baronial power base?

Warren Bennis, the US academic, stated in an article by Morris & Tarpley (2000*) 'I'm concerned about unlicensed people doing this.'* This was probably the first piece to raise publicly concerns about standards in coaching practice. The article suggested that there was a 'wild west of coaching' and the meaning was not intended to imply that there was much energy, a pioneering spirit and a creative and exciting time, but rather an out of-control and chaotic state.

This term seems to have gathered momentum within the coaching world on both sides of the Atlantic and was exemplified in an article by Stratford Sherman and Alyssa Freas called *'The Wild West of Executive Coaching'* in 2004. This negative discourse has been acted upon by some professional bodies to strengthen their claim for their own existence and to set themselves above the 'wild west' in order to make themselves attractive and civilised!

Arguably then this slogan has been used by professional bodies to create competence frameworks, training, accreditation, ethical codes, standards and supervision (borrowed from therapy), all justified in terms of *'it's what our members want'* and *'it's what the market demands'*.

Are members and the 'market' reflecting the same neofeudalistic discourse that gives rise to the codes?

Whatever the case, the result is paternalistic authority where the rights of individuals are side-lined *'under the guise of business ethics…'* (Schwartz, 2000:175), standards and safety. The International Coaching Federation, for example, gives itself *'...sole discretion'* in these affairs – a baronial arbitrator?

Mentoring

Despite the EMCC's laudable efforts to include it in their thinking, the case in the mentoring world is different. Mentoring is often a voluntary activity in organisations. If payment is involved, it is normally nominal or in kind. There are some who present themselves as professional mentors but this is nowhere near the extent to which coaches claim professional status. Additionally, whilst the coaching world has obsessed itself with professionalisation, mentoring comes from a different place. It grew rapidly through social mentoring schemes aimed at tackling deeply engrained social problems in both the US and UK. It has been employed latterly as a vehicle for talent development and as such is more akin to the idea of internal organisational coaching and is not so touched by the drive for professionalisation. Rather, it is underpinned by voluntarism.

Surveillance

Foucault, (1995:202-203) stated

> *'He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.'*

In essence, if a person believes that they are being watched, they will be complicit in their own compliance to the power and influence of the 'watchers'. This needn't be a bad thing. However, it cannot be denied that organisations extract compliance from their members and indeed the discourse of this particular brand of capitalism justifies this. Indeed, some may think this is a good thing. But Foucault argues that the tactics of power in capitalist societies have three criteria:

1. 'Obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost
2. Bring the effects of this social power to their maximum intensity and to extend them as far as possible, without either failure or interval
3. Link this 'economic' growth of power with the output of the apparatuses (rules and codes) used in a social group' (summarised from Foucault, 1995: 218)

In short, he is saying that its purpose is to increase both the docility and the utility of all elements of the system. This seems rather sinister and self-serving, especially to those of us who value our freedom

The economist Will Hutton (2011) argues that British capitalism in its current form has created huge inequalities. The alternative is what he calls 'good capitalism', where risk is shared and 'good' behaviours are rewarded – 'good' is not the same as 'compliant'. The test applied here is the wider societal good.

Supervision

In the mentoring world, Barrett (2002: 279) argues that supervision is a *'processes that occur(s) between mentor and mentee during an interaction'*. In coaching, Bluckert (2006: 109) suggests that coaching supervision is a *'time and place to reflect on one's work either with a senior colleague, in a led group, or with a number of peers'* in order *'to make greater sense of difficult and complex work assignments and to gain more clarity going forward*'.

Clearly these are different models. The first is offering a model of embededness in practice and interaction with in the relationship; the second offers an external, hierarchical and separate model with the purpose of development.

As raised earlier, mentoring is not driven by a professionalisation agenda. That is not to say that mentors would not benefit from developmental activity, and indeed this is often the form 'supervision' takes in organisations. It is important to note that it is rarely called supervision in the mentoring world and it is mostly aimed at sharing practice, developing skills, processes and collective problem solving.

However, in respect of coaching, Hawkins and Shohet (2006) acknowledge that many discourses, for example, psychotherapy, counselling, education, social work and management, inform the theory and practice of 'supervision'.

Professional coaching bodies seem to have latched on to a particular discourse – that of the 'wild west'.

The 'wild west' discourse of professionalisation

Elsewhere, I have argued (Garvey, 2011) that 'wild west' discourse is a driving force behind professionalisation and this has led to the establishment of professional body powerbases – civilised people in and 'wild west' people out! This is a very serious point. When a discourse dominates within a social group, its members cease to challenge or question. They can become blind to alternative perspectives and

critical thought is curtailed. This stops development and ironically, is counter to the whole philosophy of both coaching and mentoring, which are supposed to be about the development of new and creative thought. This development certainty is dangerous!

Bertrand Russell is credited with saying, *'…..the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt [……] Everything is vague to a degree you do not realize till you have tried to make it precise.'* As the illustration below shows, the professionalisation discourse is moving down the 'precise route' and appears relentlessly intolerant of complexity. This is a neofeudalistic discourse.

To illustrate this neofeudalistic tendency, supervision is a requirement of membership among many coaching professional bodies. It is also supported in its implementation by punitive and excluding rules – if you don't comply, you can't belong!

To take an example, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council's code of ethics requires that all members have regular supervision. It is interesting to note that if mentors take the Barrett approach outlined above, they will be in supervision every time they mentor! The EMCC code includes mentors despite the differences in context and practice outlined above. It describes supervision as follows:

> *'Normative – the supervisor accepts (or more accurately shares with the supervisee) responsibility for ensuring that the supervisee's work is professional and ethical, operating within whatever codes, laws and organisational norms apply:*
>
> *Formative – the supervisor acts to provide feedback or direction that will enable the supervisee to develop the skills, theoretical knowledge, personal attributes and so on that will mean the supervisee becomes an increasingly competent practitioner*
>
> *Supportive (Proctor calls this restorative) – the supervisor is there to listen, support, confront the supervisee when the inevitable personal issues, doubts and insecurities arise – and when client issues are 'picked up' by the supervisee.' (EMCC.org website)*

If we take a discourse analysis perspective on this statement it becomes possible to extract other meaning from what might seemingly be innocent statements written with good intent.

The normative element

The first element - Normative – could be viewed as a discourse of compliance with elements of quality assurance. Supposing those norms or codes are fundamentally unethical? The organisational norms within the banking industry prior to the 2008 financial collapse actually specified high risk taking as a norm, for example:

> *'Take courageous decisions even when they may result in criticism and unpopularity; Generate radical solutions which shape our overall direction; Cut through any irrelevancies or distractions to keep a focus on the strategic issues; Communicate strategic imperatives with complete conviction and passion; Take direct responsibility for turning an idea into a profitable finished product (an intrapreneurial spirit); Influence external stakeholders to gain total buy-in to strategic direction'*
>
> (source: HBOS Leadership Competence Framework)

These are all higher level competent descriptors found in HBOS's Leadership Competence framework. All seemed perfectly acceptable before the crash but now seem overly focused on taking high risks. Normative discourse, then, could also be a form of monitoring, or, as defined above, of surveillance, and therefore an element of neofeudalistic control.

The formative element

The second element - Formative - suggests that supervision is for learning and development purposes, and highlights the notion of continuous professional development (CPD). This, in itself, offers much potential for good. However, it could be argued that the supervisor is placed in a power position because he or she is empowered with a superior ability to give 'feedback' or pass judgement. This element also adopts the 'CPD is good for you' mantra and it provides an instrument in its formative assumption to monitor and make decisions about inclusion or exclusion based on a view of who or what is competent. Clearly, 'competent' is defined by the professional body and this itself is a power discourse which controls what is learned and how behaviour is valued. Similar to the HBOS framework, this encourages and specifies what is 'good' behaviour and what is not. This element has also spawned courses to make sure that supervision is done right! Additionally, only certain (accredited) people can offer CPD, thus an 'in' and 'out' group is established. It is also the case that frameworks of competence are often built on the same research base which in turn is produced by dominant players. These are all elements of neofeudalistic control.

The supportive element

The third element – Supportive – is loaded with assumptions about learning. First, the supervisor is invited to 'confront', perhaps with his or her superior knowledge. Thus a 'deficit model of learning' is established – based on an assumption that supervisees need 'putting right'. Further power is attributed to the supervisor by the assumption that it is inevitable that the supervisee will have 'personal issues, doubts and insecurities' and that the supervisor is obviously highly skilled (perhaps due to their training) and imbued with superior insight to assist with these debilitating incompetencies. Here the supervisor becomes the neofeudalistic baron.

New thinking is needed!

> *'the old frameworks for thinking about the global order of our lives, its political fracture lines, religious and ideological diversity and its sustainability in environmental terms, are all shown to be inadequate.' (Garvey & Williamson, 2002:194)*

In a world dominated by the managerialist discourse of rational pragmatism (Johnson & Duberley, 2000) is coaching, and to some extent, mentoring simply joining the mob? Are they really offering something different?

I think that coaching and mentoring could offer a different discourse to all that 'old management stuff' which has done nothing but divide societies and make the gaps between the rich and the poor wider and has generated conflict around the globe.

Many argue that coaching and mentoring are rooted in person centred and humanistic principles. Humanism is about an ethical and democratic way of being. It is about individuals having the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It recognises the human potential to act in an ethical way to build

a more humane society through a sense of free inquiry and the infinite capacity for people to learn and develop. It is an inclusive philosophy.

Ultimately, humanism is all about the challenge of diversity and this challenge is a huge one for humankind. If we can't learn to be tolerant and accepting of 'the other', if we constantly position and establish an excluding powerbase by subjugating ourselves, there is no hope for humanity. We will simply slug it out – Wild West style – until the last of us is left standing.

By embracing humanistic diversity, neofeudalistic power bases break down. This genuine alternative discourse of coaching and mentoring offers opportunities to move us forward to a new diverse future. The question is are we really up for it or would we prefer to *'stroll quietly along the pavement and obey the law'?* (from 'Demian' by Hermann Hesse).

Are you up for the challenge?

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