

*Perspective taking
in workplaces*

“God has taught us some very deep doctrines contained in short phrases. For example, to teach us how to live charity toward our neighbor he suggested to us “to make ourselves one,” in other words to empty ourselves... To make ourselves one requires being patient... We are not irritable because we have to be very calm in order to make ourselves one. We don’t think of wrongs, because to make ourselves one is to hope for the triumph of goodness, justice and truth in the other person...To make ourselves one with somebody else we cannot let ourselves think of possible answers to give or other things to do while we are listening to our neighbor with love. We have to empty ourselves completely in order to have room for the whole of our neighbor’s burden, every problem and every need...To make ourselves makes it easier for us to love everybody. We have to be able to cut loose from the worries that were confided to us by the person we have just met, so that we can make ourselves one with the next to come along...” (Chiara Lubich, 1971)

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ABSTRACT

Workplaces are often described as places in which individuals are motivated by their self-interests and in which negative events like time pressure, anxiety, conflict with co-workers, miscomprehensions, difficulties in solving problems, not-transmitted or not-exchanged information that lead to mistakes, and in some cases to injuries, stress or control, are part of everyday life (Dormann & Zapf, 2002; Schabracq, Winnubst and Cooper, 2003). Such situations are often the result of the limited comprehension of needs, skills, or information available to colleagues, supervisors, subordinates, clients or providers. However, workplaces are also places in which employees take care of clients, support colleagues and subordinates (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), are enthusiastic about their job (Bakker et al., 2008), are motivated by leaders that encourage employees to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the group or the organization and provide them with the confidence to perform beyond expectations (Bass, 1997). Thus positive relationships at work are becoming a new interdisciplinary domain of inquiry (Dutton & Ragins, 2006). Within this positive relationships framework, in this paper we focus on a positive component of workplaces, and particularly on an individual cognitive and emotional process that has an important role in the workplace because it facilitates interpersonal relations and communications: it is the perspective taking process. In order to describe perspective taking, we will refer to some empirical studies and particularly to the review published by Parker, Atkins and Axtell in 2008 on the *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*.

Perspective taking is a well established psychological construct, investigated both in the field of human development, as an important component of reasoning and moral development, and also in social and clinical psychology, where it is considered a component of social behaviors and of the therapeutic process (Parker & Axtell, 2001). It has also been conceptualized in different ways. Duan and Hill (1996) describe three approaches to explain reasons for perspective taking behavior: a dispositional approach, that considers empathy as a relatively stable trait or a general ability; a cognitive-affective experience influenced by situational conditions; and finally as a multiphased experiential process. However, although in modern organizations working cooperatively and taking into account customers' needs and experiences are becoming even more important (Schneider, White, and Paul, 1998; West, Tjosvold and Smith, 2003), very few studies have considered perspective taking process within organizations (Parker & Axtell, 2001). This is interesting because taking into account the perspective of others may contribute to more collaborative workplaces,

where it is pleasant to work, as also enlightened in the title of the Parker, Atkins and Axtell's (2008) paper: "Building better workplaces" is one of the possible outcomes of perspective taking. This paper aims to make available to a large audience such studies and, in relation to the topic of the conference organized by "Psychology and Communion", consider connections between this concept and ideas and writings by Chiara Lubich.

KEYWORDS: engagement, perspective taking, building better workplaces

PERSPECTIVE TAKING IN WORKPLACES

Most work environments are characterized by an enormous variety of interpersonal interaction situations: an employee asks for help or information from colleagues to solve a problem or a task, a manager describes an organizational change that will involve the company and enlightens how such change matches needs and reflects the requests of employees, an employee that works at the complaints department talks with an hungry customer and comprehends the important reasons of her complaining; a trainer identifies those trainees that are not following her explanation about the functioning of the new equipment and repeat with different words the same concepts, and so on. In these situations, and in many others that frequently happen in workplaces, taking the perspective of another, or adopting the viewpoint of another person, quite often contributes not only to employees' effective job performance, but also facilitates the creation of a positive organizational climate, which may increase the probability that such behavior will be repeated.

Parker, Atkins and Axtell (2008) define the active consideration of others' viewpoints in the following way: "active perspective taking occurs when an observer tries to understand, in a non-judgmental way, the thoughts, motives, and/or feelings of a target, as well as why they think and/or feel they way they do" (p. 151). These authors denominate "observer" the employee

that interacts with, and tries to comprehend the perspective of, another person, and denominate “target” this latter person. This definition of perspective taking implies that: 1) perspective taking is an intentional and goal-directed process, rather than an automatic or subconscious activity; 2) it is an active process, that requires effort, and hence resources, to distance oneself from one’s own perspective and to comprehend the perspective of the other persons; this means that reduced cognitive load, availability of emotional resources and good behavioral strategies to ask good questions and listen the answers, are required; 3) it is a non judgmental process, because it is required to understand the other person and what she feels and thinks, and to recognize her experiences as legitimate ones; 4) finally, it is a behavior that may be trait based but that is also influenced by non – dispositional characteristics of the person (as, for instance, mood or emotions) and by situational factors (as for instance reduced cognitive load or limited time pressure).

It is interesting to note that Parker et al. (2008) goes further and distinguish the active consideration of another’s viewpoint from the effectiveness of such consideration. The idea of perspective taking effectiveness is defined as: “the degree to which the observer has a relatively accurate, comprehensive and objective understanding and appreciation of the target’s thoughts and/or feelings and the reasons they are thinking and/or feeling that way” (p. 152). In other words the effort to comprehend the other person is not enough, because such effort may result in a limited or wrong comprehension of the other person.

PERSPECTIVE TAKING OUTCOMES

The active perspective taking results in some outcomes which comprehend intra-personal outcomes, interpersonal outcomes and collective outcomes (Parker et al., 2008). Intra-personal out-

comes of the active perspective taking include: a) positive affective responses that the observer experiences towards the target, as sympathy, compassion and emphatic concern; b) cognitive effects, because the observer is less influenced by attribution errors, like the actor-observer bias or the self-serving bias, and is more ready to make positive attributions; such un-biased cognitive reasoning is particularly important in organizational life especially during the frequent assessment of individuals' behaviors, like in performance evaluation, subordinate-supervisor interactions or customers' complaints. Another positive cognitive effect is the representation of the "other" as more in relation to the "self", because it seems that perspective taking increases the sense of "oneness" (Cialdini et al., 1997); c) finally, employees that comprehend in a better way the other persons increase the meaningfulness of their own job; for instance an hair-dresser or a call-center employee that understand more clearly the needs of their client are not only making a good job but are also helping their client to meet his/her needs. As a result, as suggested by the Hackman and Oldham (1976) model, higher task significance may increase intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction.

To investigate the impact that perspective taking has on task significance but also on intrinsic motivation, and particularly on the association between intrinsic motivation and employees creativity, Grant and Berry (2011) conducted three studies, using both laboratory and field data. They observed that intrinsic motivation was associated to higher level of creativity when undergraduate students, and also employees and their supervisors at a water treatment plant, were motivated to adopt another's viewpoint, too. In particular, Grant and Berry (2011) concluded that intrinsic motivation stimulates employees to produce many novel ideas, but when employees consider the viewpoint of other individuals (as colleagues, supervisors, customer or suppliers) they filter out those ideas that are least useful and retain those that are more useful and relevant to solve problems or to meet other persons'

goals. In some sense, perspective taking helps employees to develop and elaborate only those ideas that have more probability to be implemented because such ideas would benefit someone.

Interpersonal outcomes of active perspective taking described by Parker et al. (2008) include an higher quality and higher significance of communication: some studies show that individuals that strive to comprehend the other person, frame their own message in an easy and clear way, in order to make the message easy to be understood by the other person that, in turn, will disclose more information, thus facilitating communication. As a result of this smoother communication, problem solving skills are improved, trust among partners increases and interpersonal aggression decreases. It is thus stated that “perspective taking is likely to enhance the performance of all roles within organizations that have a strong interpersonal requirement” (Parker et al., 2008, pg. 159).

Another interpersonal outcome, supported by many social psychology experiments, is the increased helping behavior, which is an important behavior in organizations and it is considered a core concept of organizational citizenship (Bateman and Organ, 1983) and pro social organizational behavior (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Perspective taking can also change the nature of conflicts, because trying to understand the other person moves the conflict from a person-based one to a more manageable task based conflict. Parker and colleagues (2008) report studies that show that perspective taking reduces stereotyping and prejudice towards, for instance, individuals suffering from AIDS/HIV, members of minority racial groups or stereotyped groups as the elderly. It seems that perspective taking reduces the perception of dissimilarity, changes the representation of the stereotyped individuals and facilitates positive interactions.

Finally, at collective level, where interdependency among individuals is higher, perspective taking facilitates coordination and planning of team and organizational activities by making inter-

relation and communication smoother. Even inter-department collaboration is facilitated if employees, through perspective taking, are able to appreciate the distinctive knowledge and expertise that each department conveys to the overall functioning of the organization. At the team level, taking the perspective of others help to build the "shared mental models" useful to facilitate team performance. The "shared mental model" theory was proposed by Cannon-Bowers, Salas and Converse (1993) to explain effective team performance; it is based on the idea that team members share information, or mental models, related to: a) tasks to be done, b) equipments, c) procedures used by the group and d) competencies and skills of each member. More recently Rico et al. (2008) distinguished between an explicit coordination, reached through coordination and planning, and an implicit coordination in which team members anticipate the needs and actions of their colleagues and dynamically adapt their behavior without the need to communicate with the other team members. Rico et al. (2008) observe that perspective taking is an important component of this implicit coordination: the more teams of air traffic controllers had an accurate comprehension of the mental workload status of colleagues, the more they were able to anticipate and provide the help that a highly fatigued team mate needed in order to complete a task. In a study on teams of teachers working in Korean kindergartens, Park and Raile (2010) observed that teachers that were working in teams reporting an higher average of self-rated perspective taking, were also more satisfied of the communication with coworkers. Although this result needs further investigation, authors suggest that the positive climate stimulated by perspective taking tendencies may facilitate an environment in which group members as a whole are satisfied for the communication with each other.

POTENTIAL NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

Not everything is positive with perspective taking. Some potential negative outcomes resulting from perspective taking have also been described (Parker et al., 2008). A perspective taker may wish, for instance, to reach a better understanding of a target to the detriment of this latter person, or to reach some personal self-interest. This may be the case of a salesperson trying to know the customer to sell products that the buyer does not really need, or a manager trying to manipulate subordinates and using the knowledge of employees' needs to improve his/her own personal career.

Supervisors or persons in higher position feel that perspective taking may lead to less positive outcomes, or higher risks, if, as a result of the greater knowledge of the target's needs, history or perspective, they give more resources, or offer a preferential treatment to the target and this, at the same time, reduces the availability of collective resources for the group, or comes into conflict with other values as fairness or equity. These risks may arise quite often within organizations where allocation of rewards and resources, or assignment of demanding, uncomfortable or easy and pleasant tasks are frequent events. Such risks are even higher if the leader has a better comprehension of an individual's reasons against other individuals that did not have the same possibility. Thus, the possibility of the potential loss of objectivity by the observer, is linked to the increase of targets' expectations that their views will be considered and acted upon. Clinical psychologists, managers and supervisors experience these kind of fears, together with the need to maintain a sufficient differentiation and awareness of their own perspective.

FACTORS INHIBITING OR FACILITATING ACTIVE PERSPECTIVE TAKING AT WORK

Despite the potential benefits of perspective taking, it is easy to observe that individuals in workplaces do not engage in this behavior so frequently how might be expected. Parker et al. (2008) suggest three sets of factors that may facilitate or inhibit perspective taking. The first one includes factors that motivate employees to adopt the view point of others; the second one includes factors related to the capacity of the observer for perspective taking, and the third set includes environmental and situational factors that make easier or more difficult the perspective taking. We now describe shortly such factors, referring the interested reader to Parker et al.'s (2008) paper for the details.

Active perspective taking requires attention, effort and persistence, and some factors influence the motivation to engage in it. Beliefs are an important component of the motivation to engage in perspective taking. A first belief is that understanding others will be useful to reach some organizational goal or will be of benefit within the situation. It is in fact common for managers, consulting people or employees interacting with customers, to consider others' viewpoint as relevant for goal achievement and for doing well their job; even organizations, through training and selection, develop formal and informal rules about perspective taking. When this is not the case, organizations promote training or a broader role orientation to help individuals to learn when and why perspective taking can be valuable and powerful (Parker, Wall and Jackson, 1997). A second belief has to do with the assumption that the viewpoint of others is not already known. In other words, the observer that listens to the target has, at the same time, to "forget" or do not consider the previous knowledge she has about the target. Such previous knowledge may be based on previous situations in which the other's viewpoint was showed (but the situation may now be different and even the viewpoint

may be different) or based on a “false consensus effect”, in which the observer assumes that he/she knows what others are experiencing or thinking because he/she or someone else has had the same experience as the target. In such a case the risk is of does not take into account what is unique about the target or about the target’s experience.

Since perspective taking is a process that requires to open oneself to others’ viewpoint, and this requires creativity and flexibility, Parker et al. (2008) propose that motivation to engage in perspective taking will be enhanced by positive affect and mood. Positive mood is in fact related to helping behavior (George, 1991) and together with positive affect or humor, may be considered as an energetic resource that is necessary in order to comprehend a perspective that contains negative or painful information or resolve a complex dispute.

Social factors are a third component of the motivation to engage in perspective taking. Parker et al (2008) report that, for instance, liking the target, being close or interested to him/her, belonging to the same in-group, or interacting with an high-status target involve social processes that facilitate perspective taking. Even reciprocity was found to be related to perspective taking: Axtell et al. (2007) examined 347 customer service agents in a UK call centre and observed that when customer reactions were perceived as reciprocating the help they received from agents, by being pleasant and courteous, then employees tended to make a greater effort to empathize with customers.

The motivation to engage in perspective taking is influenced by the way in which tasks and jobs are structured. For instance, time pressure may interfere with the motivation to understand others’ viewpoints, knowledge and skills, because taking into account others’ viewpoint requires time. Contacts that employees had with their internal suppliers (colleagues working on the earlier phase of the production process) was found to be related to more positive attributions about supplier behavior and more empathy with

them (Parker and Axtell, 2001). In this same study, conducted on British front-line employees of a glass manufacturing company, Parker and Axtell (2001) observed also that job autonomy and contacts with internal suppliers increased both the integrated understanding of the various aspects of the work of employees and also their sense of ownership for aspects of production that were outside of their fixed tasks. In summary, even job design may facilitate or inhibit perspective taking.

Finally, the cooperative orientation of the workplace is the fifth component of the motivation to engage in perspective taking. Six organizational practices that might create a cooperative orientation and encourage employees to consider others' perspectives are (Baker and Dutton, 2006): selecting employees for their relational skills, support socialization practices that encourage good relationships, reward the usage of positive relational skills, use group incentives, encourage relational meeting practices and use collaborative technologies.

Being motivated to take another's perspective is a necessary condition to implement this behavior; however, good skills and favorable situational conditions are also necessary for an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the other's perspective. Parker et al. (2008) review studies that support the influence of these two set of factors on the effectiveness of the perspective taking.

The capacity of perspective takers is influenced, for instance, by their own cognitive complexity, defined as "the ability to differentiate aspects of a stimulus and identify complex connections among the differentiated aspects" (Parker et al., 2008, p. 179), or by emotional awareness and emotional regulation abilities. Even knowing what is relevant for specific targets enhances perspective taking effectiveness. For instance, sharing knowledge of procedures and of job demands makes easier to comprehend constraints of teammates and of colleagues of other departments (Parker and Axtell, 2001) and is a useful strategy proposed by team mental

model scholars in order to clarify expectation and enhance coordination between partners (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993).

Finally, the situation in which partners interact may present conditions that facilitate or hinder perspective taking, irrespective of the efforts of the observer. For instance, difficult topics (like values in comparison to technical problems), a low motivation to communicate, or a low capacity to communicate the perspective in a way that is less threatening for the observer, make target perspective less accessible. A shy individual, or a shop-floor employee discussing with her supervisor, may be reluctant, for different reasons, to disclose openly their perspectives and thus, may make less interesting the effort to understand their point of view. Even the medium of communication, for instance face to face, phone or e-mail communications, influences the accessibility of a perspective.

SUMMARY AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In summary, Parker et al. (2008) describe perspective taking as an active, voluntary process, that may vary in terms of effectiveness in comprehending the other individual in a correct and comprehensive way. Some of the positive outcomes of perspective taking have been presented, at different levels: the individual that take the perspective of others, for instance, are less influenced by cognitive biases and may experience an increased task significance and intrinsic job motivation; the interpersonal relation between target and observer is facilitated by higher level of trust and lower aggressiveness; finally also the team and the organization benefit of more coordination, sense of support and satisfaction for teammates communication. Potential negative outcomes are also at stake, as also the risk of violating fairness and equity values to favor the member whose perspective and needs are more known in comparison to more shy, or less urged, members. Finally, factors

that influence the motivation to take the perspective of others, the capacity of perspective takers and the circumstances in which individuals are interacting, have been presented in order to understand why perspective taking is sometimes difficult to observe in our workplaces.

Research on perspective taking is still limited and in order to examine validity and reliability of these results more studies are needed. For instance, the Parker and colleagues' (2008) model on perspective taking, with the various antecedents and outputs, has not yet been tested as a whole. Park and Raille (2010) observed that teachers' self-assessment of their own perspective taking behaviors is not related to colleagues assessment of the same behaviors, thus suggesting that self-perception and other-perception of perspective taking behaviors may lead to different results. Finally, it is also questioned if self-interest motives and other-orientation motives, or perspective taking behaviors, represent the end points of a bipolar continuum or are two independent factors (De Dreu e Nauta, 2009). In each case, we think that perspective taking is an interesting perspective to enrich the study of interpersonal processes in workplaces between colleagues, and between employees and individuals that do not belong to the organization, like providers, clients or citizens.

Finally, in relation to the topic of this conference, "Identity, reciprocity and gift of self", the following four issues, based on what reported above, are raised.

- 1) Perspective taking requires that that the target has a positive self-image and a positive identity in order to decentralize from his/her own affective states or problems in order to give attention and listen to the other. This requires that the target believes that s/he is not driven by his/her problems but that s/he has the capacity to manage his/her problems and to solve it immediately after having listened the other individual. In addition in the Focolari movement the other is not considered as a threat, and thus it is recommended to take the perspective of the other

individual whoever he or she is: gender, age, role, citizenship, political party, country or race do not matter. Thus, in some sense, the other is perceived has a non-threatening individual but, on the contrary, also as someone that requires help, attention, interest by the observer.

2) Parker and colleagues (2008) say that perspective taking requires resources, and particularly time, cognitive resources (to listen and give attention) and emotional resources (to listen in a “non-judgemental” way). Following the title of the conference, and what just reported, it is possible to agree and conclude that active perspective taking definitely requires the observer to donate something. Time, attention and emotion are very precious resources in modern, fast and competitive organizations and it is interesting to further investigate motivations, beliefs and circumstances in which the choice to devote such resources to other individuals a gift is done, particularly in order to have an effective perspective taking.

3) One interesting effect of perspective taking is reciprocity. The Axtell et al. (2007) study reports the incremental, reciprocal effect of perspective taking, in which customers react positively to employees’ efforts to understand their point of view, and such positive reaction encourages employees to be more positive.

4) Finally, following Parker et al. (2008) perspective taking is influenced by situational variables. Thus, organizations can promote, encourage and support such positive behaviors, both internally and in relation to external customers and stakeholders. Organizational culture and organizational climate often include suggestions on expected level of collaboration, how to interact with colleagues or attention to customers’ needs. However, a greater role is in the hands of each single employee, that by starting to take the perspective of the closer colleague or client, may start the process, quoting Parker et al. (2008) of “building better workplaces through individual perspective taking”.

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