

**Vitality in organisations:
fit till the finish.**

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BEWARE OF CORPORATE QUACKS!

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Since my presentation will be rather critical of one specific aspect Human Resource Management (HRM), it is wise to state at the beginning that I am as a philosophically trained sociologist a warm advocate of the integration of HRM in the administration of organisations in the fields of business administration and public administration. The main theme of this conference – ‘Vitality in organisations: fit till the finish’ – is in my opinion well chosen and very relevant. Whatever the business is – an industrial factory, a governmental department, or an institution like the university – the main focus should be, at all times, the people who work in it, and who in the final analysis are the key factor of its success. It is indeed adamant that they are fit – physically as well as mentally.

But here my problems and worries begin. The physical and mental well-being of personnel – often briefly called *wellness* – has become a rather important market for scores of greedy quacks. A quack, the dictionary tells us, is ‘a person who pretends, professionally or publicly, to skill, knowledge, or qualifications which he does not possess; a charlatan.’ The dictionary adds still another significant feature of the quack: ‘to advertise or sell with fraudulent claims’.

This neat and concise definition of the quack pertains to the medical field, more precisely to the rather extensive and often nebulous world of alternative healing methods. I shall deal with that briefly by way of introduction, but my main point in this presentation is that there have been and still are many quacks in the areas of business administration and public administration, particularly in the field of HRM. I admit that there is a normative bias in my presentation. It is precisely because I find HRM so immensely important that I am worried about the invasion of charlatans in this field, as well as about the naïve acceptance of them by most organisations.

So much by way of introduction. Let us have a closer look at this disturbing phenomenon.

It was quite smart, if not shrewd, of the infamous Radovan Karadzic to disguise himself as a paramedical guru, when he tried to avoid his arrest and the subsequent trial at the Yugoslavia Tribunal in The Hague. He looked like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the days that this guru still wore a rough beard and hairdo. As a fugitive Karadzic was not the prototype of an alleged war criminal. He wore his long hair bundled in a knot on top of his head which, according to one of his assistants, served to enable him to receive various cosmic energies. In other words, he had some sort of metaphysical antenna on his head. During all those years of his existence as a fugitive, the unsuspecting people around him were made to believe that he was an expert in alternative medicine and spirituality. This was, as so much else in his life, a blatant lie which was demonstrated, when he at last appeared before the said tribunal. The beard was gone, and when he needed his 'various energies' the most, he wore his old, full hairdo again, and to boot was dressed in a distinct business suit with tie.

Mind you, not all alternative medicine is fraudulent, but we ought to realize that the bulk of it is nonsense. I do believe that mediums, psychics and spirituality experts, are often

driven by honest motives. Not all of them are swindlers. Allow me to share with you a personal memory.

In the beginning of the 1950's my father, at that time still young, suffered a fatal disease and was given up by the official medical profession. My parents, at their wits' end, engaged a kind, little lady who called herself a 'mesmerist', claiming to command over magnetic powers that allegedly could tear diseases from a patient's body. A few times a week she rubbed with her hands over my father's body, collected the 'evil powers', and then 'threw them away' with a clicking sound of her fingers. I was still a young boy then but remember vividly how worried I was that my parents had confidence in this nonsense. I confronted them with my contention. Their sober answer was that formal medicine could no longer be of any help, informal medicine might, and if it doesn't do any good, it doesn't do any harm either. Eventually, the little lady stopped her treatment. Soon after my father's death, she told my mother that she had stopped because she knew for sure that my father would die. One day, she said, she had seen developing a black shape next to my father's body which was connected with his navel. Thus, death had set in, she claimed. Again, although I believed her so-called 'treatment' was nonsensical, I also knew the little lady was not a swindler. To begin with, unlike most charlatans in the paramedical field, she did not make an excessive amount of money.

Now, is the statement 'if it doesn't do any good, it doesn't do any harm either' correct? Often it is, often it is not. As to the latter, alternative 'healers' may well be life-threatening. If they claim, as does happen, that cancer does not exist, that not only special diets but also psychological treatments are helpful, and that thus medical doctors or specialists do not need to be consulted, death that could have been prevented may well be the result. Incidentally, not only the patient, also his or her direct surroundings can be severely damaged psychologically. A colleague and friend of mine, a great legal and sociological expert, turned

to the alternative medical circuit after his doctors had told him that his illness was fatal and that they could no longer treat him effectively. He turned away from the world of formal medicine with an anger and a crunch directed against his former medical doctors. He left his family and settled in an extremely expensive hospital in Switzerland, specialized in all sorts of paramedical, physical as well as mental treatments. Until the unavoidable end he believed what had been told by the sanatorium quacks, namely that he would not die. He refused to take leave from his wife and children who had to cope with this after his death.

So much about quacks in the medical world. It is my contention that something similar has happened in the world of both public and private organisations – the introduction of an alternative HRM, of a sort of para-HRM, practised by charlatans. Academic business administration and public administration, based upon solid scientific research, are, according to me, increasingly passed, if not eroded by quacks who operate as consultants and experts of spiritual HRM. Paramedical quacks apply methods of examination and treatment which have not proven their effective usefulness scientifically. This is also applicable to the HRM-quacks. It cannot be proven scientifically that organisations prosper by alternative HRM-methods in the long run – and, after all, it is the long run which counts, if an organisation invests a lot of money in methods of examination and treatment. If they are being asked about the long run effects of their methods, quacks usually begin to psychologize vaguely. They claim that people are more at ease with themselves and their individual identity, that they function better in the group, and that, after the treatment, the noses go into one direction, and so on.

There are some major characteristics of these HRM-charlatans. I discuss the most important ones.

To begin with, although they usually have not graduated in academic psychology and are not members of an association of professional psychologists, they freely throw around scores of semi-psychological concepts and theories as part of a well-designed impression management. Often it is being claimed, with a wellnigh shamelessly superficial profundity, that they believe in and are inspired by Gustav Jung's depth-psychology. What they pick up from Jung in particular is his admiration of *gnosticism*. This is a Hellenistic semi-religion which claims that in the inner depths of the human soul rests an aboriginal light of divine authenticity. It is, according to the gnosticist, necessary to liberate this divine spark in order for man to be reconciled with himself and the surrounding world. HRM-quacks pretend to update Jungian gnosticism with a staggering verbosity and promise their clients the much needed liberation of their souls. After all, it is the soul which is alienated by the routines of daily life, by the pressures of work in the organisation, by everything which is experienced as being inauthentic. That means, individualism is radicalized into a semi-religious subjectivism which is in search permanently of authenticity, originality, inspiration, creativity.

Now, if one investigates the theories of these quacks at a closer range, one discovers not much more than an amateuristic, rather vulgar psychology which, applying scores of bombastic concepts and terms, is dolled up under the general heading of *spirituality*. In addition esoteric religious and magical practices and ceremonies, usually derived from ancient Asiatic cultures, present rich sources for the mysteries by which quacks try to intoxicate their 'clients'. Bits and pieces from Chinese Confucianism and Taoism, fragments of Zen Buddhism, elements of Native American ceremonies are mixed into a cocktail of subjectivistic *spirituality* which ought to be savored emotionally and thus irrationally. This stands to reason because the main danger, threatening the operations of the quack, is the rationality of man's level-headed mind.

HRM-quacks excel in connecting the would-be liberated soul with *the alleged healing powers of nature*. Like gnostic subjectivism, this turn to nature is also an old phenomenon in the Western world. It is the dislike of technique and rationality, the romantic desire to return to nature, to be united with nature, to be liberated from the pressing strings of society. Also from the restrictive strings of a reason that wants to reflect upon everything logically. All that should be left behind, when one surrenders to the methods and techniques of the HRM-charlatan. Thus, adult and generally sensible people go into nature under the trusted guidance and supervision of a guru – boating on rough waters, engaging in survival trips through barren lands, walking through deserted forests and there embracing trees, sometimes even speaking with them. One quack even had people walking barefeet over burning coals. All this allegedly purifies the body and soul of the quack's 'clients'.

Individualism, this hallmark of modernity, is not only radicalized into subjectivism, it is also restrained by *the rediscovery of the group*. Following the guru we must not only unify ourselves with nature from within, but also feel at one with the other members of the group. Adult people are compelled to give up their sense of embarrassment and self-respect in various rather infantile games. They ought to bare one's soul and to liberate their body in strange poses and awkward movements. Someone who refuses to participate, is called back to the order of the group by means of a soft, moralistic coercion. Such a no-sayer is a spoil-sport and acts contrary to the sensitivity of the group's community. The 'sensitivity training' of the 1960's thus has returned. It promised to purify people, to liberate them from frustrations and repressions. It would allegedly loosen the oppressed soul and render it flexible again. What is not being said is that people, after having been infantilized, can be *manipulated* easily. If looked at from some distance, the methods and techniques of this 'sensitivity training' are in fact methods and techniques of human manipulation. The promised liberty is fake, bogus, sham. It liberates people for the apex of bondage, namely manipulation. I have always

wondered why the worker unions have not fiercely objected to this soft but penetrating form of manipulation. They have probably been misled by the innocent sounding concept of Human Resource Management.

Incidentally, this kind of soft manipulation by the pressures of the group has been perfected and applied by totalitarian regimes. In the days of Stalinism, for instance, the surrender of resisting individuals to the doctrines of communism was not effectuated by physical torture but by the pressures of group consensus. Experiments in social psychology have demonstrated that human beings are very susceptible to such pressures. HRM-quacks are generally experts in this type of manipulation which, needless to add, often comes close to a soft psychological torture. This totalitarian dimension of many para-HRM techniques is usually overlooked.

What else is characteristic of the HRM-quack? Well, you might find it a superficial and thus insignificant fact, but I am always amused and amazed by the glossy brochures which they usually proudly show, when they offer their services to the HRM-department of an organisation. It is filled with the bombastic jargon we discussed before, but also with impressive diagrams with many (often rather confusing) arrows, quadrants and statistical data. Needless to add that nowadays powerpoint presentations are indispensable if one wants to impress the HRM-department one hopes to add to one's customers. Of course, there is nothing wrong with nice brochures and powerpoint presentations. Most bonafide consultants operate with them. But one always picks out the charlatan because his brochures are excessively profound (semi-profound, of course), and loaded with difficult words, concepts, terms. These quacks have developed their own, idiosyncratic jargon. It all seems to be contemporary and modern, but in fact reminds one sooner of the charlatans who in the fairs of the Middle Ages deceived people with their tricks and words. Come to think of it, the

powerpoint presentations of HRM-quacks in particular remind one most of the magicians and charlatans of the days of the Middle Ages.

Unlike the paramedical charlatans, HRM-quacks are, as far as I can see, usually males. But with their rapidly increasing (and much needed, I may add) emancipation in the world of private and public institutions, women will undoubtedly increase the numbers of HRM-quacks. By the way, male clients are usually being admonished to lay bare the 'female side' of their character. Who could object to that, if this is proposed by a female quack? If one would simply refuse to do this by stating 'I'm sorry, but I happen to be solidly male and rather stick to that', one would be chastised severely by the guru and probably also by the other members of the group as obviously being a 'macho sexist', and thus be called to order – the manipulative order of the guru and the group.

In addition, it can be expected that with the growing integration of immigrants into the mainstreams of our society, also quacks of an immigrant descent will increasingly operate in the esoteric market of spirituality. Naturally, many ethnic groups contain traditions in which magic and esoteric philosophies play a dominant role. Organisations which are called upon to increase their diversity may well be grateful clients of these ethnic HRM-quacks.

Meanwhile, the question suggests itself how this wave of spirituality and alternative, rather anti-scientific HRM could come about in a world that otherwise has modernized rather solidly. How can it be explained that organisations often spend lots of money to expose their personnel to HRM-techniques and methods, of which it cannot be demonstrated that they are effective and fruitful in the long run. The question of morality is even more stringent: how can one justify the fact that the techniques and methods used by these quacks are utterly manipulative and in that respect utterly immoral?

The answer is to be found in the sociology of religion. Certainly in the Western-European world, organized religion has greatly lost its grip on people who for various reasons have been individualized rather rapidly. However, these individuals who turned away from the church, the synagogue or temple (with the exception of the Muslims, although imams are worried about their youngsters turning away increasingly from the mosque), are in general not 'irreligious'. On the contrary, outside organized religion there has been scores of movements representing many forms and ideologies of *religiosity*. This religiosity is weakly institutionalized, being embedded in an anti-rational search for meaning. The previously discussed spirituality is a component of this religiosity. It is subjectivistic, emotional, irrational. It is also weakly institutionalized, because it shuns the rationality inherent to all institutions.

Mind you, modern life is very rational and functional. We are permanently driven to perform and to achieve. The pressure of the quarterly accounts in the world of business and the academic compulsion to publish papers regularly in refereed journals are telling examples of this rationalization. But people increasingly ask themselves what the sense and meaning of all this really is. They experience, to paraphrase a famous poem by T.S. Eliot, a spiritual 'wasteland'. This is, of course, an opening in the market of HRM-quacks. For a long time sciences and the university seemed to take over the role of institutionalized religion, but here too a process of de-institutionalization has set in. Faith in academic medicine and in the academic fields of business administration and public administration has declined. Consequently, alternative medicine and alternative business and public administration have gained prominence and filled the respective gaps.

As sociologically understandable as the emergence of para-medical and para-HRM methods and techniques may be, the fact remains that they fail to demonstrate scientifically, that is, logically and rationally, their effectiveness and thus their utility. Moreover – and this

is even worse – they carry distinct dangers, psychologically as well as sociologically. In the case of alternative medicine human suffering and even death are at stake. In the case of alternative methods of HRM an irresponsible and psychologizing manipulation takes place which is not only immoral but may in the long run harm the aims of the relative organisations.

In the Netherlands there has been since 1880 in the field of medicine a Society Against Quackery. It might be a good idea to set up a similar association in the fields of business administration and public administration. This association should be carried and fostered by the relative academic departments, in which fundamental scientific research should offer a solid knowledge of HRM. This would then function as a much needed antidote to the quackery of HRM-charlatans presently operating outside academia in the worlds of business administration and public administration.

As I said at the start of this presentation, I am a firm proponent of HRM. It is for that reason that I am very critical about certain currents in HRM which are not only non-rational and non-scientific, but, what is worse, immoral.

Beware of corporate quacks!

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