Activity Theory Used as a Method to Draw a Vision in the Workplace

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Abstract
Activity theory was used as a method to draw a vision, or a dream, that a leader wanted to achieve in the workplace. For this purpose, an original structure of activity figure presented by Engeström (1987) was modified to make it more user-friendly while keeping all important elements. The modified figure indicates structure of activity like ‘a particular person or a particular small group of people (subject of activity) do(es) something with the use of particular tools by collaboration with other people or groups (community) under a particular division of labor and rules.’ This shows not only the structure of activity which you want to achieve but the format of the narrative you use when you present your vision to your colleagues. This paper will describe an example in which we used the method of activity theory in a training session to improve the leadership skills of nurses working for a large hospital.

Keywords: activity theory, vision, narrative

1. Introduction

There is a difference in your workplace depending on whether or not you work under a leader who has a vision, or a dream. A vision gives context that organizes many pieces of work toward a desirable final product or future. You might be able to tolerate a formidable work environment if you are convinced that it will contribute to realizing the vision.

A vision differs from a fancy because it is not an individual whim. A vision must be communicated to and shared with the people who are expected to achieve it. In this sense, a vision should take the form of a narrative.

But, it is not easy to develop a vision. Employed people are very busy. They have a great deal of work to do and can complete the work even if a vision is not presented to them. Therefore, in the workplace, a vision tends to be perceived by workers as something extra. Another important reason that a vision is not easy to develop is a lack of a method to represent or draw the vision. For example, a picture book can be used to increase communication between parents and children. Parents expand their conversation by utilizing whatever appears in the book as a trigger to converse more. Reading a picture book with children is a method for parents to increase communication. This study develops a method to draw a vision, based on the activity theory proposed by Engeström (1987).

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2. Structure of Activity

Activity theory emphasizes the fundamental social nature of individual actions. In our everyday life, we tend to focus on an individual person when he/she shows either excellence or a lack of achievement. Outstanding achievement tends to be attributed to the innate characteristics of the person such as excellent ability or enthusiasm, while poor achievement tends to be attributed to a lack of ability or lack of motivation. It is sometimes true that psychological factors such as ability, attitude and motivation are critical and thus should be targeted if achievement needs to be improved. However, a seemingly individual action often occurs as a part of the larger phenomenon of human collectivity.

Activity theory expands our scope of understanding to the extent that what looks like an individual action can be located in a larger context of collectivity. Let us start with an individual action and then expand our scope step-by-step by following activity theory. At the beginning, an individual action is conceptualized as the following sequence: a subject works on an object and produces an outcome. For example, a particular worker, as a subject, who is responsible for maintenance of a certain manufacturing system works on a machine as an object and produces an outcome that demonstrates its improved condition. Such an individual action is represented by a central horizontal line in Figure 1.

An individual action is always mediated by a tool because a subject works on an object to produce an outcome with the use of any device. Tools might be physical, like a computer or an operation manual; institutional like an award system; linguistic like technical jargon; informational like specialized knowledge; or human like a person whom you can ask to give you minor technical help for your computer work.

![Figure 1. Structure of activity](image-url)
Importantly, tools are sustained and are made available for you by human collectivity. A computer on your desk is made available for you by the diverse efforts of many people who have worked from the manufacturing stage to the sales stage of the computer and many other people who have been involved in software development and internet-related businesses. Even the person who is in charge of the mail server in your organization is in the collectivity that makes the computer available for your electronic communication. Thus, using a tool always means putting yourself in collaborative relationships with people who have made the tool available for you. In the terminology of activity theory, any action to work on an object to produce an outcome is always mediated by tools, or artifacts, that are sustained by a collectivity. In this sense, such tools are called mediating artifacts. These are shown in the upper small triangle in Figure 1.

An individual action is carried out in more direct collaborative relations with other people than we see in mediating artifacts. That is true even if you are working alone at a particular point of time. You might bring documents you have completed alone to someone else and ask for assistance to modify your work on these documents. This process demonstrates that your work, writing the documents alone, is not a purely individual action but is carried out as a part of collaborative work with someone else. Activity theory locates a seemingly individual action in the work of a collectivity, which was called a community by Engeström (1987). This is shown in the lower middle small triangle in Figure 1.

Having taken a community into our scope of view, we can specify details of the community in two more ways. First, we can make clear what division of labor is maintained in the community. The role of a subject in the division of labor is to work on an object to produce an outcome, already represented by a central horizontal line in Figure 1. Then, we can clarify what role is played by each of the other members in the community, shown in the lower right small triangle in Figure 1. Second, it is useful to grasp what rules are shared in the community, explicitly (consciously) or implicitly (unconsciously). A rule concerns either fact recognition or value judgment. This is shown in a lower left small triangle in Figure 1.

Now, we have an entire structure of activity that consists of a total of six terms. The structure enables us to expand our scope of view to the extent that an action that tends to be taken as an individual phenomenon at first glance can be located as a part of the larger collectivity. We have put an individual at the position of subject in Figure 1 so far, but it is sometimes possible or even necessary to put a group of persons at the position of the subject so that an action by the group can be understood as a part of the larger collectivity beyond the group.

From a practical viewpoint, a structural figure of activity provides more ways to improve a term of ‘object → outcome.’ By focusing on a horizontal central line in Figure 1, all you can do is to improve an individual’s ability, attitude or motivation. In many cases, however, it takes a great deal of energy and time to change the individual by education, training, or personal guidance although those efforts sometimes should not be avoided. But, you have many more options for improvement if you depend on a structure of activity. For example, you might want to improve the outcome by introducing a new tool (mediating artifact). Or, you might want to invite someone who can support the subject and thus create a new team (community), or you might want to change the role played by each member of the community (division of labor), or you might want to alter a shared belief (rule) in the community by challenging a conventional way of thinking.
3. A Method for Drawing a Vision

3-1. A diamond figure of activity structure

Any methods employed to change an activity structure must be user-friendly. The activity structure in Figure 1 looks complicated to most people. We modified it into a diamond figure shown in Figure 2 while maintaining the important elements in Figure 1. Activity structure will be explained with the use of the diamond figure in figure 2. Some parts duplicate explanations in the previous section but will be much easier to understand.

The diamond figure does not only provide a way for drawing a vision but also a way for telling it, or making it a narrative. Phrases in the Figure 2 indicate how a vision can be transformed into a narrative like ‘Someone does something with the use of ----- by collaboration with ----.’

We have used the tool as a method to change such organizations as a company, hospital, or institution and to revitalize a community. We will introduce our experiences where we used it in leadership training in a large hospital for nurses who had several years of career experience. They were expected to start playing a leadership role in the workplace in addition to further improving their nursing skills as individual nurses.

3-2. Introduction of activity theory

First of all, activity theory was introduced with the use of the diamond figure as you see in the following:

The major purpose to introduce activity theory is to see a seemingly individual person’s behavior as a part of activity of a collectivity including the person. Please note that an individual person takes an action while a collectivity takes an activity. We don’t have a term for an individual person’s activity.

Look at a horizontal line located in the center of Figure 2. This line indicates that a subject (someone) works on an object and produces an outcome. Basically, it says someone usually does something. For example, a nurse named A (subject) usually cares for a lonely patient named B (object) and produces a situation in which B can converse even if only for a short time.

We often stop the analysis here. Then, we have no way other than attributing a cause of the outcome internal to the subject such as knowledge in one’s head, skill in one’s body, or motivation in one’s mind, regardless of whether the outcome is good or bad. For example, we might assume that the good outcome was brought about by the subject’s excellent ability or conversely, the poor outcome was brought about by the subject’s lack of enthusiasm.

It is true that we can’t help attributing an intrinsic cause to the subject, but, in many cases, the subject works on the object as a member of a certain collectivity and thus his/her action can be changed if activity of the collectivity is changed. In other words, we can find a clue to change the outcome in many cases if we expand our scope of view to the extent that a collectivity, including the subject, is grasped.

The first route: Tool

We have two routes to expand our scope of view toward a collectivity. The first one is taking the tools the subject uses into account (an up-pointing arrow in Figure 2). For example, nurse A might converse with B while reading a sports newspaper (a tool) together because she knows B is crazy about football. A newspaper is an example of a physical tool but we can also use...
institutional tools such as organizations, customs, languages, and knowledge.

Here, we wonder why taking tools into account means expanding our scope of view toward a collectivity. The reason is simple. It is because tools never fall from the sky. Tools can be used by the subject only when other people make them available for the subject. Any tools must have a group of people behind them who sustain the tools. Therefore, taking a tool into account leads you to include the collectivity that you collaborate with indirectly via the tool in your scope of understanding.

The second route: Teamwork

The second route to expand your scope of understanding is taking into account people with whom you directly collaborate (a down-pointing arrow in Figure 2). For example, nurse C, working in the same section as nurse A might often give nurse A advice concerning how A should act with patient B. Also, a chief nurse, D, might often encourage A to continue her efforts to help B escape his loneliness. In this example, C and D are invaluable teammates for nurse A.

Now, you can see the subject’s action as a part of the way team players cooperate, not just an individual action, by expanding your scope of understanding through the second route. The team has a division of labor, or division of roles among team players. It also has rules that should be kept in mind for each player. The division of labor and the rules should be taken into account in the second route.

Having expanded your scope of understanding, you have many more measures to change the outcome than you had when you focused on the action of subject alone, i.e., the horizontal line alone in Figure 2. You don’t have to concentrate on the subject alone. You can explore what happens if the tool is changed, if someone else can join the team, if the division of labor is modified, or if a new rule is developed.
4. Drawing a Vision

After introducing activity theory as outlined above, we proceed to the explanation of how you can draw a vision with the use of the diamond figure. Obviously, it is not sufficient to draw a vision. We want to realize or accomplish the vision we drew. In the following text, the first step where you draw a vision and the second step where you draw an activity to realize the vision will be explained.

4-1. The first step: Drawing a vision

In the first step, you draw the activity that you don’t have but that you would like to have in your workplace. The activity reads “a dream subject does something dreamy with the use of dream tools by collaboration with dream teammates.”

Let us see an example. Figure 3 is a vision, or a dream activity, drawn by a nurse named E who worked in an intensive care unit (ICU). Emergency patients are brought into the unit one right after another. The department is like a battlefield for the medical staff. The employees tend to be noisy and have loud voices. But, patients recovering from surgery are also sent to wake up in the ICU. The room should be as quiet and calming as possible for such patients. Nurse E had a vision that the room that tends to be noisy would be as quiet and as calm as possible.

Figure 3 reads “The warning team quiets anyone who is making a loud voice with the use of the questionnaire administered for patients to evaluate comfortableness in the room and the noise level meter by collaboration with a daily appointed leader and a chief nurse of the unit.” She expects the division of labor in which the daily appointed leader emphasizes the importance of keeping the room as quiet as possible in daily meetings and the chief nurse praises a member of the warning team when he/she actually acts to quiet a noisy staff. She wants to have a rule among the warning team, the daily appointed leader and the chief nurse that the warning should be made out in open area because sometimes a team member is younger or occupies a lower status.
I establishes and supports the warning team.

by collaboration with daily appointed leader (lynch pin between the team and me) and chief nurse (encouraging other staffs)
under the rule that all staffs become a member of the team

Figure 4. An example of activity to realize a vision

than a noisy person. This is a dream. They did not have the warning team when she drew the vision. Neither the tools nor the teammates existed because the subject who used the tools and collaborated with the teammates did not exist.

In this leadership training, “I” or a group including a trainee him/herself were not allowed to be in the position of subject. It was because the purpose of the training was to leave the stage in which improvement of nursing skill as an individual nurse is emphasized most and able to enter the stage in which leadership in the workplace would be expected. It was predicted that a trainee might not pay full attention to his/her entire workplace if he/she was allowed to make him/herself a subject.

4-2. The second step: Drawing an activity to realize a vision

The next step is to draw an activity to realize the vision by taking initiative as a subject. In this step, the subject is already definite; it is ‘I.’

The diamond figures that are drawn in the second step can be divided into three types, that is, for drawing activities to produce (1) dream subject, (2) dream tools and (3) dream teammates. But, you might already have the subject or the tools that appeared in the vision. Or, you might already have established that the relationship between the subject and the teammates that is good enough to realize the vision. In these cases, you need to draw only the necessary activities among the three types.

In contrast, you might have to draw two or more activities for a single type of activity. For example, if two important tools were included in the vision, you have to draw two activities to produce them. Or, if many teammates were included in the vision and it would be difficult to develop a collaborative relationship among them all, you might need to have plural activities, each of which is to develop collaboration of a subgroup.

Furthermore, it might be possible for a single activity to accomplish two different elements in the vision. For example, both a dream tool and collaboration might be achieved by an activity in
which you work with the dream subject and his/her dream teammates to produce the dream tool in
the vision.

Let us see what activity was drawn in the second step by nurse E, whose vision was
described above. A dream subject, i.e., the warning team, had to be established and supported
before anything else to realize the vision. Figure 4 shows the activity in which nurse E, herself,
takes initiative to establish and support the warning team. The subject is ‘I.’ The figure reads “I
(nurse E) establish and support the warning team with the use of a poster and mail by
collaboration with the daily appointed leader and the chief nurse.” In the activity, the daily
appointed leader as a teammate is expected to be a lynch pin between the wa rning team and nurse
E, while chief nurse D is expected to support nurse E, by encouraging other staff members to
collaborate with nurse E. A rule in the activity is that all staffs become members of the warning
team alternately without sticking to fixed membership. In addition to Figure 4, nurse E drew
another activity to produce a dream tool, a questionnaire for patients. The activity reads like “I
develop a questionnaire with the use of the results of interviews with patients by collaboration
with the warning team.”

5. Discussions

Going back and forth

The first and second steps were described above in this order but, in many cases, you
cannot advance straightforward from the first step to the second step and then implement the
activity drawn in the second step. You might not be able to draw the activity to achieve the vision
as a central person in the second step even if you managed to draw the vision in the first step. In
such a case, you should not hesitate to go back to the first step and draw your vision again.
Alternately, even if you completed the second step, you might find it difficult to implement the
activity for accomplishing the vision in just a few days. If so, you should not hesitate to go back to
the second step or even to the first step.

Going back and forth might seem like a waste of time or that it is unsuccessful but it is not
true. Generally, it is not easy to draw a vision. You have to practice it because it is a skill. In this
sense, going back and forth is never in vain but a positive process that develops a vision. In fact,
one way to improve your skill to draw a vision is by practicing it by going back and forth.

Narrating a vision

As stated in the beginning of this paper, a vision differs from a fancy. It is critically
important that a vision can be narrated to someone else. Phrases in Figure 2 articulate a format to
narrate a vision like “Someone does something with the use of ---- by collaboration with ----.” In
our training, we repeatedly emphasized that it was important to use the format.

You might want to ask if the vision you drew is adequate. But, since it is impossible to
show an absolute criterion to determine the adequacy of a vision, how can you judge its adequacy?
The only way to know the adequacy of your vision is to talk about it to other people. Let us
explain. Suppose you are starting the activity you drew in the second step to realize your vision.
The activity includes the teammates you wanted to collaborate with. It means that you have to ask
them to play the role you indicated in the division of labor in the second step. Then, they ask you
why you have requested such an activity.

Here, the vision you drew in the first step should be disclosed. You say, “I drew this vision.
I want to realize it while playing a central role. For this, please collaborate with me.” Then, how do they react to the disclosure of your vision? There are three different possibilities.

First, they might react by saying “I am sympathetic with you. I also want to realize such an activity. Let’s work for it together.” This reaction confirms that your vision is adequate. Second, they might say, “I understand it would be wonderful if such a vision would be realized. But, I can’t see how I could assist in such a huge vision.” This reaction indicates that your vision is too large and thus unrealistic. Third, they might say, “I understand what you said is important, but it should be a part of daily work.” This shows your vision is too small. Excitement and enthusiasm are integral in order for a vision to interest another person. An idea is not a vision if it does not elicit any excitement on the part of the person who heard it.

As you can see in the above examples, the adequacy of your vision can be judged only by knowing the possible responses of the teammates with whom you wanted to work to achieve the vision. Thus, it is critical for you to narrate your vision to fit your workplace. Logically, it follows that the adequacy of the same vision will differ from one workplace to another because each workplace is unique. The same vision might be perfect for one workplace, but it might be too large or too small for others.

A new type of problem-solving method

This method of drawing a vision is a new type of a problem-solving technique. In traditional problem solving, a problem, or weakness or deficit, should be analyzed and identified, then followed by identification of, and removal of the cause. Here, the major focus is on the past where and when you experienced the cause that produced negative effects.

In contrast, a desirable situation in the future is drawn as a vision or a dream in the method we introduced in this paper. Our method is prospective or future-oriented while traditional techniques are retrospective or past-oriented. It is important to focus on problems or weaknesses but we might become depressed if we are always forced to be convinced of our weakness alone. We also need another kind of problem-solving technique that enables us to improve one’s workplace in a bright way toward the future and we believe that this method will perform that function.

References


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