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Free Space - Philosophy in Organisations

Jos Kessels, Erik Boers and Pieter Mostert

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In the 1940s, Quantum Field Theory taught us that empty space does not exist.² *Free space* was discovered to be full of dynamic interaction between particle and force fields which are in a constant state of creation and annihilation.

In their *Free Space - Philosophy in Organisations* three Dutch consultant philosophers, Kessels, Boers and Mostert, first hypothesise and then explore something like *free space* in the context of organisational interaction. For them, free space is the (sometimes protracted) event in space-time in which an un-thought thought suddenly pops up. It is the 'vacuum' between a perception and a judgement, between one thought and another, between a concern and an action, and between 'stimulus' and response. So, in their view, organisational free space is full of anticipation, suspense, discovery and reconciliation – a constant state of creation and annihilation. This makes their approach to free space remarkably similar to what is now called the 'Standard Model' of free space that earned Feynman his Nobel Prize.

They explore in their book the richness of this organisational 'vacuum': its potential for creating new thoughts, new perspectives, new energy – and for annihilating attachments, stresses and pressures. They show how we can use this 'vacuum energy' to produce freedom and detachment from personal and organisational strategies, organisational politics and power distributions, existing problem descriptions and even the everyday concerns and problems themselves.

Kessels, Boers and Mostert believe vacuum energy or free space is also the first and foremost condition for change. Moreover, they argue that to stand still regularly and reflect about what we are doing, allowing ourselves some free space, will enhance the quality of our lives, both inside and outside organisations.

Throughout the book, the authors present case material from their own practice. Some of this material is presented in a deceptively clear and simple way, for in these case studies the authors have captured remarkably well the essence of many ongoing conversations in organisations. They show how organisational leaders and professionals can engage in such conversations and deepen them, thereby generating additional free space to further enhance the level of connection, understanding and agreement.

The methodologies offered in the book, such as Socratic dialogue, Meta-dialogue, personal anecdotes and reflective diaries, are crystal clear, with instructions about such things as the time management and facilitation involved and how to reduce risks and overcome pitfalls. I have tried out some of their methods myself and find them very suitable to deal with my own preconceptions, pressure for decisions, actions and results, excessive politeness and caution. The beauty of their presentation is that Kessels, Boers and Mostert start with ordinary, everyday exchanges and concerns in relatively well-functioning groups and organisations, and go on to show how one can use free space as a lever for changing these organisations through conversation.³

In the case material they describe how easy it is for conversations to descend into misunderstanding and conflict. More interestingly, they show how to avoid misunderstanding and conflict, when colleagues are prepared to join in reflection and dialogue, making the most of simple human contact and warmth, curiosity, trust, openness and directness.

¹ This is the provisional English edition and can be ordered from w.vangils@uitgeverijboom.nl The Dutch edition is *Vrije Ruimte Filosoferen in organisaties* Boom Publishers, Amsterdam 2002.

² Feynman, R P *QED: the strange theory of light and matter* London: Penguin Books 1985

³ Compare Shaw, P *Changing Conversations in Organisations: a complexity approach to change* London and New York: Routledge 2002.

Free Space also provides an introduction based on 'classical' thought to 'modern' methods of peer consultation and action learning with colleagues.⁴ The book maps out an approach to learning and development in the workplace where free space and good listening help to generate insight and mastery.

Kessels, Boers and Mostert equate free space with the classical concept of *scholè* or *otium*, which in its original meaning of leisure and freely hovering attention informed the learning of Greek and Roman philosophers. *Scholè* has now become our word for school, a place to go to enhance learning. The three authors are inspired by classical philosophy in the widest sense and their references span five centuries of extraordinary achievement, from Socrates to Marcus Aurelius. Classical philosophy has also determined the structure of the book: the first half deals with the liberal arts of the classical *trivium* (dialectic, rhetoric and grammar) and the second half contains chapters about classical approaches to ethics, personal mastery and the 'good life'.

This is a book about the sharp and subtle divide between intentional, interested communication and communication *about* intentions and interests which remains free from both. It is an idealistic book, and in that sense I feel it is very close to the roots of organisation development. Sometimes the authors seem to speak as if from a pristine, archaic world where the earth is still at the centre of the universe, (male and Western) man is still the centre both of the animal kingdom and of society with an ordained mission called 'mastery', and where his thoughts are still at the centre of his thinking. Socrates' world is a happy, reflective, self-confident place where one does not have to deal with the decentring and disturbing propositions of, eg, Galileo, Darwin and Freud. Has Galileo not shown that the earth is indeed not the centre of the universe? Has Darwin not shown that man is not the measure of all species? Has Freud not shown that even within ourselves free space makes us un-free in our 'free associations', which are in large part determined by what goes on in our unconscious? So occasionally, the book breathes an equally classic naïveté in asserting that classical virtues and mastery will keep us and others on 'the' right path. Since we now know about the psychopathology of everyday life,⁵ we know that using free space for free association will not only generate wholesome reflection but also very disturbing messages. What if we cannot know whether we are reflecting or not, if we cannot see the difference between reflection and daydreaming or fantasy, and if we don't know if we in our cosy free space are condoning or legitimising vicious conflicts and political plotting?

I very much look forward to seeing whether the authors, perhaps in a next edition, will balance their classic 'high philosophy' with some insights and methods taken from classic tragedy and mythology. On the 'free stage' of the ancient theatre, they will no doubt find evidence of the unavoidable collisions which also take place in free space, and of the hubris and haunting furies which we can all too often recognise in the modern workplace.

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⁴ Compare De Haan, E *Learning with Colleagues: an action guide for peer consultation* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2004.

⁵ Freud, S *Zur psychopathologie des Alltagslebens: 10. weiter vermehrte Auflage* (1924). Vienna: Internationale Psychoanalytische Verlag. Translated as *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume VI 1904/1924.