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The Existential Reflection as a Prerequisite for Employee Development

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Abstract

Organizations are pre-eminently social set-ups. People organize their work in these social networks and are motivated to do so because of their need to understand their organizational settings. Man has the ability to reflect on his existential opportunity and that this distinguishes him, for example, from animals. At a given time in human development the individual is suddenly struck by the biggest, yet intimidating realization that he exists. Organizations, in which human beings spend much of their lives, are an important part of life. In their attempt to build a connection with others, human beings cope with others in an environment which is full of ambiguity. The unique and individual role which an employee plays is result of his interaction with the organizational settings and subjects around him. Leaders play an important role to encourage employees and interact in a way that certain organizational objectives may be achieved. The study aims to provide some insight of how existential reflection can help the employees to understand their existence in an organization which contributes in his development. Framework has been developed on the basis of "The four existential fears (death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness). Scholars stress that these four existential fears are a good basis to describe the conditions for employee development. The model has been designed by taking previous literature to give some new insight to managers.

Keywords: Existential reflection, employee development, existential fears, leadership

Introduction:

This article sets out to introduce and explore a number of existentialist concepts and principles by taking account of leadership and existential fear as modes employee development organizations. The intention is to show how existentialist philosophy can contribute to a critical approach that may be used in the examination of the interdependency between employee development and sense of individual existence by taking help of leadership. When people operate in organizations, they engage in various types of relationship. They attribute meaning and significance to their actions and alliances, and they develop new knowledge on the basis of new and existing understandings, a process termed "learning and development" (Blomme, 2003). It is our ability to attribute meaning to our actions that makes us who we are as human beings. As intellectual human beings, we are conscious of our existence but we also find ourselves faced with the challenge of recognizing and acknowledging the *extent* of this awareness (Blomme, 2003). Within the leadership literature, communication is often regarded as an essential aspect of the leadership relationship or as a prime leadership skill. In this article we suggest that this might be true and that leadership might be considered as an aspect of communication resulting in employee development and creativity.

This article attempts to develop a conceptual framework to enable to better understand the dynamics of employees in organizations. We will argue that four existential fears will provide a better understanding of human behavior and an important driver for complex organizational behaviour. To do so, first we will discuss existentialism and its impact on employee development and then focusing on the effective leadership to support absurd behaviors and its contribution to our understanding of organizational development. Finally, we will discuss notions from existentialism and in particular Yalom's description of existential fears (death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness) in relation to the prior theory discussed in this article with a view to developing a framework within which organizational behaviour can be approached to accept different behaviors of human capital.

Literature Review:

Understanding existentialism:

George Bataille (1988) argued that we have the ability to reflect on our existential opportunity and that this distinguishes us, for example, from animals. At a given time in our development the

individual is suddenly struck by the biggest but intimidating realization that he exists. Feelings of wonder and happiness may result from this, but so too can feelings of powerlessness and fear about one's own destiny. Even though a person may want reality to be something external and a threat to other people, the individual in his existence is nevertheless caught unaware by the clearly absolute realization that death is the only certainty in life (Camus, 1965). Camus points out that this consciousness of existence gives us the freedom to make choices in our existence. This means that we are continually forced to make choices and we must be personally responsible for our decisions. In the words of Verhofstadt-Dene`ve (2001) "A person cannot not make a decision". Every decision that is made has consequences for our future actions. Whatever the decision may be, people often try to focus either on the future, or on the unpredictable, or on the past because the past represents what is reliable and familiar to them. Focusing on the future is appealing because it presents the individual with a challenge and opportunities for development. People judge their roles critically, take risks, experiment with new things and thus contribute to the actualization of their potential. However, they are also still responsible for their decisions. This consciousness produces loneliness and fear which is related to the existential fear that is specific to the threat of total destruction (Verhofstadt-Dene`ve, 2001). This is why there is a tendency to focus on the past, which brings back the feeling of safety, that is, the safety offered by structure and what is familiar. Løvlie calls this repetitive action: "The themes are lived repetitively to avoid anxiety" (Løvlie, 1982). Meaningfulness and the behaviour which this produces is therefore the result of decisions which stem from the consciousness of one's own existence. Different scholars (e.g. Yalom, 1980; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Koole and Van den Berg, 2004) in the field of research into existential anxiety and its relation to (psychodynamic) behaviour distinguish four existential fears: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Every person deals with these concerns in their own way. The existential confrontation leads to a deeply, often unconsciously felt anxiety. Within existentialism, the term "driver" is replaced by "awareness of ultimate concern". The behaviour resulting from the propensity of human beings to avoid thinking about the ultimate fears of existence provides them with a sense of safety, but at the same time restricts growth and limits experience. This point towards what some existential philosophers have said about human nature.

Four Dimensions of existential fear:

The question arises how the notions from existentialism discussed above can be applied to describe organizational behaviour and employee development. Organizations are social networks. People establish their work in these social networks and are motivated to do so because of their need to reduce ambiguity. The reduction of ambiguity is influenced by existential fears. To avoid existential fear people have the inclination to make sense of their present ambiguous environment by drawing on their past experiences and situations. This leads to stability in the organization and anxiety avoidance. From the perspective of human behavior, it could be argued that anxiety avoidance leads to negative loops, which moderate instability and change. Therefore with the avoidance of fears of death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness, people make sense of existence so that they can predict the organizational context and can cope accordingly. That brings us to the question of how organizations deal with the ambiguity faced by employees which could hinder in development of employee. People make sense of the existing situations and human beings in their own unique way. From the perspective of existentialism we have argued that this sense-making process is limited by anxiety, human beings make sense of their ambiguous environment by trying to avoid anxiety, which appeals to existential fears. The existential perspective also answers the question why effective change is an emergent and gradual process. The conclusion that people have to look for significance in their lives bearing in mind the importance work has in this, also gives an indication regarding the effective conditions for change. The four existential fears(death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness), which will be discussed below, are introduced in Yalom's (1980) seminal work. Scholars stress that these four existential fears are a good basis to describe the conditions for change (e.g. Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2004). The following paragraphs will deal with the four existential fears and their relationship with employee development change.

1. Death

The first condition for change can be described using the theme of death. With regard to the existential fear of death, Yalom argues that it is very painful for an individual to confront the foundation of their own existence. The biological border between life and death is physical and clear. However, the psychological border is much more diffuse. In his seminal work "Sein und

Zeit" Heidegger says: "The concept of death saves us from death". A deeply felt experience of the end of personal life can sometimes lead to the "sudden" choice of a meaningful existence. Death forces us to live genuinely. Human life is not mortal and has an end. This painful truth and anxiety produces two responses, either they feel that they are too unique to die or they believe they have an ultimate rescuer. These coping modes are similar in that the individual avoids the true confrontation with his own ending, which could either be his own ending in terms of physical death, or the ending of activities, status, power positions and responsibilities. In the coping mode of specialness, the individual focuses on his own autonomy, on his being unique, and he looks at himself as being separate from others. These coping mechanisms will lead to stability, the maintenance of the existing organizational themes and the routines of organizational behaviour. The fear of death may intensify if the sense-making process does not reduce the feeling of anxiety. If the individual constructs new meanings in an ambiguous environment which do not help to reduce anxiety and existential fear, fear will increase. The sense-making process will increase anxiety rather than subdue it, and as a result organizational behaviour will be governed by coping behaviour. This is the moment when the organization finds itself in a condition of explosive instability. Referring to Camus, the acceptance of a possible death or ending will decrease the anxiety which will open the possibility for conversations in which shadow themes will develop and new organizational behaviour will emerge. If the individual is in state of continuous denial, coping behaviour will paralyses the organization which may actually result in the death of the organization. Hence, the first condition for change in relation to the fear of death is to allow the organization to accept its finiteness, which will provide the possibility to look for new themes evoking new organizational behaviour From this perspective, emergent leadership should be nurtured among all the organization's members to impede coping modes and to encourage shadow conversations, which will lead to new organizational behaviour. To quote Camus: people should be able to revolt against the fear of finiteness (Camus, 2000).

2. Freedom

The argument of freedom can be used as a second condition. According to the existential vision of life and the world, there is no Big Plan for human beings and the earth. A human being is born without being asked or without choice; he lives and dies. He is responsible for his actions and for the course of his life. According to Heidegger, human existence has a dual nature: the individual

is an object in the world, he is "there" but he also constitutes what is there. This is the duality: the individual (Heidegger calls him a "Dasein") is an empirical ego, an object, but also an uplifting ego, which constitutes itself and the world (Yalom, 1980, p. 220).

Freedom is closely linked to responsibility. Without freedom, that is the choice to construct the world in any number of ways, the concept of responsibility has no meaning. According to Camus, a person not only is responsible for the actions he takes in life but also for his failure to act. When individuals become conscious of the fact that they themselves bear responsibility for their lives, a feeling of anxiety can arise.

Nowadays we have to learn how to make our own choices in life. The external structures and institutions that tell us how to live are decreasing. There are seemingly endless ways in which we can construct our individual lives and this eventually forces us to confront ourselves. This confrontation consists of two sides. One side is about taking responsibilities for one's own personal life and autonomy. The other side is about being fully aware of the choice of life or in Yalom's term being "willing".

According to Yalom, "An individual wills himself into being what he is". Fundamental choices in life have to be based on responsibility. Be fully aware of one's existential situation means that one becomes aware of self-creation (Yalom, 1980, p. 319). The awareness of the fact that the individual himself is responsible for becoming who he really is, without any absolute, external, right answers leads to the awareness of the personal fundamental groundlessness. This is the basis of the fear of ultimate freedom: who decides whether a person's choices in life are the right ones. Freedom makes a person responsible. The conflict experienced internally makes individuals look for the real person within them. The way an individual directs his actions is based on the personal responsibility he feels to become the human being he really is. Responsibility is the possibility to construct a personal life. The will to find suitable activities makes an individual direct his personal life the way he wants. Personal action will leads to intentional actions. The answer to ultimate freedom thus begins by embracing responsibility for personal life. According to some philosophers, the most important responsibility in life is that an individual becomes the human being that he truly is deep down inside.

3. Existential isolation

The third condition will be examined using the argument of existential isolation. This does not only include social isolation, but also refers to the fact that an individual is fundamentally alone

and the only person who can steer his own existence in a particular direction. He alone is the one who knows his deepest thoughts and reflections. Existential isolation can be experienced when death is near, but it can also be experienced when an individual takes control of his own life.

In general, the anxiety related to existential isolation is not experienced directly, because it is the basis of many layers of activities and daily routines which are embedded in personal and collective meaning. The individual coincides with his activities. The questions "What am I ultimately made of?" and "What is my bottom line?" take the individual back to the most private and thus solitary answers. Fear of existential isolation is the main driver behind human relationships. The human individual arises from fusion (between his parents), grows from the mother's womb and develops into a separate human being. One human being springs from another human being but has to evolve into an individual of his own. This is what makes the fear of existential isolation so unique and why it plays an important part in every relationship. No relationship can eliminate isolation, but it can compensate for the existential pain. According to Buber, a philosopher who combined deep philosophical insights with religious dedication, human beings are capable of engaging in a "need-free" relationship with another human being. In this respect, Maslow makes a distinction between relationships that are deficiency-motivated or growth-motivated. Some human beings are focused on others who are useful to them. Some human beings are focused on others in order to grow and shape new realities. Erich Fromm (1994) addressed the question of the nature of need-free love (Yalom, 1980, p. 369). In his view, a grown-up relationship is a relationship in which two people are involved with their whole being. In a mature relationship there is room for understanding respect and consideration for the uniqueness and integrity of the other. Hence, the third condition is the feeling of inclusion in the social community which provides human beings with a sense of belonging and a recognition that they are allowed to be human beings.

4. Meaninglessness

The last condition in relation to the last existential fear is the concept of meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). Humans need meaning, direction, values and ideals in life. Without them, the individual lives in fear of life itself. At the same time, we can never know what the meaning of life really is. There are no external or absolute answers; we are not born with the meaning of life programmed in our brains or with an implicit blueprint of values. How do we find meaning, which we intrinsically need in order to live, in a world that in itself is meaningless? This is what

Camus called the human absurdity. We are meaning-needing creatures in an indifferent world. In our modern secular world it is essential that the individual finds personal meaning in a world of cosmic indifference. This means that the individual has to discover his own values and create his own guidelines. Yalom distinguishes five categories of activities in secular society that provide a sense of purpose in life. These are:

(1) Altruism, our endeavors to make the world a better place;

(2) Dedication to a cause, such as family, state, political party and science;

(3) Creativity, the fact that we live to create;

(4) Hedonism, the idea that life is a gift that must be opened and lived to the full

(5) Self-actualization, the idea that we should exploit all the possibilities we are given in life.

Camus eventually came to this conclusion. Every man has a deep desire to live a dedicated life, connected to the world, others, to nature, to all that is. Human beings do not feel comfortable when there is no larger scheme or grand design and no recognizable pattern for their activities. Human beings are meaning-seeking individuals and thus organizations consist of meaning-seeking employees. They are looking for the bigger picture that the organization can provide. Individuals with mature self-knowledge have an understanding of the bigger picture that they want to part of. The more structure the organization can provide the more effective the contribution of the individual can be. This brings us to the fourth condition. This condition encompasses the provision of enough autonomy for conversations and sense-making under the umbrella of an official ideology in which the present and future existence of the organization is depicted. When individuals in the organization know themselves, when they are able to engage in genuine relationships and when they can see clearly what their possibilities are and those of the organization, then there can be a mature relationship between the individuals and the organization.

Existential fears and Employee Development:

If the four conditions described above are fulfilled so that anxiety arising from the four existential fears is reduced, this will lead to movement and the possibility of a change in themes. This will produce behaviour, with which human will make it possible to adjust to variety in the environment. One of the assumptions is that the provision of room for personal development

leads to organizational development. Organizations that include the possibility to reflect on the fundamental question "What is our organization about" will be better able to create or follow market developments than organizations which continue to carry out activities in a routine and predominantly functional way. Giving up a position in a power relation means giving up a person's own position of specialness. The way individuals in an organization deal with the fact that the activities they carry out will eventually cease to exist will lead to other ways of working in the organization. The feeling that personal activities will by definition – end can lead to priorities, focused goals and the preservation of old routines. This will be the basis of their professional decisions and actions. The personal guiding principle in these cases may contribute to the overall continuity of the organizations long as this is significant and relevant for the continuation of the present themes and power relationships.

Leadership and communication:

It might be argued that leadership, however defined, and when all is said and done, *is* communication. In other words, leadership is no more than one aspect of communication although, of course, communication need not involve leadership. Perhaps, as we argue here, it may be the case that communication as it is understood from an existentialist perspective precludes the notion of a relationship that invokes 'leader' and 'follower'. Much is traditionally assumed, within and beyond the leadership literature, about communication and its purpose. In connection with leadership, it is often regarded instrumentally, that is, effective communication is necessary so that other things can occur: effective performance, motivation, inspiration and understanding.

Discussion and Proposed Framework for improving employee development:

Based on literature and arguments of philosophers on human existence, existential fears, leadership and organizational behavior, we are able to develop a framework for the improvement of employee development and understanding of their surrounding situations and interactions with other fellow human beings from which they interpret their individual meaning of life.

Firstly there needs to be an understanding of the fact that individuals process information in their own unique way to better understand the situation around them. This calls for our own realization of individual existence in any organizational setting. Camus suggested that this consciousness of existence gives us the freedom to make choices in our existence. This means

that we are continually forced to make choices and we must be personally responsible for our decisions. In the words of Verhofstadt-Dene`ve (2001) "A person cannot not make a decision". Every decision that is made has consequences for our future actions. So humans, as individuals must recognize their individual existence and should be responsible for their actions and its consequences. Manager, as a leader should encourage and communicate in a way to promote individuality rather than imposing decisions which could hinder creative process.

Secondly, Yalom's another existential fear can be taken to explain the expected employee behavior. As we have already endorsed his idea about Man's individual will, we further take this concept to connect it with "Freedom" of expression and speech. Heidegger argued that human existence has a dual nature, the individual is an object in the world, he is exists "there", but he also constitutes what is there. This is the duality, the individual (Heidegger calls him a "Dasein") is an empirical ego, an object, but also a transcendental ego, which constitutes itself and the world (Yalom, 1980). Freedom is closely linked to responsibility. If freedom is linked to responsibility, ever employee as an object in organization should have "Freedom" to interpret their own meanings of the situations surrounding them. Being fully aware of one's existential situation means that one becomes aware of self-creation(Yalom, 1980). We give meaning to the situations around us and confront the world in our own way. This confrontation is two sided, one is to take responsibility of our personal life and the other one is to understand the "Willingness" associated with freedom. On must be able to exercise freedom and control his "will" to be successful in organizational settings.

Thirdly, people tend to be regulated and motivated by some external forces and factors. These factors might reside in their social networks in the form of coworkers and theirs leaders. Proper channel of communication enhances the understanding of surrounding world. Emphasis is placed on understanding the nature of communication from an existentialist perspective and so Jaspers' conceptualization of existential communication is introduced along with important related concepts that may be regarded as important facets of leader communication including Being in-the-world, the Other, inter subjectivity, dialogue and indirect communication. (Ashman & Lawler, 2014)

Lastly, Existential isolation can also be explained to enhance the process of employee development. Existential isolation does not mean "Social isolation" only, it also refers to the fact

the individual is fundamentally only and he steers his life in a particular direction. He is the one who knows his thoughts and deepest feelings of outer world and he himself knows what is better for him and what does he wants in his life (Blomme, 2003). One human being springs from the other one and this is what develops him an individual man with unique existence. He evolves as an individual of his own. This is what makes the fear of existential isolation so unique and why it plays an important part in every relationship (Blomme, 2003). Deriving from this discussion we can say that a man needs to realize that he is the one who has to make his own decision to be successful in any workplace setting and in other areas of the life as well. Mangers need to facilitate their employees in a way which can motivate them to find their way to proceed and advance in a particular organization. This calls for the "motivator" role of leadership by manager and his communication skills which can contribute a lot to employee success.
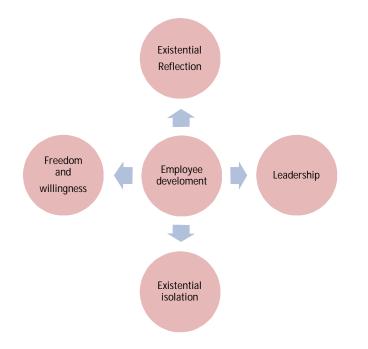

Fig 1: Framework derived from Yalom's existential fears for employee development

Conclusion:

Based on the literature review, existential reflection can bring certainty for the employees to know that they are the one need to know their individual existence. Individuals are responsible for their actions in any given situation because every individual interprets the meaning of this world in their own way which makes him unique from the others around him. When individuals confront situations differently, they would have different ways to cater with their situations and in doing so; they would end up with something unique in their own way. Employees are an important part of an organization. They exist to achieve organizational goals while working in their own way and interpretation of the world. Philosophers have said much about the existential reflection of human being in his life. Similarly, when employees become a part of an organization, they need to know their own individual existence and their purpose of existence in a particular setting. Taking from the literature and understanding of philosopher's opinions, we are able to develop a framework consisting of the existential fears and leadership, which would help employees to be able to realize their purpose and can open the ways to understand the world. Leadership has also taken because human beings are driven by someone and they seek guidance towards their goals. Communication from leaders can also improve understanding of the world.

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