

Aspects of practicing philosophical counselling with teams in corporate environment

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Abstract: This paper is a summary of my practical research regarding to the particularities of applying Philosophical Counselling in developing high performing teams in corporate environment. Considering that most of the employees from corporate environment, at least in Romania, are not yet familiar with this new domain, the research is focused to investigate the possibility of obtaining practical results in developing high performing teams and to highlight the value added of practicing Philosophical counselling in corporate environment.

Key-words: Philosophical Counselling, high performing teams, corporate environment

Goal and argument

For the last years, corporations initiate lots of surveys, asking for feedback, questioning the thinking and the values of their teams and employees. A huge number of trainings are offered by the corporates, presentations for the leaders and employees for a better understanding of corporate philosophy and values. Are all of this efficient, are these methods capable to transform the Human Resources in active promoters for change required by present volatile and complex economic environment? I will compare in this paper work the perceptions of the employees from two different teams from a corporate company, regarding the process of developing high performing teams by using two different methods:

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classical HR methods (surveys, interviews, data analysis and trainings) versus Philosophical counselling (questioning, arguing, problematizing, conceptualizing, analyzing). The target audience are two different teams with twenty members each of them, with technical background.

Philosophical Counselling can be used as a sustainable method with many advantages for organizational or teams development. I have used in my research as a trigger for Philosophical counselling a game based on Prisoner's Dilemma principles. The game is a great method for creating a good atmosphere for questioning, arguing, analyzing, problematizing, conceptualizing, analyzing. I will become later in this paper with more details regarding the decision to use this game and the description of the roles. The purpose is that at the end of the research to be able to give answers to the following questions regarding applying Philosophical Counselling in corporate environment: How the participants perceived the Philosophical Counselling process? Can we obtain results in developing high performing teams with Philosophical Counselling? Is Philosophical Counselling a competitive offer for developing high performance teams in organizational field? Is it useful and profitable to be implemented in organizations, considering that utility and profitability are important values for global mindset and corporate field?

For this approach I compare the results, needed resources and perceptions of the participants from two different teams regarding the "classical methods" (one team) versus philosophical counselling by using Prisoner's dilemma game (the other team) in order to identify the dysfunctions of the teams (using P. Lencioni's model "Five Dysfunctions of the Teams"). Last step is to work with both teams to become high performance teams and to make the mentioned comparison. Also, it would be useful to highlight the particularities of practicing Philosophical Counselling in organizations, taking into consideration the gap between the philosophical mind set and language on one hand and the business mind set and language on the other hand. Considering that philosophical practice activities are not well known between the employees it will be useful to identify the methods to stimulate the appetite for this. Also, in order to advertise Philosophical counselling in corporate environment it is useful to know who the main competitors are.

Gamification of Prisoner's dilemma as a trigger for facilitating philosophical counseling with teams in corporate environment

My observation during the years is that in a corporate environment there is not much appetite for philosophy nor philosophizing. Quite the opposite, the stereotypes about philosophy is that philosophers overanalyze and split a subject in (too) many slices. This is philosophy approached perceived, in opposite to obtain results, to be practice and manifest problem-solving attitude (stereotypy of ideal behavior). The common use of the word “philosophy” in corporations is within official presentations, on the walls, in presentation catalogs in the contexts of “The philosophy of the company”, “Leadership philosophy” etc. But usually these are only words used for theoretical and mandatory trainings. In some cases, not even some of the leaders don’t understand the meaning of them and do not promote them within teams in everyday work. There is another category of employees who consider that philosophy is something theoretical, tight, it is hard to understand, without any practical application. This idea nowadays of lack of appetite for philosophy is presented by Lou Marinoff in his book *Philosophical Practice*. He considered that in this context of crisis for the critical thinking, it is necessary a radical transformation of the philosophy, with specific instruments of social intervention. Nowadays we can observe an ambiguous language also at the level of scientific communities. Lou Marinoff introduced the concept of “stand-up-philosophy” and this means that philosophical practitioners have the duty to be role models not just speakers. They must walk the talk not making politics. This requirement to have an ethical attitude in any kind of specialization is developed by L. Marinoff (in the chapter Why is philosophy again popular? of his book *Philosophical Practice*), and this specialization of applied ethic belongs to applied philosophy. In management and leadership, as well as in various other domains (psychology, medicine, industry, etc.) applied ethics is the core activity in practical philosophy. Having in mind the idea that there are no many chances that employees from corporate environment to be very curious for a Philosophical counselling workshop, I’ve chosen to use the game “Decide for X or Y” as a gamification form of the Prisoner’s Dilemma as a diagnosis tool and trigger for Philosophical Counselling for several

reasons: this game creates a vivid experience in the team, with a real involvement of the entire rationality and emotionality of each member. This fact ensures a real *engagement* of each member, in every moment of the game and debriefing, without any fake participation or appearance behavior. The game offers a real experience of *cooperation-competition* between the participants and the teams– and this is a veritable trigger for Philosophical Counselling debate. This couple of concepts – cooperation/competition – is a real dilemma in the real professional life for many employees. The game always creates *conflict* between participants, and this is again, a great trigger for Philosophical Counselling experience because the conflict is based on different values of the participants. How we can deal and work with the people with different values - can be a philosophical debate. It will be more and more a subject of interest as corporations state “diversity” as an important value and hired an entire team responsible for “diversity”. The game is a trigger for Philosophical counselling debates regarding the values, the conflict or diversity of the values in the team: trust, win-lose, fear of not been judged by the group, fear of not been rejected by the group, the fear of not been rejected by the group, peer pressure, group pressure against the leader.

The game has the following rules: *the team is divided in sub-teams, viewed as “companies” on the same market, in a competition relation. The purpose of each team is to earn as much money as is possible. The winner is the “company” that at the end of the game will earn the largest amount of money. The „companies” play twelve rounds and in each round each team decide for X or for Y: If all the teams have decided X all the teams lose 100 USD. If all the teams have decided Y all the teams earn 100 USD. If some firms have decided X and others Y: those who decided X, earn 100 USD multiplied by the number of Ys in the round. Those who decided Y, lose 100 USD multiplied by the number of Xs in the round.* This game is a successful method to developed high performing teams in organizational field using Philosophical Counseling. Please find some of the arguments for my affirmation, based on the perceptions of the team members regarding the process. They perceived the Philosophical Counselling activities after the game was run, as a “short and intense experience, painful at the beginning but at the end it was a life lesson with a deep understanding. A real experience beyond the gaming experience where all the team members were involved. It is the best experience for people and team development”.

For the purpose of developing high performance teams in organizational field, the “classical” methods were perceived as being: more oriented toward socializing, good vibe, funny and overall good atmosphere in the team, more oriented to relations, socializing. All of this good atmosphere and good vibe in the team are useful but I will affirm (my own consideration) that creates just a context to create a real high-performance team. This context is a necessary condition but not sufficient. It is necessary for a young team, or for a mature and performing team. For a better understanding of the stages of the team is useful to remember the Belbin’s model. The stages of a team are: Norming, Storming, Forming, and Performing. Between the first stage of forming a team and last stage – a mature and performing team we have a gap. This gap can be managed by Philosophical Counselling by: analyzing the different beliefs of the members, different values of the members, different interests, and different attitudes for work, for collaboration and for competition. This stage of the team is with lots of conflict, challenges, like a real storm. Of course, might be use other methods to manage the storm stage of the team. Philosophical Counselling is a good option because conflict is generated by lack of communication and acceptance of different values, interests. These are not usual subjects discussed in the daily work. The team members observe just the effects which is the visible part of the iceberg. Discussing and analyzing the team member’s beliefs, values, fears, and biases is an efficient method to manage the storm stage of the team. This added value of the Philosophical counselling, to fill in the gap between the young team, in forming stage, and a mature and high performing team by managing the storming stage can be used in organizations to increase a classical Human Resources Key Performance Indicator: reducing the employee’s turnover.

It is common sense that the people turnover is higher in the teams that has conflicts unsolved or hidden. Controlling the turnover has impact in the return of investment because the personnel recruitment and selection for covering the turnover is an expensive process and produces a lot of demotivation in the organization. Participants responded that Philosophical Counselling process creates engagement and involvement from the participants. Corporates spend a lot of resources to increase employee’s engagement, accountability and involvement with motivational speeches and trainings. This could be a good argument for selling Philosophical Counselling in corporations. The employees who

participated to at least one Philosophical Counselling session are the best promoters within the organizations. That is the reason why I asked participants to express their perception regarding the process. Having an eye on the fact that utility and profitability are important values for a global mindset and corporate environment, it is relevant to know if Philosophical Counselling is a competitive, profitable offer for developing high performance teams in corporate environment. In this research, comparing the time budget and the material resources needed for "classical methods team" and for "Philosophical team" the return of investment is without doubt better for the second one. Philosophical Counselling is more profitable for this approach: budget time comparison: 96 hours – "classical methods team" versus 14 hours "Philosophical methods team". To compare the obtained results, I asked the team members to give feedback regarding the results of the process. I have chosen to ask for feedback because if for the "classical methods team" it is possible to apply again the questionnaire or to repeat semi structured interviews for "philosophical Counselling team" the game has a one-shot possibility to apply it. For the second application the game and the experience is not relevant. So, in order to have the same method for measuring I have asked for feedback. It is a risk and a hazard to interpret that one result is better than the other. I won't make a ranking or hierarchy between the results. Both methods are able to produce results in terms of creating high performing teams.

The some benefits expressed by the participants are:

- Team "Classical Methods": "I have learned to share information"/"The conflicts must be discussed, because the discussion will give us the chance to find solutions"/"We will organize some meetings together, outside of the job because it is useful to know each other as people not just as an employee." / "It is helpful for working together as a team" / "To create a funny and open atmosphere at work is helpful for us to better manage the stressful situation".
- Team "Philosophical Counselling": "I learn to define the problem, separate emotions from the problem, evaluate options and choose one of them" / "To be vulnerable in front of the team is a courage not a weakness. To make efforts in order to seem "perfect", might mask the fear of not being discovered." / "Trust is a fundamental value for working in a team. If the trust doesn't exist, a lot of energy is lost" / "Conflicts must be discussed not

ignored or feed with more conflict". The good news at the end of this research is that starting from Lencioni's model and using two different methods in two different teams, Philosophical counselling produced results with a very good perception from the team members and with better resource usage and spending. It means that Philosophical Counselling is a sustainable method for corporate field.

Tips and tricks for practicing Philosophical Counselling with teams in corporate environment

Considering the gap between the philosophical and the business mind set and language one of the questions is how can we practice PC in organizations? My answer at the end of the research is that *using gamification and create contexts for experiential learning* is the bridge for reducing the gap between corporate and academic mindset.

The original model of the Prisoner's Dilemma is different than this the game that I used and with a different interpretation, but for using it in corporate environment I considered that the technical speech from Prisoner's Dilemma is not a good choice to bring the entire team at the discussion table. Translating theoretical and academic theory in a game situation represents a good possibility to sell Philosophical Counselling services within corporate environment. Gamification and experiential learning activating the ludic part of the people is a channel to stimulate the appetite of the common worker for philosophical activities. In corporate field people already use to play games as part of trainings or other personal/organizational development activities. So, starting from something already known – games used for learning- but with a different debriefing – philosophical counselling- it is a possibility to practice philosophical counselling. Activating the ludic part of the employees they will be more open for analyzing concepts, for reasoning and it will be activated the pleasure for thinking. It is well known that in a positive atmosphere the engagement and the openness for new experiences will be increased. Otherwise, considering that the mind set in corporate environment is to deliver fast results, it is difficult/ almost impossible to establish a meeting with a team, just to analyze concepts. In the best scenario they will just smile and considerate it a joke. For stimulating the appetite for philosophical activities in the corporate environment, my

strongly recommendation for philosophical practitioners is to *use games, stories, movies, cartoons, case studies that contain a tension between values, beliefs, behaviors, decisions or dilemmas*. Using this we can create a positive atmosphere that will increase the appetite for practicing philosophy. Starting the Philosophical Counselling experience from a game, a movie, we help the participants to get emotionally detached, ready for thinking, analyzing, conceptualizing. To implement the Philosophical Counselling in corporations it might be useful to know who the main competitors are.

My position is that services like Psychological counselling is not a real competitor of Philosophical Counselling in organizations, even less so in corporations. This affirmation is based on my personal observation and experience: in all my Human Resources roles in all companies, I have collaborated with psychologists for some personality inventory tools used for recruiting purposes and for some mandatory annually psychological evaluation as a legal requirement - for this case the supplier is occupational medicine. From these two services offers by psychologists the last one is not the subject of our discussion, being a legal requirement. The first one, personality inventory tools, used for recruitment process is not anymore, a domain reserved only to the psychologists. More and more companies are using licensed tools that can be used by a Human Resources employee without being a psychologist. Philosophical Counselling is able to develop specialists and tools in the future, who will be capable to elaborate a personality report. My affirmation is based on the courses from the masters with prof. Victoria Chernenko. She is a philosophical practitioner and developed a method for this purpose. Unfortunately, now we don't have enough specialists to advertise on the organizational market for Philosophical Counselling. Coming back to the question who are the competitors, today, in organizational field the psychologists do not create a real competition. Rather I would say that they lost the leading position in front of services like assessment centers or some tools for non-psychologists, because it's now teachable how to use the tool and interpret the results. A real competitor for Philosophical Counselling in organizations is coaching. It has some similarities and already creates a trend. Searching on the internet the word "coaching", it was listed for sixty-six million eight hundred thousand times, and that means, comparing with Psychological counseling and Mentoring sixty seven percent. I consider that individual coaching and coaching for teams are the main competitor

in corporate field because: both are not using diagnostics, have no “patients”, they have “clients”; both address the message to the people who have some blocking points, dilemmas to solve, difficulties to take a decision or to choose between A or B when A and B are part of individual value system. Coaching and Philosophical Counselling address questions to the client and as a coach or philosophical counsellor you are not allowed to give or suggest a solution or an answer to the client. The approaches for both are to assist the client to discover himself the new perspectives. Both are addressing people with some thinking capacities and with intention and the will to analyze and understand things. I highlighted here some similarities as an argument that the real competitor for Philosophical Counselling in the organizations is first of all coaching, not psychological services. Presenting these similarities my intention is not to conclude that it is the same but with a different name. There are differences between them, starting from the minimum necessary training programs to develop a practitioner, the fact that coaching is focused to the tasks different than Philosophical Counselling that is focused to values, beliefs, dilemmas, etc.

Conclusions

In corporate environment Philosophical Counselling is a sustainable approach with a very good level regarding return of investment. It is a successful method to be used for developing high performing teams with a positive perception from the participants regarding the process. Also, it has a positive impact on Human Resources key performance indicators like: reducing employee turnover, creates engagement and involvement, efficient method to manage the “storming stages” of the teams. My motivation for this research was to have an alternative and valid method to be used in organizational development.

The good news are already expressed in this paper and with more focus in the previous paragraph. It remains another question, which can be also the subject of an entire research: in the present VUCA world (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) what method/domain is more able to help people to deal with the world and balance between competition and collaboration with others? More and more the employees are faced with a business and organizational environment dominated by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity, the known acronym

VUCA world. These characteristics of organizational and business environment are more and more present today. Digitalization, automatization, working from home, pandemic context adds another layer of the unknown, linked to fast changes in society, in the economy and people relation. All of this will make the team work more impersonal than before. Until the pandemic context the international project teams organized periodical meetings, face to face in order to reduce the distance between team members. Today, most of the white-collar employees from corporations already experienced online meetings without seeing the faces of other participants. In many cases all the information about other participants in the meeting or in the project, is just a role in the business, an unfamiliar name and a country. Coming back to Prisoner's Dilemma or any other game based on this, values like: trust, cooperation and competition working style, how will be all of this changing? Will it be possible to make decisions based on trust or only based on evidences, approvals or existing data in the systems? Trust is based on people relation, existing experiences together in the past. What will be the future meaning of the trust value, or cooperation? How will influence all these fast changes the corporates values, the people value, the attitude of employees related to cooperation and competition? I think these questions can be a subject for another research. I express here is my hope that Philosophical Counsellors in Romania will be well prepared and will have the courage to "walk the talk" not just discussing about and writing interesting speeches. The coaches are trained to deal with tasks, projects, decisions, contexts or dilemmas. Who will be more able to help the employees - by asking powerful questions, analyzing, conceptualizing, making analogies, following the logic - to deal with VUCA world? I don't have a clear answer but I hope Philosophical Counselling will be well-known and credible offer on this market.

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