

PEOPLEGRAM VS ORGANIZATION CHART: THE NEW  
MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

*TECHNEIN AT WORK OUT OF WORK*

Philosophers have always tried to explain the world, and that's their duty. Sometimes they have also tried to direct human life, and that's a worrisome extra task they are not paid for. But with just that in mind, they have looked at the hard sciences in order to borrow methods and models. The final result should have been a universal *technēin*. This is a "reasoning without reason", in the words of Jurgen Habermas, that is a reasoning producing a set of relations embodied in a model, system or better, machinery that is made up of either material or human forces. Let us think only of Marxism and laissez-faire economism as practical expressions of Determinism and Positivism.

Politics, economics and labour management are nowadays the fields where a philosophically rooted *technēin* has found the greatest application. This is today spread through the cultural world by the media industry and through the ethical field in the form of the business ethic, whereby both business and ethics are to be mechanically regulated, the first through the laws of the market, the second through a reward-punishment mechanism. Some totalitarian social systems formally aimed at people's welfare and even happiness have eventually grown to be a modern thralldom either in the form of a police state or in that of the consumer society. According to the philosophical views that embody these models, personal choice must be reduced to a minimum, every choice being a source of possible error or, better put, mismanagement.

The contemporary production system has mostly conformed to this model. As a matter of fact, it has adopted a form of strict organization where machines and individuals have a predetermined place, function and field of action, both to be directed according to an external, predetermined design. Within such an organization, individuals assigned to jobs are *organa*, that is, instrumental parts in a productive machine. This production structure is an *organization* and people working within it embody an *organization chart*, which has a logic of its own: a logic where *persons* are *organa* which, according to the Greek *ethymon*, means *implements*, firm or farm-implements.

This system is no longer working. The high cost of actual machinery, a customer orientation and the resulting emphasis on service over production,

together with the spur toward total quality, require that people at work exploit all their capacities, not only mental but even sentimental. These are capacities which are out of the reach of machines and of every sort of machinery.

Instrumental reason is going to collapse under its own weight, beginning just where it has had its greatest and most effective application. *Therefore, the time has come for passing from organization to the personalization of work systems.*

#### TECHNOLOGY FOR EVERYBODY

Three factors have determined the long-term positive trend of the advanced economies: the standardization of products for reasons of mere convenience, the minimization of transportation costs, and the affirmation, at first within firms only and eventually between firms and their ambience, of a logistic culture.

Let's consider the first one of these trivializations.

Technological devices are the result, as everything else, of labour division.

There are people whose work is inventing things, and there are also major research institutions and macro-companies that produce new technologies. The global result is a massive production of inventions and prototypes that need to enter the market, a production that then obeys market laws. Nevertheless, unlike what the preachers of the free market believe, marketing does not operate automatically for the welfare of companies, consumers, and human beings. Nor does it always operate for the maximization of profit. It rather aims at short-term benefits that do not require too much trouble.

Many brilliant solutions, all of them being socially useful, technologically possible and economically sound and profitable, could be fully adopted, but not in the short run. They then remain unnoticed just because managers seek to avoid greater complications in their plans.

Industrial production is still largely "Fordist": it prefers simplicity and, sometimes, it falls into simple-mindedness.

The first example that comes to my mind is one I am usually a victim of. It is the aircraft mobile-boarding ramp that is not equipped to link with both doors of the aircraft. A second example is the dispute over the "pull-and-press tab" on soda cans, that is, the ring you pull and press back onto a soft drink can (23 billions cans of this kind circulate in Italy every year). It is totally unhygienic. As they say, if the can is clean, then the user's finger is not. Nor is it sufficient to add a "hide-cap", that is, a plastic cap that covers the sterilized can. You just need to have a tab that does not get into the beverage.

There are dozens of patents for this, the best one is an Italian one – the *rimansicura* has been rejected by all companies, Coca-Cola included, for two

main reasons: factories would have to be converted, and so far that is legally not required. A third more substantial reason is that no direct relation can be established between infections and today's type of cans.

My conclusion: there is in the world today a surplus of technology compared with the will and capacity to apply it. If a technology is easily applicable, everybody applies it, and if it is not, once it is applied, it is immediately copied. Therefore, if you want to reach differentiated margins of productivity, you must aim at something else.

As a matter of fact, an entire area is basically left unattended and unexplored: that is people, whom, as somebody has said, we will soon do without, and that even before we ever learn how to use them just the way they are and not as machines or Taylorized monkeys.

#### A RESERVE OF PRODUCTIVITY

"It's People, Stupid", was the title of an article in *The Economist*, talking about the rush for cutting employees or managers.

"It's modernization", they say with false empathy, before granting incentives for resigning which only losers can refuse, those who have no alternative. Then they hire young people who while they do cost less, also produce much less. That is what several daily newspapers are currently experiencing: they've "modernized," that is they have mechanized the process, forgetting, however, that if you want to make a good quality newspaper, capable of facing the overwhelming power of TV, you need experienced people who know their job well, hence people of a certain age: people who have just what a newspaper primarily needs – knowledge as input, information as output.

It is one thing to deal with machines and another to deal with persons. You only need to pay to get the best machines, and then they can work on their own. The more expensive and younger they are, the more they work. Of course, you also must pay to get the best people, but luckily they cannot work like a software program. And that is not because they are imperfect, but because they are too sophisticated to be considered as just machines or, to use the French word for computers, as "ordinateurs". The better they are, the less they can work automatically in response to objective impulses. You must motivate and involve them; you must accept the fact that they may make mistakes. That is the price you must pay for having personal initiative, for learning-by-doing practise. You must entertain people once in a while; you must take some time to deal with them. They are not donkeys, stubbornly

simple and manageable with a sort of “carrot-and-stick” system, that is, the system of reward and punishment.

#### THE BRILLIANT MIGRANTS

As a result of modernization, it often occurs that the most brilliant young people, with their degrees, as well as the most specialized technicians, once they get hired and inserted into the squalid daily routines of the company, tire in one year or two. They then leave and look for a new job; they migrate, after having grabbed and brought home experience and formation just as one might bring home some stationary. The more brilliant they are, the more frequently they migrate.

I know personally the cases of two such migrants. The first one, a 30-year-old mechanical engineer, after several job experiences, finally got to Detroit. Admittedly, Detroit is not a city with a great quality of life; nevertheless, he has found there a medium-size company where he is part of a team working on small diesel engine design, work which aims at obtaining all the merits of gasoline engines without the shortcomings of diesel engines. The second case is that of a brilliant computer science engineer who, after a three-year experience at some major companies, such as IBM, got a degree in Sociology, learned Spanish and moved to Spain. Today, he's living and working at a market research institute in Barcelona, a city that indeed has a great quality of life.

Those who do not migrate are the bureaucrats, those employees firmly attached to their position, to their function, to their competence, and to their acquired privileges, who are incapable of either working or socializing outside their well-known areas. They spend their entire life studying Rules, Collective Contracts and Company Integrative Clauses, reading the classified ads looking for a better job, a much better one if at a state-run or major private company. At those places, the Bureaucrat gets married to the Bureaucracy, and after that ... off they go to live together – not happily but moderately unhappily – in a nice slot in the organization chart.

Paraphrasing *The Economist*, we could then say, “It's the environment, my friends!”

And what could we say about the will to fight of the most brilliant human resources? Being a fighter does not necessarily mean being aggressive. Aggressiveness arises from fear or social hyperphobia and becomes chronic as neuroses and tics. The will to fight arises instead from *prohairesis*, that is, the ability to see beyond. This is a will to fight in order to reach certain goals and overcome all obstacles, many of which often are simply inside ourselves.

I have noticed a higher tendency to migrate in the “brilliant-migrant-fighter.” She or he migrates until she or he gets where the “good fight” can be fought, as Paul of Tarsus would say. Luckily, there are such places, and I have seen some of them. Frustration fuels aggressiveness, and, once it sets in, it destroys resources rather than creating them. This is the human exception to Darwinian logic. Aggressiveness also depends on the pressure originating in the centralized control developed within a formally hierarchical structure. All becomes a question, not of one’s value, that is of stature (what you are), but of one’s role in the organization chart (the slot one occupies in the company).

In the top positions, aggressiveness is open and clear, manifests itself as control and repression (Lacanian “surveillance and punishment”), and aims at expanding its sway by conquest and consolidation. In the lowest positions, aggressiveness is instead sly and tricky, manifests itself as sabotage, and aims at reinforcing borders out of fear. Lines and slots in the organization chart. What gets penalized is will, and eventually the capacity to move on the open field. What gets penalized – especially at the organizational level – is the innovation that requires the acceptance of the different, the challenging, and the troublesome. All this applies to single individuals, organizations, states and nations. But what is encouraged is sabotage of the kind illustrated in Jonathan Swift’s pamphlet *Directions to Servants* (1745).

#### IT’S HARD TO LIVE WITH OTHER PEOPLE

Western civilization expelled the Arabs out of fear, although they then represented the peak of humanist, scientific and technical development. It also expelled the Jews, always out of fear. Some history books say that the Sicilians expelled the Angevins during the notorious “Vespers,” to defend honour (both that of a girl and that of the nation). The truth is that the Sicilians were afraid of losing their rural identity in an encounter with the modernizers coming from the North. They preferred to rely on the more stabilizing and conservative Aragonese. That is when the decay of the Italian south started.

A few conclusive remarks after this excursus. The peoplegram is refused out of fear, a generalized fear spreading at all levels.

The organization chart is a fortress made out of fortresses. It helps more the single individuals occupying its slots and moving suspiciously along its borders, than the company as a whole.

The company is a living, ever-changing organism. The organization chart is instead a rigid structure. It is at the same time an endo- and exoskeleton. Its slots allow people to say, “It’s not up to me,” at the lowest levels, and “It’s not something in my competence,” or “It’s not strategically sound,” at the highest

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