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FEATURE ARTICLE

Think tank: Meaningful management in a postmodern society

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Saturated values no longer describe the reality of the times. Today's postmodern environment requires new managerial practices to ensure that business processes render organizations meaningful. Unlike the modern era, which focused on economic efficiency and productivity, the prevailing climate values creativity, emotional connection, and balance in personal and work life. In this postmodern context, managers must tailor their approach to employee expectations, and concentrate on the regulation of human relationships rather than individual performance control. Instead of exercising the power that comes with their position, they need to use their authority to foster happiness through trust and caring at work. In so doing, they have to relay information, be meaningful, animate those around them, regulate working relationships, and serve as leaders.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The speed of today's technological growth has made it challenging to predict tomorrow's organizational models. The only thing we know is that the world is going to become increasingly digital. The recently coined French term for "computer literacy," *numéritie,* encompasses the impact of numerical technologies on individuals' relationships with the world, time, space, knowledge, learning, and, of course, with each other (Lacan & Silva, 2015). In a numeric world, there is no specific model to manage, and future management practices remain unknowable. Despite such uncertainty, there is a way for business leaders to prepare their organizations for the future: by developing the capability to understand the requirements of the digital age and to adapt to its consequences.

Anything that happens in society affects all its components, including organizations. In other words, each organization is a microcosm of society. Therefore, managers need to align their mind-set with social evolution as they lead their teams. They have to consider paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1972) and a new episteme, or understanding, (Foucault, 1966) that deeply modifies their managerial vision. This evolution, which entails a transition from modernity to postmodernity (Lyotard, 1979; Maffesoli, 1988), makes it difficult to predict emergent questions inside and outside organizations. Changes in the world of the work require new managerial practices and HR processes. Digital technology demands a change in the organization of work and hierarchical relations, and, therefore, management.

2 | FROM SATURATED TO EMERGENT VALUES

Since the end of the fifteenth century, society has been based on several simple principles. Many of these ideas have been summarized in Adam Smith's theories of modernity and his notion of economic actors acting in their own self-interest, guided by rationalism and the pursuit of progress (Smith & Diatkine, 1991). These principles can be called the *saturated values of modernity.* According to the Russian-born American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (2011), a saturated value does not fully describe the reality of an epoch.

2.1 | The saturated values of modernity

The values that represent modernity are no longer useful because they cannot help to understand the world in which people live and the organizations in which people work. These concepts describe a past world, and the principles they propose do not match the aspirations of today's youth. Disconnected from the real world of today, their premises are inefficient for structuring managerial practices.

Adam Smith's theory regarding the attainment of social equilibrium through the promotion of self-interest is unrealistic

in today's business environment, given the significant elements required for personal and collective action (Hirschman, 1977). It does not explain human relationships. The *Homo economicus*—or person characterized by the infinite ability to make rational decisions—is just an intellectual and ideological construct that does not actually exist. It is unreasonable to attribute to individuals the creation of what is needed for steady and fulfilling conditions to live together (Leroux, 1995). Individualism cannot be the tool for social construction in society or in an organization, which is a microcosm of society. Despite the application in organizations of various neoliberal theories that focus on individual supremacy (Becker, 1964; Harding, 1968), it is no longer relevant to rely on the use of individual interest as an engine of professional success. Furthermore, the managerial tools required to do so—the setting of individual objectives, one-on-one interviews, individualized remuneration, and so forth—are no longer optimal for the achievement of performance goals.

The value of work itself is also an old-fashioned concept. Employees consider work as a categorical imperative—something that cannot be avoided—and those who disagree with this opinion are marginalized because society rejects those who do not want to work. People attain respectability through success at work, which is valued through the lens of their professional world. What they are at work, in the microcosm of an organization, often determines how they will be viewed in the macrocosm of society at large. Although this view of work has been central to modern thought, it is outmoded in the eyes of a millennial.

In addition, models that sought to make sense of the world through rationalism and mathematization are now obsolete. Neither human beings nor organizations follow the rules of mathematical models with rational properties. Moreover, each time period is connected through its past, present, and future (Maffesoli, 2014). Today's individuals are particularly fascinated by the future. The modern fable is centered on the myth of progress, and that is why modern organizations tend to focus on long-term projects. In preparing for the future, managers seek to anticipate and control entire work processes through rationality, sometimes to the detriment of present needs, and the others in the organization follow suit.

Thus, the basic principles of the modern period are *saturated values that are* ineffective in helping today's managers understand the current environment or prepare for the future. A new approach is needed in the postmodern age.

2.2 | The emergent values of postmodernity

The new episteme calls on everyone to consider the world through the social universe (Maffesoli, 2014). It entails ecosophy or ecophilosophy, an ecological balance and harmony that evokes the love of the basic unit of society. Understanding the emergent values of postmodernity requires a reconceptualization of the world according to five simple principles.

The first principle is the return of an old sociological hero: the person. This sociological actor is very different from the individual, who was the classical actor of the modern period. Whereas the individual was a rational egoist (Comte, 1999), the person can be considered one of many, or plural. Indeed, the postmodern social agent has several identities. The person is not defined by his or her function or job, but by being part of multiple groups chosen for affective reasons, such as professional, cultural, sexual, and spiritual. This creates a new society comprising multiple communities. The postmodern person does not want to dominate the world because of its fragility and vulnerability, but to adjust his or her life to the existing world. This sociological agent is more human in a traditional sense because he or she builds on emotional and affective determiners in addition to rationality.

The second principle entails a major change in the way we envisage the need to create. The postmodern person is motivated to make his or her life a work of creation and even a work of art, which approaches Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia,* human flourishing and prosperity that result from having taken rightful actions (Aristotle, 1962). Having a good life blurs the line between personal and professional lives. People now want to live at work and to work at home in order to create lives that combine into a work of art. This creation is also a way to activate all psychic pathways (dreams, games, festivities, etc.) in the professional space, which had relied on rationality and been characterized by solemnity during the modern period. Since the reinvestment of feelings and emotions has been encouraged in the postmodern period, allowing for a sense of aesthetics and frivolousness, creativity has made a comeback. In postmodern times, the central value is no longer mere work but the act of creation.

The third principle is that people are complex sociological agents. They need to be emotionally moved to act. Even economists admit that rationality is limited by the intrusion of affect in the decision-making process (Elster, 1997). Emotions and social relationships must be taken into consideration, for the members of the postmodern generation need to feel as though they are part of a community for each of their interests, which legitimizes the activities they pursue in common. People are together because they want to be together and create together. Feeling good together and in sync with one another fosters collective creation. The postmodern person refers to *us,* not *I*, and seeks collective adventures, cooperative successes, and the mutual sharing of feelings.

The fourth principle is that whereas the modern era focused on the future, the postmodern is turned toward the present. The goal is to be connected to the here and now, and not planning for some long-term project. Although postmodern people accommodate themselves to their present world, this does not mean that they are condemned to be victimized by it. There is room for maneuver, thanks to a fifth postmodern value: immediate opportunity logic. This means it is possible to reduce the gap between what is and what is

wanted by setting short-term goals and striving for a series of quick and modest wins.

The postmodern approach offers an efficient method for understanding current reality in a rapidly changing world; and since the world is a macrocosm of many parts, the postmodern approach leads to understanding its microcosms, including the organization. Going from old-school modernity to a postmodern method of management is a key to making organizations relevant.

3 | POSTMODERN MANAGERIAL PRACTICES AND PROCESSES

The current era obliges managers to forget their old (modern) mind-sets and adopt new (postmodern) postures. Indeed, postmodern society is not external to the organization, and managers have to take societal viewpoints into consideration when formulating their policies and strategies. If society is postmodern, organizations are postmodern, and managers need to become postmodern in the way they manage their teams.

3.1 | What is a postmodern manager?

Postmodern managers must base their daily work on five simple functions, all responding to postmodern values (Lacan, 2016): They must be relayers, meaningful, animators, regulators, and leaders.

As *relay managers,* postmodern managers are responsible for the transmission of the organization's culture and strategy. From a postmodern point of view, it is totally unthinkable to let collaborators work without clear information about the needs of the organization. If managers do not transmit this essential information, their coworkers will not be able to align their daily activities to the greater organizational perspective. Managers are also in charge of the transmission of their own knowledge. They have to become a mentor to their team in the original sense of the word. Just as Mentor guided Ulysses's son, Telemachus, today's managers must be friendly advisors. The importance of this role is evident in the fact that the European Mentoring and Coaching Council has been established to help clients develop mentoring programs, and that many large organizations, such as France's national electric utility, postal service, and railway, have created the position of mentor to drive managerial transformation.

Postmodern managers also need to be *meaningful* in the sense that they motivate their collaborators to make sense of their jobs. Yet, a recent study of managerial practices found that managers spend less than 30% of their time in guiding their team by listening to them and talking with them and more than 60% of their time in controlling them and issuing reports (Denner & Falque, 2016).

Postmodern employees want their work to be a source of creation and pride. Managers are responsible for helping people find significance in their jobs and encourage their contribution to a collective creation. Meaningful managers help collaborators grow because they enable them to find their distinct place within the organizational perspective. The well-known allegory of the three stonecutters illustrates this point. Three construction workers were each cutting a stone with a chisel and a mallet. When an observer asked the first stonecutter what he was doing, he answered, "I'm cutting a stone." When the visitor asked the second stonecutter the same question, he replied, "I'm making my living." When the observer asked the third stonecutter the same question, the reply was "I'm building a cathedral." Thus, the significance of the same activity can vary widely among those engaged in it. Meaningful managers affect how their collaborators think by raising their awareness of the value of each task in the organization. In so doing, they can transform every collaborator, whatever his or her job may be, into a cathedral builder.

Postmodern managers must also be *animators* in the sense of that word's etymological roots: *anima,* which means soul, and *animus,* or reason. Animator managers foster a spirit of solidarity and fraternity within their team (*anima*) while also being responsible for its collective performance (*animus*) in the interest of the organization. Managers need to control the cooperative dynamics of their teams and organize how they live together at work. In short, they must ignite the team's sense of performance for the firm.

Postmodern managers have to manage by trust and care. This is because people want to create in their jobs—which requires them to feel trusted and to trust their colleagues—and they want good relationships at work—which reflects care. In the postmodern era, managers do not have a conceptual model to rely on; they have to tailor their approaches to what is happening all around them in real time. Those who work together usually engage with each other and organize their activities as they think best. Managers just have to optimize their colleagues' focus by agilely adapting to what they observe and discuss, to combine action and knowledge in *enaction.* First proposed by Francisco Varela to designate a new paradigm in cognitive science, this term is not based on the metaphor of the computer as in classical cognitivism but, instead, on the metaphor of living organisms (Varela & Maturana, 1994). This role is critical because through the application of trust, care, and enaction, animator managers foster the daily learning and teaching that are essential to successful creation.

The postmodern period also requires managers to move from control to regulation and, consequently, to regulate interpersonal relationships. *Regulator managers* go beyond measuring individual results with reports, controls, and appraisals to provide team members with a positive sense of living and working together. Proficient with technological tools, they use them to create a convivial atmosphere, for example, by encouraging serious games and social networks. Through this type of regulatory role, postmodern managers foster the well-being of the organization.

Those who do not want to work according to the models of the past consider management by conviviality essential. Its importance is reflected in the fact that in 2015, the French National Association of Human Resource Directors created an award to encourage new managerial practices in the field of well-being at work: the National Conviviality Prize.

The ability to leverage individuals' emotions and their social and collective interactions at work into a healthy and calm environment is a new determinant of personal performance and organizational efficiency. For example, when a Michelin factory was in danger of closing, the workers were asked to suggest ways to improve performance. They ultimately decided to revamp the way the factory's production processes were organized. The factory managers did not decide what to do; they just helped the staff to organize their thinking. Michelin eventually used the same method in several other factories.

The fifth function of the postmodern manager is leadership. *Leader managers* are not necessarily bosses, and the sources of their legitimacy can vary. For postmodern managers to become leaders they have to hold authority, and not just the power that comes with certain hierarchical positions. Authority is founded on natural charisma and on the capability to coach groups toward collective performance. Postmodern managers have to develop friendly relationships based on a logic of peers, rather than patriarchy. Leader managers do not drive their employees but coach them, creating goodwill because they generate enthusiasm without instilling fear. They do not use their knowledge to dominate their teams, but to communicate knowledge and show how things are done. Postmodern leader managers do not seek to use people but, rather, to develop them according to their own interests, in alignment with the latest research on collective performance (Lacan, 2017). Postmodern managers connect to postmodern values of society and exemplify those values in their daily behavior.

3.2 | Postmodern tools for managing teams

Thanks to technological advances, managers have an array of new tools to relay their knowledge and to animate, regulate, and lead their teams in meaningful collaboration.

First, it is important to note the change in sources of knowledge. Although technical expertise is still useful, it is not the only place to find knowledge. Characterized by the wiki spirit, this is the age of mutualization. People do not necessarily have to rely on their managers for the information they need. The manager's role has evolved from distributing technical information to nurturing mutualization. Managers and organizations can rely on two main types of digital networks: social networks through which relationships can be developed among employees within the company and technical forums for the sharing of information. For example, the French insurance company MAIF developed a Yammer network to diffuse a digital culture

throughout the organization. Today, 5,000 of the firm's 7,000 employees are active members of this network.

Methods for improving professional skills also have changed as a result of the digital revolution. Fun and efficient, various e-learning tools provide a safe environment in which to make mistakes. Offering users engagement and motivation, serious games permit professional experimentation without risk to the organization while revealing the innate personality of the gamers. Flexible, duplicable, and reusable, they are also economically practical. The French carmaker Renault uses a serious game to train its force of 15,000 salespeople located in 40 countries and speaking 20 languages.

Postmodern managers will benefit from creating and using collective spaces in which to generate a feeling of community among collaborators. These spaces can include co-working areas and open spaces, as well as home offices and other off-site facilities. According to a survey of 324 French firms with 6.5 million employees, between 2014 and 2016, 64% of the companies had begun using co-working spaces to organize new communities and collectives at work (Arctus, 2016). Managers' wise use of these different types of space will enable them to create the atmosphere needed to generate interpersonal links within their teams.

Ultimately, the aim of managers remains to elicit effective collective performance that advances organizational interests. Regulating in-person interactions is one way to make the firm efficient and meaningful. On the other hand, postmodern managers also can use virtual settings to lead and coach their teams, create a collaborative corporate culture, and exchange technical data.

The French family firm of Manutan, ranked among the best workplaces in France in 2017 for its quality of work life, is a model of postmodern management. Two of its four buildings at its headquarters are dedicated to the well-being of its staff, and encompass a gymnasium, a cafeteria, and other recreational facilities. Managers serve as a kind of community leader, organizing regular meetings and gaming activities in the space created for their teams. Here, they act as regulators of relationships and exchanges among the members of their teams, which can be considered as small communities or tribes (Maffesoli, 1988).

4 | WHY GO POSTMODERN?

Happy workers are six times less likely to be absent from their jobs, get sick twice as less often, and are 31% more productive and 55% more creative than unhappy workers (Vanhée, 2013). Therefore, an approach to management that increases employee satisfaction and well-being on the job is likely to enhance daily and overall organizational performance.

The management styles of the modern era, which were based on rationality and a strictly individualistic point of view, have outlived their usefulness. As society has evolved,

so must its organizations and those who manage them. The postmodern age requires a profound change in understanding how to manage the workplace to ensure the fulfillment of those at every level.

In sum, postmodern management practices have to create well-being and a cooperative and convivial atmosphere at work, and let collaborators express emotions for greater personal performance in the service of a higher collective efficiency in the interest of the organization. Postmodern managers have several roles to play in these practices. They have to be relay managers, meaningful managers, animator managers, regulator managers, and leader managers. Through their efforts, the enterprises they direct will become ever more effective and relevant, because they will become postmodern organizations in a postmodern world.

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