Chapter 8

In the Name of Flexibility: Three Hidden Meanings of “The Real Work” in a Finnish Software Company

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes you to a data security workplace in Finland. It presents reflections on the tensions of managing selves and others, as experienced by the employees and the managers. It argues that a generally critical approach to normative management may overlook the actual complexity and ambiguous nature of the late modern cultural environment. Both self-authoring and manipulative moves are made difficult by the amalgamating hegemonic and countercultural currents. The author points at chances for resistance through new forms of literacy. Instead of dropping “culture” as a conservative or managerial pursuit, we must learn to navigate successfully in the broken cultural landscape of today’s workplaces. The very same images that can be used for manipulation are open to more solidary configurations by the cultural and social imagination of organizational members.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge economy is the dominant call today, as much in official national and multinational strategies as in the rhetoric of corporations. Organizations must meet demands for innovativeness and quick learning. As the human imagination is a hard thing to control, the managerial elites have tended to turn from Taylor-like physical control to more psychological forms that lead discreetly to the desired outcomes. No direct monitoring is needed to guarantee maximal input from the workforce. Manipulated workers themselves define high objectives and devote themselves to their tasks,
sometimes at the risk of their health. The limits of this approach are attained in cases where increased pressure to produce ever new innovative solutions on time and respecting consumer demands has led de facto to decreased creativity and burnout symptoms. To the frustration of the fashionable faith in managerial omnipotence, it seems that the sought-after revolutionary innovation just cannot be merely called into being, but may instead appear as a byproduct of leisurely playful activity. Indeed, market pressures and innovations seem to mix like oil and water. How can any realist management strike a balance between these two?

Alongside rather primitive retreats to tight control, the past decade has also witnessed fairly ‘democratic’ and participatory moves, partly as an inheritance from the high-tech industry’s most typical professional culture, referred to alternatively as ‘nerd culture,’ ‘hacker ethics,’ or ‘techies culture.’ The field of high-tech management is by no means dominated by manipulative forms. Very different approaches coexist, and managers as much as workers rely upon one or another of them in the underdefined cultural conditions of late capitalism. Local societal and institutional conditions bring further variation to the arenas of industrial relations, regulatory practices, and work cultures.

This chapter is based on ethnography in a middle-sized Finnish software company F-Secure, mainly in its Helsinki headquarters and by comparison in a Silicon Valley subsidiary. I went to the organization originally to inquire into ethnicity and its management, since the company had a relatively high proportion of foreign workers. I soon learned that there was no management related to ethnicity. The first round of my inquiry in 2000 suggested that foreigners in Helsinki were nevertheless exceedingly happy about what they called “Finnish management.” Why? Could it be explained in terms of the workers being so lucky—middle-class with stable incomes, during a boom and with a common professional identity? Largely, of course. They were, however, happiest about the more sustainable traits in management style, such as investment in education and respect for personal autonomy. The foreigners summarized it as “air of democracy.”

After the downturn, F-Secure’s “democracy” came under attack, but survived and was even institutionalized in some organizational practices. Yet its acting out in the social exchange of daily work is continuously contested and defended in the face of the postmodern pressures of investor relations, financial insecurity, consumer demands, market strategies, and technological development—all of which may and do cause sudden turbulence that needs to be checked, often curtailing the freedom of the workers. In this day-to-day balancing action, cultural forms like the discourses around ‘flexibility’ take the role of tools for self-management and managing others. Both workers and managers attempt to construct situated identity and agency, but their attempts are confused by the ambiguity of connotative links and the absence of clear addresses in dialog with the world.

“FLEXIBLE” WORK AND ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

Many writers have drawn attention in the last two decades to the widespread use of the image of ‘flexibility’ in dominant postmodern discourse, especially concerning work and production. For Richard Sennett, this is one of the cornerstones in the talk of the managerial elites or “Davos men” (Sennett, 1998). Liberated from the iron cage of rigid organizations, workers must now survive the fierce competition of postmodern, unpredictable markets, selling their capabilities anew each day and renewing their skills as best they can (Sennett, 2006). I have myself listened to a representative of the Confederation of Finnish Industries reciting the necessary qualities of today’s workers as “creativity, curiosity, interaction, development, renewal, faith in one’s own opportunities, target setting, interest in the customer, skill to tackle in
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