

The unconscious at work; how hidden patterns in organizations may hamper social innovation

Abstract

Social innovation is the renewal of labour organisation that leads to improved performance by the organisation. The innovations that are promoted under the heading of social innovation often require substantive behavioural change on the part of employees and managers. However, in many organisations there are hidden, often unconscious forces at work that make it difficult to implement these new ways of working. In this paper Maslow's hierarchy of needs and transactional analysis theory are used to identify possible barriers for the implementation of social innovation. A case study is presented to show how potential barriers can be identified.

Keywords

Social innovation, managerial and organizational innovation, change management, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, transactional analysis theory

Introduction

In the Netherlands, managerial and organizational innovations have been coined "social innovation". The term is meant to indicate a contrast between technological innovation and innovation of organisational structures, management and processes. To promote social innovation, the Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation has been founded, as part of the Dutch Innovation Agenda. The aim of this center is to "contribute to the enhancement of labour productivity, better use of talent within organizations and enhancement of 'fun at work'" (Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation, 2009a).

The Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation defines social innovation as "a renewal in labour organisation and in labour relations that leads to improved performance by the organisation and realisation of talents" (Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation, 2009b). The term should not be confused with social innovation policy, a term used in the USA for policy aimed at solving social problems. For example, the White House has a special office for social innovation. Volberda and Van de Bosch don't use the term social innovation to avoid this confusion. They talk about 'managerial and organizational innovation' (Volberda & Van den Bosch, 2004)

The innovations that are promoted under the heading of social innovation include ways to improve the labour organisation, labour relations and the relations between an organisation and others (Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation, 2009b). Social innovation includes giving employees the opportunity to determine their own working hours and schedules (self-

scheduling), involving them in strategy development and innovation, and giving them a say in the way processes are organised.

Many of these measures may seem quite obvious and simple to implement. However, most of them often require substantive behavioural change on the part of employees and managers which makes them difficult to implement. Organisations often seem resistant to this change. In this paper we hypothesize that in organisations there are hidden forces at work that make it difficult to implement new ways of working. Organisations have an “unconscious life” (Mosse, 1994) and these unconscious forces may hamper the implementation of social innovation measures.

This paper explores the nature of the unconscious life in organisations to identify possible barriers for the implementation of social innovation. It employs two different theoretical bodies to look at the hidden patterns in organisations: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), and transactional analysis, a theory of personality originally developed by Eric Berne (Berne, 1964). To illustrate the application of these two theoretical perspectives we will present the results of a small case study of an educational institution in which a questionnaire was used to assess whether there were barriers to change in the unconscious patterns of the organisation.

The paper is structured as follows. First we will explore the innovations that are promoted under the heading of social innovation from a change management perspective. Then we will present the two theoretical perspectives on the unconscious life in organisations. Next we will illustrate how these can be used to identify possible barriers for social innovation using the case study. We will conclude with some suggestions for further research.

Social innovation and organisational change

Under the heading of social innovation a number of approaches are promoted. They can be divided into three groups: improving the labour organisation, improving labour relations and improving the relations between an organisation and others (Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation, 2009b). Improving the labour organisation includes among other things giving employees the opportunity to determine their own working hours and schedules (self-scheduling), involving them in the development of new ideas, and giving them a say in the way processes are organised. Improving labour relations includes the involvement of employees in strategy formulation and decision-making, encouraging learning and innovation, and the promotion of trust. Improving the relations between an organisation and others includes among other things the involvement of external partners (suppliers, clients, people in the community, knowledge organisations) in innovation and the involvement of the organisation in the community and with social issues (Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation, 2009b).

The organisational measures promoted under the heading of social innovation seem to be straightforward and not difficult to implement. However, they are based on the following prerequisites that are not always fulfilled in organisations. First, involvement of employees assumes there is a communicative relationship between managers and employees. These two groups must be ‘on speaking terms’, there must be a willingness to listen to each other, and to respond to the others’ actions. Second, these measures require a certain level of trust between managers and employees, a feeling of safety, and an idea of mutual respect. Third, the measures assume a certain level of ‘rational’ behaviour by members of an organisation. They assume members are conscious of their actions, are able to act in a responsible way based on

logical reasoning. In short, social innovation requires a certain level of maturity of the organization and its members.

Organisations are not always mature and rational. In organisations non-rational, unconscious, and systemic processes are at work (Armstrong & Huffington, 2004). Organisational life has an emotional undertow (Armstrong, 2004) that can act as a powerful source of success but also as a source of failure. Organizations can have a 'dark side' (Vaughan, 1999); for example, members of organisations can be cynical about change as a result of a history of change programs that are not consistently successful (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997); or leaders may be destructive and their followers susceptible (Tierney & Tepper, 2007; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007).

In many organisations a lot is going on "below the surface" (Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle, & Pooley, 2004) that may hamper social innovation. The relationship between management and employees may be damaged. There may be a lack of trust and mutual respect. There may be unconscious patterns at work that counter the innovation and hinder organisational change. This is yet to be addressed in the social innovation literature and practice. In order to look below the surface different perspectives are needed. In the next two chapters we will present two theoretical perspectives that may help identify hidden barriers to social innovation.

Deficiency needs in organisations

One way to look for hidden barriers to social innovation is to check whether the basic needs of employees are fulfilled. A useful tool is Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). According to Maslow, people have at least five sets of goals which he calls basic needs. They are physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs. These basic goals are related to each other, being arranged in an hierarchy. When a need is fairly well satisfied, the next need emerges. Herzberg (1966) translated these needs to the workplace. He identified eight "hygiene factors" that must be present in a job before motivators can be used to stimulate an employee, including working conditions, salary and benefits, job security, and status.

In his work on theory X and Theory Y, McGregor grouped Maslow's hierarchy into "lower order" (Theory X) needs and "higher order" (Theory Y) needs (McGregor, 2006). Theory X and Y are two opposing perceptions about how people view human behaviour at work. Theory X states that people have an inherent dislike for work and will avoid it whenever possible. In this theory, management's role is to coerce and control employees. In Theory Y the assumption is that for people work is as play and rest. People are not lazy and will exercise self direction if they are committed to the objectives. In Theory Y, management's role is to develop the potential in employees and help them to release that potential towards common goals.

Social innovation is closely related to Theory Y. Both social innovation and Theory Y assume that employees are self-motivated and capable of using creativity, ingenuity, and imagination to solve organizational problems. Following McGregor, Herzberg and Maslow we therefore hypothesize that in organizations lower order needs need to be fulfilled before social innovation can take place.

This means that the physiological needs of employees need to be satisfied and they need to feel safe, both physically and emotionally. They must experience social relations and a sense

of belonging and acceptance. And they must feel respected and have self-esteem and self-respect. These deficiency needs or hygiene factors need to be taken care of otherwise employees will not be motivated to get involved. If they are not fulfilled. Employees on the surface may act as if they are participating, but below the surface they will ignore the changes or actively oppose them. Taking stock of the fulfilment of the basic needs can provide insight into the readiness of the organization to adopt social innovation.

Unconscious patterns in organisations

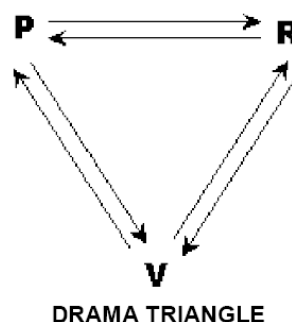
Another way to look for hidden barriers to social innovation is to identify hidden patterns of behaviour in organizations. Managers and employees bring their individual differences to work each day. They bring their personal history, their past experiences in the organisation, their personality, and their ambitions and frustrations. At an unconscious level these elements play a role in the behaviour of people. When people bring this heritage into organisations different forms of group dynamics starts to take place. Group dynamics are the actions, processes and changes that take place within a group (Forsyth, 2009). These dynamics may take the form of structural patterns of behaviour (“scripts”) that are either productive or unproductive. These behavioural patterns are part of the organisational culture (Schein, 2004).

Scripted organizational behaviour is often performed unconsciously (Gioia & Poole, 1984). People can become entrained in such a script, and if so their speech, behaviour and reasoning styles will express the pattern in which they are entrained (Henning, 2008). Unproductive patterns of behaviour may hamper social innovation. But as these patterns often take place at an unconscious level they are often not noticed (Henning, 2008). Bringing these patterns to the surface may help identify barriers for social innovation and create the opportunity to address them.

Many patterns of behaviour may exist. For example, Senge (1990) lists seven patterns that hamper the ability to learn in organizations. A particular way of looking at these patterns is by seeing them as a game (Berne, 1964). A game is a series of transactions between people that each play a different role. A game has a predictable pattern and a certain payoff for those playing it. Often the players switch roles during the game. The payoff makes for people play the same game over and over again. The payoff can take the form of certain resulting feelings (such as anger or superiority) or taking or avoid taking certain actions.

Berne identified dozens of games. In this paper we will focus on one particular pattern of behaviour that was first described by Karpman (1968) and which is called the drama triangle (Figure 1). This pattern is more intense than a regular game with a greater number of events, a greater number of switches per event, while one person often plays two or three roles at once.

Figure 1: The drama triangle



The three roles in the drama triangle are the Victim (V), the Persecutor (P) who pressures coerces or persecutes the victim, and the Rescuer (R) who wishes to help the victim without being asked. The drama is in the fact that people may suddenly switch roles, and others will often switch unconsciously to match this. In organisations the drama triangle may be played by the participants to avoid having to take action or responsibility, to receive attention, or to experience feelings of anger, superiority or moral superiority, among others.

A wonderful (albeit fictional) example of the drama triangle is given by De Graaf and Kunst (2008, translation by the author):

“During the team meeting the members of the management team show their disrespect for their boss in a rather obvious way. Arjen shows he does not give a damn, Carla is coughing in a noticeable way, Kees is critical as ever, Anton is drawing recognizable cartoons of fellow team members, and Mirjam uses body language to show her disagreement. The behaviour of the team members seems to be one big Persecution of their boss Rutger, who feels Victim of this behaviour. He feels that his team member want him to know he is a failure. In the afternoon he confronts his boss, director Ben, with this behaviour. “There is no energy in this team anymore”, he complaints, “they don’t take me serious anymore”. Ben has all the characteristics of a true Rescuer and he decides to have a firm conversation with the team. This meeting fails miserably. The director, whose intention was to rescue Rutger, takes on the role of Persecutor of the team members. The team members switch from Persecutors of Rutger to Victims of Ben. During the next team meeting Ben explains that it had never been his intention for Ben to take this action. He wants to be the Rescuer of his team members. He adds that everybody knows that Ben is not a very skilled communicator, thereby persecuting Ben. Immediately Kees responds: “I think that you as team leader should show more respect for our director!”. A new rescue, a new persecution. Etcetera, etcetera.”(p. 124).

The drama triangle as a structural pattern in organizations is unproductive or even harmful in a number of ways. The players do not take responsibility for their role in sustaining the pattern. They don’t take responsibility for breaking out of the pattern and improving the situation. Instead, responsibility is passed around and nothing happens. Furthermore, the drama triangle harms constructive relationships between the players. It makes people avoid a real confrontation in which players might feel vulnerable, but as a result it allows that a conversation about the real issues in the organisation does not take place. And it creates a level of distrust in the organization. One of the pay-offs of the drama triangle is that it constantly reconfirms the participants way of looking at the organisation (De Graaf & Kunst, 2008). It sustains a particular view of the world (“I told you do”) and as a result the need for change is not felt.

A way to look for hidden barriers to social innovation is to look for drama triangle patterns in teams. The aim of social innovation is to empower employees and teams at a low level in the organisation. But teams that behave according to the drama triangle will not be willing to take up that responsibility.

Identifying barriers in organisations, a small case study

Both Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Karpman’s drama triangle can be used to identify hidden potential barriers to social innovation. This was done in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the Netherlands using a simple questionnaire. About 100 members of the organisation were questioned during a lecture about the unconscious life in the HEI using an audience response system. This enabled an informed response because each question could be

introduced by providing background information about Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Karpman's drama triangle. This questionnaire technique is similar to the Choice Questionnaire used in policy studies (Neijens, 1987) and allows for more complex issues to be questioned.

The lecture took place during an annual teachers training conference organised by the HEI. The sample was not totally representative for the teachers population for two reasons. First, it is likely that the more motivated teachers joined the conference. Second, the audience had chosen the lecture out of an array of lectures and workshops as part of their personal program for the day. It is likely that the lecture had attracted an audience interested in the unconscious life in the HEI.

During the lecture, questions were asked about Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Karpman's drama triangle. In addition, questions were asked to highlight other aspects of the unconscious life in the HEI not discussed above: the dominant working styles in the organisation (Hay, 1992), the role of emotions (Frost, 2003), and way the organisation deals with strokes (Steiner, 1974).

Dominant working styles (or "drivers" in transactional theory) are characteristic ways of behaving. They are based on messages people pick up during childhood and they become part of the way they lead their lives. Kahler (1975) identified five working styles: Be perfect, Be strong, Try hard, Please others, and Hurry up. Organisation also can have a dominant working styles, which can be the result of the leadership style of a current or previous leader. In the questionnaire respondents were asked which working style is dominant in the organisation.

The way organisations deal with emotions is also part of the unconscious life within organisations (Frost, 2003). In the questionnaire a distinction was made between five basic emotions: Angry, Afraid, Happy, Sad, and Body feeling. Body feeling is the feeling of pain or anxiety in the body as a result of suppressed feelings. In the questionnaire respondents were asked which emotion was well known in the organisation and which emotion employees were not allowed to show.

In transactional analysis theory a stroke is a unit of human recognition (Berne, 1964). Strokes can be positive or negative. They can be given conditionally ("you did a good job") or unconditionally ("you are a good person"). The way an organizations deals with strokes can be an indicator of how healthy the unconscious life in the organisation is. In healthy organisations members receive a good dose of positive conditional strokes. The questionnaire asked the respondents whether they felt they received sufficient positive strokes. Table 1-5 show the results of the questionnaire.

Table 1: Results of the questions on deficiency needs

N=99

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I experience sufficient safety and security within our organization	9%	49%	38%	3%
I experience sufficient social relations and a sense of belonging and acceptance in our organisation	29%	51%	17%	3%
I feel acknowledged and valued in our organization	8%	56%	32%	4%

Table 2: Results of the question on the drama triangle

N=98

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
I encounter the drama triangle in my daily work in our organisation	1%	48%	43%	8%

Table 3: Results of the question on dominant working styles

N=97

	Be perfect	Be strong	Try hard	Please others	Hurry up
Which working style do we know well in our organisation?	10%	3%	28%	4%	55%

Table 4: Results of the questions on emotions

N=97

	Angry	Afraid	Happy	Sad	Body feeling	None
Which emotion do we know well within our organisation?	38%	34%	6%	4%	10%	7%
Which emotion are we not allowed to show within our organisation?	24%	27%	8%	15%	8%	18%

Table 5: Results of the question on strokes

N=95

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
In my work, I receive sufficient positive strokes	12%	60%	25%	3%

Forty-three percent of the respondents indicate that they do not experience sufficient safety and security within the organisation (table 1). This can be explained by the fact that the HEI is the result of a merger, after which the dominant leadership style has been to install fear among employees to pursue organisational goals. Although the responsible leader has left the organisation for a couple of years, people still feel this fear, as table 4 indicates: fear is the second best known emotion and also the emotion employees are the least allowed to show. Experiencing fear while not being allowed to show it can create a dangerous cocktail of emotions in the unconscious life in organisations.

Table 1 indicates that more is going on below the surface in this HEI. Most employees experience sufficient social relations and a sense of belonging and acceptance, however, more than one third indicate they don't feel acknowledged and valued. This despite the fact that seventy-two percent indicates they receive sufficient positive strokes. When asked to specify this, the group pointed out they receive positive strokes from their direct colleagues and much less so from management. There seems to be a tension between management and employees. Another indicator for this can be seen in table 3. More than half the respondents indicate that "Hurry up" is the main working style in the organisation. After the merger management

pushed hard to reorganise the structure of the organisation and to substantially change the primary process of teaching. Although management four years after the merger recognized that the speed of change had been too high, employees still feel this “breathing down the neck” management style of the past. Finally, over half the respondents indicate they recognise the drama triangle often in their daily work. This seems to be a dominant organisational script in the unconscious life of this HEI.

What emerges from this questionnaire is the picture of an organisation in which a lot is going on under the surface. People don't feel secure. They have suppressed emotions. There is a lack of trust between employees and management. As a result members play the irrational script of the drama triangle so they don't have to take responsibility for change. These are indications that the prerequisites for social innovation (a communicative relationship between managers and employees, trust between managers and employees, and a certain level of 'rational' behaviour) are not all fulfilled.

Conclusion

The success of social innovation as a change program within the Dutch Innovation Agenda will depend on the successful implementation of its ideas. The topic of implementation has not yet received enough attention in the program. More research is needed into the prerequisites for successful implementation of social innovations. We need insight into what the barriers for implementation are, how they can be identified, and how they can be overcome. As a contribution to this debate we hypothesized in this paper that in many organisations there are hidden, unconscious forces at work that make it difficult to implement social innovation. Revealing this unconscious life requires a set of perspectives that can uncover patterns of behaviour that are disruptive for change. We suggested Maslow's hierarchy of needs and transactional analysis theory as means to identify these innovation barriers. In the case of a HEI, these perspectives proved to be useful. The findings indicated that barriers exist and the barriers could be given meaning by including the recent history of the organization into the analysis.

Further research is needed to empirically test the hypothesis that elements in the unconscious life in organisations hamper the implementation of social innovation. This requires a study of both unsuccessful and successful implementations of social innovation. In such a study, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and transactional analysis theory can be used to identify variables that might explain the level of success of social innovation implementations.

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