Chapter 7: Postmodern Perspectives

Chapter Overview:

The postmodern approach challenges the dominant assumptions of how we work in the world. Postmodernism describes the political and aesthetic movements that exist as disciplinary, social, and narrative responses to the historical period defined as modernity.

Previous, or modern, approaches characterize society as rational, stable, and well-ordered. Postmodern approaches, in contrast, value counterrational, reflexive, other-oriented, global, and networked models for organizational study.

Stewart Clegg (1990) in his Modern Organizations builds on the concepts of Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1983), who describe the postmodern condition as highly ordered, technologically specialized, mass-mediated, and demanding of precision, speed, flexibility, and adaptability in individual performance. These continuous and often conflicting demands promote numerous constructions of reality, foster ambiguity, raise distrust of traditional authority, and stimulate alternative sensemaking. Baudrillard has termed the postmodern condition of converting empirical and symbolic reality into mass-mediated signs, experiences, and objects the simulacrum.

Scientific management, and to some extent the other organizational perspectives we’ve discussed, called for task specialization, mass consumption, and specialized jobs for which workers were thoroughly and completely trained. Clegg contends that postmodernism rejects these concepts when he characterizes postmodern organizations as flexible structures needing workers with multiple skills who are capable of continual learning. Market niches replace mass consumption, and smaller is better if organizations are doing what they do best. Bureaucracy is replaced by workplace democracy in which all employees are valuable sources of decision making. Market needs are primary, and teams replace the emphasis on the individual contributor. Top-down management is made obsolete by self-managing teams and quality is a part of all processes, not the “inspected-for-quality” mentality of the past. Management is a responsibility fulfilled at a point in time rather than a permanent occupation, and rewards are more group- or team-based than based on the individual. Trust is fundamental among all managers and employees, with an emphasis on broad support for planning and decision making.

Eric Eisenberg and H. L. Goodall (1993) have described five principles of the postmodern organization: decentralization of power, changes in markets and commodity values, flattening of hierarchies, cultures based on trust and respect for differences, and the use of groups.

Chapter Outline

I. Four distinct ideas aid in understanding postmodern thinking.
   A. Identities are “made” or constructed out of popular culture.
   B. Moralities and ethics are also forged out of dialogue and choice.
   C. No style of art or culture dominates; there are endless variations.
   D. There is a truly global civilization characterized by rapid information exchange and unprecedented mobility.

II. BMW plant in Spartanburg, SC is an example of a postmodern organization.
   A. Postmodernism is a move from signs to practices.
   B. Postmodernism is a move from democratic theory to a democratic workplace: a marriage of rights and responsibilities.
   C. Postmodernism is a move toward organizing multicultural communication in workplace democracies.
   D. Postmodernism facilitates multicultural understandings and international marketing practices.
   E. Postmodern theories embrace teams and global networks.

III. The term “postmodern” is defined differently by various disciplines and expresses various perspectives on knowledge and meaning in society; therefore, it may best be defined as “a sign that resists a common signifier.” According to Lyotard, the “postmodern condition” for organizations is one in which the domination of science as a vehicle for human progress is challenged.
   A. Postmodernity describes the time period that follows modernity. Postmodernism refers to social or aesthetic movements in the cultural field that distinguish it from modernist movements.
   B. Postmodernism is characterized by new political and aesthetic movements.
      1. Political refers to the challenges to all kinds of authority—governmental, artistic, scientific, and institutional.
      2. The aesthetics of these rebellions are found in various discourses, such as graffiti, television, street theater, rock
and roll or rap music, etc. Each emphasizes pleasure over rationality, novelty over reason, difference over consensus, and rapid change over static, middle-class sameness.

C. The postmodern era in society brings new challenges to individuals in organizations as well as to organizations trying to remain competitive in a global economy. Order and control are two basic issues in these changes.

1. The dominant model of traditional organizing is challenged by a political and economic aesthetic of “leaner, meaner,” team-based organizing. The first group assigned to us when we enter an organization is our primary work team. What we have been hired to do places us structurally within the organization and identifies our supervisor and related peer group. Work teams vary in size and formality. Some will work closely together, whereas others exchange infrequent information. Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto (1989) have identified three common features of competent workteam members: (1) the possession of essential skills and abilities, (2) a strong desire to contribute, and (3) the capability of collaborating effectively. [p. 189]

Self-managing teams are formed to give individual team members more responsibility, authority, and accountability for their work. Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith (1993) define a team as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves accountable.” [p. 191]

Contrast this with Hegemony where employees come to believe their behavior is controlled not by other people, but by the rules of the organization or company or compare it to Deetz Multiple Stakeholder Model in Chapter 6:

1. Create a workplace where every member thinks and acts like an owner. (Give them power to make decisions and be responsible for the outcomes of those decisions.)
2. The management of work must be reintegrated with the actual doing of work—we can’t afford to have people watch other people work to make sure it gets done. Decisions about how work is done should be made by people who do the work. (Dean Parsons taught a class Winter Term.)
3. Quality information must be widely distributed. The real information that has meaning and affects the business and the work it does.
4. Social structure should be from the bottom up rather than reinforced from the top down. Participatory decision-making.
The growth of the numbers of self-managing teams in organizations is a result of the need to reduce management layers and the realization that high-performing teams potentially can outproduce work groups in more traditional hierarchical structures. Support is found throughout numerous organizations for the assertion that teams outperform individuals, particularly when multiple skills and experiences are required. Individual performance is frequently enhanced within a climate of group goals. Self-managing teams usually schedule their own work, cross-train team members, troubleshoot process and product problems, set evaluation criteria, conduct peer evaluation, and recommend product and process improvements. Clay Carr (1992) suggests that teams are most likely to succeed when they have clear, worthwhile, and compelling goals and when team members understand that they are expected to commit themselves to these goals. [Court, Fairhurst, and Rogers] (1989) found that the self-managing environments were characterized by a variety of question-and-answer combinations, conversational elaboration, and a lack of managerial orders and commands. [Barker and Tompkins] (1993) report that workers in self-managed teams tend to identify more strongly with their team than with their company, particularly in terms of loyalty. [p. 192]


2. Postmodern rebellion in cultural understandings and practices also takes place in everyday organizational life as people face a jobless future and seek more fulfillment outside of work.

3. From a postmodern perspective, effective communication models involve adapting messages to one’s listeners through negotiation and being open to new ideas and problem-solving.

4. Postmodern movements thus view social, cultural, and professional life as marked by three factors:
   a. Relativism—Because there is no one truth by which to judge the value of competing ideas.
   b. Populism—Because diversity challenges the domination of cultural elites.
   c. The presence of multiple meanings and images—All of which coexist and vie for expression.

IV. Two major objections have been lodged against applying postmodern ideas to organizations and to organizational communication.

A. To embrace the postmodern is to give up rationality and therefore infers that postmodern ideas are counterbusiness.

1. In fact, a postmodern perspective may suggest the opposite: It can provide new energy for business practices. If
organizational cultures provide fluid contexts for deconstructing the strategic ambiguities of signs, information control can be redistributed and power relations can be redefined.

2. Deconstruction is the critical practice of “taking apart” meanings that have been socially constructed, thus exposing the interests represented (and those marginalized) by the vision and tenets of that construction.

B. To adopt postmodern ideas requires replacing capitalism with Marxism.

1. Yet, postmodern ideas do not critique commodity capitalism the same way that Marxism does. Instead, postmodernism provides a means of deconstructing ambiguity in business “consumable commodities.” Postmodernism challenges capitalism yet is fully vested in capitalist processes and outcomes.

2. The postmodern seeks to empower employees to accept responsibility and make decisions, to engage contexts creatively, and to recognize and respond to the interdependent, ambiguous nature of a dynamic, commodity-valuing, business culture.

3. ‘From a postmodern perspective, organizational communication is all about sharing power, accepting responsibility, and recognizing interdependence. It offers global ways of generating capital and consuming commodities.

C. However, objections to postmodern applications to organizational theory may be a definitional debate. Some think “postmodern” is actually better thought of as “late modern.”

1. This critique stems from the fact that despite cultural concerns about diversity and critical objections to abuses of power, scientific rationality is still widely practiced and bureaucracies still exist.

2. However, such a critique is largely definitional. Whether organizations are living through “late modernism” or “postmodernism,” things are changing, and those changes are beginning to forecast a future wherein traditional jobs are replaced by many new types of work.
The postmodern perspective contributes to the idea of balance between individual creativity and constraint.

A. From a postmodern perspective, dialogue is the key to balancing the moment-to-moment attempts at sense-making (creativity) and the construction of organizational cultural understandings (constraints).

1. Commodities are the result of our interpretive efforts and communicative practices.
2. Meanings have value only insofar as they relate to current market conditions.
3. A dialogue among empowered employees is the major authority in determining how things are and what should be done. There is no authority outside of or beyond what we agree to.

B. Narratives are a powerful source in understanding postmodern organizations and the concept of balance between creativity and constraint.

1. From a postmodern perspective, narratives are the simulated realities of organizational consciousness.
2. If narratives are simulated realities, then new narratives, or vying stories, can be told.
3. By improving organizational storytelling, employees and managers can be taught how to live under conditions of shared authority, teamwork, deconstruction of dominant power structure, and respect for differences.

C. From a postmodern perspective, work itself is defined as interpretation.

1. You are the story you tell about the work as much as the work itself. The story is the commodity whose value will shape interpretations of what you actually produce.
2. To work is to interpret signs within the fields of possibilities. The possibilities are endless in terms of individual creativity, yet they are narrowed by organizational constraints.
3. Therefore, work lies in the everyday negotiation of meanings between these extremes through dialogue with others.