

# POS' Power

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I came to Positive Organization Scholarship through the study of really evil organizations. I had been writing a book on *Power and Organizations*, at the centre of which there came to be a chapter on *The Heart of Darkness*, a title obviously borrowed from Joseph Conrad's wonderful novel and inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola's equally remarkable movie, *Apocalypse, Now*. This chapter discussed how total institutions concentrated power relations; it discussed the organization of the Holocaust; the stolen generation of aboriginal children; the institution of the Magdalen Laundries, which spread globally from Eire through the Catholic church; the total institution that was the German Democratic Republic, before it was reunited with West Germany. Using these cases I demonstrated, through abstracting twenty rules for constructing really bad organizations, that these were not somehow off the scale of normal organization; they just depended on the intensification of some normal organization tendencies. Later I went on to write a series of papers about the evils of the Khmer Rouge and the organization of their death camps. I was cornering the market in really bad stuff.

Mired in so much bad stuff, a friend suggested to me why didn't I write about the good that organizations could do. I wasn't convinced that there was a lot of good around and this was before the Hayes Royal Commission, the various reports on the institutional abuse perpetrated by various respected bodies such as the Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and various elite private schools. So, you might understand my scepticism. However, I had good friends who were increasingly working in what was becoming the Positive Organization Scholarship community and they encouraged my opening up to this emerging body of work. It was through working with three of them, Miguel Pina e Cunha, Armenio Rego and Ace Simpson, that our recent book on *Positive Organization Behaviour* came about.

My way of explaining the POS world recently, which occurred to me while giving the only lecture the virus allowed me to deliver this year in a classroom, has been through rethinking something that I learnt as an undergraduate, a long, long time ago. I learnt then that organizations were founded on *Communication*, *Coordination* and *Control*; that communication was through top down imperative command; that coordination was required because of a high degree of differentiation and division of labour and that control consisted of exercising power over subordinates in a hierarchy in order to ensure conformance with organizational and management dictates – today we call these strategies. I also learnt that the corollaries of these Big Three Cs was the Big Three S's: Communication that was top down bred *Sycophancy*, as subordinates sought to anticipate powers' needs; Coordination between different divisions of labour bred *Secrecy*, as each element sought strategic contingency through what they knew and did that others did not know and do; that Control through imperative and impersonal control led to *Sabotage* through alienation and distrust of the machinery, literally and figuratively, of organization.

Well, today I think we need to supplement the Big Three Cs with two further Cs and this is where POS comes in: the two additional Cs are *Compassion* and *Collaboration*. The acquisition of the two Cs can transform old-style management because once Compassion and Collaboration come into play the dynamics of communication, coordination and control change. They do not disappear; they are functional prerequisites the enactment of which in the past is deeply sedimented beneath the surface of present-day structures.

Communication through collaboration changes from top down broadcast to digital mass self-communication networks, through social networking channels, which opens up opportunities for open sourced strategy and innovation as well, one should say, top-down manipulation and abuse of Big Data as we saw with Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. Coordination also

changes as opportunities for digital mass-self communication come into play; however, the biggest difference is in Control exercised through power over people.

It is wise to realize that control through power over people is not the only concept of power on which we can draw. There is also 'power to' and 'power with' as well as 'power over'. While control as *power over* tends to be isolating and dominating, *power to* is empowering, creative and innovative – it recognizes the ability to make things happen while *power over*, the typical form of control, focuses on assuming conformance by punishing non-conformity, labelling it as deviance from performative benchmarks, making sure that some things don't happen, stopping people from doing things. It is not an accident that the most popular academic definition of power saw it as the ability of an A to get a B to do something that the B would not otherwise do. In terms of what organizations can do with power they *can* use it as a negative, corruptive force but we also need to acknowledge that power can be an indispensable force for good.

When we add power with to the mix then we are tapping into the real capabilities that we have, not only the power to do things individually but also the power to conjoin with others in order to do what might otherwise be unimaginable. Without power, nobody "changes the world". Power can be used to liberate as much as it can be used to dominate. Organizations can adopt processes to generate positive approaches to power: creating cultures of speaking up, moving from command and control to empowering, stimulating divergence through devil's advocacy, among others. By powering positivity, organizations are doing a service to themselves as major corporate scandals are, to some extent, a product of the misuse or the abuse of power, as documented in recent scandals such as those involving VW's dieselpgate or the recent Royal Commission into the Banking and Finance Industry.

Of course, the positive can produce intended or unintended negative effects. There is invariably a dialectic, giving rise to the paradoxical side of organizations, including positive organizations. It is important to aim to avoid the "surface positivity" often adopted when promising miraculous

solutions. There are always people making a living out of selling solutions that promise more than they deliver. Modern medicine shows, fakirs and fairs are not entirely absent from modern corporate life; think of contemporary hucksters selling one-minute management or the Anthony Robbins' events. Fostering positivity may be used as an instrumental tool, a moral technology aimed at gaining more effort from more satisfied employees, much as contented cows allegedly produce more milk.

People spend a significant part of their lives at work. Yet, for many, work life is far from fulfilling. As displayed in movies as old as *Modern Times* or as recent as *Horrible Bosses*, life in organizations can be punishing, as expressed in the deaths resulting from work-related suicide in places such as France, China and Japan. Work too often sucks rather than sustains, negating rather than nourishing the spirit, a dismal reality that we would not contest. There is now abundant research suggesting ways to manage people decently, rather than dreadfully, research that we address in our book on *Positive Organizational Behaviour: A Reflective Approach* (Cunha, Rego, Simpson & Clegg, 2020).

## References

Clegg, S. R., Courpasson, D, and Phillips, N. (2006) *Power and Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cunha, M. P. e., Rego, A., Simpson, A and Clegg, S. R. (2020) *Positive Organizational Behaviour: A Reflective Approach*. London: Routledge.