THE ART OF JUDGMENT:
A CASE STUDY ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE
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The author argues that stories told by managers, and the subsequent judgments they make when engaged in the actual work, are an effective way to communicate useful knowledge to students and practitioners of public administration. The recent Oklahoma City bombing produced a massive response by many government agencies. The Oklahoma City Fire Department was on the scene early and had primary responsibility for safety and rescue. The event produced a complex set of problems for administrators and required changes in rules and procedures that had not been taken into account in planning. Using a case study approach, the author argues that adaptation to a chaotic milieu requires an understanding and appreciation of the human capacity for innovation. This is often not recognized as legitimate by traditional scientific analysis.

Numerous recent critical and interpretive contributions to the study of organizations have contradicted the academic orthodoxy of rationalism and functionalism dominant in much of social science. A few of those works will be recounted here. From a critical historical perspective, Adams and Ingersoll (1990) argue that "technical rationality," defined as a set of beliefs embedded in the culture in which (1) there is complete control of

organizational work processes; (2) there are means for obtaining organizational objectives; and, (3) there is efficiency and predictability that are more important than any other considerations in the organization. Technical rationality is a historical, ubiquitous, and pervasive thought process in which the scientific-analytical mindset is emphasized in the American political culture. Adams (1992) and Adams and Catron (1994) further maintain that historic and current emphasis on classical individualism is socially and politically pathological and misrepresents basic human experience.

Managers cannot isolate themselves from their work and their workers. Within the critical theoretical perspective, Habermas (1971; 1989) demystified the myth of objectivist self-understanding of the human sciences by demonstrating that the so-called observer is an inextricable element of the network of social relations under study. Mitroff (1983, 1) has shown that the "strict separation between where the inside of the autonomous individual supposedly leaves off and where the outside of the collective or society supposedly begins" needs to be bridged in order to heal one of the most fundamental divisions in modern social science. Classic traditional social science has promulgated this tendency of manager-worker separation in both theory and practice (see Pugh 1987).

In addition to the critical and historical approaches, Hummel (1990), coming from an interpretive-phenomenological perspective, maintains that analytical scientists have argued that knowledge acquired by plunging preconceived hypotheses into reality and testing the result is to be accepted because it meets standards of validity (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Rational scientists have determined that knowledge acquired by other methods (such as storytelling) do not meet the same rigorous standards. To Hummel, there are four elements on which reality is constructed by a storyteller (manager) and how it is to be judged by the recipient of the story: (1) Self: can the listener put on the storyteller's shoes?; (2) Other: does the relationship established between the storyteller, and the object(s) of the story have any resemblance with the kind of relationship that one would expect from the storyteller's, others', or one's own relationship to similar objects?; (3) Relationship between the two: is there trust?; and, (4) Coherence of the whole story: does the story ring true? Hummel submits the idea that recalled personal experience through the telling of stories (case studies) engages the listeners more than mere information.

An important organization theory which integrates important aspects

of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives is Sir Geoffrey Vickers' appreciation systems approach (1995). Forester (1995) notes that

> Human systems become recognizable as more than machines only as they honor (or betray) valued norms like impartiality or responsiveness, respect or productivity, or combinations of these. So all management and administration, all planning political action, depend not just on mechanical rule-following, but on practical goal-setting too: on appreciative judgments constructed in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty about what a rule or obligation or goal really means.

Vickers' (1995) system of appreciation consists of elements of the interpretive and critical perspectives and are outlined here.

Reality judgments — making judgments of fact about the 'state of the system,' both internally and in its external relations. These include judgments about what the state will be or might be on various hypotheses as well as judgments of what it is and has been.

Value judgments — making judgments about the significance of these facts to the appreciator or to the body for whom the appreciation is made (Vickers 54)"...the dominance of governing human values must be taken for granted in any study of the process; and it is these values that select and in part create the 'facts' that are to be observed and regulated" (Vickers 1995, 114).

The relation between judgments of fact and of value is close and mutual; for facts are relevant only in relation to some judgment of value, and judgments of value are operative only in relation to some configuration of fact (Vickers 1995, 54).

Instrumental judgments — or 'what are we going to do?' A problem has been posed by some disparity between the current or expected course of some relation or complex of relations and the course that current policy sets as the desirable or acceptable standard. The object of executive judgment is to select a way to reduce the disparity (Vickers 1995, 103).

The incorporation of the epistemological and ethical along with the

instrumental in the single activity of appreciation is a central feature of Vickers' thought. The more economic and analytic treatments of judgment and decision making common in the social sciences provide a means of assessing only the instrumental. Epistemological and ethical judgments are typically treated merely as 'givens'. For Vickers, human action as distinct from reaction, instinct, or reflex, inextricably entails all three forms of judgment. It is a product of judging what is, what ought to be, and what can be done to reduce the difference by selecting specific means from the possible actions at hand (Adams, Catron, and Cook 1995, xix-xx.)

Vickers' appreciation system provides an appropriate means for evaluating real world work experiences shared by managers. "Shared" is the key component of his analytical framework. There is an implication here of the manager being involved in, and not separated from, the work in which she is engaged. The sharing of experiences of human beings in an organizational and communicative setting is the common thread that binds the critical and interpretive theoretical perspectives.

Forester (1994) has observed that Vickers' work teaches us how basic questions of political and social theory are perpetually posed and resolved in the ongoing work of planners and policymakers, and that these issues are never resolved once and for all. Human events are not static; they are ongoing and subject to change. Managers have to adapt to situations in which conditions require a reappraisal of planned responses. Oftentimes they have only a few minutes on any given event and do not have time to consider all analytical scientific theories available to them (Mintzberg 1975). Hummel (1991), makes the observation that the knowledge manager's seek must answer the fundamental question of "What is going on here?" in face-to-face relations with employees before any scientific attempt at measuring what goes on where and when.

The following case study explores "the art of judgment" in a real world situation involving the actions of members of the Oklahoma City Fire Department (OCFD) in the wake of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995. Because of the complexity of the aftermath of the bombing, not all of the day's participants and events are recounted here. The scope of the task would be beyond the time and space limitations of this paper. We will examine how OCFD managers on the scene were compelled to use their appreciative judgments, rather than scientific rational detachment, in a tragic and complex situation.

APPRECIATION AND THE OKLAHOMA RESCUE

The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building April 19, 1995, was the worst domestic act of terrorism in United States' history (Verhovek 1995). Most importantly, there were 168 deaths and nearly 500 people were taken to Oklahoma City area hospitals for injuries suffered as a direct result of the blast (Painter and Ross 1995). Beyond the human costs, the bombing resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars being lost (Martin 1995). The magnitude of the event was unprecedented. The immediate aftermath of the bombing demonstrated, however, how well managers and organizations could respond to a difficult and chaotic situation (National Fire Protection Association 1995). Plans made in the past had to be adapted to change for unforeseen circumstances. After the blast, numerous governmental agencies had to respond to the scene. The Oklahoma City Fire Department is the organization which we will examine here.

COPING WITH CHAOS

The Oklahoma City Fire Department is one of the primary agencies for handling emergency disasters which occur in the city. Assistant Fire Chief Jon Hansen (1995) recounts what firefighters faced immediately after the blast:

> Twenty-two years in the fire service will teach you to be ready for anything. But on April 19, 1995, I learned there are some things you can never be completely ready to face. *You can be prepared and that helps but you can never totally be ready for a disaster of this magnitude* . . . . No one waited for the alarm that we knew was coming. Instinct kicked in immediately . . . . As my car topped Fifth and Walker, I was stunned to see the chaos in front of me . . . . There was dense black smoke everywhere. A thick cloud of brown dust hung in the air. Bricks and debris filled the street . . . . Dozens of dazed people wandered the streets, many with blood streaming down their faces. People were running—some running for help while others were running to help. Paper rained from the sky (7-9). [italics added for emphasis]

Hummel (1991), following Vickers, notes that what makes an event a problem is that it does not fit into existing routines. Furthermore, even if the problem has been encountered in a similar situation before, the manager must still make a judgment as to how the general and repeated pattern of the past fits this event of the present with an opening toward a future solution. The OCFD clearly faced a significant event for which there was no historical precedent to go by based on their experience. Especially in the early stages of the disaster, the managers of the OCFD, working in conjunction with the Oklahoma City Police Department and the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, had to rely primarily upon their own appreciation of the situation.

There was extensive training that the department had undergone in the event of an emergency, but primarily for a disaster response to tornadoes. The management of the situation was adapted to the events which had taken place. After the initial shock, Hansen points to the following:

> It wasn't an accident that our emergency management system functioned as well as it did. Responding to disasters was something we had actually practiced. Less than a year earlier, all our local agencies who would be called in any real-life crisis had spent a week together in training [at Emmitsburg, Maryland].
>
> As a result, when this real-life crisis crashed in on us, we were able to quickly and efficiently coordinate efforts to rescue, evaluate, triage, treat and transport victims. . . . Our fire department was also able to draw on a system of mutual aid that had been developed through years of working with other area chiefs. . . . A lot of trust had been built up over the years. There was a tremendous amount of personal credibility and mutual respect between the lead agencies. When we all came together to form a unified command that morning, it was an impressive thing to witness (Hansen 1995, 14-16).

While training and cooperation were key to the overall success of the operation, managers and firefighters on the scene had to face several dilemmas after the bombing (National Fire Protection Association 1995). Using Vickers' concept of reality judgments to analyze the facts of the situation (i.e., determining the "what is" and "what has been"), we see that Assistant Chief Hansen set about making an assessment of the situation at hand, implementing and adapting his organizational resources

to the crisis and making quality judgments to influence the outcome of the state of "what will be." The OCFD and responding agencies rapidly adapted to the crisis. The coordination of efforts resulted in approximately one hundred rescue workers being at the scene within minutes (Hansen 1995, 18; *Daily Oklahoman* 1995). The quick initial response to the chaotic situation has demonstrated retrospectively the effectiveness of the organization's efforts.

THE "WE" AND "I" IN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

Value judgments were also rendered by managers and workers on the scene. One of the most salient facts presented to the rescuers was when there was a second bomb threat while they were in the Murrah building trying to extricate the victims. Firefighters are supposed to evacuate a hazardous situation if their lives are placed in jeopardy. The managers themselves had to make life and death decisions for their charges and for the victims. Word of an imminent second blast taking place caused Fire Chief Marrs and Assistant Chief Hansen to make a reappraisal of the situation:

> The decision to pull out our people was made quickly. In truth, there was no choice to make. The first rule for those responding to an emergency is not to become victims themselves. However, getting everyone to comply was not as simple as giving the order to vacate the premises. First, we had the logistical problem of getting word to rescue workers . . . . When the call came to evacuate, some of our people were working to extricate victims from the debris that trapped them. We learned later that some of those rescuers opted to stay with the injured and ride out the threat. We didn't reprimand any of them for their decision. We felt it was one of those few times in life where there wasn't a right choice. Whatever each rescuer personally chose to do given each specific situation was the right thing to do . . . rescue workers were forced to leave some people who were conscious but trapped. Leaving was extremely tough on everyone who was sent out of the building, but it was obviously far worse for the victims left inside. I don't think any of us can ever really understand how terrible that moment was (Hansen 1995, 18-19).

The facts of the case at hand were laid out to the rescuers on the scene. It is important to note here that the workers had an appreciation of the consequences of their actions. First, all of the rescuers could have left the Murrah building in good conscience and still would have maintained the organization's ethical and legal principles. Individuals made the decision as to whether to leave their respective victim or stay with him or her despite the chance for personal injury or death. This left the rescuers with the highly personal dilemma of "what are we going to do?" or, perhaps more appropriately in this case, in a collective sense, "what am I going to do?" The instrumental judgment made by each person on a case-by-case basis incorporated the epistemological and ethical dimensions of Vickers' theory of appreciation. No rational detachment was going on here. There were no absolute 'givens' for the rescuers and managers to use to decide on an economical-optimal, analytic-scientific or all-possible-options-weighed outcome. Rather, an appreciation of the situation, or human action based on an integration of reality judgments, value judgments, and instrumental judgments (or judging what is, what ought to be, and what can be), is a more appropriate measure of what the managers were actually facing.

Second, OCFD Chief Marrs and Assistant Chief Hansen understood that human action sometimes takes precedence over organizational objectives. Flexibility and innovation are important components of the overall "appreciative system" as Vickers (1995) observes

> The mutual relations that link . . . readiness into a system are threefold. They form part of the system by which the individual makes sense of the *observed* world in which he lives and its configuration in space and time. They form part also of the system by which he makes sense of his *communicated* world that he shares with his fellow men. They form part, too, of the system by which he makes sense of his *experienced* world and hence of himself. . . . A highly organized mind is one that comprehends the variety of experience in a number of conceptual patterns, overlapping but not mutually inconsistent. A flexible mind is one that readily alters its conceptual patterns so as to assimilate change without a prohibitive increase in incoherence. These mental skills have and will always have their limits, though these will be greatly enlarged, when our society has come to regard its appreciative system and those of all its members as precious, irreversible but always unfinished works of art . . . . I find it convenient to regard an

> appreciative system as a net, of which weft and warp are reality
> concepts and value concepts. Reality concepts classify experience
> in ways that may be variously valued. Value concepts classify
> types of relation that may appear in various configurations of
> experience (84-86, his italics).

Thus, under the clear judgment of hindsight, the activities surrounding the
bombing rescue efforts were adjudged to have been successful. The
managers in this case did not punish the firefighters and other personnel
who opted to stay behind with their victims even though the rescuers
knew they could have been violating organizational rules. Their appreciative
systems proved to be appropriate for this aspect of a complex organizational
problem.

An objection could possibly be raised here as to whether it was
merely fortuitous that there was not a second explosion and that then,
perhaps, the fire chiefs would have made a terrible decision, i.e., not forcing
all of the rescuers to leave the Murrah building or subsequently punishing
them. However, this scenario did not occur and in retrospect the decision
made was sound, given all the circumstances involved. Vickers' (1995)
appreciative systems perspective addresses the question of rediagnosing
a retrospective judgment:

> Reality judgments are more susceptible of 'proof'. . . . Some are
> estimates of probability. In the event, the improbable may happen;
> but the estimate is not thereby proved faulty. Some are of facts
> essentially unobservable and never clearly demonstrable, such as
> the state of people's opinions . . . . (86)
>
> What I have called judgments of reality and judgments of value
> must account between them for situations that we use four sets of
> verbs to describe. What we can and cannot do, must and must not
> do, should and should not do are distinguished from what we want
> and don't want to do in ways that are subjectively familiar but not
> always easy to define . . . . Questions in the form, 'Why is he doing
> that?' are misleading unless both asker and answerer supply the
> suppressed termination, 'Why is he doing that *rather than
> something else*?' We have in common speech a variety of ways in
> which we can answer such questions: for example,
>
> • 'because that is what, at the moment, he wants to do';
> • 'because that is what he feels he ought to do';

- 'because he thinks that will have results that he wants or feels he ought to bring about';
- 'because that is what in the circumstances he is accustomed to do';
- 'because that is what his role requires';
- 'because that is what someone asked him to do'; and so on. Of these, the first and second appear as separate though not necessarily conflicting categories, while the remainder can be readily subsumed under one or other or both of them . . . . (123-124, his italics.)

Vickers reminds us that judgments are rendered subjectively and within the constraints of time and space limitations available for making decisions. None of the rescuers died as a consequence of the judgments made by the chiefs. Also, the question raised above as a possible objection is not in itself value-free. An appropriate response by the fire chiefs to the inquirer of the hypothetical question could possibly be "what are you getting at?" or "what do you mean?" and "what would you have done differently?" Thus, the fitness of a decision is held in the eye of the beholder. The assessments made by the fire chiefs were decided within the context of the organization system, as the entire appreciation was rooted in the culture within which decisions were made (National Fire Protection Association 1995). And the case of the firefighters making the choice to stay behind in the Murrah building after the second bomb threat resulted in personal decision making based on the individual's conscience. The OCFD managers and workers were simply not rationally detached from events which they had to face on a personal level.

The OCFD firefighters have to live with the consequences of their actions. Their effective management of the agonizingly complex situation will have a positive impact upon the citizens of Oklahoma City for years to come. Assistant Fire Chief Hansen (1995) summed up the entire rescue operation:

> Luckily, there are a lot of us who will be dealing with the memories, and just like was true throughout the incident, we will have one another. From the first moment, this effort was about 'we' and not 'I'. It was about dozens of public safety agencies pulling together. It was about lots and lots of people doing their jobs. It was about hundreds more doing things that weren't their jobs; instead their actions were an outpouring of the faith and love that

lies within the people of this great nation. It was about family members who let us all embrace them as we struggled through our pain. This has always been about all of us (174-5.)

SUMMARY

The case study method of organizational analysis offers practitioners and academics the opportunity to demonstrate the concerns and issues of actual managers engaging in the real world practice of management in difficult situations. In sum, managers make decisions within the context of what they deem is important. Managers have an appreciation of the workings of their organization and can oftentimes relate their stories about what is going on within their organization. The stories or case studies of managers may not necessarily meet the highly technical-rationalistic standards of science, but they do offer a glimpse into what really happens in an important singular event. The common, everyday activities of managers may not be complicated to the extent of the devastating and chaotic circumstances met by the firefighters of the Oklahoma City Fire Department in the immediate aftermath of the bombing. But this case clearly demonstrates how effective managers using good judgment can cope with a devastating crisis in one of the worst possible scenarios.

Current renditions of traditional analytic-science, which have also been variously described as technical rationality or objective rational detachment, may be an inappropriate analytical tool for understanding what managers *actually* do in situations which require making reality and value judgments, and not just instrumental judgments. As has been shown, analytic-science makes the assumption that epistemological and ethical judgments are unquestioned givens and not subject to rigorous scrutiny. Interpretive and critical theorists raise the issue that organizational analysis cannot be completely value-free, as the manager in a real situation cannot extricate herself from the ongoing events.

Another issue raised in response to traditional science is that managers simply do not have the time available to them in every case to scientifically analyze every conceivable option which may or may not be available to them, especially in complex situations. Hence, they are dependent upon their workers and often come to rely on their judgment. Managers have common face-to-face human interaction with their employees and most

frequently choose direct communication to exchange information with their workers. Managers, while conversing and interacting with workers in their organization, can also foster a sense of trust in the organization. Furthermore, as shown in this case study, managers can give responsible decision-making authority to employees and encourage them to use their judgment wisely and appropriately.

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