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Beiträge zur Beratung in der Arbeitswelt

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Supervision in the knowledge society

The role of Professional Associations for Supervision as actors in civil society

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Defining a new role for supervision

Supervision can be defined as an activity which enables actors to recognize blind spots, hidden meanings and latent options within a complex interactional setting by being exposed to additional perspectives and options. Mostly, supervision is related to professional activities such as education, teaching, therapy, social work, consulting or management, and it is of particular relevance to professionals as an opportunity to reflect on their communication and operational strategies. It is important to note that, in this sense, supervision is not just a reflexivity mechanism – i.e. teaching to teach or managing management or consulting consultants. Instead its goal is to add additional perspectives and dimensions to a given interactional setting by way of instigating reflection in order to expand its range of options and its range of observing (Willke 1997: ch. 1.2).

Traditionally, the focus of supervision is on individuals who seek support in improving their professional efficacy. However, the better we understand the formative role of *systemic contexts* for patterns and processes of interaction, the more supervision should count as an important approach (including concepts, methods and instruments) to scrutinizing and improving the functioning of entire systems, be it teams, groups, organizations or indeed societies.

The formative role of systemic contexts for shaping interaction is not an entirely new idea. Many disciplines have contributed to the understanding that collective superstructures, like culture, rituals, value systems, rules and patterns of communication, organizational structures etc., strongly influence actual behavior and interaction (Stacey 2000). Two disciplines, in particular, have paved the way for a more adequate understanding of the intricate interplay of local (individual) interaction and the emergence of systemic properties. On the one hand, this is systemic family therapy, which early on has constructed a view of the family as a system of its own and in its own right being superimposed on the actual communications/interactions of the members of a family (Haley 1988; Liddle, Breunlin and Schwartz 1988). On the other hand, organization development has become a discipline in its own right, in addition to human resource management (HRM), because it has become obvious that profound transformations of organizations and serious change management need both, the people side of change and the system side (collectivity) (Senge 1990; Willke 2005).

Supervision as a specialized discipline for support and development has yet to find and define its position in relation to complex systems going

beyond the individual. Promising beginnings have been made in taking account of collectivities beyond the individual, for example concerning collective emotions (Ciompi and Endert 2011) or concerning the role of pattern formation for organizational dynamics (Stacey 2000; Volk 2011). However, what appears to be needed is a much more systematic and comprehensive inclusion of systemic (holistic, organizational, societal) concerns into the approaches of supervision. The point here is to enable the discipline of supervision to offer professional advice beyond the level of individuals and, eventually, to include social systems up to the level of society in its range of professional supervisory activities.

Present national and international constellations of extended financial, fiscal and economic crises are pointing to a dire need to include and use the capacities of supervision for improving societal and political reflection. Even beyond that, there are seemingly overwhelming global problems such as climate change, terrorism, underdevelopment, scarcity of resources or atomic energy risks which urgently call for all the help they can get. There is no reason at all why the discipline of supervision should not contribute and provide professional support in *all* these arenas. The point, of course, is not to insinuate that the above problems can be solved with the help of supervision. Rather, this argument is aimed at using the competences of supervision to contribute (in a modest way) to the multitude of efforts being made to cope with these problems.

Defining a new role for Professional Associations for Supervision

In an innovative step, together with research partners, the German Professional Association for Supervision (DGSv) commissioned a study on work and life in contemporary organizations (Haubl and Voß 2011) in 2008, and the researchers have repeated this study in 2011. It is a move forward from the traditional concerns of the association to extending its activities to the sphere of pressing societal problem areas. Equally important, it is a move forward to involving the association itself as a "collective actor" in defining and extending the field of supervision. This implies firm determination to envision the association as an actor in civil society. Mostly, professional associations are simply regarded as aggregations of individuals given the task to further the goals and the standing of their members and the particular profession. This turns out to be a very limited view of the possibilities and capabilities of a collective actor.

An association as an organized social system can be understood as an entity of its own in a specific sense: it incorporates and documents in its history, culture, business processes and rule systems aspects of the collective experience and learning of its members. The organization as organization is in a position to accumulate and develop "organizational intelligence" (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Quinn 1992), learning capabilities (Argyris and Schön 1978; Argyris and Schön 1996) and "systemic properties" (Senge 1990) which transcend the disaggregated expertise of its members.

Surprising as this argument may appear at first sight, it becomes less offending when we think of the effects of the "culture" of old, traditional organizations, i.e. churches, universities, school systems, political parties, corporations etc. Such organizations have accumulated experience across people, time and location and thus are able to generalize expertise and, in an evolutionary (historical) process, incorpo-

rate any relevant expertise in their structures, operational procedures and rule systems. Obviously, the degree of "institutionalization" varies depending on the types of organizations/associations, but as soon as there is a formal organization, the organization as such is beginning a life of its own. Interestingly, this becomes quite obvious regarding the negative aspects of organizational life as described in series of critiques of the power and obstinacy of organizations. The point here is that there also are important positive sides to organizational life – and these should be acknowledged and put to use.

Within an emergent knowledge society professional organizations have at their disposal a most precious resource – expertise. Apart from being a resource, such expertise also implies an obligation to contribute, within the organization's particular capacities, to the welfare of society. As actors within civil society, professional associations for supervision must take seriously their social responsibility as representatives of a kind of specialized expertise which may prove valuable for solving vexing societal confrontations or impasses. In this sense a plethora of foundations, NGOs, think tanks, research institutions, associations etc., contribute to collecting, organizing and putting to use their specialized expertise in a given societal context. To some degree they complement and countervail the influence of traditional lobbying, but, more importantly, they are beginning to establish a new regime of decentralized and distributed expertise, which is then available for coping with all kinds of societal problems and dangers to public goods. In this sense private organizations may become relevant actors in civil society.

Supervision is the activity of accommodating different views, of moderating, coordinating and integrating divergent perspectives and

opposing interests, and of reflecting professional practices. Over and above the individual experience and expertise of its members, the association itself cumulates the collective experiences and expertise of its varied members, thus forming and retaining a body of generalized and accepted principles of supervision. Supervision appears to offer something that is of increasing importance to complex and heterogeneous societies. Modern societies come in many flavors but they are all differentiated into highly specialized and complex components which follow different logic paths, different interests and different trajectories, thus creating serious incompatibilities, ruptures and discontinuities. Therefore, competencies in "translating" and moderating between divergent views and conflicting interests are in high demand. Certainly many disciplines – from coaching to consulting – may contribute to these efforts, but it should be equally unequivocal, then, that supervision offers adequate competence in this respect.

If professional associations for supervision as actors of civil society are to have an impact on relevant political issues, then three steps of analysis are in order. First, the most pertinent deficiencies in processes of political decision-making must be stated clearly in order to identify the need for additional resources caused by certain actors in civil society. Secondly, the specific expertise of a professional association for supervision as a collective actor needs to be formulated as an offer to contribute to societal problem-solving. Finally, a process of matching the competencies of professional associations for supervision as civil society actors with perceived needs of society should make these associations focus on a few selected areas of civil society activities which look promising in terms of "societal supervision".

Building a resilient society

In view of the volatilities and complexities of modern societies the most important overall quality of a society is probably its capacity to cope with ubiquitous conflicts and crises. We will call this capacity its "resilience". The global financial and economic crisis, the Euro crisis, the crisis of the health system, the energy, environmental and many other crises have sufficiently demonstrated that the capacities of the political system to deal with these challenges are limited indeed. Therefore, all efforts to improve the resilience of modern societies should be welcome, which is why we want to show that professional associations for supervision are in a position to contribute to this endeavor.

>»Strategic resilience is not about responding to a one-time crisis. It's not about rebounding from a setback. It's about continuously anticipating and adjusting to deep secular trends … . It's about having the capacity to change before the case for change becomes desperately obvious« (Hamel and Välikangas 2003: 53f.).

In this sense the quest for extended models of transformation and system change is connected with a different approach of coping with uncertainty. Uncertainty, derived from complexity and non-knowledge, is presumably the most important and influential factor for societal decision-making. The term "governance" is used in this context as a comprehensive term for describing the problems of management, guidance, adaptation, transformation, and strategic alignment of the actors and institutions within a given society. The governance mode of a system describes its set of principles, concepts, methods and instruments by which the system is co-

ordinated and/or coordinates itself. The expansion from "government" to "governance" means that actors from civil society now become part of the policy process and in this sense actively contribute to political decision-making.

Although the future in general and future challenges to governance in particular remain uncertain, stakeholders and institutions have choices about how to prepare for the unexpected. Fostering resilience means leaving the comfort zone of incremental adaptation and incipient crisis management. In fact, resilience calls for a more strategic inspiration to build governance regimes that go beyond the mere correction of malfunctions and mistakes: "The quest for resilience can't start with an inventory of best practices. Today's best practices are manifestly inadequate. Instead, it must begin with an aspiration: zero trauma" (Hamel and Välikangas 2003: 54).

The traumas of system failure and political mismanagement have been many, and they include bitter historical experience of misconceptions and misreading of signals. Still, thinking about governance and advanced modes of adaptability should not be traumatic but should instead be inspired by the successes of new forms of governance. Even if political governance today seems manifestly inadequate for many areas at issue, it contains all the elements that are necessary to rebuild/restore/recover resilience as a mode of governing highly sophisticated and complex systems in the context of a global knowledge society.

Achieving resilience then translates into broadening the base of governance and providing the governance of complex societies with mechanisms for fast learning and strategic reconciliation of diverse and centrifugal dynamics. In this endeavor, supervision can make a relevant and important contribution. Aspiring to resilience starts with the

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assumption that the re-integration and reconciliation of diverse and centrifugal interests within society is of paramount importance for the prevention or management of crises. In these processes of re-integration and reconciliation (including moderation, accommodation etc.) supervision as an evidence-based approach to problem-solving may be helpful. Any proposition to rely on a stationary model of policy processes and political governance would have to consider the costs of systemic crises and the consequences of hasty and clumsy crisis management: "A turnaround is transformation tragically delayed" (Hamel and Välikangas 2003: 54).

The contribution of supervision to sustaining and promoting resilience is to make organizations and societies "ultra-stable" in Ashby's sense, i.e. in the sense of providing different modes of internal setup according to different qualities of external demands and external dynamics (Ashby 1958). It is exactly at this point that the role of supervision may take effect. Supervision aims at opening up the options of interdependent and competing/conflicting actors in order to develop "third options" which might overcome a zero-sum constellation and instead offer a win-win option. Or, in other words, the task of resilience is to enable complex systems to develop forms of governance that are compatible with the challenge of "high reliability systems" – meaning that systems characterized by high levels of complexity, uncertainty and hazard create instances of collective intelligence in order to shift from adaptation to "a proactive, preventive decision-making strategy" (LaPorte and Consolini 1991: 29).

Complicated concepts like ultra-stability, high-reliability systems or resilience have not become part of the supervision and governance discourse by chance. These concepts indicate an undercurrent of discon-

tent with the standard notion of politics as a failure-tolerant, trial-and-error, incremental and low-reliability mode of governance. To be sure, such concepts are strong signs of a first level of systemic intelligence, similar to the intelligence of evolutionary adaptation and survival in relatively stable and placid environments. However, in constellations of fundamental change, for example the transition from an industrial society to a knowledge society and from nationally organized societies to global systems, this first level of systemic intelligence appears to be insufficient. An emerging knowledge society needs additional support or more specifically, an overall upgrading of its infrastructures, components and operating principles.

A second level of systemic intelligence aims at high reliability and high trust qualities of collective decision-making in conditions of turbulent change. It implies second order learning capabilities and strategic intent supported by instruments of collective intelligence, evaluation of performance and other standard operating procedures. This kind of systemic intelligence means monitoring external challenges and opportunities on the one hand and providing strategic options and operational excellence on the other. Admittedly, it still seems a bit preposterous to impose the discipline of supervision on something as intricate/ challenging as system governance. However, in times of serious crises from local to global level the idea of offering the capacities of supervision in relation to perceived challenges on all levels (from individual to organizations to societies) may not be too farfetched after all. If the impacts of supervision helped to succeed in making political governance more reliable and more resilient, the effort would seem particularly worthwhile: "Reliable systems are smart systems" (Weick and Roberts 1993).

Collective intelligence of Professional Associations for Supervision

Intelligence is defined as the ability of a system to cope with the challenges posed by its environment. Intelligence includes the system's competencies to adapt, to learn and to build resilience in relation to the sum of noxiousness and opportunities or risks and chances presented by its environment. In higher order social systems a specific knowledge base is provided by the idiosyncratic experience of the system supplements and eventually dominates the basic biological intelligence (survival intelligence). It would be more appropriate, therefore, to speak of collective expertise instead of collective intelligence. Both terms are used here as equivalents.

The core of collective intelligence is the empirically observable fact that the *same* people act and cooperate differently in different social contexts. LaPorte and Consolini have described one amazing example:

"Extensive field observations on board both aircraft carriers and within air-traffic control centers found an unexpected degree of structural complexity and highly contingent, layered authority patterns that were hazard-related. Peak demands or high-tempo activities became a *solvent of bureaucratic forms and processes*. The same participants who shortly before acted out the routine, bureaucratic mode switched to a second layer or mode of organizational behavior. And, just below the surface, was yet another, preprogrammed emergency mode waiting to be activated by the same company of members. There appear to be richly variegated overlays of structural complexity comprised of three organizational modes

available on call to the members of hazard-related units. Authority structures shifted among (a) routine or bureaucratic, (b) high-tempo, and (c) emergency modes as a function of the imminence of overload and breakdown. Each mode has a distinctive pattern, with characteristic practices, communication pathways, and leadership perspectives" (LaPorte and Consolini 1991: 31).

In quite different situations similar experiences are described as "flow" permeating high-performing teams on a run or entranced jazz combos or classical quartets when the common cause transcends the individual contribution. The point always is to combine the capacities and expertise of a team, a group, a network or an association in such a way that the system becomes more than the sum of its parts. This additional quality is worthy of pursuit because it enhances the resilience of the system and thus strengthens its capacity to overcome trauma, crisis, and adversity.

There is no doubt that political systems of all kinds are in dire need of collective intelligence in order to achieve a higher level of resilience. Therefore, the practical question is how to improve the concepts, instruments and strategies of political decision-making in highly complex societies. One promising way to do this is for the political system to take advantage of the competencies and expertise of civil society organizations – and for these organizations to actively offer their contributions to politics.

The German Association for Supervision, for example, has almost four thousand members which cover all fields and varieties of supervision. The association itself monitors the activities of its members by way of communication, conferences, professional exchanges, conflict resolution, and in many other ways. It also documents, in its day-to-day operations, procedures and standard business processes, as well as, in the evolution of its rule systems, some of the collective experiences of its members. Consequently, there is a basis for an emergent "common view" of the possibilities, offerings and strengths of the concepts and practices of supervision. Whereas the individual members have the advantage of their highly specific situations, experiences and expertise, the association has the advantage of a generalized idea and an overarching concept of supervision built on the combined efforts of its members.

Resilience through supervision

Supervision and accommodation become all the more important as the division of labor intensifies, as supply chains and production chains become fragmented and global, and as innovation is happening in "hybrid environments" where different disciplines, different technologies, and different perspectives are brought together in order to create something new. One primary goal of systemic supervision, therefore, would be to support and enable cooperation in the face of[heterogeneous or even conflicting interests.

The obvious need for supervision, however, does not mean that the actual implementation of cooperation/accomodation is trivial or largely successful. Quite often, the actors disregard that sustainable cooperation needs a framework or a frame of reference which defines the terms of cooperation. The principles of supervision may provide this framework. Supervision establishes a communicative order within a distributed network or social system – and thus prepares the ground for successful cooperation.

Cooperation comes easy when both parties (or all parties involved) understand their mutual advantage. Cooperation becomes much more difficult when the distribution of advantages and costs is unclear or when benefits are delayed while costs are immediate. In a classic study on the evolution of cooperation, Robert Axelrod found three major factors which support and sustain cooperation even under difficult conditions (Axelrod 1984). These factors are (1) the shadow of the future (meaning: the relevance of the future for the actors involved); (2) the possibility of a positive-sum game; and (3) cooperation as a learning process.

We will not go into details but instead focus on the third factor – cooperation as a learning process – which is becoming increasingly crucial as the traditional industrial society is in its first steps toward transforming into a knowledge society. The preconditions for cooperation are manifold and include mediation, moderation, coaching, consulting, conflict resolution and compromise in various combinations. Supervision is understood here as an overarching concept which serves to prepare the ground for cooperation (in its many flavors) between interdependent and competing/conflicting actors within a complex policy field. This means that in many crucially important and contested policy fields an input and influx of supervision and supervisory competencies might help to disentangle complex conflict constellations and prompt options of cooperation.

Early on, Gregory Bateson has distinguished three levels of learning and, without going into details, we should focus, for a moment, on the third level of reflective learning. Gregory Bateson assumes that learning III, that is reflection, happens only rarely even at the level of persons. "But it is claimed that something

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of the sort does from time to time occur in psychotherapy, religious conversion, and in other sequences in which there is profound reorganization of character" (Bateson 1972: 301). This formulation has the charm of old-European serenity. Today, "profound reorganization of character" is commonplace in persons and organizations. The entire former Second World of socialist states is engaged in an ongoing process of reconstructing their societal and national identities in a profound reorganization of character. Even in the First World, particularly in Europe, the ongoing overall restructuring of the welfare state aims at reinventing societal identities. It presupposes nothing less than a profound reconfiguration of the mode of operations of modern western societies. It is an interesting question, worthy of further analysis, why Bateson's "profound reorganization of character" has changed, within a comparatively short period of time, from a rare exception to the rule of self-transformation of complex dynamic social systems.

The surprising normality of processes of self-transformation seems to be one of the consequences of the fact that social systems, particularly complex organizations, have generated powerful ways of intervening and influencing not only each other but also themselves. To a considerable degree these strategies derive from new opportunities and constraints of cooperation/moderation between systems which, at the same time, compete fiercely in a global market. This coincidence of opposing demands calls for highly developed reflexive competencies in shaping one's own identity in response to equally developed strategies of learning. The pressures of these changes on individuals, particularly on professionals, are enormous, and they are producing considerable risks to physical and mental health, to proficiency and

general wellbeing. Again, competencies in supervision might help to diagnose and treat instances of overload, burn-out, excessive stress and other factors which, to a great extent, impede the optimal functioning of persons, organizations and entire societies (Volk 2011).

Learning presupposes the ability to reconstruct information and knowledge from "foreign" data within a different frame of reference or within a different context of criteria of relevancy. Learning implies transferring implicit knowledge in processes of socialization (Nonaka 1994: 20) within a "community of practice" but, of course, the hard part is to establish that community. Professional associations for supervision are established communities of practice. Therefore their specialized competencies can be used in coping with societal problems and crucial policy arenas.

A serious decision of an organization or a policy arena to submit to supervision marks an important step in setting the stage for learning. It means to accept partners as autonomous and, as a basic principle, equal, and it means to send signals that you are prepared to respect the partners' identities and the appropriate mode of operation selected by them. Unsurprisingly then, supervisory modes and settings depend on mutual trust, which must be built up patiently and painstakingly. Trust functions as a general medium to reduce differences. It enables actors and systems to operate and proceed in spite of missing information on general assumptions of compatibility. Trust thus creates a realm of *virtual commonality and community*.

Supervision based on trust turns out to be one of very few serious strategies to instigate organizational learning. Trust based on processes of supervision is reflexive in that each partner needs to *imagine* the situation of the other one, building an internal model of the partner's

operational logic, and to imagine itself *in the eyes* of the partner in order to understand what it looks like to its partner. In realizing these differences step by step it becomes apparent that trust is needed to overcome them and to start operating *as if* these differences did not make any difference in relation to the common project. Supervision is reflexive also in that it needs the projection of a common future in order to work, and in order to give trust the space to unfold. Cooperation based on supervision requires the ability to imagine future events that make a difference to present operations.

In a very simplified form, we might say that successful processes of supervision lead to mutually beneficial learning and a sharing of knowledge resources. Collective learning leads to collective intelligence, in particular an intelligence of networks and fragmented supply and production networks. In turn, collective intelligence enhances a system's resilience. One of the goals of professional associations for supervision, therefore, can be to offer its collective expertise as a resource to improve the collective intelligence of our present modern societies.

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