ENABLEMENT, CONSTRAINT, AND *THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE*

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Article:

Popular management writing and discourse fascinates me for two reasons. First, it makes me ask the questions, "Why did this writing and discourse ever become 'popular'?" and "Why would someone ever want to read popular management literature?" Second, popular management writing and discourse fascinates me because so much of it professes new forms of organizing and methods of managing when in fact quite a bit looks suspiciously familiar. In fact, the question of popularity may be linked to the content of the genre.

The new practices of organizing and managing offered in the genre also lead to new or revitalized forms of organizational identity with corresponding new or revitalized combinations of enablement and constraint. In other words, processes of organizing involve "making people up" (du Gay, 1996; Hacking, 1986); as people organize, they shape themselves. Important questions are: "How does popular management writing and discourse make people up?" and "Does this shaping of people account for the popularity of the genre?" I consider these questions by discussing data from people trained to use Stephen R. Covey's (1989) *The 7Habits of Highly Effective People*. I close the article by addressing some implications of popular management discourse and writing for organizational scholars and members.

A number of recent analyses of popular management writing and discourse have shed light on how it affects the nature of membership in organizations (e.g., Carlone, 1998; du Gay, Salaman, & Rees, 1996; Garsten & Grey, 1997; Jackson, 1996; Rimke, 2000). In general, these analyses indicate that popular management discourse appeals to individuals' desires to maintain positive self-concepts in the face of organizing instability. The preferred method for maintaining a positive self-concept requires each individual subject[1] to work on herself or himself to acquire the appropriate internal values and attitudes and the proper public practices.

These analyses typically view this "preferred method" of self-management as a new form of control and/or domination in organizations. However, if managerial discourses make people up, might these personal transformations result not only in control but also in the formation of attitudes and practices that allow the subject to live in the (organizational) world in new ways? Rather than framing the effects of popular management discourse and writing in terms of control, domination, or resistance, I prefer to conceptualize their effects in terms of the production of enablement and constraint. In other words, in every case of organizing (including the application of a popular management tool or method), a subject will be shaped so that he or she may do some things and not others. An examination of *The 7 Habits* helps illuminate these issues.

Since its publication in 1989, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* has gained enormous popularity, selling 12 million copies in the United States and abroad. *The 7Habits* offers readers a method for examining themselves and their personal and professional lives with the goal of prioritizing their daily activities based on a selfproduced—yet guided—inventory of core values and commitments. The book encourages readers to use these values and commitments in their time management and interactions with others.

As the title of the text plainly states, the highly effective person performs seven habits. The Private Victory habits are as follows: Habit 1, Be Proactive; Habit 2, Begin With the End in Mind; and Habit 3, Put First Things

First. The Public Victory habits are as follows: Habit 4, Think Win-Win; Habit 5, Seek First to Understand Then To Be Understood; Habit 6, Synergize; and Habit 7, Sharpen the Saw (Covey, 1989).

In my research, I study the contemporary use of self-help ideas in American business settings. Specifically, I have examined how *The 7Habits* shapes the identity of organization members who read and use the book. For this project, I collected data from members of a U.S. military organization. The facility commander of this organization required all members to participate in a 3-day *7 Habits* training seminar. This training is part of a broader reorganization effort mandated by congressional budget cuts. In the following section, I discuss several representative comments drawn from the interviews with members who completed the training.

Each interviewee told me that *The 7 Habits* helped him or her with challenges such as stress management, problem solving, and listening. For example, Bruce[2] told me how the ideas helped him balance his life.

> Bruce: [Playing music] is specifically for *me*. For my own sanity, because I think I've reached the level of sanity. Well, actually, it's not sanity, it's balance. Balance between the two sides of my life: the work side, which is anywhere from 50 to 60 hours a week, and the other side, which is the other hundred unpaid hours a week. You have to have balance, and that does indeed seem to be the most important factor. [The idea of balance is] what I took from all of *The 7 Habits,* stuff that I wrote and studied.
> David: Is that view of balance something that grew out of your experience with *The 7 Habits* or did you have that idea of balance before you read the book?
> Bruce: I had an idea that it was missing, before. I had the idea that things were—out of whack. Or out of balance, maybe.

The 7 Habits provided Bruce with a language and frame of reference for making sense of his feeling that "things were out of whack." Indeed, the notion and importance of balance is the key lesson Bruce learned from working with *The 7 Habits*. The book allowed Bruce to handle what was "out of whack" not by altering work but by altering Bruce. Popular management writing and discourse often advocate that people change themselves to meet the new conditions in which we work and organize.

Diana, a *7Habits* trainer, explained how the material helped her:

> It's amazing! Going through the class—I think I took it in '96 or '95. And I equate it to the equivalent of getting a Jiminy Cricket on my shoulder. It either awakened the conscience that I had, [the conscience] that I was being able to control, or it was basically a conscience that I didn't have. I don't know. It gave me such an awareness of stuff that I ... don't know any other way to do things anymore. And to me just little things like [getting up when my] alarm clock [goes off]—or if I make a commitment to run certain days during the week—if I can't honor that, it starts there. It's just been really powerful.

Diana stated quite clearly that *The 7 Habits* has changed her perceptions and her behaviors. According to Diana, thanks to *The 7 Habits,* she has a conscience, or a commitment to commitment. This modification in her attitudes and practices has been thorough enough that she no longer knows how to do things differently.

Bruce and Diana's comments provide a partial, perhaps obvious, explanation for the popularity of management literature: It aids people with their life problems. For Bruce and Diana, *The 7 Habits* altered individual awareness, which led to altered practices. It simultaneously helped and altered them. In short, *The 7 Habits* enables certain kinds of attitudes and behaviors by shaping the subject.

As *The 7Habits* message and training enabled some actions, the message also interacted with deeply held American cultural values. A common critique of self-help literature is that it focuses on the individual as the source of problems and solutions (e.g., Cloud, 1998). This theme figures prominently in the lessons of *The 7*

Habits and helps provide further explanation for the popularity of the text. The theme is apparent in the following excerpt from my interview with Doug:

> "Sharpen the Saw" ... [is] such an important habit. I mean, it's about—it's the habit of renewal. It's the role of the self. It's, you know, on your weekly compass, it's the role of self. And you focus on, you know, different ways—the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, mental—on how you can sharpen this, not just maintain it. So it grabs the "you." It says "you," you know.

Given the importance of the individual to American culture (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Lears, 1981), Doug's concern with the self should not be surprising. Many people have told me that the book aids their personal development. Thus, we must recognize that popular management discourse builds on rather than challenges many key values of American culture. Of course, if this discourse did not tap into our commonly held values it would not be popular and, thus, would not be the topic of this Forum.

Building on individualism within *The 7 Habits* does more than capture readers' attention and reaffirm our sense of self. Relying on "the individual" also blunts the cooperative possibilities of the Public Victory, which teaches the effective person to cooperate with others to achieve personal and public ends. Many participants expressed difficulty or wariness implementing this idea. For example, Bruce said, "Sometimes when you understand another person, indicate understanding in another person, they see that as consent for their view. And that is something you need to guard against." Janet expressed similar difficulty using Habits 4 to 6, the Public Victory habits, because, according to her, they were the most challenging to implement. I noted in my observations that they required a great deal of work and attention from her. These habits seemed quite unnatural, unlike those in Private Victory. Habits 4 to 6 also required the participation of other people, which complicated their use and application. Based on Janet's experiences, other people may see her attempts to use Habits 4 to 6 as weaknesses to be exploited.

Covey's Public Victory habits advocate the adoption of a "win-win" perspective, active listening, and a willingness to seek a "third alternative" so that all parties in a decision attain what they need. Many of those interviewed worried that their attempts to enact these habits might lead to the erosion of their presence as individuals. One interviewee told me that some of her coworkers viewed cooperation, in the form of "win-win," as "un-American." *The 7 Habits* helps produce specific kinds of organization subjects. As the preceding comments suggest, though, these interviewees resemble previous subjects, as evidenced by the importance placed on the individual in their interviews.

The 7Habits offers these subjects solutions for, and transformations of, the self. *The 7Habits* leads them to live in the world differently. The participants report satisfaction, reassurance, and a new sense of self-awareness. They also report a wariness regarding cooperation with others. Recognizing all of this moves us away from the domination-resistance model of organizational subjects. We must begin to acknowledge, then, that *The 7 Habits* enables and constrains these subjects in new and old ways.

A focus on enablement and constraint focuses analysis on what organizational subjects can and cannot do, which is important because it will help or hinder efforts to organize. For example, the intense and deeply held belief in the individual in American culture negates the focus on cooperation within *The 7 Habits*. Wariness regarding cooperation also might lead subjects to consider attempts to democratize the workplace as misguided. Even attempts to introduce teamwork and/or consensus processes may be blunted by the American cultural legacy. In addition, the degree of satisfaction expressed by those I have interviewed regarding *The 7Habits* suggests that these people may see democratization efforts as unnecessary for improving work. When used in collectivist cultures, by contrast, the first three habits of the book may seem unnatural and, as a result, more difficult to apply.

Attending to popular management writing and discourse is important because they modify processes of organizing and make up subjects in new ways. This process of modification changes not only what organization scholars (should) study but it also changes what scholars and organizational members should and may imagine.

NOTES

1. I use the term *subject* to reference the theoretical position that a person is the result of structures and processes that produce particular ways of living in a social world. Although used here in my definition, "person" is a particular kind of subject. Other examples of subjects include, for example, members, citizens, employees, and managers.
2. The names of interview participants are pseudonyms.

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