

Cooperation at work: insights from the psychodynamics of work

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THE WORK IN CONTEXT

Collective deterioration processes along with extreme levels of competition between subjects have undermined the possibility of genuine cooperation. In the perspective of the psychodynamics of work, cooperation cannot be prescribed: instead, it needs to be constructed through a triple relationship between the subject, the activity and the reality of the work. Supported by this theoretical approach, in a dialogue with ergonomic work analysis, research projects conducted in service and industrial organisations revealed important elements to advance understanding of cooperation construction, such as: authority and authoritarianism; subjectivity and intersubjectivity; competition; fear and sense of threat; and defensive strategies, among others. Researchers and practitioners can benefit from the psychodynamics of work approach to reflect – and, more than that, to develop actions – aiming to improve work and, accordingly, organisations.

KEYWORDS

Cooperation, work, psychodynamics of work.

We are experiencing profound changes in the world of work that are to a great extent reflected in the deterioration of the collectives. In many situations, people see themselves as enterprises, in a permanent competition with each other (Dejours, 1999; Dardot and Laval, 2014). This process has serious implications: if there are no collectives or colleagues, but instead potential enemies, genuine cooperation becomes extremely weakened.

If the starting point of cooperation is the need to achieve a certain result, it extends beyond immediate goals and interests, enabling the construction of a collective identity (Dameron, 2005). Organisations may create favourable or unfavourable conditions for cooperation to emerge in terms of goals, outcomes, and work evaluation, but cooperation is not something that can be prescribed (Dejours, 1997).

In the perspective of psychodynamics of work (PDW), the subject, in mobilising subjectivity to overcome the challenges imposed by reality, can transform suffering into pleasure through an experience of sublimation, providing the possibility of reinforcing identity construction and health (Dejours, 1997, 2012). Sznelwar, Uchida, and Lancman (2011, p. 27) pointed out that “*subjectivity is, in reality, an intersubjectivity (...) what we do is with others and for others*”. Work is understood as a relationship between the subject, the activity and the reality of the work that imposes itself on it, and the ‘other’ (Dejours, 1997). Cooperation is part of this triple relationship.

It is in the process of building collective deliberations about working, in the development of rules, norms, techniques and ethical values involved in the act of doing that cooperation can emerge. To make the activity of work visible is fundamental so that it can be recognised and evaluated in the

eyes of the profession. But for this to happen it is necessary to trust the colleague, not fear retaliation. Trust is a construction, one that is based on the validation of agreements in daily life. Even those who are not included in one's circle of trust can be liked. Fear, competition in extreme levels, and lack of respect can lead to distrust, distorting the possibilities of authentic speech and listening about the experience of the real.

The confrontation of opinions occurs in spaces of deliberation and it is not always possible to reach a consensus within the time available. It becomes necessary to mediate conflicting positions. This poses a challenge: who can arbitrate in cooperative work? The natural answer may be someone who has the authority to do so, but here it is important to distinguish between authority and authoritarianism. In a collective where cooperation prevails, authority can be legitimately constructed from experience, or based in the specific capacities of mediating, pondering and communicating different opinions. In this sense, arbitrating may be a form of power and domination.

Supported by the theoretical framework of PDW, as well as of ergonomic work analysis, research projects conducted in service and industrial organisations revealed the existence of a constant fear by workers of losing their job, due to various reasons. In the corporate world, policies aimed at high performance put one in competition against another under a constant threat of dismissal, while in a cooperative organisation the fear is of a more capitalised competition. This sense of fear and threat, in addition to hindering cooperation within the collectives by strengthening defensive postures, poses dilemmas for managers, who try to shield their teams from these pressures so that cooperation can exist internally. However, organisational or market pressures, as well as team questioning of authority, can lead to defensive positions that blur the threshold between authority and authoritarianism. A striking difference is that in organisations based on cooperation there was strong processes of collective life construction, and solid development of identity and trust within the shop floor team, but the challenge of building trust with management remains – after all there was a distance between what the market demanded and what the cooperative organisation could produce. This reflects the mismatch between what is real and what is prescribed which can be a source of serious conflict if the planner is far from the operator, as in the corporate world, or if market demands are far from the possibilities of execution, as in the cooperative.

If the great power of cooperation lies in the construction of social relationships based on ethical values and the construction of a common work, understanding how organisations are guiding the conditions of cooperation allows us to unveil some features of the current types of social bonds. Fear, competition, defensive positions, and authoritarianism prevailing over authority are present in the world of work, which makes PDW a powerful approach through which researchers and practitioners can reflect on the improvement of organisations.

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