

fooling the company – The Corporate Jester As Driving Force For Organizational Change

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Abstract

This conceptual article proposes the establishing of the position of a corporate jester to support organizational change processes. The article focuses on the inevitable transformations companies have to go through, given the diversification and pluralization of the workforce. The corporate jester theoretically is framed as part of an organizational “comical artifact staging”, that by utilizing humor as an element of organizational change, experiences more openness and less resistance than more educative tools.

Keywords: corporate jester, humor, organizational change, diversity management, inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper the corporate jester is conceptualized and proposed as an innovative instrument of organizational diversity management programs to initiate and support organizational change processes in order to create a corporate climate of inclusion. Within companies a lot of stereotype-based mechanisms of exclusion operate alongside all dimensions of diversity (for example sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, skin color, etc.). These mechanisms lead to a stabilization of existing segregations and hierarchization among the particular manifestations of each dimension. The emphases of this paper are the organizational mechanisms that are related to the dimensions nationality, sexual orientation and gender, but the fundamental structure that underlies these mechanisms is transferable to every dimension of diversity.

Against that background a corporate jester as an element of a “comical artifact staging”¹-strategy can contribute to uncover these mechanisms and activate processes of reflection to reduce the tendencies of segregation. On the individual level the overcoming of these tendencies would broaden the vocational room for maneuver. Taking into account that capacities and talents are not connected to certain manifestations of diversity dimensions a stereotypic and segregating allocation of working power within companies cannot be the most effective. Therefore a weakening of these mechanisms of exclusion can also have a positive economical impact on the organizational level [1]. In order to conceptualize the corporate jester it is important to deepen the understanding of these mechanisms of exclusion und the underlying stereotyping and sense-making processes.

2. STEREOTYPES, ATTRIBUTIONS AND SENSE MAKING

Basically, stereotypes are ascriptions of characteristics or behavioral patterns to humans or groups of humans humans [1]. The function of stereotypes is to reduce complexity and, for humans, they facilitate and accelerate their capability of acting. Stereotypes immediately enable the individual to assign sense to experiences, and to order a complex environment [2]. Beside

¹ This concept was developed together with my colleagues Helga Gartner and Heike Mensi-Klarbach

this constructive function stereotypes can also reinforce mechanisms of exclusion that provoke inequality and discrimination.

At the workplace these mechanisms of exclusion hamper the accession to higher organizational hierarchy levels for (to take two examples) women and non-domestics. For women this phenomenon is often labeled “the glass ceiling” [3].

Furthermore, access to certain task-related corporate sectors may be restricted to either men or women. In the case of gays and lesbians, these mechanisms mean that, the higher they climb on the organizational hierarchy ladder, the more they may have to mask or to deny their homosexuality [4]. Analogous to the “glass ceiling” this phenomenon can be labeled as “the gay glass ceiling” [5] or “the lavender ceiling” [6]. Beside this horizontal segregation these mechanisms cause the tendency of vertical segregation for openly working gays and lesbians that work in adequately stereotyped divisions [7], [8]. In terms of nationality and gender, equivalent mechanisms impede the access of employees perceived as non-domestic, and female employees, to higher organizational hierarchy levels or to certain task-related corporate divisions [9], [10]. On the one hand, the exclusion and segregation is based on the internalization of certain stereotypes by the stereotyped themselves [11]. On the other, the exclusion is based on hidden mechanisms that impede the accession to certain areas [12], [13]. As an example, an informal evening meeting, where the unspoken expectation is for employees to bring a partner of the opposite sex. In summary, these mechanisms lead to a horizontal and vertical segregation of e.g. women and men, domestics and non domestics and also of heterosexuals, or closeted working homosexuals and openly working homosexuals [14].

2.1 Sexual Orientation- and Gender-Related Stereotypes in Organizations

A basic assumption of this article is that the belonging to a certain nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or any other manifestation of any diversity dimension, does not allow any direct conclusion about an individual's capacities and abilities. Therefore any attribution of vocational characteristics or capacities that is solely derived from manifestations of any diversity dimension is based on stereotypical attributions alone.

In this context, gender stereotypes, like any other diversity stereotypes, can be defined as “cognitive structures that consist of socially shared knowledge about the characteristics of men and women, gays and lesbians, natives and foreigners, etc. They are special cases of terms that structure individuals` knowledge about the world, and at the same time are building stones of understanding” [15]. An illustrative example of stereotyping as a generalizing attributive denomination is given by Ricarda Huch when she describes female poetry: “...male is the creating power, shaping and designing; the filling and animating the picture is female: male is the architectonic and plastic, female the picturesque and musical, and within the arts again the male is the constructive and female the decorative” [16]. Eckes summarizes the stereotypic male characteristics as instrumental, and the female ones as expressive. Consequently, because of their bipolar relationship, at opposite ends of an imaginary scale, one person can have either expressive, or instrumental characteristics, never both [15].

The stereotypic localization by gender is strongly connected with sexual orientation, as far as gender is also defined by heterosexual desire, for example masculine men have to desire women [17]. Thus lesbians by tendency get ascribed more male attributes, and gays more female ones [18], [19]. These attributions of typical male or female characteristics determine the expectations about the behavior and acting of men and women. The stereotypes control the role, and behavioral expectations, which may lead to sanctions in case of non-compliance [20, 21]. These gender and sexuality related stereotypic attributions may have changed in the course of time and lost some of their intensity [22]. Even so today – at least by trend – there is still an observable division between a male connoted, instrumental, working world, and a female connoted, expressive, private world [23]. Male-coded behavior is still perceived as adequate and appropriate for working contexts and it is reproduced in media, the staging of management in biographies of successful managers and also in cartoons [24].

Besides the stereotypical shifting of masculinity and femininity in connection with homosexuality [18], there are more specific attributes related to sexuality and sexual orientation that also work in organizations. Buba und Vaskovics [25] point out that one essential generalizing pre-assumption gays and lesbians are confronted with is connected to the equation of sexuality and homosexuality. Gays and lesbians are perceived as over-sexualized and their sexuality becomes the main feature of their personality and overshadows every other part of their personality. In conjunction with the fiction of asexuality as an essential condition for a productive workplace [26], this over-sexualizing is the basis for the assumption that homosexual employees might be less productive. Furthermore, the tendency to see sexuality as taboo in the workplace and in economic contexts, in connection with the perception of gays and lesbians as oversexed, causes a latent reserve to assign them jobs that demand a seemingly high degree of economical rationality [27].

Because of these interdependencies, companies often fill vacant gender- or sexuality-connoted job profiles appropriate to the stereotype. Out of probabilistic considerations this kind of allocation of resources cannot be the most effective in an economic way [28], [29]. Thus for gaining or retaining competitive advantages enterprises have to find measures to counteract these organizational practices.

This is the connecting point of the proposed organizational concept of intervention. Its starting point is to weaken the constraining effect of these stereotypes by making them visible within the framework of a “comic artifact staging”.

3. COMIC ARTIFACT STAGING

The concept of artifacts in this paper is based on Schein [30]. Within organizations artifacts are the expression of commonly shared values (and therefore also of shared stereotypes), but because of their reciprocal conditionality artifacts can also be the starting point for interventions to initiate processes of changing organizational values [30]. In that approach artifacts can be any kind of expression of certain value structures and they are not limited to material or tangible phenomena.

The reference to comicality and theories of comicality [31], [32], [33] eases the dealing with contradictions in the organizational social structure and its visualization. Beyond that it facilitates the thematization of taboos and their underlying norms. Resistance that is primarily based on the constructive function of stereotypes can be reduced and shifted by comicality. Another positive impact of the use of comicality is that it allows the non-reproduction of common shared stereotypes, and therefore does not contribute to their stabilization [34].

Staging in this paper means the process to stage or to showcase someone or something. The crucial point is that the staging itself to a certain degree can influence how something is perceived and experienced. Staging is applicable to indicate unstable, alterable and contingent relations because it does not take objectifiable realities as a starting point but refers to aesthetic processes of construction [35].

Elements of a “comic artifact staging” proposed in this paper are instruments of denaturalizing the dichotomizing sexuality and gender patterns by alienating strategies like obvious masquerades and exhibited posing [36]. In this paper, these elements are conceptualized in the shape of a corporate jester. The focus remains on the diversity dimensions of sexuality and gender, but an extension of the concept in other dimensions is possible because the mode of operation of stereotypic attribution does not differ between the different dimensions.

4. THE CORPORATE JESTER

This paper proposes the concept of an organizational jester or a corporate jester, based on the figure of the court jester. In Europe in the late 16th century until the early modern age the jester incorporated the role of an advisor to the king. Most commonly the jesters were male [37] and

highly-esteemed specialists or educated academics. They had the privilege that they were allowed to irritate and to be provocative. In literature two types of jesters are described: the natural jester, usually mentally or physically disabled persons, and the artificial jester, persons who simulate folly [38]. The usefulness of a jester for the king derives from the enormous imbalance of power in medieval royal councils. By tendency no one had the courage to question decisions that were made by the king or queen, out of fear of losing favor with them. In contrast, the jester explicitly had the permission to question, to criticize and to express doubts without having the fear of reprisals.

Assuming that nowadays top-managers also operate within a high imbalance of power, concepts like the court jester again might be of certain importance to overcome deeply-rooted maldevelopments. A corporate jester could counteract the systematical constraints and the tacit fears in a productive way. He or she would have the privilege to challenge the management hierarchies without having to fear negative consequences because the jester is not involved in corporate hierarchies.

The corporate jester, as a person, could have different organizational functions. He or she could be the intermediary between the workforce and the management, but could also operate within the workforce to initiate change processes. Because of his or her position outside of the organizational hierarchies the jester has immense scope for action.

Figure 1 shows one possible direction the jester could act as an instrument of an organizational diversity management strategy. He can address the stereotypic basic assumptions that cause and stabilize the tendencies of organizational segregation in terms of sexuality and gender. The jester has to recognize the mechanisms of exclusion and communicate these to the top. That does not mean that the workforce itself is conscious of these mechanisms. The jester does not have to fear negative consequences, neither from the top-management nor from the workforce.

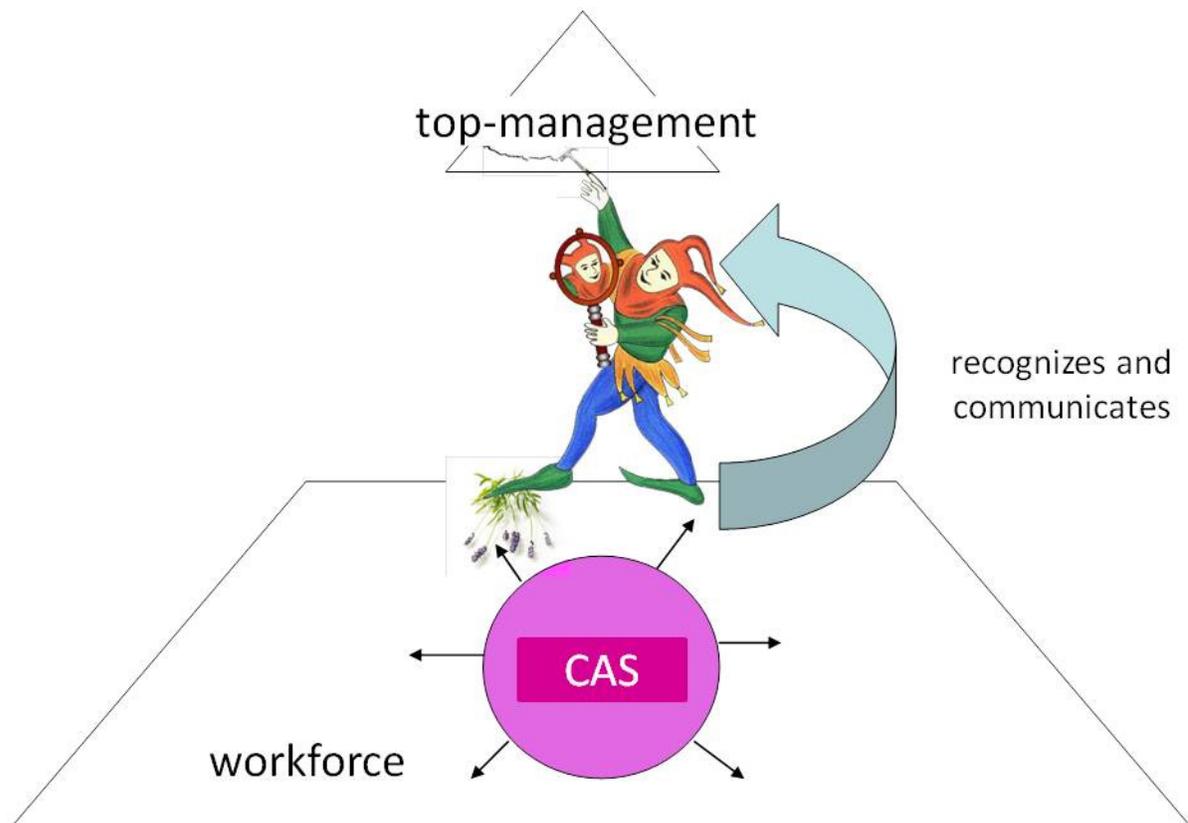


FIGURE 1: Corporate jester

From the perspective of horizontal segregation, the hammer in the jester's hand symbolizes the smashing of the "glass ceiling" and the treading down of the lavender symbolizes the abolition of the "lavender ceiling".

The pink ball represents the possibility that the jester can also operate in the middle of the workforce to achieve a broad impact. For instance, the jester can stage plays in the sense of an organizational theatre approach [39] that, as comical artifact staging, tries to reach the employees and initiates and supports change processes. The jester also could use paintings, comic-strips, music or any other kind of artifact that can be perceived by the workforce. It is important that these artifacts are positioned in a way within the organization, whereby as many employees as possible can experience them. These artifacts, for example, can overdraw commonly shared stereotypes or even contradict them to initially trigger jocularity and amusement, and subsequently to initiate processes of reflection and discussion within the workforce.

By permanently changing the artifacts and mixing up techniques including exaggeration, discontinuity, contradiction, decontextualizing, scenic isolation, etc, the jester can try to avoid a moralizing effect that would face a bigger resistance than a comic and humorous staging.

5. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The concept of a corporate jester as an element of a comic artifact staging seems to be a promising new approach in discussing organizational change processes. In practice, organizations tend to copy each others' diversity approaches, and thus follow a risk-minimizing strategy that largely prevents new types of diversity measures being tried out. Against this background, the concept of a corporate jester can be a starting point for organizations to break out of this self-referential circle of homogenous implementation patterns. Although theoretically its impact can be derived and explained, a certain risk still remains when it comes to its practical implementation, because of its experimental character. Utilizing humor in an impersonalized and embodied way can help reduce organizational resistance, and make the management and workforce more amenable to trying to break new ground. A number of questions still remain open. In particular, one would need to discuss and elaborate upon the artifacts - beside the jester - that could be utilized in initiating the intended change processes. Furthermore, in the case of a jester being employed, one would need to discuss where in the company he or she could be located and paid (in order to keep him or her outside the hierarchies), how such a person can be found, and what qualifications the jester has to have. Beside these concrete jester-related questions, future research could generally focus on the potential role of humor for organizational change processes. Experimental research projects as well as conceptual and theoretical research can contribute to develop further the understanding of these interrelations, also extending beyond change processes that are related to diversity issues.

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