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## **Popular Management Literature**

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# 1. Guiding principles

The main hypothesis of this paper is that the success of popular management literature can be explained from the simple fact that with it something has been done very well! Nothing more, but nothing less!

Pop management literature is successful

Our main argument is that popular management literature is related to Organisational Mastery as close as well-known, successful coaching literature of the last century is to Personal Mastery, a linkage that has not been observed so far.

A shift of perspective from social systems (i.e. organisations, companies or administrations) to psychic systems may help to explain what is happening to organisations at the moment. The problem of the “exhausted self”<sup>1</sup> and the “flexible men”<sup>2</sup> in a “multi-option society”<sup>3</sup> is well known. Either well known, is the success story of personal mastery.<sup>4</sup> Be it the shelves of self-help literature or the wide-ranging offers of coaching of all kinds. Personal mastery works. It works on the basis of a process oscillating between self-recognition and self-creation. This is generating stability and meaningful orientation for the self out of self-observation and self-description. This perspective, of course, leads to the question of what Organisational mastery is all about.

It is related to organisations as coaching is to individuals

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01\_ Ehrenberg (Fatigue, 1998)

02\_ Sennet (Flexibler Mensch, 1998)

03\_ Gross (Multioptionsgesellschaft, 1994)

04\_ Butler-Bowdon (Selbsthilfe, 2003)

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## 2. From Personal Mastery to Organisational Mastery

Getting back to the comparison to Personal Mastery, it seems quite simple: Organisational Mastery aims for the same objectives but with organisational reference. The challenges of post-modernity now have also reached the organisation. Post-modern contingency and the need to decide (and to draw distinctions) in a multi-optional societal framework along with the shifted responsibility from the collective to the individual – that has been described in Beck's "Risikogesellschaft" back in 1986 – describe such phenomena, that after the individual, now also organisations are confronted with. So, the task in these days is about creating and providing sense and guidance both for the organisation as a whole, and for every individual member.

Challenges of post-modernity have reached the organisations:

...creating and providing sense and guidance

The derived targets of this challenge are obvious: self-recognition and self-creation. But self-perceptions (as the basis of self-recognition and -creation) are not an obligatory part of consciousness (see Alexander Thomas). This is the starting point of coaching for individuals: the transfer of self-perceptions from the unconsciousness into the consciousness. As a result of this achieved self-awareness an oscillation between self-recognition and self-creation is observable. This is generating stability and meaningful orientation for the self out of self-observation and self-description, checked with the individual objectives and desired developments. In post-modern times with its well-known characteristics of the "exhausted self" and "the flexible men" in a "multi-option society", Personal Mastery is an interesting offer for individuals. Why not trying to adapt it for organisations? That is what Popular Management literatures does.

Target: self-recognition and self-creation

In organisational contexts the adaptation of Personal Mastery, Organisational Mastery, is the competence, first, to recognise yourself to find ways through post-modern contingency and complexity. "Gnóthi seautón" reads the imprint above the entrance of the ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi as the basic advice to retain the ability to act. This is exploring an organisation's possibilities, opportunities, its identity and culture. Similar to the individual's approach this is done by self-descriptions and -observation. This is how organisations generate meaning and attribute sense.<sup>5</sup> Self-recognitions bring an organisation back into contact with itself.

On organisational self-recognition

Organisational Mastery, second, is the competence to create yourself. Will and decisions are the very foundation of self-creation.<sup>6</sup> Decisions create an organisation.<sup>7</sup> This is what an organisation actually does: processing decisions. They give shape to processes and structures. Thus, decisions organise an organisation. And they create the organisation for itself, being an organisation in its own world. But, from social science's systems theory perspective, an organisation does this first of all without a recognition of its environments operations. This instance leads to the questions of self-reference and other-reference and the structural couplings of an organisation to its environment.

On organisational self-creation

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06\_ Luhmann 2000

07\_ Luhmann 1994/Handy 1976

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### 3. Operations: self-reference and other-reference

The process of self-recognition and self-creation is based on self-observation and self-description might it be self-referential or other-referential.<sup>8</sup> Especially along the lines of self-description we see, that some images are rather blueprints from the outside deployed to describe an organisation. This is not a question of being an authentic organisation, however it highlights that although we regard organisations as being operationally closed and processing autopoietically they are not closed for information.<sup>9</sup> Organisations are structurally coupled to their environment.<sup>10</sup>

Following systems theory assumptions of operative closeness, every self-recognition and self-creation has to be self-referential. And even more: “Autopoiesis means blindness concerning the operations of the system’s outer world. Operational closeness means deafness concerning the siren’s singing of the system’s environment.”<sup>11</sup> Under these circumstances, the question is, how to achieve extrinsic or other-reference? One answer is: Popular Management literature! (it supports organisations to achieve self-awareness, self-recognition and self-creation).

Popular management literature provides extrinsic reference for organisations

But Popular Management literature’s offers follow certain rules similar to scientific revolutions, as described in the work of Thomas Kuhn.<sup>12</sup> The need for extrinsic self-observational blueprints (such as Management literature being used as a self-observational tool) as well as scientific theory is answered with a theoretical offer that underlies the dynamics of “managerial/scientific fashions.” What does that mean?

Our idea is about the “consequences of good theory”. A new theoretical offer might work well in its first contexts of appliance. It gives new insights and pushes thinking further as well as practise. It provides more than satisfactorial results. Therefore, it will become “popular”. The effect then is that it will be applied on further questions and/or problems up to situations in which it only will provide marginal or even no significant results anymore. The reception of the theory becomes critical in reference to managerial or scientific benefit.

Popularity follows certain life-circles similar to scientific theory development

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08\_ Nassehi (Organisation, 2002)

09\_ Beer (Diagnosing organisations, 1985)

10\_ Luhmann (Politik, 2000)

11\_ Willke 2005, 331 (own translation)

12\_ Kuhn (Revolution, 1962)

Therefore, the theory or method will be modified (i.e. differentiated) until either anything goes or it will be substituted by a new offer that is able to include all the “blind spots” of the original offer in practise. It then will become “out of fashion.” But this is not because of its lacks of explanatory power, but of its misuse in contexts that it was not developed or designed for.

One example: Taylorism or „Scientific Management“ still is the best offer for Operations Research. It allows you to optimise production chains. But in the context of management optimisation it simply does not work (or has only unsatisfying results). It does not yield the expected good results. But in the past, that was the very expectation. Scientific Management was applied to management systems, and did not fulfil the expectations. Has this been a question concerning the power of the theory itself or of the application and its contexts? The answer of course is about the context and the usage of an offer, might it be a theory or a managerial tool. The usage has to fit the challenge – otherwise the decision for the application is not founded on the belief of using a better tool but only on its popularity in a certain community/context where it is fashionable at that time.

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## 4. Again on Popular Management literature

So what popular management literature can provide, is a sort of blueprint that structures the own self-observation by using other-referential criteria of observation. Then it is a other-referential tool that supports achieving new insights about oneself. It can take the self-observation further by using the two principles mentioned above that popular management literature focuses on without naming them. And it is its success that founds its popularity.

Popular Management literature provides structures of self-observation

Two impressive examples: The first one is “From Good to Great” by Jim Collins and the second one is “Blue Ocean strategy” by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne. Both books strengthen the shift from other-reference to self-reference. Self-reference in the past has happened via markets and strategy, while nowadays it is observable that self-reference has shifted towards clients and future as the basis of strategy. That is what the mentioned publications are about. “From Good to Great” focuses on self-observation to create the opportunity to shift towards excellence (see for example the “hedgehog-concept”). In contrast to self-reference via the perspective of the shareholders and controlling (i.e. figures of the past performance), it is now about a radical “presencing”-approach (another example of popular management literature; see Senge, Scharmer et al., Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future), concerning the stakeholder’s perspective as an orientation for strategy (i.e. aimed future, emerging from the present status). A successful description of this shift can be found described in “Blue Ocean Strategy”.

Examples from the literature

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## 5. Consulting

This blueprint function of popular management literature works in consulting practise. Organisational requests for consultative support, attendance and monitoring in the last twelve month have shown the tendency to focus on self-recognition as the basis for next steps in the organisational development (i.e. self-creation). In our consulting practise, we have been confronted with a strong desire for authentic information on one`s organisational state and condition. Inspired by the above mentioned books, decision-makers in organisations have asked for the application of the “hedge-hog concept”, the entire “good to great”-idea or for comprehensive interview settings for the employèes to achieve a systemic “big picture” of their organisation, to mention just a few. The challenge of the post-modern organisation is mirrored in these requests: to bring organsations back in contact with themselves. This thesis is also the core of present pop management literature, might it be with the focus on the indiividual (personal mastery) or on entire organisations (organisa-tional mastery).

Examples from consulting  
practise

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## 6. Conclusion

Our conclusion is rather simple: everything is about observation and self-observation. In many references: in reference to organisations towards management literature, to organisations towards themselves but also to an observer of second order, who observes the observations of the others. Therefore, a praxeological sensitivity is recommended that takes seriously which ideas of management literature are successful at present and why. This approach does not only gives insight to popular management fashions and popular management literature but also to the current state of organisations, their needs and their relations to their environment, which is the (post-modern) world.

Everything is about  
observation

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