

The Meme of Control

Becoming aware of the meme of control

A change of mindset is needed for organizations to reach towards the next stage of their development. With this change of mindset comes along the needed change of language. Currently there is a tendency for organizations, and those 'in-charge' of organizations to lock in a very specific metaphor and language for tackling organizations. Rationalising the goals, specifying targets and then optimizing the outcomes. Applying matrix logic and mobilizing the troops. It's time to make, manage and meet the plan!

Such metaphors and their resulting language are all driven from the underlying assumption of control. Someone having it. Someone applying it. With control holding such intellectual and emotional power over us it may be useful to consider it a meme and in doing so, provide us with a new refreshing perspective. [Susan Blackmore's *Awakening from the meme dream, The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and Our Day-to-day Lives*. Ed. G.Watson, S.Batchelor and G.Claxton; London, Rider, 2000, 112-122]

Generally, a meme is anything which can be imitated [Susan Dawkins "The Meme Machine"]. You could also say a meme is a unit of information (or instruction for behaviour) residing in a brain and passed on by imitation from one brain to another [Richard Dawkins "The selfish Gene"]. Dawkins gives examples of memes such as; ideas, tunes, scientific theories, religious beliefs, clothes fashions, and skills. Let's add one more. The meme of control.

Evolution of the control meme

We are a small tribe species. For thousands of years we have existed in small family units. In open space technology, a large meeting format methodology which allows for up to 5000 people to gather focused on a particular theme, has observed natural group formations of up to 100 people. Other research suggests that the size of groups varies between 8-12 up to a contiguous group size of 150 before groups need to split.

The organizations of today are much larger than what we have been used to as a small tribe species. To compensate for this two social inventions were necessary for us to escape the limitations of our small-tribe inheritance [Bob Dick What happened to bureaucracy]. First, introduce regimentation. By controlling the behaviour of people and reducing the variability of this behaviour it is possible for 1 person to attempt to control the many. There is one problem. Who will control the controllers? Introduce hierarchy and you witness the formation of the traditional organizational structure (see figure 1).

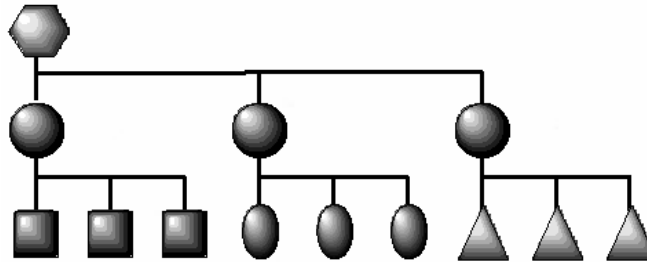


Figure 1: Traditional organisational structure

The control meme in management

Harrison Owen has stated that the history of western management can be described in terms of the unending search for control [The millennium organization]. With the westerners iconic history of the industrial revolution, Henry Ford, Newtonian physics and metaphors of a clockwork universe it's no wonder the control meme is so prominent.

Need more? Recently The Economist [The X & Y factors Jan 19th 2006 The economist] recognized the dominant academic discipline behind the science of management to be engineering. In the late 1970's Oxford allowed management to be taught in a degree called "engineering and management". And that's not all. If you look to who are the famous management gurus and business leaders you will find names such as Michael Porter, Michael Hammer, Tom Peters, Alfred Sloan of GM and Jack Welch of GE. All engineers. Add to this that Frederick Winslow Taylor was father of management science, also being an engineer, and you have real support for the control meme in our population of management science and thinking. I won't even bother to mention the Business process re-engineering trend in the 1990s.

Whilst working towards my PhD I spent a lot of time tutoring engineers. It's no surprise to me that with the emphasized importance of understanding control systems and the methods of controlling systems, that the meme of control is so pervasive and dominant for engineers. One of the greatest breakthroughs in control feedback systems for engineering was the Watts governor, invented by James Watt. The governor is a system that controls the speed of an engine by regulating the amount of fuel admitted, so as to maintain a near constant speed whatever the load or fuel supply conditions. Incidentally, James Watt was a Scottish inventor and engineer whose improvements to the steam engine were fundamental to the changes shaping the Industrial Revolution.

The (un) successful control meme

There is no doubt the control meme has been influential. Without it the industrial revolution wouldn't have been possible and certainly there are many stories of organizations making remarkable progress. Indeed, the control meme has enabled itself to displace many other structures which could have worked for organizations.

Take for example the story of Motorola [The new organization Jan 19th 2006 The Economist]. In the 1970's Motorola was a tightly centralized business with 3 men being

in control in the headquarters at Schaumburg, Illinois. As the company grew however, these same men decided to decentralize the business.

By the mid 1990's business growth was reported to be so fast the leadership team felt it impossible to control. The supposed comfort of the control meme was lurking in their subconscious. Gerard Fairtlough, former CEO of Shell Chemicals and author of "The three ways of getting things done" has suggested that many companies are held back by their addiction to hierarchy. Whichever, in 1998 the company laid off 25000 people and took up the reins of control back at Schaumburg headquarters.

Given, as Bob Dick lucidly states "the central function of organizations is to coordinate effort and expertise" [Bob Dick What happened to bureaucracy]. How then, do organizations operating primarily under the control meme deal with problems? (see Figure 2)

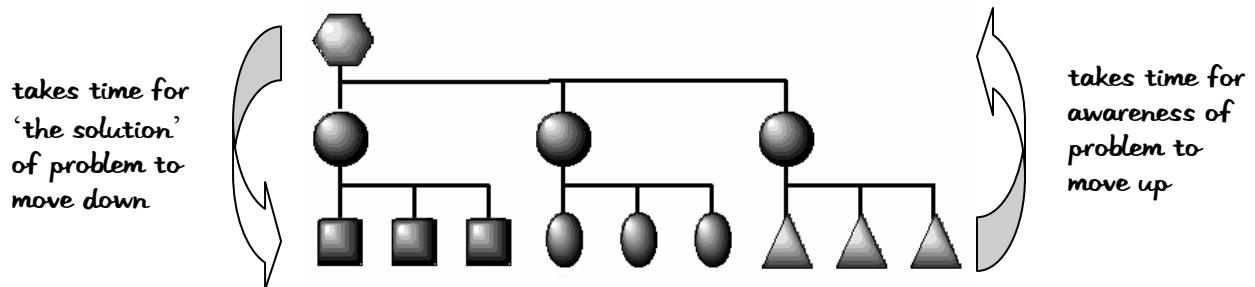


Figure 2: The cycle of problem and solution in a hierarchy

More often than not problems will emerge at the coal face. It takes time for these problems to rise up to management and more time yet for awareness of these problems to rise up to leadership. Once leadership are aware of the problem and then work out their method of attack for the problem and send *the solution* on its merry way down to the managers for implementation at the coal face, its no wonder that the solution often no longer matches the problem, which, now has changed and the whole cycle repeats.

Even if the environment in which this organization lives is stable, slow moving and rarely changes, it is questionable whether this organization will be able to respond effectively. What does this mean for organizations in environments which are highly complex, fast moving, dynamic and always changing?

The impact of the control meme on us

We have discussed the evolution of the control meme and how it naturally (or unnaturally) may find itself into the way an organization works, its structures and hierarchies. There is one other important angle to consider with the control meme. Its effect on us.

It is well known that long distance athletes should eat complex carbohydrates before embarking on marathons. An athlete who consumes simple sugars will be prone to ups and downs, not at all effective to the overall performance of the athlete over the long

distance marathon. The consumption of complex carbohydrates allows the body to slowly process the material and replenish and supply the body for the duration of the marathon. The control meme is like simple sugars. It may provide a quick and easy burst for the way things are done (and controlled) in an organization however there is one significant drawback. Its effect on learning.

In a study of over 6000 people, Chris Argyris – a leading management science theorist, found that people in organisations will move almost naturally into a defensive stance when it comes to making mistakes. This so called defensive reasoning loop has the following four characteristics:

1. To remain in unilateral control
2. To maximize ‘winning’ and minimize losing
3. To suppress negative feelings; and
4. To be as ‘rational’ as possible

These four characteristics lead to conflict, misinterpretation, mistrust, self fulfilling prophecies, limited learning, reduced effectiveness and diminished quality of worklife [Schwarz The Skilled Facilitator].

As Argyris claims in “teaching smart people how to learn” the very success of professionals helps explain the problems they have with learning. People who rarely experience failure end up not knowing how to deal with it. That is, people, especially successful people, will find it very hard to let go since after all, the control meme demands that “I am in control”, “I’m right”, and “my feelings of negativity and inadequacy should be quashed, after all, I’m in control...right?”

Moving on from memes

In the 1960’s Douglas McGregor, a Harvard academic, wrote a highly influential work titled “The Human Side of Enterprise”. In this he divided management styles into Theory X and Theory Y. [The X & Y factors Jan 19th 2006 The Economist]

Theory X was that of command and control, maybe the first recognition of the control meme. Interestingly this theory was built on the belief that management must counteract an inherent human tendency to avoid work. Theory Y on the other hand was based on the assumption that people will exercise self-direction and self-control in the achievement of organizational objectives. Theory Y seeks to challenge employees to innovate and discover new ways of organization.

Clearly, there is an alternative to the control meme. We just have to be aware. Mindful. And open.