

Defining Reality

In a small but thought-provoking book entitled *Leadership is an Art*, Max De Pree claims that “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.” Notice that De Pree didn’t say “describe reality” but rather “define reality.”

In an accessible introduction to what is called “postmodernism,” Anderson (1990) writes:

“If there is anything we have plenty of, it is belief systems. But we also have something else: a growing suspicion that all belief systems – all ideas about human reality – are social constructions. This is a story about stories, a belief about beliefs, and in time – probably a very short time – it will become a central part of the worldview of most people.”

For the time being, however, the dominant worldview of most managers is that of “modernism” where the availability of objective knowledge is held as certain on the part of unconditioned, ahistorical observers dispassionately viewing the world as it is.

In most of our day to day managing we operate with such an objectivist understanding of the world, knowledge and truth. So much so that we take this “common sense” view as entirely self-evident. As busy managers with “important work to do,” it would strike us as ludicrous to waste time on critically examining three underlying presuppositions:

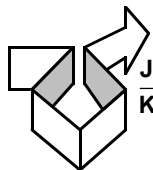
1. that the world is objectively real and knowable,

2. that the world displays an order inherent to itself, and
3. that this inherent order is completely independent of human activity.

Objectivist understanding generally seems to work just fine in day-to-day corporate managing. On those occasions where this breaks down and different observers see a situation differently, modernist managers explain it away as “just different subjective perceptions” of the assumed one true reality.

Postmodern leaders reject the fundamental assumption of an absolute, objectively knowable universe that underpins modernist thought. They reject the assumption that we live in a world where we encounter entities that are “out there” and that are easily identifiable by their inherent properties. Moreover, they reject that a simple one-to-one relationship exists between the pieces of language we use to describe the world and the pieces of the world we seek to know.

Postmodern leaders have a deep appreciation that we do not simply see the world directly as it presents itself to us but rather that we bring forth the world we see. We construct the world using distinctions in language we bring to it. A purely objective view of whatever reality may be out there cannot be gained since the only vantage point is through our own structuring in language. We bring forth the world we see depending on



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the social context within which we are observing and on the tradition in which we are speaking.

We are generally completely blind to such contexts and traditions until we attempt to do business in or with another culture. (Compare American managers anxious dislike of silence in a business conversation with their Japanese counterparts who hold that it is better to have silence than silly speaking!)

Because our social context can change, meanings can change — and the world as we see it and live it through language can change. This provides a leader with a vital opening to defining current reality.

Vital Questions for Reflection

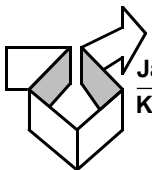
1. Recently, how have you as a leader “defined reality” to:
 - a. Yourself?
 - b. Your team?
 - c. Your organization?
 - d. Your community?
2. What troublesome organizational problems might you be suffering because of a commitment to objectivist understanding?
3. When there is disagreement in a team, how would a modernist manager handle this? What would a postmodern leader do?

Recommended Reading

Walter Truett Anderson. *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.

Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Max De Pree. *Leadership is an Art*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.



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