

Taking power to the edge of the organisation: role as praxis

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Abstract

In their book on the revolution taking place in military affairs, Alberts and Hayes provide an excellent critique of the 20th century industrial organisation and outline the main characteristics of the 21st century organisation. The transformational challenge of our time is to take power to the edge of an organisation. The 'edge' is where demand meets the organisation: leadership power needs to be at the edge because it is there that decisions must be made about how to respond to the particular form the demand takes. This is in contrast to holding power at the centre which is the traditional form of hierarchical organisation post WWII. Power held at the centre requires leadership to maintain the cohesion of the organisation as a whole and keep its members motivated to carry out their expected roles. Power taken to the edge requires leadership to be distributed. This implies a different relationship to role in which the authority of a role arises primarily through its relation to demand, rather than by virtue of position in a hierarchy.

The different relationship to role creates new challenges for the person-in-role. It is necessary to deal with the anxiety associated with their personal relationship to the role, as well as the systemic anxiety evoked when new forms of demand call into question the very formation of the role itself. A different form of role consultation is needed that can support this re-forming of role as a praxis. The traditional approach to organisational role analysis works with the differences between the fly-on-the-wall's (phenomenological) view of what-is-going-on, the (normative) hierarchical view of what ought to be going on, and the role occupant's (existential) view of what is felt to be going on. The transformational challenge requires the occupant of a role to re-form it in terms of a praxis in which the role emerges from its particular relation to demand. This adds a fourth (referential) view of what is going on in relation to the way the demand itself is constructed independently of the way in which the organization attempts to satisfy it. The challenge this creates can be appreciated if we characterize the person in role as a self-employed employee.

This paper describes how we used role-as-praxis to enable individuals within an organisation to develop a different relationship to their roles based on their ability to make common cause with other individuals in order to meet new forms of demand. This systemic approach to understanding the formation of their role provides them with the means to manage anxiety through transformational change, and also to change the way they understand the organisation itself. Our presentation will combine theoretical exposition with case vignettes, and conclude by drawing out the parallels between the learning rooted in the WWII experience which brought the Tavistock thinking to the notice of its public, and the learning that is now arising from the war on terror that requires new forms of response to asymmetric threats.

Introduction

Organisational role analysis considers the way in which a person takes up a role within a system (Reed, 1976). It may be necessary to question what is the primary task of that system, but organisational role analysis enables the individual to wrestle with the formation of their role within that context. Thus the administrator of a clinic within an NHS hospital must balance the managerial demands of meeting budgets with the demands made by its patients on its clinicians; the telephone service engineer must balance the constraints imposed by the availability of equipment with meeting the demands of his customers; and the religious movement must create the conditions in which its members can find meaning and purpose in their lives.

What is the primary task of the system?

Is the primary task of the clinic to treat as many patients as possible, or to provide the best possible long term care for the patients it takes on?

Is the primary task of the engineers to repair the maximum number of faults, or to provide agreed levels of service availability for customers.

Is the primary task of the religious leadership to create the conditions in which as many members as possible can find meaning and purpose in forms of service, or to create the conditions in which each member may find meaning and purpose in their own particular way?

How is this balance to be maintained? The contract of employment will leave the employee in no doubt that the ultimate decision rests at the top of the organisation. But what if the result is that the clinic fails to meet the demands on it and 'goes out of business on budget'? Primary risk (Hirschhorn, 1997) is the risk that the wrong primary task is chosen. So how is this primary risk to be managed? How is the professional to balance the patient's need with the costs of care, the employee's understanding of demand to inform top management's understanding of these risks, or the minister's response to a member's need be balanced with the limitations of time and energy?

What is the primary risk of the system?

Treating as many patients as possible may reduce the average cost of a treatment, but reduce the clinic's ability to manage patients' conditions over time, resulting in a greater long term cost to the healthcare system.

Fixing as many faults as possible may keep the system running, but conceal the underlying tendency for the number of faults to increase as the uses made of it gradually change over time with the effects of broadband.

Running as many services as possible may reach the maximum numbers of people, but prevent any time being available to engage with individuals' struggles, resulting in a gradual drifting away from the movement towards other more direct sources of meaning and purpose

This paper will argue that the 'internal' face of the role defined from within a system has to be distinguished from the 'external' face of the role that is presented in relation to the customer's demand, and that this distinction is most apparent in roles at the 'edge' of an organisation. It will argue that this involves distinguishing the system in terms of which the role is defined from the system which emerges from responding to the demand itself. The resultant tension that may arise between the role-as-defined and role-as-praxis may involve challenging the way power is currently exercised.

What are the 'internal' and 'external' faces of the role ?

The 'internal' face of the role is towards the administrators and more senior members of the profession, but the 'external' face is towards the ongoing care of the patient

The 'internal' face is towards the efficient maintaining of the infrastructures, while the 'external' face is towards sustaining the ongoing experience of the customer in his or her use of that infrastructure .

The 'internal' face is towards the place of service within the larger context of the movement's doctrines, while the 'external' face is towards the way these doctrines are interpreted in the daily practice of members' lives.

The great advance made by the Tavistock Institute at the end of the Second World War was to develop ways of applying the insights of socio-technical systems, boundaries and primary task to the enterprise. During the course of the second half of the century this advance proved to be of great value in the formation of the corporate enterprise. But with the 21st Century has come a new challenge to the enterprise of asymmetric forms of demand. This calls for a further advance that can best be encapsulated in the challenge of the edge role, and the different forms of anxiety that it gives rise to.

Asymmetric Demand

In their book on the revolution taking place in military affairs, Alberts and Hayes (2003) provide an excellent critique of the 20th century industrial organisation and outline the main characteristics of the 21st century organisation. Thus the 20th century organisation was concerned with creating the greatest efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of products and services to the largest possible numbers of customers, whether from within a private or public enterprise. But in the 21st century, the very success of this enterprise is rendering the achievement of this outcome no longer adequate. The customers want more.

The axis along which this wanting used to run was one of comparison over time: bigger, better and more convenient that we used to have, greater value for money. So in comparison to our parents, we could see ourselves as having made progress with our cars, houses, holidays, clothes, food, medicines, etc etc. But now we begin to see that axis shifting to one of difference between ourselves as each of us struggles with the particular challenges of our lives (Beck, 1992). We still want more, but only if it is also different: customised, personalised, particularised, timely. As customers, we no longer want our more to be mass-produced – to have the same as our neighbour. We want an experience that is unique and distinctive to ourselves within our contexts (Bobbitt, 2002). This means travel times, interior designs, destinations, styles, menus, treatments, etc etc that fit with what we particularly want. (Zuboff & Maxmin, 2002)

On which axis is the dominant challenge to the business?

Is it the relational challenge facing the clinic trying to fulfill its public service ethos of doing as much as possible for the customer without jeopardising the sustainability of the clinic?

Is it the positional challenge facing the telecoms business of leveraging the value of its network through doing as much as possible for the business without jeopardising the relationship with the customer?

Is it the positional challenge of maintaining the cohesiveness of the movement, or is it the relational challenge of connecting with the meaning and purpose of each individual life?

Alberts and Hayes argue that this is creating a transformational challenge for our time in which power must be taken to the edge of an organisation. The ‘edge’ is where the customer’s demand meets the organisation. For the 20th century organisation, the assumption was that there could be symmetry between what the customer wanted and what the organisation was supplying. In the 21st century this is no longer true, so that *asymmetry* has to be assumed. Thus power needs to be at the edge because it is only there that choices can be made about how to respond to the particular form the customer’s demand takes – to the asymmetric nature of the demand. This contrasts with holding power at the centre, evident in the hierarchical form of organisation, and reflecting the symmetric assumptions about demand made at the centre and applied uniformly throughout the organisation.

What is the corresponding transformation in the relationship to demand?

A presumption that there is an asymmetry between the patient’s need and the clinic’s response, in which there is a need to treat each patient differently?

A presumption that there is an asymmetry between what the engineer has been trained to do, and the nature of the faults that he is being asked to fix, because the nature of the faults depend on how the equipment is being used.

A presumption that there is an asymmetry between the services being asked for, and the particular way in which each member must engage with their struggle for meaning and purpose.

But wait a minute. Alberts and Hayes were writing about the challenge asymmetric *threats* pose to the 20th Century organisation. Placing the emphasis on threats implies that the existing forms of organisation experience asymmetric demand as a threat to their current ways of doing business. And this is right. Spend any time amongst professionals working within the public sector, or on the wrong end of a customer relationship management system, and it is very clear that current large-scale organisation is working hard to exclude and/or limit the ways in which they are prepared to respond to asymmetric forms of demand. Symmetry still rules.

How, then, are we to approach this question of the edge role? Power held at the centre is associated with leadership that can maintain the cohesion of the organisation as a whole and keep its members motivated to carry out their expected roles. But power taken to the edge requires leadership to be distributed (Huffington et al, 2004). This implies a different relationship to role in which the authority of a role arises primarily through its relation to demand, rather than by virtue of position in a hierarchy (Boxer & Eigen, 2004). How is the person in the edge role to hold their role in this way? And how does it take us beyond existing understandings of organisational role analysis?

Breaking Symmetries

The original insight concerning the relationship between the person and the role formed the basis of our understanding of systems as being socio-technical. Thus considering systems to be socio-technical was essentially both more productive for the business, and more satisfying for the engineers in managing the way they responded to faults, if the social nature of the relationships between the engineers (based on their respect for each others' knowledge) was allowed to influence the way they used technology to fix the faults. In the same way, the uses of medical technology could not be separated from the ways these uses were embedded in an essentially social understanding of the clinician's role. And of course the role of the minister was not simply as an instructor in the relation to orthodoxies, but rather as part of a social process.¹

The first asymmetry

This way of understanding the system as socio-technical involved breaking the first symmetrical assumption that the technology of the service determined the outputs of the service, thus creating the first asymmetry. (In Figure 1 this is represented as the separating of the technology matrix from the ways the outputs of this matrix are used by the output matrix.)

The first asymmetry: the technology is not the output

The role of the clinician had become associated with the fitting of surgical appliances. Establishing the clinical role of orthotics with other clinicians involved separating out the prophylactic effects of orthoses from the processes needed to fit them.

The role of the engineer was to understand the technology well enough to fix the faults encountered. As customers began to connect their own equipment to the network, so it became necessary to treat the engineer as part of the business relationship, rather than as an overhead.

The role of the minister has become associated with instructing members in the disciplines of the religious formation. As members began to try and live according to these disciplines, so the minister had to separate out the ways in which the disciplines could be interpreted.

Of course the engineers were employed by a business that defined what it was that it required of them in terms of productivity, working practices, and so on. The concept of primary task emerged, therefore, as a way of thinking about the outputs that an enterprise must deliver in relation to its environment if it is to survive (Miller & Rice, 1967). And with

¹ The original insight related to the methods of long-wall coalmining. It was realised that allowing coalminers to influence the way the technology was used was essentially both more productive for the coalmine and more satisfying for the miners. (Trist et al, 1963).

this concept of primary task came the concept of the boundary of the enterprise, for without a boundary, how were the outputs to be defined? Thus “unless a boundary is adequately located, different people will draw it in different places and hence there will be confusion between inside and outside. In the individual this confusion leads to breakdown; in enterprises, to inefficiency and failure.” (ibid, p42) (This definition of the outputs of the socio-technical system as defined by the business is shown in Figure 1 as corresponding to “Primary Task”).

Leadership of the enterprise therefore involved ensuring that these boundaries were managed, both those associated with the task systems and with the sentient groups (i.e. with both the socio- and the technical- aspects of the enterprise). Such leadership had to have sufficient power at the centre of the enterprise to contain and work through the differences that emerged between its sub-systems and groups in the interests of the enterprise as a whole. The result of this leadership was to establish a supply-side ‘logic’ that defined the consistency of the enterprise within its boundaries (i.e. the first three matrices in Figure 1).

How are boundaries defined?

The clinics were typically located within acute hospitals, reflecting their origins in support of surgical procedures. As such they were managed as overheads to particular forms of surgical treatment, rather than as a source of rehabilitative or prophylactic care in their own right. Thus both boundaries and primary task reflected the priorities of the enterprise within which they were located.

The engineers belonged to a Division that had to recover its costs from other Divisions that sold the network capacity maintained to different kinds of client. In this sense the ‘customer-facing’ Divisions cross-subsidised the engineering Divisions, and both boundaries and primary tasks reflected the parts in the larger whole of the telecommunications network.

The community was defined by those who belonged to it and paid its dues. Potential members were ‘outside’ and actual members were ‘inside’. On this basis, the minister was paid to minister to the members, and the better s/he was the more people would want to become members.

The second asymmetry

Increasing competitive pressures on telecommunications meant that the uses to which its outputs were put were becoming increasingly specialised, forcing the second symmetry to be broken. Telecommunications was no longer a good business to be in *per se*, but rather a way of providing particular communications solutions for its customers. This was the essential insight of marketing, through which the market, based on the solutions that the customer wanted to buy, defined what business the enterprise was in. (In Figure 1, this is represented by the business matrix being separated from the solution matrix).

The second asymmetry: the business is not the solution

The outsourcing of the role of supplying and fitting orthoses placed all the emphasis on the cost of the inputs to the clinic, taking them away from the clinical value of its outputs. As a result, the effectiveness of the referral pathways was ignored, through which delegation of responsibility for securing clinical outcomes could be managed.

The scale and complexity of the network was such that, for all but the largest customers, it was much easier to optimize the utilisation of engineers for fixing faults, than it was to align their activities to the differing needs and commercial priorities of sustaining different levels of customer service.

The pastoral work demanded of the minister always took the him or her beyond the services themselves to engage with the lives of the members. As long as this work could be related to the services, however, it could be limited in the demands it made. To be effective, however, this required members to organise their sense of religious meaning and purpose around that of the services.

From the point of view of the enterprise as a whole, the breaking of this second symmetry created the second asymmetry and faced the leadership with primary risk – the risk that the wrong primary task had been chosen (Hirschhorn, 1997).² This risk involved recognising that there were a whole range of possible ‘solutions’ that the business could offer. The necessity to choose which ones to offer therefore had to be based on a competitive *strategy* through which this primary risk could be minimised. In effect, therefore, managing primary risk meant selecting a supply-side ‘logic’ for the business that could create sustainable competitive advantage in the market.³ (In Figure 1, Primary Risk and Primary Task are defined by the way the business establishes its supply-side logic.)

The third asymmetry

Developments in the technologies underlying how telecommunications are provided (i.e. digitisation) have resulted in both unprecedented levels of investment in infrastructure, and also unprecedented levels of choice in how the technology can be used by customers. It is therefore no longer a question of choosing the right primary task, but of being able to support multiple forms of primary task, depending on the particular way in which any given customer wants to use the technology. This breaks the third symmetry so that the demand for telecommunications no longer defines the particular way the customer wants to experience its use. More generally, the breaking of this third symmetry creates an asymmetry in which the customer’s demand can no longer be assumed to be what the customer wants to experience within his or her context-of-use. (In Figure 1, this asymmetry is shown by the way the demand – what the customer asks for – is distinguished from the experience, which is way the solution provided to the demand is experienced within the customer’s context-of-use.)

The third asymmetry: the demand is not the experience

The patient’s demand was for shoes that made it possible to walk easily, but from the clinician’s point of view, what mattered was ensuring that in wearing the shoes, they had a long term effect on the development of the patient’s condition, thus reducing later difficulties such as the need for a hip operation.

The customer’s demand was for a broadband connection that would link into their home network, but from the supplier’s point of view, what mattered was that the service interacted seamlessly with the other technology in the house to provide a satisfying experience of high-definition media.

The member’s demand was for services that related to their experience of life within the community. But the experience of each member was of a struggle for meaning and purpose in their life in a way that went far beyond what could be related to the services.

The gap experienced by the customer between their actual experience of the solution and their expectations of it is a **value deficit**. If the supplier assumes symmetrical demand, then a solution will be chosen that produces the lowest average value deficit across all the different customers’ contexts-of-use. But breaking the third asymmetry involves recognising that demand is asymmetric, and that the value deficit must therefore be managed in each case.⁴ This faces the enterprise with a multiplicity of demand-side ‘logics’ that it must relate to, and to which it must find ways of aligning its supply-side logic.

² In terms of the relationship to the client and sponsoring systems addressed by the reflexive consultation process (Boxer & Eigen, 2003 & 2004), whereas primary task is a way of characterising the particular relationship of a client system across its task boundaries to its environment, primary risk speaks more to the implicit if not explicit risk that the sponsoring system faces in endorsing one formation of the client system over other possible formations.

³ Hence ‘positional advantage’, from which position as little as possible is done for the customer without jeopardising the customer relationship. Porter (1980) represents an early example of how this form of competitive advantage is understood.

⁴ Hence ‘relational advantage’, in which as much as possible is done for the customer without jeopardising the sustainability of the business.

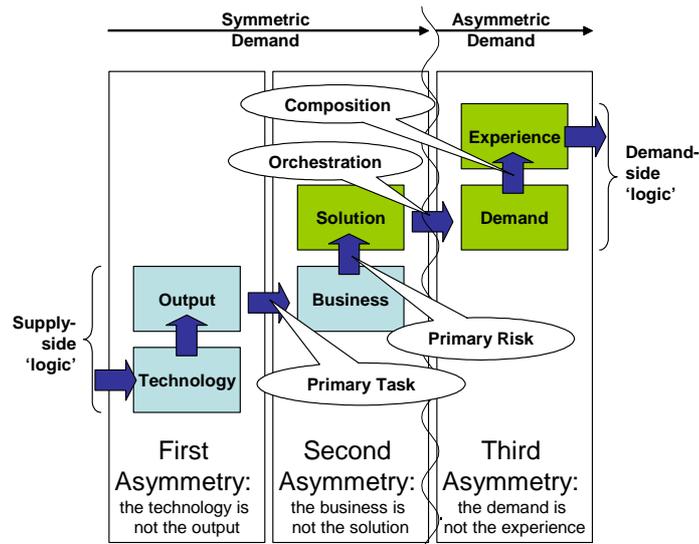


Figure 1: The three asymmetries

We can begin to see now the challenges facing the enterprise in taking ‘power to the edge’ in order to satisfy asymmetric forms of demand. If the supporting supply-side infrastructures are capable of infinite variation in how they can be used, then the person in the ‘edge’ role can orchestrate and compose them in a way that minimises the value deficit in each case (In Figure 1, orchestration and composition reflect the demand-side logic in how it builds on the solutions offered by the supply-side). We hope to see this in the relation of financial advisers to the products that they offer their customers. In the case of the healthcare industry, or telecommunications, pseudo-markets are created within the enterprise as a way of freeing the person in the edge role to do this. And in the case of the religious movement, we hope to find it in the way ministry relates to us in a way that is wholly particular to our circumstances. But in many situations this is not wholly possible, and the supply-side infrastructures impose constraints on the way the solutions they offer can be orchestrated and composed. Under these circumstances we see the challenge facing the person in the edge role clearly: how are they to balance the interests of the supplier’s supply-side logic and the customer’s demand-side logic?

In the following table, levels 1-3 define the supply-side, and levels 4-6 define the demand-side. Without the breaking of the third symmetry, then supply-side logic dominates. But with its breaking, creating demand asymmetry, then the person in the edge role is faced with the way levels 4 and 5 bridge between the supply-side and the level 6 context-of-use.

| The levels of articulation | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| 6: Experience | The patient’s condition | The customer’s use | The member’s life |
| 5: Demand | The care prescribed | Supporting the customer’s use of the bundle | The struggle for meaning and purpose |
| 4: Solution | The orchestration of the care from treatments | The bundling of service products | The pastoral work |
| 3: Business | The provision of treatments | Service Products | The provision of services |
| 2: Output | Component treatments | Component services | The selection of teachings |
| 1: Technology | Medical technology | Comms infrastructure | The body of teachings |

When is a boundary an edge?

In researching how markets are defined, Lane & Maxfield (2004) distinguish between three kinds of uncertainty:

- Truth uncertainty: uncertainty over whether a well-defined proposition is true or not. Thus if I say that this piece of equipment will behave in this particular way, can it be observed to be true?
- Semantic uncertainty: uncertainty about what a proposition means. Thus when the salesman says that the piece of equipment is reliable, does he mean what I mean by reliable?
- Ontological uncertainty: uncertainty about what kinds of entity inhabit a speaker's world, what kinds of interactions these entities can have, and how entities and interaction modes themselves can change as a result of these interactions. Now we are facing uncertainty about the very way in which the world is constructed by the speaker, within which s/he may try to say what s/he means.

The point they make is that innovation involves creating ontological uncertainty because it involves changing the ways in which people understand things to be possible. A market therefore involves creating ontological 'scaffolding' within which all the participants in the market can establish a good-enough shared understanding to be able to trust each other in the conduct of business.

We have experience of what care organisations take to create their ontological scaffolding, within which task systems, boundaries and roles may be agreed, commitments made, and expectations fulfilled. This ontological scaffolding will take the form of a 'supply-side logic' which may extend to include a whole industry and its customers. Within an ontological scaffolding that is shared in this way there will be task boundaries between one sub-system and another, and between one organisation and another, but there will be no edges. There will only be an edge if the ontological scaffolding being used on one side of the boundary is different to that being used on the other side.

So the breaking of the third symmetry involves admitting the possibility of edges between the supply side logic of the supplier, and the demand-side logics of customers. Of course our caricature of the salesman is of a person who is adept at making this translation in a way that is limited to the moment of purchase alone. But when we are dealing with the ability of an engineer to diagnose the particular reasons for a piece of equipment having failed as a consequence of the particular way in which it is being used, or the ability of a clinician to prescribe a treatment on the basis of its effects within the context of the patient's way of life, then it assumes a different level of importance.

We may also consider the effects of outsourcing on organisations. Outsourcing depends on identifying the routine and predictable aspects of an organisation's activities that can benefit from securing access to economies of scale in how they are carried out. The resultant hollowing out of an organisation changes the balance between those concerned with the routines of the organisation – 'safe' within its boundaries – and those concerned with its development and growth, and therefore potentially exposed to the edges of the organisation.

Two questions arise, therefore. Firstly, what form of consultation is needed by a person in an edge role? And secondly, what is different about the way an edge role is experienced?

Edge Role Consultation

The traditional way of conducting a role consultation is in terms of three different kinds of observer position. Firstly the 'normative', which approaches the role from the point of view of what 'ought' to be. This is the point of view of the powers-that-be in how they want their organisation to be defined in terms of systems, roles and boundaries. Secondly the 'existential', which approaches the role from the point of view tacit in the way the role holder experiences the role itself – tacit in the sense that the feelings and emotions evoked by the

experience may themselves be taken as symptomatic of a way of ‘knowing’ what is going on that is distinct in its own right, and rooted in the very being of the role holder. Thirdly, the ‘phenomenological’, which approaches the role from the point of view of the proverbial fly-on-the-wall, thus providing an account of the role in terms of what can be observed to be going on. It is this last point of view that is most likely to grasp the full task complexity of the context within which the role is situated.

The three different kinds of observer position

The normative role expectations of the clinicians were laid down in their contracts of employment. Because the service they were providing had been outsourced, there was a phenomenological account constructed from observing them at work in their clinics. The two conflicted with each other, for instance in the time available in practice for clinical note-taking and treatment reviews. The existential view of the clinician could be summarised by “exhausted”, as the demands of the patients always took them beyond the time allotted.

The normative role expectations of the engineers were to make as many repairs as possible within the contracted times. The phenomenological observation was that they were frequently unable to fix the faults they were dispatched to because their training and/or resources turned out not to be appropriate. Existentially, the engineers felt that they were being progressively de-skilled as a side-effect of the way the enterprise was trying to maintain service levels while reducing costs.

The normative role expectations of the minister were to run good services, give good sermons, and have an effective pastoral manner. Phenomenologically, the ministers were engaging with large amounts of ‘shadow work’ as they struggled to keep up with the members’ demands on them. Existentially, they felt on their own, once appointed, as well as overwhelmed, because there was no real interest or capacity to engage in what they were doing beyond that which met with the normative role expectations.

Each of these points of view offers a particular perspective on the person and what they bring to the role; on the role itself as it emerges as well as how it is defined in relation to the task systems and the sentient relationships between role holders; and on the enterprise itself as a system. There is no presumption here that these perspectives will produce understandings that are consistent with each other, and indeed the work of a role consultation is to locate these inconsistencies and to consider how to work them through in the interests of all three: the person, the formation of the role and the interests of the enterprise. But if this process is understood as a negotiation between different systems of meaning, then the outcome can be thought of as ontological scaffolding that can accommodate those inconsistencies in the interests of the enterprise as a whole. In Figure 2 this process is shown as a circular process between the two white boxes through which the inconsistencies are progressively worked through.

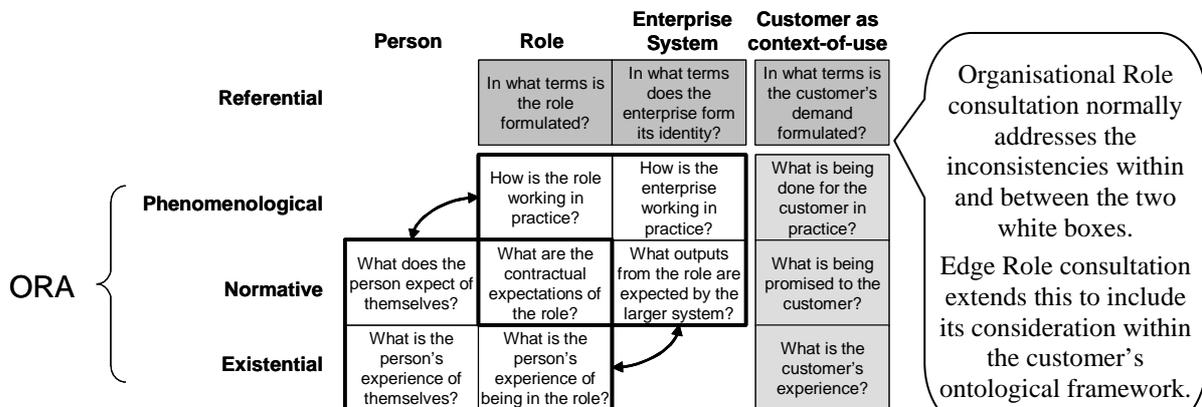


Figure 2: The Role Consultation Matrix for an Edge Role

How, then, is the edge role to be understood. From what point of view is a distinction to be made between the supply-side logic of the enterprise emerging from a process of role consultation, and the demand-side logic of a particular customer? If we were only dealing

with a boundary role, and not an edge role, then we would only need to add the pink boxes to take into account the relationship across the boundary to the customer⁵. Our approach is to add a fourth ‘referential’ point of view which allows us to consider the nature of the ontological scaffolding not from the point of view of the enterprise, but from the point of view of the customer’s experience-of-use. This means considering ‘role’ not only in terms of its ‘internal face’, i.e. its part in the enterprise as a whole as rooted in the enterprise’s task system, but also in terms of its ‘external face’, i.e. its part in the customer’s experience. This also requires that the third symmetry is broken from the point of view of the enterprise, so that there is a legitimate concern with the relationship to demand as being asymmetric.

Establishing a legitimate concern with the asymmetry of demand

The driver that broke the third symmetry was failure of the clinical service to break out of its role as a provider of appliances, so that there was a systematic underuse of the treatments resulting in significant suffering for patients. The supplying industry knew this to be the case through the experience of its clinicians, but was unable to argue the case because of the perception that they were only seeking to serve their own interests. The missing voice was the voice of the patient.

The driver that broke the third symmetry was continuing high levels of customer dissatisfaction combined with the emergence of new technologies that interacted to a far greater extent with the customer’s context-of-use. The difficulty faced by the supplying infrastructure was that it was organised to solve a different problem – providing fault-free connections. Eventually the twin pressures of competition on prices and loss of customers made this an enterprise-level issue.

The movement had prospered for many decades through the organic growth of its members. The driver that began to break the third symmetry was the loss of members from the later generations combined with the non-engagement with many other potential members. The Faustian Pact made it difficult to acknowledge the nature of the challenge in a way that could be jointly addressed. Ultimately it was for the leadership process to bring the movement to face this challenge.

This means adding an additional dimension to the existing role consultation matrix that can distinguish the ontological scaffolding within which the customer’s experience is situated. In Figure 2 above it is shown as the blue boxes, distinguished by their being articulated from within the point of view of the customer. In practice, it means building a picture of the customer context within which the enterprise takes up its role, and defining the way in which the particular relationship to this context has to be orchestrated and composed out of the available repertoire of behaviours of which it is capable. The resultant model has then to be brought alongside the supply-side model of the business to establish where it fits, and where it does not.⁶

It is evident from this that edge roles increase the variety of demands being placed on the infrastructure of an enterprise, requiring it to be more agile. One kind of response to this is to create a pseudo-market, in which some or all of the internal services can be outsourced, creating a kind of palette of services from which the edge roles can orchestrate and compose customer relationships. This is evident to GPs drawing on the services of a Healthcare industry, or in the financial adviser drawing on the services of a Finance industry. But not all

⁵ ‘Customer’ here need only be someone in another task system on the other side of the boundary, but with whom there is some interaction. Susan Long et al (1999) considered this in terms of creating role dialogues through which collaborative negotiation of role boundaries could take place, based on a shared respect for role and the task from which it is derived.

⁶ The methods needed to add this perspective start from the experience of the customer, but are organised around the question of how the customer defines value. In practice this involves building a map of how the customer’s way of valuing organises the demands s/he makes. This map is called a value ladder for customers that are organisations, and a referral pathway for individual customers – ‘referral pathway’ because it describes the way a need experienced by an individual customer is ‘diagnosed’, i.e. transformed into demands for which there are solutions. The big challenge with referral pathways is the extent to which they become colonised by suppliers’ ontological frameworks.

infrastructures are readily amenable to such treatment, being constrained by the way they are able to create economies of scale. Thus we see whole new technologies becoming necessary, such as in the digitisation of Telecommunications, before the edge roles can be supported effectively.⁷

Supporting the Edge Role

The attempt to create a pseudo-market for the treatments that are needed to care for patients can be appropriate where the resources used by the service itself are not tightly coupled to other services. Where this is not the case, the absence of a way of representing the more complex forms of demand means that they lose out to the exigencies of the supply-side logic imposed on the infrastructure.

Only with digitisation of network infrastructures does it become possible to manage the interdependencies of the network as a whole in a way that can respond to asymmetric forms of demand. This requires an approach that stratifies services in a way that directly relates to the nature of the end-uses being supported.

Ministering to individuals' struggle for meaning and purpose is ultimately dependent on the leadership of individuals. The resources used are not particularly complex, but managing the people-intensive nature of ministry is. As the older more monolithic forms of ministry in the form of services becomes less appropriate, so the need arises for a much greater number of individuals prepared to take up the role.

So who is on an edge?

At the very least, the person at the 'top' of an organisation is on its 'edge'. It is for this reason that so much work is done with top leadership teams on questions of competitive strategy. What is at stake in this work is the supply-side logic of the business as a whole. It is only when the third symmetry is broken, so that the business must deploy multiple forms of competitive strategy, depending on the particular competitive contexts in which it finds itself, that power has to be taken to the edge, and leadership 'distributed'. Huffington et al (2004) describe the consequent shift away from vertical to horizontal axes of authorisation, and the new kinds of challenge this presents to top management in "opening up new ways of understanding and developing the organisation's practice in an evolving context of opportunities and challenges" (ibid, p81).

Our own work with reflexive forms of consultation (Boxer & Eigen, 2004) describes a process aimed at enabling the top management team to create these new ways of understanding and developing the organisation's practices through the way it is able to recognise the gaps in its own understanding within and between the positions they represent on behalf of the organisation as a whole. With this recognition comes a different way of relating to managers 'on the edge' precisely because they come to understand the way the organisation relates to demand in a different way – a way that recognises that they are working in relation to multiple ontological frameworks. This different way of leading, referred to as type III leadership, is contrasted with type I leadership, in which the person at the top embodies the right way of doing things, or type II leadership where the people at the top are assumed to know better than anyone else within the organisation what is the right way of doing things.

Taking power to the edge must necessarily be accompanied, therefore, by a type III leadership style that can do three things: (i) set the frame within which the organisation is open to new forms of demand; (ii) authorising the formulation of edge strategies that must necessarily challenge existing ways of doing things; and (iii) secure support for these new ways of doing things through enabling change in the supporting infrastructures. In effect,

⁷ Something of the radical nature of this work is described in Engestrom's paper (2004) on co-configuration work, which argues that these challenges require the business to go beyond the forms of architectural knowledge associated with mass customisation and address the way the relationship to the customer itself has to be co-configured. The forms of understanding needed to describe the different ontological frameworks at the edge are covered in Boxer and Cohen (2004).

therefore, type III leadership must create processes in which there can be a constant re-negotiation taking place between the frameworks within and outside the enterprise in the interests of aligning the one to the other. It is this way of working in relation to the customer's experience that necessarily involves working with the third asymmetry, and which has to be distinguished from competing in product and solution spaces that characterise the breaking of the other two asymmetries (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003). Thus instead of doing as little as possible for the customer without jeopardising the relationship with the customer, the new imperative becomes one of doing as much as possible for the customer without jeopardising the sustainability of the business – a shift from a *positional* to a *relational* strategic posture.

So who is on the edge?

The failure to establish a relational strategy at the level of the clinic flowed directly from the failure to win the argument at the centre over how to hold clinics accountable for the way they spent public funds that was transparent. The alternative, however, which was to continue to use siloed methods of accountability, although they created transparency from the centre, did not do so from the point of view of the care being provided at the edge – a catch 22.

The demand for a relational strategy was increasingly apparent because of the work that was done on the asymmetric nature of the demands facing the organisation as a whole, and the recognition that this required new ways of responding to be established. The subsequent work to establish practical ways of holding edge roles accountable for performance in a way that also protected the sustainability of the whole was fundamental to this.

To start with it was as if it was the members who were on the edge. The process of realising that it was the ministers who were on the edge involved a profound re-framing of the movement's understanding of what it was – no longer primarily a membership organisation as a religious organisation with members. With this came a different understanding of leadership itself necessary to recognising the true nature of the role of the minister.

So who is on the edge? This question cannot even arise if the third symmetry has not been broken. And if it has, then it is the central question facing the reflexive consultation process.

Praxis, risk and the management of anxiety

So what is it like to be in an edge role? Pretty scary, because you are being asked to balance the interests of the customer with those of the enterprise, very often under circumstances in which the enterprise is not really interested. It is here that understanding role as praxis becomes important. Where the ontological scaffolding is already defined by the enterprise, defining a role is a matter of defining its place within this framing context. But an edge role is working between two ontological frameworks, potentially having to modify both in order to define a workable way of relating the one to the other. In this sense the theory has to emerge from the practice, which itself has to be a pragmatic response to the nature of the demand.

Traditionally, this praxis has been left to the individual's discretion, formed informally and accepted as long as it does not conflict with the formal requirements of the role. This is the Faustian Pact which frees up the individual in the edge role while at the same time allowing the enterprise to remain unchanged. But if there are real resource constraints requiring new ways of managing the available resource to support the edge roles, then it cannot be left to this kind of informal mechanism, and a more explicit leadership commitment has to be made consistent with opening up the third asymmetry:

- to give legitimacy to the challenges being set to the organisation by those in edge roles;
- to ensure that there is support for meeting those challenges in ways that are appropriate; and
- to set the frame within which the challenges at the edge are taken up.

The difficulty here is with the way anxiety is managed. We can approach this by considering the different kinds of risk faced by the person in the edge role relating to the customer. The first asymmetry creates the first kind of risk, that the technology will not produce the outputs specified (performance risk); the second asymmetry creates the second type of risk, that the way of creating a solution for the customer will not work as planned (composition risk); and the third asymmetry creates the third kind of risk, that the experience of the solution within the customer's context will not create the effects anticipated by the customer (implementation risk). Thus, as long as the enterprise restricts itself to symmetric forms of demand, the person in the role is only having to manage performance and composition risk within a framework defined by the enterprise. The anxiety associated with this is limited to 'doing their job', and the role itself acting as a defence against the anxiety associated with taking in the full experience of the customer/patient etc (Menzies Lyth, 1988).

But in taking on the third asymmetry, the role holder is being asked to take at least shared responsibility with the customer/patient for managing the implementation risk. This will involve not only feeling more of the customer/patient's pain/pleasure, but also potentially having to challenge the ways in which the enterprise is able to respond to the customer/patient's demands. If the leadership outlined above is present, then the anxiety may be bearable. But if not, then the role holder will be risking abjection by the enterprise, possibly the annihilation of the role, and if the demand is strong enough, the demise of the enterprise itself.⁸ Without leadership that offers the possibility of working through the new demands, then one of two retreats are likely: either to cynical incohesion and isolation, or to fundamentalist aggregation.⁹ Either way, the faith that an appropriate response to the demand can be found is abandoned.

It is finding ways of countering this loss of faith that most defines edge role consultation, which involves struggling for a way of making sense of the situation that not only engages with the customer's demand but also engages with the challenge facing the enterprise. It is this struggle that defines the role as praxis, changing the relationship of the enterprise to the role from one of expecting conformity to one capable of learning from the demands arising at the edge.

Conclusion

Organisational role analysis has tended to focus on the way the person is able to hold their role within the system of the enterprise. As such it has tended to focus on the challenges of implementing the strategies of the enterprise. In taking power to the edge, strategy too has to be formed at the edge. This changes the focus and expectations of the edge role. Supporting the praxis of the edge role is a way of enabling the enterprise to learn from the edge role and leverage that learning in the interests of the enterprise as a whole.

⁸ This threat of annihilation is associated with the experience of trauma and with the abjection of premature separation from the mother. It is formulated as one of the two axes of anxiety (Harari, 2001), and relates to Kierkegaard's 'concept of anxiety' (1980), in which freedom appears before itself as a possibility. This opening up means that "... whoever is educated by possibility remains with anxiety; he does not permit himself to be deceived by its countless falsifications and accurately remembers the past... for him, anxiety becomes a serving spirit that against its will leads him where he wishes to go." (p159)

⁹ This is the basic assumption incohesion:aggregation/massification (baI:A/M) (Hopper 2003). It appears to be a reworking of the basic assumption MeNess (baM) (Lawrence, Bain and Gould, 1996), formulated in relation to Turquet's basic assumption oneness (baO) (1974). In the latter case, the emphasis is placed more on the role of the 'non-group group', but in both cases, what is at stake is the very formation of the subject himself or herself.

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