

## CONTESTING THE ORTHODOXY OF MANAGERIALISM

*Psychosynthesis is a well-established therapeutic modality, it is currently expanding into the field of life coaching. However, I argue that psychosynthesis has more to offer than has currently been capitalised upon. It is to a lesser extent known, tried and tested as a change method in management. This paper delves into my practice and experience of contesting the orthodoxy of managerialism through introducing psychosynthesis in public organisations. My approach to professional practice recognises that organisations, seen as human and relational systems, are made up of unique and valuable individuals. Assagioli (Keen, 1974) stated 'In psychosynthesis we stress individual responsibility. No matter what has happened to a person he must assume responsibility here and now for changes he wants to make in his personality*

[...] Of course, we are conditioned by the past, but we have the power to [...] change ourselves [Italics mine].'

Introducing psychosynthesis in public organisations where the discourse of managerialism is prevailing, has proven to be more of a toilsome challenge than I expected at the outset a decade ago. Psychosynthesis is a holistic philosophical concept, fluid and evolving over time in practice. And as such, it is an antipole to the positivist discourse of managerialism as an objective, rationalistic and detached practice.

### Fear as a surfacing phenomenon

A key tenet for my psychosynthesis work in organisations is that everyone is encouraged to bring their whole selves to the workplace. Bringing your whole self to work means acknowledging that all of your subpersonalities (Assagioli, 2000) may surface in professional settings (Tshibanda, 2013). For example, we are shaped by our childhood as managers, whether we are aware of it

or not, and our childhood story is influencing the way we show up at work (Hill, 2017).

When I am implementing psychosynthesis in organisations two pivotal questions oftentimes surface among the participants: 'Did I really sign up for this?' and 'To what extent am I willing to

share my life story at work?' Managers are usually not prepared for, or sometimes not even willing, to work deeply and soulfully on the personal level together with their colleagues. And consequently, another question is bound to surface: 'How do we deal with our inner fear as managers?' Fear is a powerful and primitive human emotion, its primary seat lies in the brain's amygdala (Winerman, 2005). Generally, fear can be understood as two responses, physical and emotional. The physical response is universal, while the latter is highly individual. Furthermore, fear is contagious, we 'pick up' each other's emotions (Eyre et al., 2017), and our mood is spreading through social interactions where one person's emotion may trigger a similar emotion in the other (Hatfield et al., 1992), we can even smell fear physically (Groot et al., 2012).

In my experience, sharing our life stories is an effective, but a strenuous and challenging, method to deal with inner fear as managers. My personal hardships have been instrumental to my professional development and career as a manager in values-driven public organisations. I have experienced some powerful moments at work when I, carefully and thoughtfully, have exposed my humanity, i.e. shown my true feelings and personal struggles. Denborough (2014, p.

9) writes that 'Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learned through hard times can make a contribution to the lives of others in similar situations.' Furthermore, Hill (2017, p. 178) argues that 'The surest way to ensure that trust can emerge is to be transparent, to be open'. Research looking at growth through defining moments in life, such as hardship, bereavement and trauma among managers, shows that the managers involved described these processes as their catalyst for growth (Armstrong, 2014). By discerning ourself we may understand our shared humanity and create trust amongst us.

Stepping out of socially constructed ideas of the detached 'professional', of which most of have clear preconceived ideas, usually involves dealing with fear. Fear is surfacing where the discourse of managerialism is so deeply engraved into the mindset that any attempt to challenge it, even in the most gentle and modest of ways, is being perceived as profoundly threatening. In my experience, psychosynthesis work may come across as being threatening since it is focusing on the social and psychological processes operating in organisations, teams and the participating managers. It is thus challenging the status quo on the personal, intrapersonal and organisatio-

nal level. A key learning for me is that one has to keep in mind that the participating managers have been loyal to, and promoted by, the very system I am challenging them to impact and change. A natural reaction is thus to dismiss exploratory *inquiry and curiosity as intrusive and annoying traits. I have experienced how hard it seems to be for managers to speak to 'explore', and not to 'explain' or make statements into the 'relational space'. The preferred conversational styles espoused by most managers, i.e. advocacy or advisory types of language, are a challenge in psychosynthesis group work. These styles suggest answers and are not particularly useful if one wants to stimulate and encourage managers to explore their practice on a deeper, more profound and soulful level. In my experience, no amount of management techniques will make up for your being, who you are, as a manager.*

The most important is our attitudinal approach, the mental state of 'living life as inquiry' (Marshall, 2016).

The critics among the participants are oftentimes trying to hi-jack the 'relational space' during group work in order to avoid working on the personal level, but rather with structures. Citing that their 'busyness', them being caught up in the daily whirlwind of management, requires from them to be solution-focused on operational issues and structural management. As one manager once claimed 'Back in the days, when I worked in a frontline team I was dealing with people. But I'm a senior manager now, and now I'm only working with structures. Not people.' He was obviously, albeit momentarily, forgetting his own staff and the colleagues in the senior management team he was addressing in that moment.

Fear is an emotion which we can, by skilful use of the will (Assagioli, 1994 and Ferrucci, 2015), choose how to approach its manifestations in us and in our practice. Assagioli wrote (in Guggisberg Nocelli, 2017, p. vii) 'A wise will must at times and places know how to dare, assuming responsibility and risk. You must have the courage to err [...]'. An attitudinal approach of self-compassion, paired with curiosity, may support us in understanding, reinterpreting and hence, transforming our

fear. Pattakos and Dundon (2017, p. 160) notes 'Learn about your strengths *and weaknesses.*

*They all provide valuable insights into who you really are as you move along your path to finding deeper meaning and realising your highest potential [Italics in original].'* As managers it is more dangerous to dodge or trying to avoid our inner fear, than dealing with it. I have been experiencing defining moments in psychosynthesis group work when the participating managers started to share willingly. Several years ago, I wrote in my action research journal, 'Suddenly she started to share her childhood story with the group, her experience of trauma of losing her little sister in a tragic accident, and the grief that followed. Her loss explained to me her irate and sometimes irrational behaviour at work. Sharing her pain made her more human in my eyes, she was all of a sudden a whole person and we've gotten along so much better ever since.'

Contesting the orthodoxy of managerialism, with psychosynthesis as an over-arching philosophy, means embarking on a risky venture which involves dealing with our inner fear. But without risk, rewards tend to be greatly stunted. And, what could be more necessary today, when the world is facing a systemic sustainability crisis, than being a manager who is daring to soulfully lead from the heart?

---

Pascal Tshibanda

#### About the author

Pascal Tshibanda, is an action researcher and senior manager, he currently works as a Chief Executive Officer in the Swedish public sector. He holds a MSc in Sustainability & Responsibility from Ashridge Business School, UK. His master's dissertation 'The crowd within – an experiential inquiry into leadership in sustainability' focused on subpersonality work. He has also received additional training in psychosynthesis at the institutes in London, UK and Gothenburg, Sweden and he participated in the First Psychosynthesis Leadership Coaching Symposium in London, UK in November 2018.

## Bibliography

- Armstrong, A. (2014). *I'm a better manager: A biographic narrative study of the impact of personal trauma on the professional lives of managers in the UK*. Aston University
- Assagioli, R. (2000). *Psychosynthesis*. Amherst: Synthesis Center Inc
- Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company
- Eyre, R.W, House, T., Hill, E.M & Griffiths, F.E. (2017). *Spreading of Components of Mood in Adolescent Social Networks*. The Royal Society Publishing. Retrieved March 3, 2019
- Ferrucci, P. (2015). *Your Inner Will: Finding Personal Strength in Critical Times*. New York: Tarcherperigee
- Groot, J., Smeets, M., Kaldewaij, A., Duijndam, M. & Semin, G. (2012) *Chemosignals Communicate Human Emotions*. *Psychological Science*, 23(11)
- Guggisberg Nocelli, P. (2017). *The Way of Psychosynthesis*. Easton: Synthesis Insights
- Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. L. (1992). *Primitive Emotional Contagion*. In M.S. Clark (Ed.), *Emotion and Social Behavior*. *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, 14, 151–177.
- Hill, S. (2017). *Where Did You Learn to Behave Like That? A Coaching Guide for Working with Leaders* (Kindle ed.). Dialogix
- Keen, S. (1974). *The Golden Mean of Roberto Assagioli*. *Psychology Today*, December. Retrieved February 17, 2019
- Marshall, J. (2016). *First Person Action Research, Living Life as Inquiry* (1st ed.). London: SAGE Publications.