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Organizing with purpose: Between ideals and idols

English summary

Prof.dr.ir. Elco van Burg, October 28, 2021

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

[Cardinal Dearden, 1979]

We are facing crucial changes and science has an important role in these changes. (George et al., 2016). These changes deal with the forces from nature that turned around our lives. These changes have to address the exploitation of nature and global warming, and need to deal with a transition which is taking too much. These changes also need to take care of global inequalities and their consequences, including mass migration, which call for justice. Change is needed because how we as humans collaborate is at the core of all these and other issues.

Human collaboration with a certain purpose and meaning, that is the core of organizational theory. Today I would like to address this purpose and discuss how we organize meaningfully.

Different ideals

Organizing with purpose does not mean you can organize with or without purpose. Purpose is defined as that which gives direction and provides the core reason for an organization's existence and where it is heading to (George et al., 2021; Hollensbe et al., 2014). Meaning, which I also frequently use in this address, is broader, as organizing can carry multiple meanings.¹

What purpose and what meaning do we aim for in organizing? Govert Buijs has categorized human action, and with that the purpose of those actions, in three categories:² caring for, transposing and facilitating life (Buijs, 2019). Caring for deals with maintaining life: providing food for ourselves and taking care of life in our direct environment. Of course, this also includes caring for children, sick, elderly and others who need help. It also includes education, which hands over 'life' to the next generation. Transposing deals with making life comfortable and nicer, such as through technology, art, design et cetera. Through attempts to understand life, such as in religion or philosophy, life is also enriched. The third category, facilitating, includes governing and coordinating life and financing and crediting life, which also covers trade activities.

Using these three categories, it becomes clear that all too often management sciences have focused on facilitating as the ultimate purpose, while it would make more sense to see facilitating as a means to care or to enrich life (transposing). Well-known questions in management research are: How to increase efficiency of our activities? And how does that lead to more profit, better return on investment for the shareholders? Purpose like caring or transposing is all too often lost.

Of course, and luckily, there are other voices, which increasingly become louder and important (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1994; Hoffman, 2021). Some call to – at least in Europe – to return to the Rhineland tradition in which caring is the purpose, instead of aiming for anglo-saxon shareholder style firms (Hodges & Woolcock, 1993; Romme, 2016). Others advocate to stakeholder- instead of shareholder-models which also put caring front and center (e.g., Harisson & Freeman, 1999; Trevino & Weaver, 1999). Likewise, in hybrid organizations like social ventures, social and commercial goals go hand in

¹ Recent management literature has scarce attention for meaning, but more attention for purpose of organizations. Recently, there is also an increase in studies that focus on meaningful work (e.g., Bailey et al., 2019; Michaelson et al., 2014), which in particular attends to the individual level. Next to that, in the last decades scholars have studied how people make sense of what they do and how that guides their decision-making (e.g., Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995).

² Buijs builds here on Hannah Arendt's distinction of labor, work and action (Arendt, 1958).

hand (e.g., Dacin et al., 2011). These calls and modes in fact enrich the pallet of meanings in human collaboration. That provides a firm foundation for rich ideals for organizations and organization theory.

Idolatry and idleness

Everyone has such ideals, someone we aim for, implicitly or explicitly. In organizing these ideals can be related to the three categories discussed: caring, transposing and facilitating. Those ideals are beautiful. They motivate and direct human action. Yet, I see two risks in aiming for ideals: idolatry and idleness.

First, an ideal can turn into an idol. Max Weber stated that each life domain has its own value sphere, as a god which is worshipped in that domain (R. Friedland, 2013; Weber, 1946). These gods are often implicit and not-rational, but form almost transcendent goals to which people aim for in practice. Theologians point out that good ideals can become idols if they receive too much attention, start to dominate other domains (Keller, 2009). Profit for instance is important keep an organization running, also when focusing on caring or transposing, yet when profit becomes the sole aim it starts to dominate and the purpose is lost. Things get out of balance when one goal becomes totalitarian (Ellul, 1977). If a firm only focuses on profit or shareholder value, this often comes at the cost of societal impact, the environment and also the employees (cf. Harisson & Freeman, 1999; Hillman & Keim, 2001). Every ideal can turn into an idol, with important consequences.

A second risk is that an ideal becomes idle, empty. Greenwashing is a well-known example of an ideal that became idle. Terms like corporate social responsibility and sustainability have been all too often used as just a frame of existing business practices (Laufer, 2003). Many firms have engaged in greening existing products without really engaging in sustainable transformation (Hoffman, 2021). As if through a sustainability report a firm starts to operate really differently.

Between ideals and idols

As I now have addressed the potential degeneration of ideals, the question is: how can we collaboratively organize with purpose and at the same time reduce the risks of idolatry and idleness? The key here is collaboration. Max Webers (1921/2019) seminal work already expressed doubts about organizing 'value-rationality' collaboratively. In other words, organizing with purpose is not a nuisance.

Values are a central term in the discussion of collaborating and organizing with purpose (Rosso et al., 2010), as deep-rooted, leading concepts about what is desirable (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Kraatz et al., 2020). Organization sociologist Selznick considered values as leading for behavior in relation to ideals which an organization aims for (Selznick, 1957, 1994). Values thus guide human behavior, which subsequently contributes to purpose and providing meaning. Recently, studies have picked up values once again as important for organizations and organizational change (Klein, 2021; Kraatz et al., 2020). I partly build on that work in my research on organizing with purpose.

Organizing with purpose faces a number of key problems (Adler & Heckscher, 2018). First, values in larger collective differ between people and groups, and there is not automatically consensus about which values and which purpose should be leading. Second, if values are turned into norms, people tend to focus on the norms instead of values (norm-replacement). Third, a larger collective needs a certain degree of central decision making and leadership, which comes at the cost of individuals who act based on their own value-systems.

To organize with purpose, therefore, first of all a shared vision is needed, possibly formulated by means of an open, internal dialogue (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; George et al., 2021; Romme, 2016) or rather through moral leadership of middle- and higher management (Solinger et al., 2020). A strong narrative can link values, behavior and ideals in order to organize with purpose. If an organization, however, does not get beyond just a narrative, it turns into just another instance of social-washing or greenwashing.

Therefore, the second element is necessary, which is, however, much more difficult. Organizing with purpose has to become embedded in organizational practices, structures, remuneration and the governance of an organization (George et al., 2021). Next, the means have to be provided to actually organize for that purpose (George et al., 2021; Mayer, 2021).

In my research agenda, I particularly focus on the latter: organizing with purpose through organizational practices and structures, and how to manage that. This area faces many open questions (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; George et al., 2021). These questions in particular revolve around: how can individuals, who want to organize with purpose, agree on what that shared purpose is and which values are leading (Cloutier & Langley, 2017)? How do different values and moral evaluations lead to tensions in organizing with purpose and how can such tensions be leveraged or can rather turn into a dark side of organizing with purpose (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Demers & Gond, 2020; Dionne et al., 2019)? Are collaborative ways of decision making, for instance, better in order to organize with purpose (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; Etzioni, 1996; Gehman et al., 2013; Romme, 2016)? Research on organizing with purpose does not only require attention for new organizations, but in particular established organizations face large questions in the transitions they face (Solinger et al., 2020).

Ideals and idols in the academy

Not only society and business face transitions, also the academy. Is management research and education not also responsible for managers' focus on profit instead of purpose? Are researchers too much focused on their own success, even through publications shortcuts (e.g., Hicks et al., 2015; Martin, 2013, 2016), resulting in idle research output (Tourish, 2020)? Have scholars lost their purpose somewhere (Gulati, 2007; Knights & Scarbrough, 2010; Van de Ven, 2007; Wickert et al., 2021)? Did not the business schools educate the top managers who are now leading the world of business (e.g., Khurana, 2010; Romme, 2016)?

Without being able to analyze these problems and potential solutions here in great detail (see instead Romme, 2016; Van Burg, 2016) I would like to point at four ways in which organization theory can give a larger contribution to organizing with purpose.

1. Engage with practice-processes of collaboration

Research in organizing with purpose starts with practice (zie Van de Ven, 2007; Wickert et al., 2021). As research, however, tends to abstract and distance from that practice, and deals with a limited set of observations, many practice-processes and meaningful interactions are not well covered. We need to take into account that organizing with purpose is a process and has a temporal dimension, which organizations can use strategically (Berends et al., 2021; Bourne & Jenkins, 2013; Christensen et al., 2020). Organizations can postpone realizing purpose, reformulate it, cancel it, or address it in a new narrative.

We need studies that use social-interactive research methods, which can really capture these practice-processes of collaboration (Elfring et al., 2021; Fuhse & Mützel, 2011; Solinger et al., 2020; Van Burg et al., 2020; Van Burg & Karlsson, 2020). Social network research is one important technique in that toolkit, especially as organizations less rely on traditional hierarchies and network elements become more and more important (Adler & Heckscher, 2018; e.g., Ibarra, 1993; Marineau et al., 2018; Pittz et al., 2019).. Research on organizing with purpose shows that these networks play a large role, to voice concerns, to cluster around concerns, and to trigger actions and reactions (Gehman et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2017). With some colleagues, I recently categorized existing network research into five key action mechanisms: accessing, acquiring, diversification, embedding, and associating (Elfring et al., 2021; Van Burg et al., 2021). I suppose these five mechanisms also play a crucial role in organizing with purpose, both negatively as well as positively (see also Fuhse, 2009).

2. *Study positive, as well as negative meaning*

As ideals can degenerate into idols or idleness, we learn that organizing with purpose also has potential dark sides. These dark sides need to be recognized, but are often neglected, not only in practice, but also in research (e.g., Klyver et al., 2011). Collaboration in general has the dark sides of conflicts, opportunism and unethical behavior (Klyver et al., 2011; Oliveira & Lumineau, 2019). Also recent research on purpose and values has predominantly focuses on the positive sides (e.g., Kraatz et al., 2020). Yet, as researchers we need to understand the dark sides of idols and idleness in order to be able to shed light on the dynamics and explain when positive impact turns negative. When people, for instance, are not able to keep up with their ideals, they turn to hypocrisy through lying, which, paradoxically, reinforces the ideals (March, 2007).

3. *Research potential worlds, instead of the existing*

Research on organizing with purpose faces an open future, ideals that are realized in the future. Therefore, we need not only explain what has been, but we need to provide guidance for what can be (Romme, 2003, 2016; Simon, 1969). In fact, we know quite a bit about organizing with purpose, but we often do not turn that into actionable knowledge which can be put into practice. Generating such actionable knowledge has to be done in close engagement with practice (Van Burg et al., 2008; Van de Ven, 2007). More radically, this implies that we need to research with, instead of for practice (Dimov et al., 2021). That research needs to result in relevant products, not only publications, but also practical models, dialogic methods, exemplar solutions et cetera (Dimov, 2016; Van Burg et al., 2008; Van Burg & Romme, 2014).

4. *Meaningful and character-developing research*

At the core, professor is a lecturer (in Dutch *hoogleraar*). That implies that my last, but not the least, remark is about education. As academy, we have tremendous influence through educating the next generation of workers, leaders and entrepreneurs. What does that imply for organizing our education with purpose? First of all, students need to learn to think systematically. The challenges we face require collaboration and understanding the bigger picture. Next, critical thinking and reflection form the core of academic education (J. Friedland & Jain, 2020). That is crucial, as through hubris, pride and overconfidence ideals will turn into idols and negative sides are easily neglected. It is necessary that students develop moral character as a compass to their daily decisions. I am thankful that I can fulfill the office of professor at the Vrije Universiteit, as moral character formation is at the core of educational practices here.

Shalom

What is the meaning of an organization? With what purpose do we organize? The meaning of the three activities of caring, transposing and facilitating is synthesized in the Hebrew *shalom*, which means 'peace' in a very broad sense. It can be interpreted as humans flourishing in all their relationships, with themselves, others, God, and their physical environment (Wolterstorff, 1983). An old hymn sings points at this vision:

Love and truth will embrace; justice and peace will kiss.
Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven.
(Psalm 85)

That is dazzling vision, something that does not seem to be possible for mortal humans. Justice, peace, truth – these are big words which. Yet, I believe we are called, also in organizational theory, to work guided by this vision. Not as a messiah, but just as a worker, each day laboring for *shalom*.

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