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The Complex Edge of Talent Management: A cross-disciplinary approach

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ABSTRACT

The field of Human Resource Management (HRM) has traditionally been focused on conflict resolution to the detriment of positive factors. Because of this, HRM has a reputation for being negative, and is thus perceived quite negatively. This paper draws on complexity thinking to combine similar, yet distinct academic fields in order to realise benefits for both researchers and managers. Talent management represents an emerging trend within HRM that is beginning to focus more on positive factors, while positive organisational behaviour presents an excellent opportunity to apply theory to the field of HRM, traditionally criticised for a lack of theoretical support. The methodological tool of appreciative inquiry is suggested as an effective and practical way to facilitate this cross-disciplinary approach.

Keywords: Human Resources Management, Talent Management, Positive Organisational Behaviour, Appreciative Inquiry.

PREAMBLE: CONCEPTUALISING THE EDGE

What exactly is ‘the edge’ in regards to managing organisations? A quick literature search for the phrase “managing on the edge” demonstrates a strong relationship between the conference theme and the emerging discourse of complexity theory; in particular, managing organisations on the edge of chaos. Richardson and Cilliers (2001) conducted a review of literature that focused on the discourse of complexity theory, and suggested that research in this field can be represented in three distinct communities:

- ***Reductionist Complexity Science*** (or ‘first order complexity’ (Tsoukas & Hatch 2001)): Research within this community can be linked to the quest for a “theory of everything”, through which theorists seek to “reduce the wide richness of reality to a handful of powerful, algebraic expressions” (Richardson & Cilliers, 2001, p6). To authors in this community, complexity is a property of the system itself, and typically, authors will attempt to map the behaviour of complex systems using advanced computer modelling (Maguire & McKelvey 1999; Richardson & Cilliers 2001; Tsoukas & Hatch 2001).
- ***Soft Complexity Science***: In contrast, there have been a number of authors whose work suggests that complexity theory is best utilised as an analytical tool. Analysis is typically shaped through a set of metaphors commonly used in complexity informed inquiry (Maguire

& McKelvey, 1999; Aram & Noble, 1999; Fotopoulos, 2000; Holbrook, 2003; Cioffi-Revilla, 2005; Gould, 2009; Kuhn, 2009), such metaphors allow for the discussion of complex phenomenon without oversimplification.

· ***Complexity Thinking:*** Within the third community, the belief is generally held that if organisations ‘on the edge’ are deemed to be complex, then the way we think about them also needs to be complex (Richardson & Cilliers 2001, Cilliers 2002). In this respect, complexity theory is viewed as paradigm; a continuation of the constructivist paradigm, with complex mutually informative relationships between ontology, epistemology and axiology (Kuhn 2007).

It should be noted here that it is well outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of complexity theory and its emergence in management. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to limit our discussion to what Cilliers (2002) has labelled ‘complex thinking’. In this respect, we are suggesting that “managing on the edge” requires a fundamentally different epistemological orientation to that of the more traditional, positivist positions taken in management. Such a position is consistent with those taken by Richardson and Cilliers (2001), Tsoukas and Hatch (2001), and Kuhn (2009). However, this still leaves the question of why complex thinking is important in managing organisations on the edge in the context of our paper.

Organisations on the edge have an inherent sensitivity to initial conditions. Initial conditions can be conceptualised as any moment of historical importance to the system (Kuhn and Woog 2007).

Complex systems exhibit great sensitivity to changes in initial conditions. This principle goes by many names, for example the ‘avalanche metaphor’ (Bak, 1996), ‘self-organising criticality’ (Kuhn, 2007; Nunn, 2007) and the common (almost colloquial) ‘Butterfly Effect’ (Dooley, Johnson & Bush, 1995; Holbrook, 2003). In essence such labels are ‘a compact way of saying that complex systems are nonlinear, inherently unpredictable, and dependent on history’ (Nunn, 2007, p99). In particular

relevance to this paper, the sensitivity to initial conditions can be related to the impact of managers' decisions relating to their employees.

As part of his characterisation of 'Complex Thinking', Cilliers (2000; 2002; 2005) has made arguments for recognising an ethical component of complexity in which we recognise the limits of knowledge created through our choices, as he points out in the following excerpt:

Our decisions are guided by some notion of what we think the organization should be – and it is in this “should” that the ethical dimension is contained. If the organization decides “The bottom line is our first priority”, then that is the kind of organization it would be: nothing comes in the way of making money. The central issue here is that a system of values is exactly that. Values are not natural things that we can read off the face of nature; we choose them. It is not written in the stars that the bottom line is vital to the survival of a company, it comes with accepting a certain understanding of what a company should be under, say, capitalist conditions. ... The ethical position is not something imposed on an organization, something that is expected of it. It is an inevitable result of the inability of a theory of complexity to provide a complete description of all aspects of the system (Cilliers 2000:29-30).

So, when managing on the edge, we need to be aware of the impact that our decisions, not only in managing, but in researching management, can have on the wider community. It was through this thinking that we struck upon the idea of discussing the way that problem-oriented research into Human Resources Management (HRM) could be negatively impacting the way that HRM departments are perceived by employees and managers. This negative perception may then be leading to more research in a negative framework within the field, which perpetuates an ongoing cycle. We believe that a promising way to repair this cycle may be through the emerging methodology of appreciative inquiry.

Some of the foundational researchers in the study of appreciative inquiry also believed that it had the potential to address the issues created from a long history of negatively focused research (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This belief has directed the study of appreciative inquiry, as shown by Ludema and Mantel (2000, p44) who suggest that appreciative inquiry “is based on the premise that human systems grow and construct their future realities in the direction of what they most persistently,

actively, and collectively ask questions about”, and that “based on the topic they choose to study and the questions they choose to ask, organizations enact and construct worlds that determine their eventual destiny”.

This line of thought has led us to the belief that talking about things positively, and focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses, are some of the most important aspects to consider when managing on the edge. In this paper, we will discuss the theoretical justification for a more positive focus within the field of HRM, and provide some preliminary observations to support our propositions.

BACKGROUND

This section will provide a detailed outline of the theoretical fields underpinning this paper, illustrating the development, contemporary thoughts, and how the current study aims to connect these fields. To begin, the field of HRM is evaluated and discussed. This discussion then leads into the rise of talent management, and how this field provides an excellent opportunity to break the problem-oriented, perpetuating negative cycle within the field of HRM. The paper will then discuss the similarities and opportunities that exist between the fields of talent management and positive psychology, specifically, the field of positive organisational behaviour.

Human Resources Management

While it is difficult to establish an exact date that marks the birth of HRM as a discipline, the human relations movement of the early 20th century is often cited as contributing to the formation of HRM as a field of study (Lawler & Porter, 1967). The origins of research in HRM began to be formalised around the time that fundamental management studies began to investigate people management issues. For example, the Hawthorne studies conducted by Mayo (1949) suggested that employee performance could be affected by factors other than financial compensation and working conditions. This approach

to the workplace was further developed through the 20th century, with many related fields (such as personnel management, human resource development, strategic human resource management) further extending the study of HRM (Bratton & Gold, 2003). However, while the scope of HRM has increased with further academic attention, there have been concerns raised in regards to the theoretical support underlying the field in general.

For the last few decades, several researchers have made reference to theory being sparse across most areas of HRM. Guest (1997) provided a review of HRM related theory, but indicated that there was little, if any, theory supporting HRM in practice. This is a criticism that has continued to be levelled at the field of HRM, with some researchers suggesting that HRM isn't actually a field of academic study, but rather just a "set of prescriptions derived from anecdotal evidence or personal experience about what management 'should' do when managing its employees" (Bray, Waring & Cooper, 2009).

In addition to the questionable theoretical support underlying the field of HRM, there is another challenge facing the field of HRM. Following in the footsteps of most empirical fields of study, HRM has adopted a traditional problem-oriented approach to both research and practice. As discussed in the paragraphs above, the theories which have traditionally been linked to HRM reinforce the emphasis on things like 'fixing the problem' and 'preventing poor performance'. As discussed in the preamble to this paper, the authors believe that this problem-oriented focus within HRM creates a perpetual cycle of negativity. However, there have been some developments in the field in the last decade that show the potential to break this negative cycle.

Talent Management

While appearing sporadically in literature from around the 1970s onwards, Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod (2001) suggest that the origin of term 'talent management', as it is currently understood, can be attributed to when the term was coined by consultants from the management-consulting firm, McKinsey & Company. Since then, the term has been defined slightly differently by a variety of

researchers (Tansley, 2011). For example, Rappaport, Bancroft and Okum (2003, p55), while not offering an apparent definition, implied that to successfully engage in talent management, an organisation would need to “get the relevant facts now, assess the extent of their own organization’s vulnerabilities, and adopt strategies and programs that will help them weather the changes ahead”. Ashton and Moreton (2005, p29) claim that talent management is “more than a new language for old HR work”, and that “for many organizations, it has become a strategic imperative”. Furthermore, Ingham (2006, p20), suggested that talent management involved “the acquisition, allocation, development, retention and succession of the most important, value-adding people”, and also indicated that “effective management of an organization’s talent [is] one of business leaders’ most critical challenges”. Clearly, there is a lack of agreement when it comes to a specific understanding of what is meant by the term talent management.

Lewis and Heckman (2006) noted this issue with definition, and suggested that because many people were simply assuming that the words ‘talent’ and ‘people’ could be used interchangeably when referring to talent management, there would never be a consensus on the exact meaning of the term. However, Lewis and Heckman (2006) primarily discussed the functional aspects of suggested definitions, such as whether the definitions focused on the outcomes, the processes, or the decisions involved with talent management. However, given that talent management developed from the field of HRM, we believe that like HRM in general, talent management has historically been too problem-oriented. This can be seen in some of the definitions provided above, such as Ashton and Moreton’s (2005) definition that suggests talent management involves assessing the extent of vulnerabilities within an organisation, rather than assessing the extent of the strengths. With this in mind, we believe that there are numerous potential benefits to be gained from applying new theoretical approaches to the field of talent management.

Meyers, van Woerkom and Dries (2013), highlight that managers typically believe that the talent management practices within their organisation are ineffective, with only 6% of managers believing that their talent management systems were effective. This finding formed part of the justification

behind the study by Meyers et al. (2013), who postulated that a key reason for managers' lack of confidence in their talent management systems may have been due to the lack of theoretical foundation supporting talent management as a discipline.

In a recent review, Dries (2013) suggests that a potential area in which talent management could look for further theoretical support is the field of positive psychology. Raising similar arguments regarding the problem-oriented nature of HRM, Dries (2013) makes a call for researchers to consider the application of positive psychology to the field of talent management. In adding to this call, we suggest that the field of positive organisational behaviour may be a good place to begin the process of analysing talent management in the context of positive psychology.

Positive Organisational Behaviour

This field of study forms a link between positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and organisational behaviour (Wood et al., 2006), and according to many researchers, is rapidly expanding in both the research and practical environments (Wright & Quick, 2009). Luthans (2002) was fundamental in drawing attention to the area of positive organisational behaviour, and defined the field as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace" (p59). For further examples of the use of positive organisational behaviour in practice, see Robertson and Cooper (2010), Saks and Gruman (2011), Linley et al. (2011),

There are clear parallels to be drawn between the definitions of positive organisational behaviour, and the definitions of talent management discussed above. It is the belief of the authors that the application of positive organisational behaviour to the field of talent management will provide both researchers and practitioners with a way to break out of the problem-oriented approach that talent management has developed from its background in HRM. Furthermore, the field of positive organisational behaviour is congruent with the methodology of appreciative inquiry, which aligns with the use of a complexity

theory perspective shown in the preamble to this paper. The link between these two areas can be seen clearly in the discussion of appreciative inquiry by Cooperrider et al. (2008), as follows: “It is well established that groups are formed around common ideas that are expressed in and through some kind of shared language which makes communicative interaction possible” (p366). The following section will further discuss methodological considerations for the application of positive organisational behaviour to the field of HRM, specifically, the use of appreciative inquiry within a talent management context.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This section will provide several key considerations that researchers and practitioners should make when applying positive organisational behaviour theory within the context of talent management.

Naturally, every study will have its own unique set of methodological considerations, and these should be discussed in full within each individual study, but the considerations below provide a set of initial considerations that any study in this specific area should address.

Qualitative Approach to Talent Management

Firstly, it should be noted that there are effective ways of conducting both qualitative and quantitative research in the area of talent management. However, when considering the emerging practice of applying positive organisational behaviour theory within this field, qualitative research will be more practical for obtaining meaningful data. The use of a qualitative approach allows for in depth interviews and discussions with managers and employees, and this type of data will be instrumental in establishing the effectiveness of positive organisational behaviour practices and theory. With this in mind however, it also noted that there would be scope for large-scale quantitative and mixed-method studies once a foundation has been set by initial qualitative studies. This qualitative focus also aligns with the suggested methodological tool of appreciative inquiry, as discussed below.

Appreciative Inquiry as a methodological tool

One of the most prominent ways that positive organisational behaviour theory is being applied currently is through the use of appreciative inquiry as a both a theoretical framework or ideology, and a methodological tool or process (Stowell & West, 1991). The use of appreciative inquiry as a process has been outlined by Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett (2000), who provide ‘the 4D model’ of appreciative inquiry (see Figure 1 below). The 4D model provides a step-by-step cycle for managers and practitioners to incorporate positive changes within the workplace, and provides researchers with a way of investigating positive organisational behaviour theory.

- **Insert Figure 1 around here** -

The use of the 4D model within organisations has the potential to yield significant findings for researchers in relation to the effectiveness of positive organisational behaviour within the workplace. However, researchers looking to apply appreciative inquiry within the field of talent management will also need to make considerations for how to most effectively combine positive organisational behaviour theory with pre-existing HRM theory. However, we don’t believe that this will be problematic, as the development of HRM has shown key influences from a variety of fields of academic study, and positive organisational behaviour presents not only a theoretically appropriate opportunity to draw new theory into HRM, but also an opportunity that has the potential for substantial benefits to be realised both in research and in practice. The following section of this paper presents a brief discussion of the concepts raised, presents some preliminary observations, and concludes the paper by providing some of the implications for both academics and managers.

DISCUSSION

While this paper primarily presents a conceptual argument for the application of positive organisational behaviour to the field of talent management, this section will present some preliminary observations that we believe illustrate how this conceptual argument could be applied in practice.

These observations were made during a research project with different objectives, but were re-examined in light of the ideas presented in this paper, and shown here not as a form of empirical evidence, but rather as a practical example to help clarify how some of the theoretical concepts discussed might be researched in the workplace. Also, this section will provide some implications for both researchers and practitioners in this field.

Preliminary Observations

In the course of a research project examining effective team communication, a workplace team in the broad area of financial services was observed, and several key team members interviewed. While a full explanation of the objectives and findings of this research project is outside the scope of this paper, it is sufficient to say that the research project involved multiple teams from multiple organisations, and the observations shown here have been isolated and re-examined for the purposes of this paper. No identifying information can be provided due to confidentiality arrangements made in the original research project.

One of the first observations supporting the idea that positive organisational behaviour could be effectively applied to talent management was made in the analysis of the team manager's understanding of effective teamwork, as shown in the following quote:

I suppose an effective team would understand the differences in the teams, and be mindful of the way that they talk to people. Because we're very conscious in our team of...say for example, I need everything to be drawn for me...so if anybody talks to me they need to draw whatever it is that they're talking about. And then, there are other people in the team who just want the very bottom line of what you're trying to ask them to approve, or disprove. So [an effective team] is mindful of how people learn and understand. – **Team Manager**

The manager here emphasises that the way the different team members learn and understand is an integral part of how the team functions. A traditional talent management approach may conceptualise the problems that arise from misunderstandings, but with the framework of positive organisational behaviour, an approach that focuses on what each team member does well could help to improve overall team performance. In the example given above, a team member that only wants the bottom line

could be negatively characterised as someone who doesn't understand detailed explanations, but this same characteristic could be seen as an individual strength (i.e. big picture thinking, efficient processing of information).

A further observation that prompted the direction of this paper was the attitude towards human resources departments and HRM as a field of study that was prevalent throughout the team. Several team members expressed concerns with the way that the human resources issues within the company were being addressed, as shown in the quote below:

There's a few people...I know there's a few people with HR issues, I know that there's...a lot of people who are just sort of sick of it...Yeah, I don't think they'll stick around much longer. – **Team Member**

As discussed previously, there seems to be a negative attitude towards HRM, which we believe is a result of a negative cycle that starts from a problem-oriented approach to HRM in general. The rise of talent management as a field of study presents the field with an opportunity to break this negative cycle.

Finally, an observation was made across the whole team during interviews and team meetings that a positive focus would not only be useful for functional aspects of the job, but would also be beneficial for the overall performance of the team. This idea is captured in a quote from the team manager, who when asked about the possibility of conducting training sessions focused on the tenets of positive organisational behaviour, responded with:

I don't think we do enough of that kind of training. Because, sales people naturally need to feel loved. – **Team Manager**

This quote emphasises the opportunity available for positive organisational behaviour to be applied to talent management. At present, the argument could be made that talent management is still rooted in the problem-oriented nature of HRM, and as such, is not doing enough to make employees 'feel loved'. We believe that the application of methodological tools such as appreciative inquiry will be capable of achieving this within workplaces, and thus represents a promising opportunity for both

researchers and practitioners alike. The following section will go into further detail about the implications that the concepts discussed in this paper could have in these two domains.

Implications for future research

As discussed in the preamble to this paper, complexity theory suggests that the way you perceive something has a substantial impact on the way it develops. This attitude towards managing on the edge has led us to believe that there are substantial benefits to be gained from the application of positive organisational behaviour theory to the field of HRM. Specifically, we have suggested that the methodological tool of appreciative inquiry could be effectively applied within the context of talent management. This process has the potential to break what we have perceived as a negative cycle in the field of HRM, where a problem-oriented focus in the research domain leads to negative perceptions from both researchers and employees, and thus begets further negatively focused studies.

This paper also presents methodological considerations for incorporating appreciative inquiry into talent management research, and shows how the pre-existing framework associated with appreciative inquiry can be effectively applied. We believe this could lead future research in several directions. First, qualitative research could utilise appreciative inquiry to further explore pre-existing attitudes towards HRM, and establish ways to improve the perception of HR departments within organisations. Second, quantitative research could analyse the effects of incorporating positively framed interventions, to establish generalisable findings within the area of talent management. Third, a large-scale, mixed-methods study would be able to not only identify trends and patterns affecting organisations in regards to their talent management practices, but would be able to provide an in depth understanding of these issues, and through the application of appreciative inquiry, provide substantial benefits for managers and organisations.

In conclusion, we believe that applying positive organisational behaviour theory to the field of talent management not only addresses the criticism of talent management and HRM in general lacking in theoretical support, it also provides practitioners and researchers to develop new ways of effectively managing on the edge.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

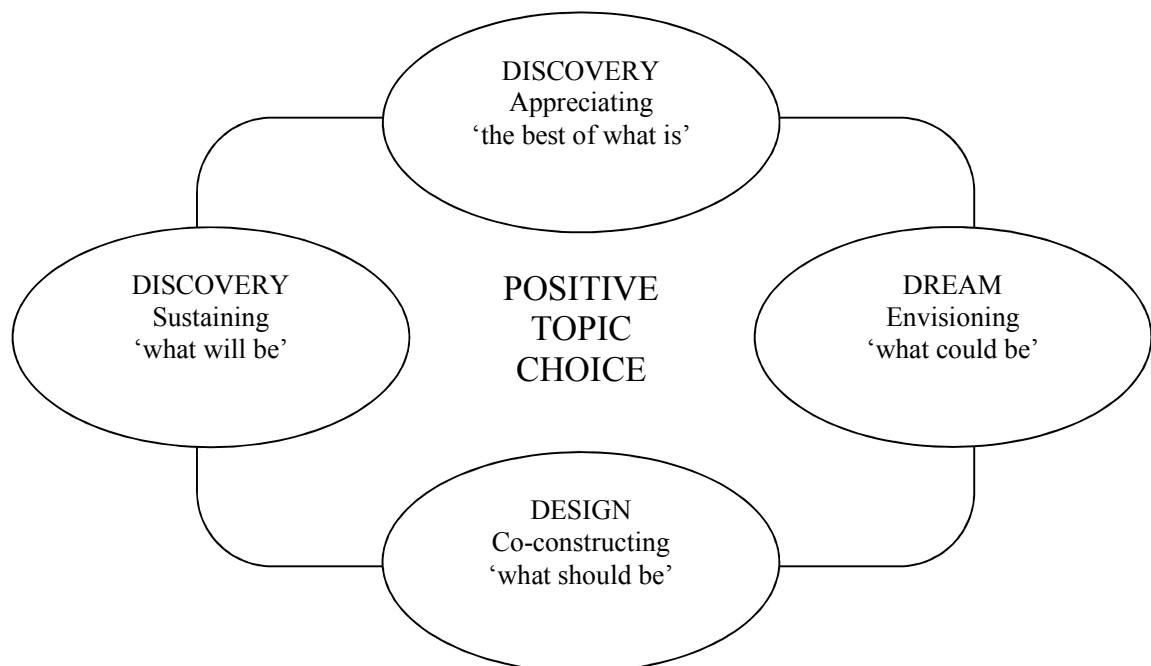


Figure 1 – ‘The 4D Model’ – sourced from Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett (2000)