

## PCP IN BUSINESS: A SPECTRUM OF EXPERIENCE

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My introduction to PCP occurred in 1986 through my attendance at a seminar organised by George O'Connor ACX of Aer Rianta, the Irish Airports Authority, and facilitated by Fay Fransella from the PCP Centre in London, in the lovely city of Kilkenny in Ireland. I was researching for my PhD at Trinity College (TCD) at the time. My supervisor and I had become fixated on the subject of how organisations dealt with the topic of quality of service. A lot of threshing around led us eventually to search for a robust model of how managers could blend ideas from organisation theory with psychology to make progress in this area. I was fortunate to discover PCP, in my search for a methodology for measuring perceptions of quality of service. Though he knew nothing about PCP, my supervisor had no hesitation in urging me to deepen my understanding of the subject, and to present work in progress to seminars organised under the aegis of the European Group for Organisation Studies. That resulted in my studying for a Diploma in PCP at the Centre for Personal Construct Psychology in London while finalising my Doctoral Thesis at TCD.

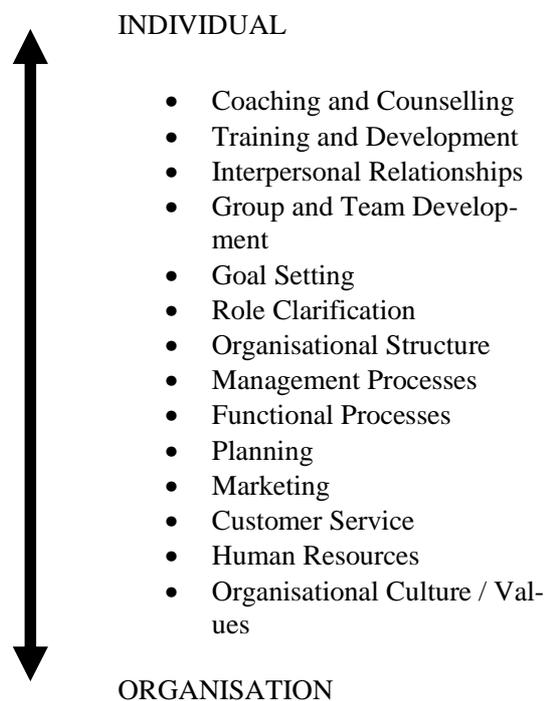
Looking back over my experience as a consultant over the last twenty years, often collaborating with Fay or seeking her advice, I can see how the scope for using PCP in business organisations is enormous. As a professional community we have only scratched the surface in this vast domain. Business organisations are merely aggregates of individuals making sense of streams of events in particular contexts and in relation to particular others. Personal Construct Psychology is the science of human sense making. So how might PCP be used to intervene constructively within a particular organisation?

PCP is principally used in the Therapy, Health Care, and Education contexts. Over the last twenty years, however, a small group of practitioners led by Fay Fransella as a consultant and George O'Connor as a line manager has extended its use into the domain of business organisations. Entry to this domain has been expanded by people like Helen Jones, Devi

Jankowicz, John Porter and Shenaz Kelly Rawat. This brief paper offers a non-exhaustive range of possible interventions initially developed in my paper to the EPCA conference in Florence in 2002 (Brophy, 2002). The paper summarises some of my experiences as a PCP facilitator and shows the diverse possibilities for applying PCP in organisations, and partly meets Fay's intentions for this conference.

### SUMMARY OF PCP APPLICATIONS

Table 1: A spectrum of O.D. interventions using PCP



PCP is a very flexible psychology. One can see this by observing a range of possible interventions in the life of a business organization. The foci of these

interventions are arrayed in Table 1 one below as a spectrum of Organisation Development (O. D.) interventions from one single individual to the culture of large groups of people.

## COACHING AND COUNSELLING

At this level one is closest to the well-developed use of PCP in therapy. Coaching and Counselling are at opposite ends of a spectrum of interventions with individuals in contexts that might be described as 'Opportunistic' through Coaching and 'Distress' through Counselling.

*Opportunistic:* An example could be of coaching individuals to improve their efficiency as managers. One way to do this could be to help individuals to turn their desired management competencies, like 'communicating well' into a series of dichotomous constructs on a repertory grid. They would be asked to rate themselves on two elements- 'me in my job now' and 'me in my job as I'd like to be', say in six months time. Through a process of 'laddering and pyramiding' questions, the person being coached is helped to understand his or her own construing and to design experiments (Dalton & Dunnnett, 2005). He or she then carries out experiments, to test a desired view of himself or herself manifesting the particular competencies, and is helped to reflect on the results.

*Distress:* An example could be counselling individuals to adapt to changes in their lives. One way to do this could be to use PCP to help an individual to cope with the loss of a particular job through demotion or a failure to be promoted. In these contexts the counsellor helps the individual to re-construe the events in question. The aim is to help the client to regain a sense of control and autonomy in their life, through new interpretations, alternative perspectives and careful experimentation, sometimes using fixed role therapy in which I have collaborated from time to time with Franz Epting.

## TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

An example could be training in leadership skills. One way to do this is to take a generic list of the

attributes of a good leader in the particular context of the business unit. Questions are used to elicit dichotomous constructs that could be arrayed on a repertory grid. Clients on a training workshop could be invited to rate themselves on a number of elements on this grid, e.g. 'myself as a leader now', 'a good leader in my business', and 'how I would like to be as a leader in 12 months time'. The ratings could then be pooled anonymously to reveal a pattern for the group to allow individuals to see the degree to which they share experiences with their colleagues. Each client is then helped to find insights from the ratings and to consider actions whereby they could act on their own initiative through experimentation to reach the desired ratings over the time period agreed. Similarly they could be helped to figure out ways in which a change in the context of their jobs could be negotiated to facilitate the desired movement.

## INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

An example could be a form of mediation between two persons perhaps as a prelude to some form of team development in which they would participate. One way to do this is to meet the individuals separately to allow for catharsis of the feelings associated with the breakdown of the relationship. Then one could elicit constructs to do with each client's expectations from the other and reciprocally their notion of what the other expects of him or her. These expectations are then converted into dichotomous constructs in conversation with each client to reveal what they wish to achieve and to avoid. The couple is then brought together against the background of ground rules for a fair process, like e.g. separating the person from the problem, focusing on interests rather than on positions, and no monopolies on the truth, or of being hurt (Fisher & Brown, 1991). Sometimes the cathartic experience has to be continued through one or more meetings with the facilitator inviting each person to achieve sociality with the other by paraphrasing what the other has just said so that each one can get a sense of having been heard. The constructs based upon expectations of each other can then be tested with the two persons for clarity of understanding and acceptance of the various terms can be negotiated. This can take up several sessions and the process

can be helped by inviting the individuals to work on the relationship separate from the substantive issues that divide them. Fisher and Brown have evolved also a series of principles for what they call an 'unconditionally constructive strategy for collaboration' (Fisher & Brown, 1989). This series of principles can be converted into dichotomous constructs by the participants, to reveal what they want, and what they wish to avoid. Further they can be helped to consider the implications of adopting the principles and of accepting each other's expectations as valid within the relationship. Later sessions can be focused on reviewing their experiences.

### **GROUP AND TEAM DEVELOPMENT**

An example could be to design and facilitate a process that would serve to improve the cohesion and functioning of intact work teams. This could be based on generic aspects of intact groups, e.g. clear goals and roles, and processes for dealing with the world outside the group and with relationships inside the group (Schein, 1985). Initially each member of the group could be asked to elaborate their understanding of their responsibilities and their sense of the expectations of critical stakeholders to their role. These statements could then be tested in plenary session with the team members for clarity of understanding of and negotiation of changes to their responsibilities and expectations of each other. The facilitator can then elicit their construing of a range of elements consisting of the network of stakeholders external and internal to the group who are making demands on them, in terms of processes to deal with these demands. The resultant set of constructs can be arrayed on a repertory grid and rated by individuals on a number of elements, e.g. 'how I see my team now' and 'how I see my team in six months time'. The ratings can be pooled anonymously and displayed to allow for a group discussion. In the discussion the pattern of ratings can be examined on each construct in turn to search for the meaning behind the clustering of ratings or otherwise. Laddering and pyramiding questions can be used to deepen their collective understanding of why the ratings are as they are and how they can be illustrated in terms of observable behaviours. The scope for and desirability of change on various constructs can be examined and ideas elicited for prac-

tical experimentation by individuals or through negotiation by stakeholders.

### **GOAL SETTING**

An example here would be to use PCP, as in the previous example, to elicit a group's constructs of the demands made on them by a network of stakeholders by treating the group as an 'open system' (Beckhard, 1977). They are then invited to indicate how they are meeting those demands at present. This discussion is followed by a collective construing of trends likely to impact on the life of the group on such elements as *Economics, Technology, Politics, Demography* and the behaviour of *Consumers, Competitors and New Entrants* into the group's markets. This analysis allows for a construing by the group of demands from stakeholders in, say, five years time followed by a debate as to how those demands can be met. Options can be tested using Implications Grids and then ranked in terms of effectiveness and viability using Resistance to Change Grids (Hinkle, 1965). This final process allows the team to select goals and related action plans over the time period in question.

### **ROLE CLARIFICATION**

An example could be similar to the first part of the process outlined above for using PCP in a Team Development intervention. In this case the people involved need not be members of an intact work team but persons in the same organisation that have some degree of interdependence. The process would be confined to eliciting from individuals their responsibilities and their sense of the expectations of their role set. The resultant documents would then be tested for clarification and a negotiated agreement by a PCP facilitator using appropriate questions to assist the group's elaboration of their collective construing of their roles.

### **ORGANISATION STRUCTURE**

Structure is an arrangement of roles used in organisations to focus power, responsibility and accountability. Usually when complaints are made about

one or another structural feature, the underlying cause is a problem of power or lack of it. Personal construct psychology can be used to make explicit the construing of personnel about a problem inherent in a particular structure. That may be about inadequate decentralisation of decision-making, overly long lines of communication, inadequate personal discretion and autonomy. Moreover when allied to a personal construct understanding of resistance to change in those centres of power under threat, the process of change can be rendered less painful and traumatic for those concerned.

### MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

Management processes such as meeting schedules, reporting formats, and various policy guidelines for action can be rationalised using PCP. Personal construct research focussed on a range of management processes as elements can highlight areas of dissatisfaction and mal-functioning. Feedback of the results of this research can lead to changes that allow organisation members to function more effectively with their time more optimally focussed on the core mission, such as service to clients as opposed to meeting internal bureaucratic needs that are often wasteful of effort.

### FUNCTIONAL PROCESSES

The possibilities here are as eclectic as the diversity of functions found in modern organisations. The examples below offer a mere hint of the range of possible applications of personal construct psychology.

*Planning:* One possibility is to identify several planning scenarios as elements e.g. Enter industry 'A', Exit industry 'B', take over Business 'C', Merge with Business 'D' and so on. These can be construed by representative groups of different layers of management. Further they can be rated in terms of the probability of their occurrence and attractiveness to the respondents. The results are a best guess of the future by the groups, allowing a planning team to pursue from an evidential point of view the hypothesis set out by the respondents.

*Marketing:* The construing of customers' needs for products and services and perceptions of those products currently on offer from an organisation and its competitors can be elicited. Another use is for a group of product designers to construe their level of innovation as perceived by their major stakeholders – for instance, the sales personnel in an organisation. Further the group could construe the climate for innovation within which they operate to highlight contextual factors that could inhibit their innovation and responses to the dynamics of their marketplace.

*Customer Service:* Customer service values espoused for a particular brand can be transformed into bipolar constructs in conversation with service personnel. They could then be asked to rate themselves as service providers 'now and as they 'would like to be', say, in three months time. Other elements rated could be, 'my unit or department', 'my organisation', 'how I think the customer sees me' and so on. The resultant analysis can form the basis for related interventions designed to remove factors that inhibit good service e.g. a clash between lived and espoused values. Training, based on the data, can be facilitated to provide good service and promotional programs to highlight service features to customers. New constructs can be derived from a pyramiding process where concrete examples of the espoused values authentically lived can be identified and the implications of choosing them can be explored

*Human Resources:* The remit of the H.R. department spans the spectrum of the entire set of relationships between a person and the organisation. Consequently it is in this area that PCP can be used most eclectically. We have seen above how PCP can be used within individuals and groups. Further PCP interventions can be concerned with selection and promotion processes, assessment centres, performance appraisal, personal development, industrial relations, grievance resolution and mediation, inter personal and inter group peacemaking say after an industrial dispute and with succession planning.

## ORGANISATION CULTURE / VALUES

An example could be when two organisations are merging and the cultures of both are studied, using the methods pioneered by the Diagnostic Research Unit of the PCP Centre in the 1980's in the case of the British Airways cabin crews. This method allows a comparison of the construing of common elements and of each of the constituencies represented by groups in each organisation. During feedback sessions the sense of difference and commonality could be explored together with Kelly's diagnostic constructs of anxiety, fear and threat to legitimise those feelings and to facilitate sociality between the proponents of both cultures. A great example of this type of intervention is the pioneering work of George O'Connor and his colleagues at Aer Rianta, the Irish Airport authority, in seeking to reconcile the different cultures of unions and management in a State enterprise.

In recent years it has become popular for chief executives to seek to have their organisation's values clarified and embraced by the majority of organisation members. PCP is the best intellectual framework for intervening in this cause. PCP interventions follow a three-stage process: Values clarification, Values communication and finally Values implementation or sustainment. Examples of interventions in this area can be found in the International Handbook of PCP edited by Fay Fransella, (Fransella, 2003, pp.367-375), and in a presentation to the 8<sup>th</sup> EPCA conference in Sweden this year (Brophy, 2006)

## SUMMARY

The interventions described briefly above give a flavour of the possibilities for using PCP in organisations. An important feature of PCP is that the theory allows the practitioner to relate understanding gained at different levels and with different people in different contexts within the same frame of reference. The use of PCP with its focus on both the uniqueness of a person's construing and the possibilities for commonality and sociality serves to engender trust in the authenticity of an intervention. It also provides a framework for creative thinking and action and engenders confidence in the guidance of the facilitator in helping individuals or groups to

become more effective at solving their own problems at work.

All of the interventions above described out of my own experience would not have been possible without the initial guidance of Fay Fransella and her ongoing support for my work over the past twenty years. It is said that if you give a man a fish you may feed him for a day but if you give him a fishing rod you feed him for life. PCP has been my fishing rod since Fay put it into my hands twenty years ago. I hope my catch over that period has been worthy of her trust and inspiration.

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