

# Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids®

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Tom Brown and Gary Wagenheim

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**Journal "Challenging Organisations and Society . reflective hybrids® (COS)"**

COS is the first journal to be dedicated to the rapidly growing requirements of reflective hybrids in our complex 21<sup>st</sup>-century organisations and society. Its international and multidisciplinary approaches balance theory and practice and show a wide range of perspectives in and between organisations and society. Being global and diverse in thinking and acting outside the box are the targets for its authors and readers in management, consulting and science.

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*Christian Stary*

## **Handling the Intangible – An Introspective Dialog on Structural Pressure**

CS: Picture an impediment that is not tangible and thus cannot be neutralized by means of prevention, leadership or technical task accomplishment. If you want to climb to the next level in a hierarchy, you call the impediment a glass ceiling; if you have arguments that cannot be refuted but are not accepted in a certain situation, you term the impediment an invisible wall. This impediment becomes a means of triggering processes, as they would occur naturally, logically, intuitively or even inevitably, even though they may not make sense from a technical perspective.

Self: What are you talking about?

CS: I can give you an example. Consider yourself a team leader who feels responsible for his team members and you experience ‘running into an invisible wall’ when you need to work in the interest of your team members.

Self: Well, it is the idea of the role of team leader to work in the interest of his/her team members.

CS: Correct. You may understand the issue better if I provide you with a certain case. You hire a co-worker for a project. The project is designed to last a certain period of time, let us assume 6 years. Management agrees to the respective contract and the project can start as planned. After this period it becomes evident another year will be required to finish the project successfully while keeping the team members on board.

Self: So far this is not unusual; we know projects of that length are rarely completed on time.

CS: I also agree with that. You as a responsible team leader inform management once funding has been settled for another year. You assume you will be able to keep the project team members on board, as you were able to provide funding for them.

Self: From the project team leading perspective, just in time information, and even ensuring funding of the team members for another year, in order to proceed seamlessly with the project.

CS: Unfortunately, here the power of structure comes into play. The management has changed from pragmatic decision taking to regulation-driven. Formal regulations in our case only allow a person to stay in an organization for a maximum of 6 years before becoming eligible for a permanent contract. As funding is not guaranteed for a permanent position, the management acting formally correctly informs you as a project team leader that the people that have been working on that project cannot be contracted longer due to legal constraints.

Self: So you need to argue from a technical perspective as well as in terms of the image of the organization that could be damaged in case the contracts cannot be extended for another year.

CS: You mean, arguing why these people are the best way to complete the project successfully?

Self: Of course.

CS: We can go even further: The project team leader starts arguing from an economic perspective. It would require substantial effort and costs to find and qualify team members who could replace those team members whose contracts cannot be continued.

Self: This is the argument that finally counts for financially responsible management.

CS: Actually, the formal argument in this case is stronger: The top management lists a number of cases where the organization has been sued by team members (not related to the current team) insisting on legal rights to enforce permanent contracts, regardless of funding.

Self: However, these were different cases.

CS: With respect to the project, you could consider it like that. With respect to hiring people from an overall organizational perspective, this argument does not hold. Obviously, some team members from other projects that could not be funded longer insisted on their formally granted right to get a permanent contract.

Self: Still, top management could check whether special regulations could be found meeting the demands of the project at hand.

CS: Up to the point of being sued, the top management has been searching for case-specific solutions and in most cases offered a work around or interpretation of regulations fitting the needs of previous projects.

Self: So, top management should have experienced that process and the benefits resulting from making case-sensitive decisions.

CS: One could expect that. The team members applying for another project term would have to be dismissed if this tradition is not kept. From an external or shareholder perspective, such a strict interpretation of regulation reduces any risk, as the organization is acting within the regulations when contracting people.

Self: How can such a situation be overcome?

CS: I consider two dimensions to be relevant for handling structural pressure: how to act in principle and ad-hoc for a case at hand.

Self: Ok, let us start with 'in principle', translating it to a structural dimension.

CS: In that case, working in a preemptive mode with the (top) management seems to be the only valid option. This means, once you as a team leader become aware of regulations that could cause structural effects that in turn could affect team operation, a dialog or discussion needs to be initiated. It needs to be before a case pops up requiring a decision. The latter reduces the set of options management may take into consideration.

Self: Do you have any concrete suggestions?

CS: Yes. The discussion can be set up in such a way that different cases from the organization can be thought through. In each organization several types of contracts exist requiring dedicated handling by HR according to regulations. Why not talk about cases that could occur due to the new regulations, and invite HR to join or moderate the process?

Self: Okay. Can we assume all cases or issues can be resolved in this way?

CS: No. If there are limits, top management needs to understand that it has become active across boundaries of organizations, e.g., together with other organizations of the same sector, or on the political stage. It has to raise awareness about regulations that might hinder business, innovation or sustainable development.

Self: What can be done ad-hoc?

CS: This case is delicate, as top management already has an intention if not a decision how to (re-)act. If a team member has to leave and cannot be contracted for another year the team leader could find a project partner arrangement preventing brain drain at least from the project. In this case another project partner could hire the person that has to leave his/her organization.

Self: In that case, the team members have to leave the organization?

CS: Yes, this is the case. Taking risks for the management would mean keeping the structural pressure outside or at the boundary of the organization and communicate that it relies on the (self-)organization of the team to find ways either to keep team members permanently or to keep them until the end of the project.

Self: And the role of the team leader?

CS: Make evident where the structural pressure starts, at the boundary of the project, or the organization.

Self: Thank you for enriching the role model by system thinking.

## About the authors

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*Relationship, and Learning, and Speaking of Learning: Recollections, Revelations, and Realizations.*

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His current research interests include the area of interactive distributed systems, with a strong focus on method-driven learning and explication technologies for personal capacity building and organizational development.

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## Next New Action

(3d)

*Assess your creative potential for leadership and consulting*

dates 2018 forthcoming

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## COS Curriculum

# Creators for Organisations & Society

25 days & 1d/8h coaching for master's piece

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Freestyle \*

\* choose one – or more (optional)

*Craft your ideas and developments and bring them into the world. Act!*

tbd. with participants

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## Whole System:

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- Enter uncharted territory.

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The future is an unknown garment that invites us to weave our lives into it. How these garments will fit, cover, colour, connect and suit us lies in our (collective) hands. Many garments from the past have become too tight, too grey, too something...and the call for new shapes and textures is acknowledged by many. Yet changing clothes leaves one naked, half dressed in between. Let's connect in this creative, vulnerable space and cut, weave and stitch together.

Our target group is reflective hybrids – leaders, scientists, consultants, and researchers from all over the world who dare to be and act complex. Multi-layered topics require multidimensional approaches that are, on the one hand, interdisciplinary and, on the other hand, linked to theory and practice, making the various truths and perspectives mutually useful.

If you feel you are a reflective hybrid you are very welcome to join our COS movement, for instance by:

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**Challenging Organisations and Society . reflective hybrids®**

**Volume 6, Issue 1**

**Title: Inner Outer Spaces**

**Editors: Maria Spindler (A), Christian Stary (A)**

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