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Integrale Steuerung von Organisationen

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Curiosity is raised whenever a new perspective of organizational theory is offered, particularly if integral *Steuerung*¹ helps to implement the principles and practices of sustainability, as is promised in the book's introduction. Only a few good new approaches were published in the past few years.

Born in 1959, Jürgen Weibler is the author team's senior member and professor ordinarius with a chair in business administration – specializing in leadership and organizational behavior – at FernUniversität Hagen. Before that, he was research manager at the *Institut für Führung und Personalmanagement* (IFPM) at the University of St. Gallen. The two younger authors are students of Jürgen Weibler's: Jürgen Deeg, now working on Professor Weibler's staff, and Wendelin Küpers, who formerly held positions at Hagen and St. Gallen. Mr. Küpers wrote a comprehensive array of publications on integral theory and organizational behavior and has gained international teaching experience.

Following a time-honored tradition, the authors start by showing the limitations of existing theoretical concepts. As their intention is to present a new comprehensive theory, this is a long list indeed, taking up four of the six chapters. To them, *Steuerung* of organizations means “in general, the sequence of processes and changes which do not occur randomly but in a planned and consciously designed way“ (p. 6). In contrast to their own views, they describe a rigid mechanistic-instrumental conception of *Steuerung*, as has been done on several occasions in other publications (chapters 2.1 and 2.3.2).

In chapter 2.2 the different options of organizational *Steuerung* are shown in a portfolio showing the (situational or pre-situational) point of time and the layer of (external and self-) *Steuerung*. There is also the well-known comparison of social network, internal market, hierarchy and bureaucracy as configurations of *Steuerung*, albeit without the future aspect of the development of these alternatives that are discussed in other authors' writings.

In the past, the dominant factor was the human desire for simplicity, focusing on single elements of *Steuerung*; possibly, we have not been able to handle more than one at a time until now. The limitations of the traditional *Steuerung* of organizations lie in the emergent complexity and dynamics. Newer and older answers to that – from Taylorism to culturalistic approaches – are criticized for their one-dimensional view of the subject matter.

The sections in this chapter can only provide a cursory view of these approaches, which is why the fundamental statement is not especially original, yet written with great expertise and skill. This chapter, therefore, may also be read as an introduction to organizational theory. In the chapter's summary, the authors go back to those ap-

¹ We chose not to translate *Steuerung*, as any English word cannot possibly render the full meaning of the term.

proaches to organizational development which had overcome the described objections from the very start.

Astonishingly, they do not mention the structuration theory of Ortmann, Sydow, and Windeler,² although these authors – in resorting to Giddens – have the same intention as the one pursued by the integral approach, that is, to theoretically establish a comprehensive view on organization.

Ken Wilber, one of the fathers of integral theory, is briefly cited only on two occasions (p. 114 and 116) despite the fact that the authors obviously owe to him the book's overall concept and the idea of integral *Steuerung*, with the conception of the holon, the development, the dynamics, the individual and the collective. Also, "all quadrants, all levels", which is heavily used in the book, goes back to the example set by Wilber. Other representatives of integral theory (e.g. D. Beck, J. Gebser, S. McIntosh) are not cited.³

What do we get from such an overall presentation of an integral consideration of organization, if we picture organization as an integral connection of entities and parts thereof? We are reminded that "development steps and lines of development of individual members, culture and system, respectively, are moving at different levels but are not completely independent of each other. Rather, they are interconnected as an integral cycle, which energizes specific dynamics of growth and integration" (p. 125). The quadrants refer to individuality and collectivity, to the inside and the outside of an organization.

The integral model may be interpreted as a meta-paradigm, with cognitive pluralism and the adoption of a superordinated viewpoint. This permits the categorization of the conventional approaches criticized at the beginning, and the authors can demonstrate the lack of integral comprehension of development and transformation (p. 128).

Chapter 5 explains the fundamentals of integral *Steuerung* and the entities and worlds of the integral model, the psyche, the agent, the collective and the agency, well sorted within the portfolio of the inside / outside and of individuality / collectivity. This chapter is written at the highest level of abstraction, demonstrating the understanding of organization and "basic views of organization and leadership as different, yet interconnected perspectives" as a prerequisite for chapter 6, which discusses the actual subject of the book, that is, *Steuerung*.

The title of this chapter tells us that it is about integral *Meta-Steuerung* of organizations, without providing a more detailed explanation of *Meta*. Integral thinking adopts various perspectives of *Steuerung*, leading to an integral configuration of *Steuerung*.

Undoubtedly, complexity is a challenge for practical work and for science. This is shown more than once by means of the portfolios, which refer to four perspectives

² Günter Ortmann, Jörg Sydow, & Arnold Windeler (1997). *Organisation als reflexive Strukturierung*. In Günther Ortmann, Jörg Sydow, & Klaus Türk (Hrsg.), *Theorien der Organisation*. Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen.

³ See the special edition of *Integrale Perspektiven* No. 16 – Juli 2010, „Integrale Wirtschaft“, with an interview of Ken Wilber.

each. The filling of the fields, though, invariably is done within the framework of already known approaches. The additive listing of different perspectives will only help us if paths are shown for the boundary lines. Positive exceptions for this are the reference to coordination between organizational structure and personnel structure, the strong demarcation of organizational units, and the reference to unintended consequences of *Steuerung* (p. 176ff.).

Another interesting perspective is to see “organizations as relational conversations“ (p. 180), showing how parts “are operating together or against one another when *gesteuert*”. This “processual in-between“ is a new approach which demands a new way of thinking, even though the level of abstraction reaches new heights here. “By what is called diastasis/-es as the shaping force of (broken) experience, what is differentiated is created within the actual in-between, which separates yet connects at the same time. In this way, the constellation model allows for the pre-subjective and pre-objective, as well as the pre-collective and pre-interobjective, context of the in-between and what those involved experience in it, or create in it, physically and linguistically and / or what effect the socio-cultural and structural-functional dimensions will have” (p. 182). Is this about elevating Martin Buber to the level of organization?

Such statements cannot be categorized theoretically, nor utilized practically. Statements such as “poorly functioning matrix structures result in conflicts“ (p. 177) or “bad investments ... cause additional mental and group-related pressure or stress” (p. 177f.) fall short of the high integral standards of an otherwise very ambitious discussion. No integral theory would be necessary for this: What is bad can only lead to bad results.

In summary, the authors define organization as follows:

“Based on the ... integral model and allowing for the ... interrelational complexities, an integral overall comprehension of organizations emerges. In the process, organizations as holons involve both an agent-like and individual identity through their awareness and behavior segments, and a collective identity through their cultural and system segments. Organizational holons also refer to an (inter-) subjective identity through their inner segments, and to an (inter-) objective identity through their outer segments. As a holon, organizations are also part of the more comprehensive holons at the macro level“ (p. 188).

The fields of influence (*Steuerung*) in the fields of consciousness, behavior, culture and system show fields of influence such as personnel development with management by objectives, a cooperative and communicative culture, which leads to the participation of the people concerned. And, of course, the shaping of the development of a learning organization and of meta-learning will require meta-*Steuerung*. Restructuring measures reveal the necessity for this field of development to be coordinated, within the system area, with the other fields of development. This is basic knowledge for organization developers. So, these are not exactly exciting conclusions drawn from a comprehensive excursion on theory; rather, such findings have already found their way into the basic knowledge repertoire of managers.

On a positive note, the integral viewpoint provides us with an overview of all relevant fields of organizational analysis. Moreover, we are informed that everything is

related to everything else. “Thus, individual areas can be studied more in depth, but may also be related to each other, so as to make the complexity of organizations and their control comprehensible and manageable” (p. 167). This translation into practice, however, is the least developed part of the book. There is an urgent need for it to be expanded on in a second volume.

In this first work of integral organizational analysis, the authors hardly ever succeed in leaving a high level of abstraction to arrive at a practical application, other than by mentioning tried-and-true insights. Quite rightly, the authors themselves emphasize that “the true test of limited integrality ... (shows) itself in the concrete implementation of the constructions of the integral model under practical conditions (if) abstracted from the ideal model“ (p. 219). In the final paragraph of the book the authors themselves write that the biggest challenge is to achieve “... a practical test and an empirical review of an integral organization, control and *Meta-Steuerung* (p. 226). The reviewer gladly adopts their view, voicing his hopes that Volume 2, with these additions, will soon be published.

So far, it is only in segments that scientific research and practical management have been able to come close to the complexity of reality. The authors’ “*Integrale Steuerung von Organisationen*“ makes a strong attempt at walking away from this segmental perspective. With this approach, they succeed in

- not omitting any perspective in scientific analysis or practical *Steuerung*,
- probing further into the connections and transitions between the segments.

Unfortunately, the topic of sustainability was not brought up again for the remainder of the book, much to the disappointment of the reviewer.

It is worthwhile for the practitioners and theorists to have a look at this book when they deal with organizations. As compared with traditional organization concepts, the authors took it upon themselves to look far beyond their own noses – beyond the scope of business administration – in their criticism, but mainly so in the approach presented by them. For that, they should have our respect and recognition.

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Skorstad, Egil J. / Ramsdal, Helge (Eds.)
**Flexible Organizations and the New Working Life –
 A European Perspective**

Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey 2009, 272 pp., £ 60.-

Do companies really increasingly use flexible patterns and is that good or bad news for employees? These are the questions addressed by Egil J. Skorstad and Helge Ramsdal in their anthology “Flexible Organizations and the New Working Life”. Herewith, they contribute to the long-lasting discussion about the new type of organization, i.e. the ‘flexible organization’ and its impact on working life in general and working conditions in particular. Scholars around the world relate the companies’ new competitive environment to terms as globalisation and information technology in a knowledge and service society. To master this new environment, firms are advised to be dynamic and flexible as the bureaucratic organization is said to be outdated in our times⁴.

In their introduction, the editors present the effect of flexibility on working life and working conditions as not clear and controversially discussed among international scholars. Those in favour of the concept argue that it enhances varied and challenging work, empowerment and improves employability, seeing the workers as beneficiaries. Those against the model of flexible firms suspect more intensified work, less long term employment, less protection and union support, seeing the employers as beneficiaries.

Skorstad and Ramsdal see the reason for this ambiguous picture of flexible organizations in the term ‘flexibility’ for it is employed and understood in a “myriad of ways” [p. 2]. Therefore, the volume starts in chapter 2 (*Egil J. Skorstad*) with the deconstruction of the term ‘flexibility’ into four dimensions: ‘employment practices’, ‘organizational structure’, ‘culture’ and ‘network’, all being interdependent. The following contributions in this volume empirically investigate and discuss the issue of flexibility in those four dimensions for the private and public sectors in UK, Sweden, Norway, Italy and France with the help of national surveys, company- or industry case studies with qualitative interviews as well as document analysis for a country study. In the final chapter 12 (*Egil J. Skorstad* and *Helge Ramsdal*) the editors discuss the results of the contributions in regard to their previously created model of flexibility, building therewith the frame of the book.

The chapters 3 – 6 deal with the dimension ‘employment practices’ and focus on two main questions: Is there a trend towards more flexible working practices? How do they affect working conditions? All the contributions employ John Atkinson’s model of the ‘flexible firm’: splitting up the workforce in 1) a fix core of workers who are functionally flexible, ensuring quick qualitative adaptability in the company and 2) a peripheral group of workers that can easily be changed numerically depending on demand, ensuring a quantitative adaptability. Taking this model as basis, the above stated questions are answered: Some evidence for flexible working practices can be observed (chapter 3: *Michael Rose*, chapter 4: *Harriet Bradley*) but no clear trend towards an in-

⁴ See for example Schreyögg (1999).

crease of their use can be identified (chapter 5: *Brigita Eriksson* and *Jan Ch. Karlsson*). Apart from that it is shown that the reasons for more flexible practices may also be caused by gender and industry effects⁵ (chapter 6: *R. Øystein Strøm*). The effect of flexible employment practices on the workplace life was perceived negative (chapter 3) or diverse, depending on the age of the employees (chapter 4). Considering these results for the dimension ‘employment practices’, the editors conclude by wondering if either there is already sufficient flexibility, so that no further development is necessary, or if Atkinson’s model of the ‘flexible firm’ might be invalid.

Even though the editors themselves stress that employment practices is only one dimension of flexible organisations, the remaining three dimensions are only dealt with in three contributions. Chapter 7 (*Philippe R. Mossé*) investigates the ‘organizational structure’ in French and Italian hospitals, chapter 8 (*Henrietta Huzell*) explores the ‘culture’ in the Swedish Rail Industry and chapter 9 (*Stephen Ackroyd*) discusses the ‘network pattern’ of the British Manufacturing industry. The results can be summarized as follows: by implementing flexible patterns, institutional backgrounds as the respective industry and unions as well as the attitude of the workforce have a high impact on the success of such implementation and the perceived effect on working conditions.

The remaining two chapters (*Helge Ramsdal*; *Tor Claussen*) deal with the special role of the Scandinavian countries with their highly collaborative agreements between unions and employers in a globalizing world. It is shown how these institutional backgrounds can create a culture which facilitates the implementation of flexible patterns ensuring positive effects for employees and employers.

The main idea in this volume is the deconstruction of the term ‘flexibility’ into interdependent dimensions. This offers an explanation for the missing empirical evidence of the flexible organization⁶ as the change in one dimension might lead to unexpected effects in another dimension. The issue of the flexible firm cannot be narrowed to flexible working practices, as these “... may turn out to be of minor importance compared to what may be obtained through structural, cultural or network arrangement” [p. 259]. Given the importance of all the dimensions, it would have been desirable to represent them equally in this volume. However, the crucial question of the beginning of the book, if flexibility is beneficiary for the employer or the employee, is answered in the concluding chapter of the volume: The employees’ compliance can be reached either by commitment of the workers as described in the Scandinavian model or it can be enforced by threats and constraints. Networks with asymmetrical relations of power and authority in favour of one firm as well as the transfer of power from management to shareholder seem to foster the negative effects of flexible patterns for the employees; nowadays even in Scandinavian countries.

The book’s focus on Scandinavia and few other European countries is a welcomed change in the discussion about flexible organizations mainly carried out on the

⁵ Gender effect: more women entering the workforce; industry effect: development towards a service industry traditionally employing more flexible working patterns.

⁶ Next to the ambiguous evidence in this volume, see for example: (Bolin & Härenstam (2008); Morris & Farrell (2007)).

American continent. The European heterogeneity⁷ necessitates a dissociation of the American discussion especially in terms of empirical evidence since the issue has mainly been described in a conceptualized way. Skorstad and Ramsdal have edited a multidisciplinary anthology, containing of multiple methods as national surveys, case studies and document analyses in private and public firms. They have succeeded furthermore in editing a book that is well integrated for each contribution is deeply routed into the framing model of the editors. The cross-references of the single contributions and the common theoretical basis are only examples. By highlighting the special Scandinavian role and therewith a certain European perspective, the editors pay tribute to the title of their book. Summing up, this anthology can be warmly suggested to anyone, who wants to read not one more conceptual essay⁸ about 'flexible', 'intelligent', 'boundaryless', 'network', 'post-bureaucratic', 'post-modern' etc. organizations, but to read a work from a European perspective full of empirical evidence and reflecting thoughts.

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⁷ As shown for example in Mayrhofer et al. (2004).

⁸ See for an overview of the different approaches: Mayrhofer et al. (2002).

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