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Change in Flow: How Critical Incidents Transform Organisations

Editors: Nancy Wallis and Maria Spindler

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The Common Sense Company:
Purpose Driven Self-organization in
Practice and Theory

Abstract

This paper is built upon the example of an SME where the owner experienced a need for radical change of the organization. For this reason, he started to establish a self-organizing structure. Such a self-organizing structure is one example of radically new ways of organizing that have been implemented in several companies and NPOs all over the world (Hamel, 2011, Laloux, 2014). Despite distinct features in each case, this kind of an emerging new paradigm of organizing may be summarized through the following characteristics: purpose-driven, distributed authority, self-organization, and wholeness (Laloux, 2014). In this paper I characterize various organizational models that realize these principles in practice and summarize strengths, challenges and crucial topics which frequently arise when applying such approaches.

Keywords: self-organization, natural hierarchy, distributed leadership, organizational purpose

"I didn't see a future in where this company was heading"

The company Tele-Haase was founded in 1963 by Günther Maria Haase. It produces relays and control systems and is located in Vienna, Austria. Tele-Haase achieves revenue of 14.5 million Euros with about 95 employees and exports its products into 60 countries worldwide.

The founder of Tele-Haase passed away in 1977, when his son Christoph was only 4 years old. His widow, Heidemarie Haase, inherited the company. Between 1977 and 2000 the company was run by Heidemarie Haase and a shareholding partner (25 %). The Haase family bought back their shares

after the partner left the company. Christoph later took over one third of the shares.

As an adult, Christoph started a career as an art director at other companies. In 1999 he came back to his own company, Tele-Haase, and rebooted their advertising activities. He quickly grew into his role and "got caught", as he describes it. But he felt uncomfortable with current management styles and describes the development as follows:

> "I'm not an engineer and I wasn't familiar with all the in and out of the industry - nor did I ever feel comfortable with the thought of running the company in a traditional, hierarchical way. I didn't see a future in where this company was heading - neither financially, nor in terms of products. I saw a slowly dying patient that would either have to be completely re-vamped - or get sold for next to nothing. Just continuing what had been, there was no option and hardly something I'd muster up the energy to get out of bed for. Some inspiration came for me from the book *The Seven-Day Weekend: Changing the Way Work Works* [Semler, 2004] although I have to admit I only started reading it but never finished. It was more like a motivation to start looking for a different way to run a company. Our management at that time was given a copy of the *Seven Day Weekend* (even though I have never finished reading it ☺). I told them that a lot of what was written in there makes sense and that we should think about moving towards an organization that was more 'common sense'. Nowadays you'd call that 'self-organizing' or 'agile' or whatever. I still like to call it 'common sense'."

Therefore Christoph Haase became convinced that the whole organization would have to be changed. He wanted it to function according to the common understanding of the employees. However, the management of those days showed no ambition to realize this approach, which would make hierarchical power more or less obsolete. As Christoph Haase describes it:

> "It turned out that our management wasn't keen on applying common sense. They and the employees just didn't understand it. Around the end

of 2011 Markus, a friend and consultant, and I started talking about the organization. I was telling him about some of the ideas I had about a flatter, smarter, quicker, more intelligent organization. We came to talk about our processes and I told him that they existed, were in place and running fairly smoothly. I pulled out all our documents regarding that matter and we both realized that all this was very outdated. We understood that we should start from scratch. That was the start of what would eventually become our 'Company of the Future'."

Christoph and Markus did not follow a pre-given template of how to do it right. Instead, they gave the employees the chance to work on a structure for the company which would be a good basis for achieving the best outcomes possible. They were expected to draw conclusions from their personal experiences. Christoph says:

"We ended up designing the whole system that runs our company from scratch because of a lack of any examples. I wasn't able to find much other than a little bit of information about Semco, the company led by Ricardo Semler. I didn't find out about Holacracy until about a year after we had already put our own system in place. The method 'Holacracy' [Robertson, 2015] was not an inspiration but rather an affirmation that there are indeed others out there that are doing something similar. Soon we started a work group with volunteers that had one assignment: Design every process in this company anew. That team consisted of about 15-20 people and called themselves 'Team Armageddon'. They decided which processes were necessary and designed them. At the same time Markus and I had started to scribble my initial ideas in a kind of typical clean-sheet-of-paper approach. The goal was to come up with something that wouldn't need managers in a traditional sense."

Sorrow, happiness and a point of no return
Christoph describes the transformation process as follows:

"In the beginning this change process was very difficult and caused a lot of internal tensions. It's a rollercoaster – it still is, to the present day. However in the beginning (2012-2013) it was one long valley of sorrow with the occasional happy bump. The occasional "happy bump" occurred in moments when things would align and offer a glimpse of the future in which systems actually worked. Between 2013 and now the valleys have become significantly shorter, to a point where we are on a high plateau now with an occasional "dumb dip": times when certain parts of the organization seem suddenly and collectively to dip into idiocy. At these times they don't seem to apply common sense - and need a kind of nudge in order to start functioning again."

After some years Christoph realized that they had reached a point of no return. By then a substantial group of employees had already understood in which direction all this was leading and committed themselves to it. Christoph and Markus realized that if they had stopped the process – which was no real option – then they would lose these most engaged employees.

Today the company does not have a hierarchical pyramid anymore. 'Team Armageddon' developed completely new internal operational processes. They cover the *three core processes of production, sales and innovation* and *eleven support processes.* These processes are each led by two people - one responsible for the contents and the other one responsible for the staff. Those leaders are elected by the members of the process for the limited time of one or two years. One of those support processes is called 'Regie', which means 'directing', in which support process the CEO and Christoph are active. Strategic decisions are made in one of six independent committees (business plan, innovation, organization, quality assurance, strategy / distribution / marketing and environment / ecological sustainability). Those committees usually consist of those employees who are engaged in the specific topic and who are affected by their decisions, but they are open to anyone. Anyone can join and become a member or attend as a guest. This implies that employees take important strategic decisions without the CEO or owner being involved. All relevant data and information is always accessible and easy to find for

everyone. "Transparency is key for many things we do here", Christoph emphasizes. The support process 'Regie' (CEO and owner) theoretically would have the power of veto against decisions of these committees but they have never yet used it. For this reason it is planned to abolish this power of veto completely.

The role of a CEO is required by law. Sometimes employees make fun of the fact that he is legally responsible for their decisions: "They have already prepared a bed for you in prison," people often joke.

A central idea of this approach developed by the employees for running the organization is that every person has more competencies than the ones necessarily required by the specific job. If somebody works in a voluntary fire brigade, this could also be the basis for leadership abilities – even without an MBA degree. For example, the company had a customer in Brazil who didn't speak English. Luckily an employee came forward who speaks fluent Portuguese.

"The single most important factor in all of this is the people. We need 'the right' people, which is more an issue of *character and mindset* than anything else. We are often described as democratic, which we certainly are. However, we are 'democracy', guided by the attitude of every single person here. This means we are NOT a real democracy, since this organization filters out people who don't have a certain cultural fit", as Christoph describes it.

Christoph and Markus emphasize the following most important advantages of the current status at Tele-Haase:

1. **Decision-making.** In hierarchical organizations decisions usually are difficult to implement because employees often resist them. Christoph regards this as an important difference at Tele-Haase: "Our employees are very committed to decisions because they are more or less obliged to make up their own minds and make a decision. We are still struggling with spending too much energy on getting people to engage. So

we and the whole organization try to come up with ways to either get people out of their comfort zone or - ultimately - make them realize that this is not the right place for them. Employees are asked to openly share their opinions about the topic and take part in the vote. The term 'common sense', which is heard very often in the company, refers to implicit knowledge and the company culture. It reminds the employees that they rely more on it than on highly sophisticated concepts and theories. But the employees also have to execute unpleasant tasks like firing people, which actually happened today on two occasions. I consider this a crucial moment and vital for the organization to emancipate itself", says Christoph.

2. **Responsibility,** Markus stresses the point of responsibility: "If people think they can change something to the better, then they are able to do it." The employees manage their work and the whole company. Moreover, they work much more efficiently because they may take decisions during their day-to-day jobs without the need to ask a superior. Christoph says: "The employees in the manual production are mostly low-skilled workers." There it gets difficult when it comes to self-management. Currently, Markus actually conducts German classes so they are at least able to communicate in the same language at a certain level of competence. The employees decide on the salaries themselves collectively. A working group was established on that topic because some people found that the salary scheme was not fair for everyone. This was a first step towards a more transparent, more comprehensible scheme suitable for the organization. The employees may raise the salaries themselves but they also know that they have to consider sufficient profit. Now they regard payment as fairer than in former times when the boss decided on it. Not everybody fits into that culture. There are people who need somebody to tell them what to do. About 40 people left the company during the last few years: partly because of natural turnover, partly because they did not want to work in this style. It is important to check whether applicants can cope with this new freedom.

3. **Role of CEO and Management.** What is left for Christoph and Markus to do if the employees manage themselves? Markus, the official and legal CEO, works *within* the company and ensures that the process of self-organization may unfold, he is 'holding the space' (Nixon, 2015). Christoph defines his position as working *with* the company somehow with an outside perspective: "I am not busy with work on spreadsheets anymore. Therefore I may creatively focus on the future of the company. I may release impulses and may challenge the company. The committees decide whether my ideas will be realized or not."

4. **Evolution.** Christoph emphasizes that this is an ongoing journey. He summarizes a goal for the company using the words 'create your own job'. The organization is heading in a certain direction. Somewhere along that way it seems logical that people will create their own jobs based on the needs of the company and/or what they think the company is lacking or could use. He differentiates between 'company' and 'organization': "The way we are organized is merely a means of having a proper 'system' in place that will be able to cope with the ever-changing external circumstances and the increasingly volatile environment a company is embedded within these days. The 'organization' is the operating system of the 'company'."

The question may arise whether the owner and the CEO are just pretending equality. Do they really believe in and live this distributed authority?

When I told Christoph and Markus that I wanted to write an article on their company and I would like to get feedback from them, the answer was: *"You could join the committee organization. They should give you feedback on it."* For me it was this reaction which finally made it evident that they do not think of themselves as the top of a pyramid anymore.

The future of organization is alive already

In hierarchical organizations usually all decisions of importance are made by managers. Very often they are not connected to the practical activities

anymore. Thus those decisions in many cases are not well-founded and cause resistance by the subordinates. To be the object of such decisions reduces motivation for many employees. Globally, only a fraction of 13 % of the employees were found to be actively engaged at work whereas 24 % were actively disengaged (Gallup, 2013). Managers themselves tend to be overloaded with operative details and to lose sight of the strategic perspective.

However, there are some organizations in Europe and the USA which not only do not have a flat hierarchy but have none at all. Interestingly, those companies developed their own approaches more or less independently from each other – like Tele-Haase. Semco in Brazil is one of them, and Frederic Laloux described 12 more in his book *Reinventing Organization* (Laloux, 2014). Some more have been found meanwhile. These organizations include production (e.g. Morning Star, Patagonia) as well as service industry (e.g. Zappos), profit (e.g. SUN hydraulics) and NPO (e.g. ESBZ, rhd), small (e.g. evolution at work) and big (e.g. AES). Some of them were founded in a hierarchy-free manner (e.g. Buurtzorg, evolution at work) while others transformed (e.g. FAVI, Poult).

Figure 1: The future of organizing is alive here already
© Hamel 2011, Laloux 2014, Pircher 2015

Characteristics, Strengths and Challenges

Among others, three central characteristics of such organizations may be summarized as follows (Hamel, 2011, Laloux, 2014):

1. To serve the purpose or mission of the organization provides the leading orientation for every decision and action. Whether an idea or argument is good or bad will be judged according to this assessment criterion. Every employee at Morning Star, for example, "is responsible for drawing up a personal mission statement that outlines how he or she will contribute to the company's goal of 'producing tomato products and services which consistently achieve the quality and service expectations of our customers'." (Hamel, 2011).

2. The *power* to take decisions is allocated to those people in the organization who are *capable of doing it.* Employees choose how much money to spend on what, even including salaries. They are responsible for acquiring the tools needed to do their work. Employees even define the strategy themselves. There are no titles or promotions because there is no hierarchy. In such organizations there are no managers anymore. However, everybody is a manager in terms of competencies to decide. One employee puts it like this: "I'm driven by my mission and my commitments, not by a manager." (Hamel, 2011). Employees negotiate responsibilities with their peers. They apply market-style practices within their relationships. If they want to make investments larger than what they are able to finance themselves they have to convince colleagues to lend them the rest. "There is a social risk in doing something your colleagues think is stupid." (Hamel, 2011).

3. People do not have to fit into predefined boxes, which could be labeled as *wholeness.* They are expected to take on bigger responsibilities as they develop further competencies. Therefore, there are broader and more complicated roles than elsewhere (Hamel, 2011).

It may be concluded that in such organizations the employees have a lot of freedom to do what they are convinced is the best thing to serve the purpose.

Simultaneously they have peer-negotiated responsibility for the results of their actions. There are almost no rigid structures like hierarchy and status markers which keep them from fulfilling their mission.

Such a fundamental shift of organizational structure and culture also has its *drawbacks.* It usually takes a quite long time to get accustomed to it and to be productive. Not everybody is willing to enter such an organization or is suitable for it. Employees who are used to working in a rigid hierarchical environment may not be able to adjust. This selection criterion is difficult to assess and constitutes a limitation for growth in terms of number of employees. Without a hierarchical ladder to climb, employees may also find it difficult to evaluate and communicate their progress relative to peers. That can become a handicap when they want to switch companies. Peer-negotiated responsibility requires explicit feedback in case a counterpart does not meet his / her promises. This may be challenging for employees on both sides, but it constitutes a core factor for productivity (Hamel, 2011).

It appears to be evident that such a new type of purpose-driven organization requires people with the ability and willingness to manage their actions and competencies quite independently and to coordinate them with colleagues. On top of their professional expertise, they have to establish self-management and self-leadership abilities. Self-leadership may be defined as "a comprehensive self-influence perspective that concerns leading oneself toward performance of naturally motivating tasks as well as managing oneself to do work that must be done but is not naturally motivating" (Manz, 1986: p. 589). In addition to self-management, the concepts of the 'what' and 'why' are covered. Through the focus on the 'why' and 'what' of self-influence, individual self-leaders address the underlying reasons for effort and behavior (Manz, 2013, see also Pircher, 2015). Increased self-leadership corresponds with better affective responses and improved work performance (Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011).

Popular misconceptions concerning self-organization

This type of hierarchy-free organizing seems so completely to contradict our fundamental assumptions regarding the organization of human collaboration that it triggers several misconceptions which I will try to clarify briefly here:

- "There is a lot of talking and little action": Clear structures and processes create a 'grid' which channels discussion and interaction towards the purpose. Personal accountability for their own actions and achievements ensures that nobody hides behind the decisions of a superior.

- "There are still hierarchies but hidden ones": A fluid and purpose-driven structure allows existing human competency to effectuate itself wherever it is needed. There is still a natural hierarchy of competency, but it would be neither rigid nor self-sustaining if it no longer served the attainment of the purpose.

- "This is a nice hippie utopia but it doesn't work in real business life": Most of these new organizations make profits which they have even been able to increase through this fundamental transformation.

How do we transform hierarchy towards distributed self-organization?

There are basically two possibilities to transform an existing hierarchical organization:

- Radical change ordered by top management (e.g. led by Tony Hsieh at Zappos)

- Incremental and participative step-by-step change (e.g. led by Christoph Haase at Tele-Haase)

There is at least one precondition, however: A leader who *lives* the change and takes the risk. A human being is required who embodies the collaborative and participative mindset of the future company (Laloux, 2014).

During transformation the following 'hot topics' could arise:

- What is the real *purpose*, the mission of the organization?

- How do we help the (middle-)managers to find an image of their *future identity* in the organization?

- How do we deal with *salary* if there is no hierarchical ladder anymore telling me who is worth how much money?

- Who wants to take part in the journey? How do we find an appreciative way of separating from those who do not find a place for themselves in this new organizational identity?

- How do we design the recruiting process where those people who may identify themselves with this purpose are selected?

- What are approaches fit to the purpose and the history of the organization regarding topics like decision-making, definition of roles and processes and competency development in areas like self-leadership, etc.?

Conclusions

I would like to summarize the Tele-Haase case as follows:

- This example shows that it is possible to transform an existing hierarchical organization into a self-organizing and flexible social structure. This example highlights that a traditional small technical company may successfully change a hierarchical pyramid into a flexible and process-oriented structure without designated managers.

- This kind of flexible structure not only includes but even encourages competency-based leadership among all the employees. In such a structure there are still hierarchies but they are based on differences in competency instead of rank and promotion. As competencies are related to business-relevant topics, an individual may be a leader in one area and a follower in another. Therefore, employees are peers who decide on leadership roles

among them in a context-specific way. Arguments are judged with regards to contents, not power. To establish such a 'flexible hierarchy' means that the organization tends to avoid rigid structures which would hinder competency-based activity from reaching the purpose.

- The case of Tele-Haase emphasizes the roles of owner and CEO. Without their support or at least acceptance such a structure could hardly come into existence. Their mindset and attitudes are decisive. Such a flexible structure requires their willingness to let go of the traditional vertical understanding of power, command and control. It also suggests that shared leadership is possible even if it there is no trace of traditional vertical leadership left. Moreover, it is not restricted to knowledge work but also is applicable in manual work environments (compare Pearce, 2004).

- This case does not necessarily imply that every organization should change to shared leadership and flexible structures. However, such structures seem to raise the organizations' ability to adapt and to innovate. Therefore in times of turbulent and ambiguous business environments owners and leaders would be well advised to question the appropriateness of the command and control paradigm. To replace centralized power by collective intelligence could increase organizations' ability to survive and to achieve their purpose.

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Being global and diverse in thinking and
acting outside the box are the targets for
its authors and readers in management,
consulting and science.