

Andrew J. Marsiglia, PhD, CCP
www.lead-inspire.com

**DEVELOPING A PERSONAL
RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY:
ASSESSMENT AND
APPLICATION**

February 2009

Developing a Personal Research Philosophy

Andrew J. Marsiglia, PhD, CCP

Introduction

Post-modernists suggest that modernism has contributed to the corruption of society, facilitated the enslavement of human beings, and lulled western society into complacency through emersion in a hyper-reality environment (Borgmann, 1992); (Clegg, Hardy, & Nord, 1996); (Rosenau, 1992); (Boje, 1995)). These claims, however, do not stem from a central, contemporary school of thought but have their genesis in many philosophical theories. For instance, Rosenau (1992) states, "...post-modernism represents the coming together of elements from a number of different, often conflicting orientations. It appropriates, transforms, and transcends French structuralism, romanticism, phenomenology, nihilism, populism, existentialism, hermeneutics, Western Marxism, Critical Theory, and anarchism" (p. 13). However, despite the organization theory and philosophical schism created by post-modernism, it has the potential to improve modernity by encouraging us to think more deeply about our reality and to closely consider the multiple layers, multiple truths, and multiple voices that comprise our environment.

Philosophy of Modernism and Post-Modernism

Literature regarding post-modernism shows that there is a continuing, exasperating effort to define the various aspects of post-modernism, especially its research approach. The problem appears to stem from the fact that when we try to define post-modernism as a theory or research methodology in modern terms, we fail to identify any coherent characteristics. This is because post-modernistic research is more of an attitude than a method. In fact, Cheek (1999) uses the following attitudinal terms to define post-modern

research: notion, perspective, particular understanding, approach, position, strategy, struggle, and interrogate. Cheek (1999) states,

It is important to note that postmodern approaches are not a research method in themselves. There is not a set of postmodern research methods able to be applied to a particular substantive foci...Rather, postmodern approaches are a way of thinking about the world that shapes the type of research that is done and the types of analysis that are made." (p. 4)

Consequently, the net result of postmodern research is to encourage researchers to reconceptualize taken-for-granted aspects of modern organization and leadership theory.

Despite the efforts of post-modernists, modernism is ubiquitous in western civilization to the extent that consideration is given to its contemporary manifestations of systemic and critical modernism. Burrell (1994) states, "As social scientists, we need to be more like philosophers; as people locked into empiricism we should be more excited by the transcendental; as pursuers of practice we should be more utopian in what we advocate. In organization studies, we rest fundamentally upon the modernist project conceived of in one of two ways. Either we are 'systemic modernists' always seeking performativity, or we are 'critical modernists' seeking emancipation for ourselves and others" (p.16). The operative phrase "we should be more" implies an expansion of our perspective rather than remaining inextricably devoted to a single point of view of modernism. Consequently, Burrell (1994) opens the possibility that there may be another, more contemporary form of modernism. This writer identifies it as neo-modernism.

Modernism is a fact despite its theoretical variants. Burrell (1994) states, "Either way, we can hardly escape modernism despite all our best efforts to move through 'jumping' or

‘pushing’ or whatever” (p. 16). If this is the case, then modernism is in a state of flux and “neo” may very well be the most appropriate prefix to description is contemporary manifestation.

The suggestion that modernism has entered a new era is based on the precepts of rational, critical-modernist thinkers such as Habermas. Critical theory, currently championed by Habermas, is self reflective in nature, value driven, and depends on language as the medium of reason and understanding (Cooper & Burrell, 1988). Jensen (1997) states, “The ultimate goal of the critical theory is to transform our present society into a just, rational, humane, and reconciled society” (p.2). In particular, Jensen (1997, p. 2) points out that critical theory seeks to accomplish the following goals.

1. To promote a diversified education for all individuals in order to steer them away from over-specialization.
2. Create a social balance between the personal autonomy of the individual and universal solidarity of the collective.
3. Promote revolution against all forms of fascism and nationalism.
4. Promote revolution against all forms of discrimination.
5. Preserve the good moral values that promote universal solidarity and will help bring about a more just, humane, rational, and reconciled society.

If the elements of critical theory and critical modernism were melded with the “cybernetic-like monolithism” (Burrell, 1994) of systematic modernism it should produce a more participatory, democratic version of modernism. In addition, Cooper (1988) states,

“For critical modernism, the thinking subject is the human individual or, more precisely, a network of thinking individuals who, through the commonsense of ordinary discourse, can reach a ‘universal consensus’ of human experience” (p. 97). In addition, the idea of focusing on the “thinking individual” seems congruent with Jacques (1996) concept of developing learning workers. In the diverse, global organizations of the 21st century, this neo-modernistic approach could make the difference between organizational mediocrity and long-term success in our educational endeavors, personal interactions, and professional development.

Personal Application Plan

Each person’s concept of meaning and value is a blend of beliefs, interpretation of sensory information, psychological projections, cultural environment, and a spiritual sense of responsibility and morality. These aspects of life enable people to ascertain what is significant in their world relative to their time and place within it. In addition, an individual’s chronological age, career discipline, demographic characteristics, physical limitations of body and brain, gender, and personality traits also affect his or her concept of meaning and reality. Another important aspect of how people construct meaning is that the knowledge they acquire is a result of interpretation based on previous experiences and traditions (Winograd & Flores, 1987). Martin Heidegger, whose philosophy has acutely influenced post-modern thinking, posits that the conditions that enable us to identify and interpret the world are composed of language, culture, as well as the everyday values, attitudes and feelings that make up our existence (Krell, 1993). Therefore, we must be fully cognizant that information will not be interpreted the same by all people. In this respect,

post-modern perspectives have the potential to elevate our thinking to a point where we become reflexive about the things we ordinarily take for granted.

A person's philosophy of modernism and post-modernism has a direct effect on managerial and leadership effectiveness. The key is to apply this philosophy to organize followers and direct them toward a common goal. The way to do it depends on factors such as the conditions of the follower's situation and the nature of the people being lead. For instance, an authoritarian monarch may command his subjects and expect unquestioned obedience. A corporate executive, on the other hand, may take a democratic approach of seeking the opinion of her subordinates in developing a strategy to achieve a mutually desired outcome. Consequently, the meaning of leadership and its potential effectiveness may depend on the kind of institution in which it is found (Bass & Stogdill, 1990).

In addition to being institution dependent, modern leadership is more precisely defined in the context of other seemingly post-modern dimensions. Bass (Wren, 1995) summarizes these when he stated,

“Leadership has been conceived as the focus of group processes, as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument to achieve goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, as initiation of structure, and as many combinations of these definitions (p. 38).

Therefore, it appears that leadership definitions are, at a minimum, a function of people, place, position, personality, power, and purpose. If we accept this assumption, then the way to increase leadership effectiveness is to employ post-modern analysis in order to become more reflexive of these functions and ask questions such as, “What are the taken-

for-granted assumptions and understandings of the organization that have shaped the way it operates?” This approach has the potential to create projects of “micro-emancipation” and “wrench the politics of the possible from post-modern nihilism and totalizing modernist certainty” (Parker, 1995, p. 11).

Moving beyond the definition leadership, a realistic philosophy of modernism and post-modernism also should improve the core functions of leadership. Roby (1961) states,

The functions of leadership are to (1) bring about a congruence of goals among the members, (2) balance the group’s resources and capabilities with environmental demands, (3) provide a group structure that is necessary to focus information effectively on solving the problem, and (4) make certain that all needed information is available at a decision center when required (p. 383).

In developing a personal action plan, not only is it important to be cognizant of these leadership functions but to also understand the different styles of leadership that are available to perform the functions. Research by Goleman (2000) suggests that the most effective executives use a collection of leadership skills, each in the right measure, and at just the right time. The problem is that most leaders are not aware of all of the different types of leadership styles and those that do are not always sure how to use them. Goleman (2000) conducted a study in which he found that effective leaders must have a certain level of emotional intelligence. Leadership skill, combined with the post-modern characteristic of emotional intelligence, enable effective leaders to successfully manage themselves and their relationships relative to the four emotional capabilities of self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and social skill. Furthermore, Goleman’s (2000) research showed that there are six leadership styles that spring from these emotional capabilities.

These are coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching. The key to successful leadership, therefore, is determining under which situations to employ a given style and when to switch to another style. A post-modern approach could reduce this ambiguity by encouraging the leader to ask reflexive questions in order to excavate through the layers of understanding reality and develop effective multiple leadership perspectives.

A macro-perspective personal action plan, that includes components from Jensen's (1997) list, should improve a leader's interpersonal skills and increase his or her leadership potential. The list includes the following elements:

- A. Continuous personal education in leadership and philosophy-related courses.
- B. Promote a diversified education for organization members.
- C. Create a social balance between the personal autonomy of the individual and universal solidarity of the organization.
- D. Promote complete change against all forms of discrimination especially race and gender.
- E. Preserve and openly proclaim the good moral values that promote solidarity and will help bring about a more just, humane, rational, and reconciled organization.

- F. Be open-minded of deviance that breaks from established routines but has merit in creating innovative productive change.
- G. Encourage reflexive, interrogative discourse among organization members.

Conclusion

Weiss (1999) posits that to lead effectively and dynamically, we must possess the skill to accurately diagnose the situations we are trying to influence, be able to adapt to the contingencies of the situation, and communicate clearly to the people involved. A well-developed philosophy of modernism and post-modernism should be invaluable to developing these skills and insuring leadership and organizational success.

References

- Bass, B. M., & Stogdill, R. M. (1990). *Bass & Stogdill's handbook of leadership : Theory, research, and managerial applications* (3rd ed.). New York: Free Press.
- Boje, D. M. (1995). Stories of the storytelling organization: A postmodern analysis of Disney as "Tamara-Land". *Academy of management journal*, 38(4), 997-1035.
- Borgmann, A. (1992). *Crossing the postmodern divide*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burrell, G. (1994). Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis 4: The contribution of Jurgen Habermas. *Organization Studies*, 15(1), 1.
- Cheek, J. (1999). Influencing practice or simply esoteric? Researching healthcare using postmodern approaches. *Qualitative health research*, 9(3), 10.
- Clegg, S. R., Hardy, C., & Nord, W. R. (Eds.). (1996). *Handbook of organizational studies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cooper, R., & Burrell, G. (1988). Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis: An introduction. *Organization studies*, 9(1), 91-112.
- Goleman, D. (2000). Leadership that gets results. *Harvard Business Review*, 78(2), 12.
- Jacques, R. (1996). *Manufacturing the employee: Management knowledge from the 19th to 21st centuries*. London: Sage Publications.
- Jensen, W. A. (1997). *Defining the critical theory*, [World Wide Web]. Available: <http://www127.pair.com/critical/> [2002, April 27, 2002].
- Parker, M. (1995). Critique in the name of what? Postmodernism and critical approaches to organization. *Organization Studies*, 16(4), 553.
- Roby, T. B. (1961). The executive function in small groups. In B. M. Bass (Ed.), *Bass & Stogdill's handbook of leadership : theory, research, and managerial applications* (3 ed., pp. 383). New York: The Free Press.
- Rosenau, P. M. (1992). *Post-modernism and the social sciences: Insights, inroads, and intrusions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Weiss, W. H. (1999). Leadership. *Supervision*, 60(1), 4.
- Winograd, T., & Flores, F. (1987). *Understanding computers and cognition : A new foundation for design*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Wren, J. T. (1995). *The leader's companion : insights on leadership through the ages*. New York: Free Press.