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## **Responsibility**

When I was practically finished with my BA in psychology and had to take a six-month internship as part of my masters degree, I realized what *responsibility* means from an existential perspective. The memory is still so crystal clear that I can put a date to that day when I fully realized what existential thoughts are. A former colleague from the military had suggested that I contact Mercuri Urval, because there I could get an excellent idea of how an IO-psychologist works.

So I got in touch, was called in for testing, and thereafter an interview with the "house psychologist," chief psychologist John McFarlane, who after going through the test results asked me the frightening question:

"How will your obituary read?"

I was at a loss for an answer, because I had never before thought so long and so deeply. On the way back from the interview, I walked over The Bridge of Knippel from the island Amager and into the center of Copenhagen with this fateful fact running around in my head:

You are 35 years old, and you don't even know what the meaning of your life will be.

I was nearly *bowled over* by existential thoughts; could not see any direction in my life; lacked any connection to – or meaning in – my working life.

By linking this experiences to theory, the idea of *responsibility* began to take shape. The feeling of being alone and that of doubting the meaning of it all are examples of existential thoughts. And as this slowly fell into place for me, as did my own significance as well, due to the fact that I found my niche as a self-employed IO-psychologist, the thought came to me almost on its own: Why not attempt to unite these existential thoughts with working life?

I tried at first to find others who had done the same, but had to note that there existed only one article from 1995<sup>1</sup> at that time. Nevertheless, I discovered in the process that the project I was slowly undertaking had, in a way, already been done before, but with different content. For within both psychology and philosophy there are old ideas and theories, which more recently have been imported into the workplace.

Where psychology is concerned, it has always been a matter of theories that are first devised for therapeutic purposes, and thereafter transferred to the workplace. The systematic approach is a good example of this, because so many today recognized the approach, without realizing that the whole thing originally began with family therapy.<sup>2</sup>

In philosophy, on the other hand, matters are much broader, because the point of reference has not turned on a specific field, such as therapy. No, philosophy has concerned existence in and of itself, so its perspectives have more recently been used in a more focused way, especially with management. *Values-based management* is probably the most widespread theory.

As an IO-psychologist, I am of course extraordinarily interested in individuals at their work. I am interested in companies, and in how the individual and the company get along with each other. But in practice, I operate differently than do other IO-psychologists, because I work out of an existential foundation and call this existential analysis and advice. In contrast to other "service professionals" – for example, lawyers and accountants – I do not function exactly as an expert would.<sup>3</sup>

The most important sources for the existential approach are the manager and the employee. They themselves know best what will work in practice in their particular daily routine. Therefore, my work is often process-oriented, because having a good helper available is beneficial for the practical results. I have accordingly always

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<sup>1</sup> Tame, 1995. The article deals with how one as a consultant can give existentially based advice.

<sup>2</sup> Systematic theory views the whole (the system) in its entirety rather than looking at the individual. See, e.g. Palazzoli, Anolli, Blasio, Giossi, Pisano, Ricci, Sacchi & Ugozio, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> I am not specifically an expert in a particular problem, but am an expert in psychology and therewith particularly in the analytical approaches that are generally bound up with the particular problem.

planned out the course of events in advance, but gladly alter them as things unfold. This does not mean, however, that I reply to each and every question: "Yes, but what do *you* think?" Because individuals and companies who form a relationship with me have the right to a concrete answer and to my own personal opinion, if that is what they need to serve as their mirror. It is here that I distinguish my own from most other IO-psychologists' advice. In general, I use myself – my life – as the source of inspiration in my work, and I expect that others, my employees, our clients – companies and their employees – do the same. Hence, there arise *reflection, recognition, and responsibility* which are keywords for the existential approach's methodology.

As an advisor, I can be both process-oriented and an expert in the same session. Both being in process and leading the way towards a desired goal form the framework or the context in which we work. Accordingly, I do not insist upon directing events so strictly as is sometimes the case with, for example, the systematic approach. That is to say, we change from one moment to the next, as, for example, when the *break* – as the French existentialist Albert Camus called the moment of recognition – suddenly brings about a new realization in the middle of the agenda for a management group. Should I begin the next topic, exactly as I had planned? Or should I instead encounter these individuals at the spot where they actually are?

In relation to the field of psychology, my existential point of reference is the *healthy* individual, the individual who has mastery over work and over moving in a specific direction. In relation to the field of philosophy, my existential point of reference is the individual human being's *dilemmas* in life, and in relation to the field of economics, the existential point of reference is money as a *means*. In an introduction, Senge <sup>4</sup> quotes Russ Ackoff of *The Wharton School of Economics* as saying:

"Profit is like oxygen. If you don't have enough, you won't be around long; but if you think life is about breathing, you're missing something."  
(<http://learning.mit.edu/res/kr/world.html>)

This three-pronged approach does not mean, however, that every manager and every employee at every moment are at their peak mentally. No human being is like that. Nor does it mean that I am uninterested generally in philosophy. The universal conditions of existence fascinate me, just as I acknowledge money as one of the factors at play in a market economy.

But I prefer to direct my efforts towards dialog, towards common reflection, and towards supervising from an existential basis, rather than towards diagnosing illness, theorizing about life or chasing the bottom line just for its own sake.

I have argued here that the existential concept in working life can bring something new to the table. By drawing on philosophy, as well as psychology and economics, it provides a way, a new method, with which I will hereafter confront working life as it is in practice. At the end of the chapter, I will use the existential concept to pose the question: Do we work to live, or live to work?

You are responsible.

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<sup>4</sup> Senge, 1999. He wrote the book "The Fifth Discipline" about the Learning Organization, which since its first publication in 1988 has achieved international distribution.