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# COHERENCE, THE FOUNDATION OF AUTHORITY WITHIN ORGANISATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Coherence is today a source of moral authority. Being coherent frees us from external influences and gives us the capacity to decide for ourselves, but also places us in a privileged position with regard to others. We will turn our attention now to coherence as a foundation of authority in organisations. And to do that, organisations must be divided into different levels and different dimensions. Coherence will only be possible when the worker is capable of weighing up the distance between the organisation's specific vision and the operational processes that effectively take place within it. All companies, as a sum of possibilities, respond to the intention of those who govern them insofar as their assets permit it, and their ultimate value resides therein; the possibility of being recognised for their way of being, their corporate ethos.

*Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, moral philosophy, management, coherence, authority*

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## APPROACHING THE NOTION OF COHERENCE

Two or more things are said to be coherent when they are interrelated, especially when they are interrelated in accordance with a pattern or model. From this perspective, we could say that two objects are coherent or two dresses are coherent. However, coherence, understood as an ethical value, goes beyond mere fulfilment of a pattern and requires loyalty to the credo itself, which means that, in order to be coherent, firstly there must be a credo, in other words, a referential system of ideas and, secondly there must be a willingness to follow it.

The value of coherence can adopt multiple forms. Firstly, there is coherence between thought and word. What issues from our lips does not always reflect what our mind is thinking. As indicated earlier, coherence is transparency, in this case, transparency between what we think and what we say. Those who do not think for themselves can be neither coherent nor incoherent because they do not have their own ideas. The possibility of coherence is conditioned by having ideas and being willing to follow them.

In the words of sociologist Max Weber, coherence requires conviction and responsibility: conviction to state and defend a series of norms and responsibility to accept their consequences. In this respect, it should be said that in some contexts, it is very difficult to be coherent, either because what we think is very different to what others think, or because we are unsure of how to faithfully convey what we think.

At times, the presence of others can be challenging and, either through fear or an inferiority complex, we fall into the practice of incoherence. The presence of others makes us withdraw from our coherence and we end up saying what they think, but not really what we ourselves think. On other occasions, we do wish to practise coherence but realise that we have neither the argumentative force nor sufficient rhetorical weapons to duly defend our thought. In these cases, we abandon the possibility of being coherent and fall into incoherence.

Secondly, there is another form of coherence between word and deed. A coherent person is a straightforward person, who say what they do and do what they say. Between word and deed there are many discontinuities, either because the words we speak are very demanding or because the deed we regularly carry out is a far cry from the words that utter forth from our lips. Being coherent means being transparent between thought and word, but also between word and deed. Loyalty to one's own ideas

within our practical life is what we call coherence.

At times, being coherent with oneself implies being coherent in the eyes of others, because our concept of coherence does not always tally with that of others. Our demands for coherence are very personal and such a virtue cannot be demanded of others if one does not practice coherence in one's own everyday life. For that reason we say that coherence involves the exercise of critique, but especially of self-critique. A coherent person critiques their own incongruence and endeavours to overcome this with time.

## COHERENCE, A SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

So far, we have seen that coherence can adopt multiple forms and that in all of them it demands a convincing and responsible attitude, exercised critically, as proof of loyalty to oneself. However, coherence also has an effect on others which we cannot ignore.

Coherence is today a source of moral authority. Being coherent frees us from external influences and gives us the capacity to decide for ourselves, but also places us in a privileged position with regard to others. As noted by Paul Ricoeur in his latest book dedicated to applied ethics, the ideal type of dominantly expository and institutional authority has gradually been eroded over the centuries.

The word authority, however, generates a fair amount of suspicion. In a society accustomed to tolerant coexistence with otherness, mutability and a permanent openness to the *other*, the concept of authority appears to evoke the external imposition of a value that limits and even liquidates that which does not adapt to its criteria. In this respect, an external conception of the authoritarian must be ruled out in favour of the consideration that the authority we gain by means of coherence is not that of *being able to command* but rather that of the recognition of one's own values that others feel as their own. The recognition of authority (in pacific environments) is always related with the idea that what authority says is something that can be recognised as valid and coherent for others. It is in this way that, over the centuries, we have internalised the foundation of authority to the point where what matters is the merely individual reciprocity between our acts and our thoughts, without said reciprocity depending on any external influence.

Authority can no longer be confused with authoritarianism. As Hans Georg Gadamer reminds us, authority is not bestowed but rather acquired

and has to be acquired if it is to be appealed to. Moral authority is achieved by means of testimony and coherence, whereas authoritarianism is a despotic way of relating to others which cannot in any way be considered a virtue. True authority does not need to be authoritarian.

The great moral masters of humanity have recognised moral authority and it can be stated with absolute certainty that they never practised authoritarianism. Authority must not be confused with power, or with managing the public domain; rather it is part of the moral ethos. A coherent person has authority but not for what they specifically say or do, but rather the congruence that exists between what they do and say.

## THE EXERCISE OF COHERENCE IN ORGANISATIONS

We will turn our attention now to coherence as a foundation of authority in organisations. And to do that, organisations must be divided into different levels and different dimensions. The coherence displayed by the head of an organisation and the receptionist will not be the same if they both do their job conscientiously, and similarly it will not be the same when we talk about the design of a company and its organisational environment (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969) or market interests and the cultural positioning of a certain organisation.

Although organisational hierarchy is gradually giving way to a more horizontal model, in which the executive tier as a whole is beginning to carry the same weight as the CEO of a company, we cannot deny that there are still major differences between the members of the same organisation. In this case, being coherent consists precisely of understanding such diversity and making demands of each individual in accordance with their position.

Within another sphere, when we come across a conservative company, entrenched in its system, the same that Douglas A. Ready and Jay A. Conger use as an example to analyse how to make bold visions possible within an organisation, what we cannot do is force its fundamental structures, flying the flag of change and innovation. We must, as they show us, ensure a series of crucial aspects pertaining to the essence of said organisation. In other words, we must be coherent with its reality and transform it within its possibilities.

The same thing happens with market interests. Now more than ever we know that they fluctuate and are subject to variability that is impossible

to predict. Flexibility in times of crisis is only possible if we are capable of defending our beliefs and assuming the responsibility for our actions. Once the storm has passed, only companies that are coherent with their own possibilities will be left standing.

### Values of reference

In all these cases, the value of coherence responds to an organisation's capacity to define its values and its horizons of reference. Only then can we subsequently identify its coherence or incoherence.

Organisational coherence can be understood as a weighted game, the validity of which is grounded in the acceptance of and compliance with values that drive an organisation, for example, the ethical guidelines used when drafting the social responsibility report which outline the triple balance (economic, social and environmental) or the creation of ethical codes to provide conceptual tools for those who in the future must defend their position in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

In this respect, coherence is closely related with other *values* which affect interpersonal relations. Consider integrity for example. As well as affecting the personal relations which in general must be established between a certain group or groups of people (including working groups), integrity is also strongly related with responsibility itself. Often the emphasis is placed on the need for company management to develop values that bestow a moral character on their actions, but we must not forget that all the strata of a business action must respond for its integrity. All workers respond for their work, which translates into a need to respond for the coherence between what is said and what is done.

### Management strategies

Management strategies, the projects and programmes developed within a company must transparently reflect the system of values that defines it for the organisation to be considered coherent. That naturally affects the main executors of said programmes but also, at a different level of responsibility, those who make them possible.

Following the same schema, any action undertaken by an organisation should take three aspects into account: organisational hierarchy, the assets

and skills it contains, and its position within the social reality.

Coherence will only be possible when the director is capable of weighing up the distance between the organisation's specific vision and the operational processes that effectively take place within it. All companies, as a sum of possibilities, respond to the intention of those who govern them insofar as their assets permit it, and their ultimate value resides therein; the possibility of being recognised for their way of being, their corporate ethos.

A great deal has been said about the amorality of the market and the impossibility of treating the organisation as a moral subject. The free market philosophy has always endeavoured to push ethical questions aside from the market in favour of self-regulation. In spite of that, differences between organisations are evident and the social repercussions are undeniable.

By fixing to certain values, communicating them and defending a way of working is not something that should be hidden. There are no indifferent actions. All strategy can be considered from an ethical point of view. This means that it responds to certain values and hiding them should only make us mistrustful. Organisational design increasingly depends on the capacity to make clear that which is defended within the exercise of coherence between what is said and done when faced with different circumstances.

### **Negotiating with reality**

We will now turn our attention to the third element of coherence, from thought to action, from action to reality. In many cases, exercising this transparency involves negotiating with reality. The vision derived from an organisation's mission is always immersed in conditioning factors that cannot be ignored. Under such circumstances, coherence demands transparency between an organisation's vision and praxis, but also allows for a certain amount of room to manoeuvre. This margin will find its limits in the moral frontiers of the society in which the organisation is situated, but will allow it sufficient movement to programme future actions. The important thing is never to stop negotiating with reality. Digging one's heels in and trying to refute tendency is as absurd as believing that a company depends entirely on the society in which it is immersed.

Instead, it is a shared dialogue in which the two parties' ability to adapt defines the rules of the game. The moment a company is unable to adapt

to changes in its environment, it will soon lose its relevance, its customers and, ultimately, the support of its stakeholders (Gary Hamel and Liisa Välikangas, 2008). But similarly, it is possible for an organisation to breathe new synergies into markets, by significantly alternating its form. Most of them keep to the middle ground, between the tension of their philosophy and the demands of reality.

The way in which the tension between an organisation's ideology and the factual reality of the market is resolved expresses its degree of coherence. Institutional values are not manifested at a theoretical level but rather through situations in real life.

Confrontation with reality affords an opportunity to evaluate the depth of an organisation's values. The same occurs at a personal level. The way in which a person reacts in the event of a crisis situation highlights their true resources and values. In this respect, the economic and financial crisis we are undergoing at the moment could be an acid test for organisations, especially for the most fragile ones. Only those with sufficient capacity to negotiate with reality and loyalty to their own values will survive the impact of this crisis.

## Coherence and public image

It is precisely this negotiation with reality that compels us to concern ourselves with acquiring and maintaining an optimum image in society, since therein lies our reputation and, ultimately, our good positioning within the market. The aim is to be able to weigh up the different factors, always maintaining the character that defines company interests, thereby forging a public image that corresponds to a certain notion of coherence.

In an iconoclastic society, the image that a business group or organisation is capable of projecting within society has major repercussions. It is not for nothing that so much capital and a considerable amount of effort are dedicated to preserving a certain aesthetic. Undoubtedly, what ultimately maintains an organisation in the market is the product it offers, but image is a key stimulus that sparks interest and attention to this product, and in spreading awareness of it among new target consumers. Advertising theoreticians have perceived that ethical values have a positive effect on the potential consumer. If an organisation is capable of projecting itself through values such as honesty, coherence, solidarity or rigour, these values spark interest in the potential consumer. Lately, some key organisations

in the tourism and services sector have been presenting their public image through ethical values.

The value of coherence demands transparency between the organisation's external image, in other words, the image it projects to the outside, and its internal reality. It is considered incoherent to show a system of values that are not operating within the organisation itself. Until relatively recently, an airline publicly presented itself through the value punctuality, whilst a large section of its aircraft were accumulating major delays, perhaps attributable to reasons beyond the company's control, but even so the company's supposedly star value was damaged.

The value of coherence demands transparency between corporate image and the internal reality of the organisation. It must also be highlighted that when the value projected through public image is repeatedly damaged, the organisation loses all credibility and potential consumers no longer pay any attention to future advertising messages. It is much more effective to preserve axiological neutrality than to nominally proffer a body of values and then not make them effective.

### Paradigms of coherence

So, coherence establishes that the relationship between what is said and done, between the theoretical framework defended and the practical action it assumes must be non-contradictory. However, one of the potential conflicts that affect the internal dynamics of organisations is that the paradigms of coherence assumed do not coincide. It is not hard to find examples of professionals who, when carrying out their tasks with the best of intentions and being fully coherent with their approaches are judged by others as being professionals who are not doing *what they ought to*.

It is useful to remember that recognition of what is and is not coherent is not per se evident. Depending on the professional ideology, something may or may not be coherent; so it is very important to clearly establish the basic paradigm of coherence; not only by virtue of the ideology but also by virtue of a certain professional profile. For example, if a company takes as a point of reference that only people of a certain height can do a specified job (for example, in the police force), no matter how well this professional might carry out the tasks inherent to the profession (patrolling, surveillance, working with members of the public, etc.), the company will have to reject the candidate on the grounds of its internal *coherence*.



The problem surrounding the practical content of coherence has been approached in many different ways, which just goes to show that the framework for coherence is not unambiguous. Hence, procedural ethics (with Habermas offering the greatest paradigm) have underscored the need to establish common frameworks that enable individuals to feel they are involved and in harmony with said framework. This implies a contractualist vision of interpersonal (as well as business) relations, requiring a constant revision of what is materially *coherent*, which, from this perspective, must be grounded in the rational reality of the human being. However, also grounded in the rational structure of humanity, virtue ethics (MacIntyre) insist that the potential that constitutes us as human beings must be discovered in order to carry them through and realise them in our moral action. Undoubtedly, they both argue that coherence must be a non-negotiable trait of human action, which does not mean that they effectively agree on the content of *that* coherence.

## PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

However, one of the problems that emerge around the endeavour to seek coherence within organisations is how to evaluate it within the people who make up the project. The question is clear: how should the coherence of a potential employee be examined within an organisation? What kind of surveys, questions, approaches should be taken in order to guarantee that they will fit in with the organisation and be coherent with its system of referential values?

The increasingly exhaustive analysis into the heart of an organisation carried out by CSR research will undoubtedly help us to catch a glimpse of the kinds of indicators required to monitor coherence at every level. However, a few points can be sketched out:

1. Articulating the value of coherence depends on all the assets of an organisation: the management tier, the employees at different levels, the advertising and publicity projected of the group, and also the financial groups that capitalise the project. The organisation must ensure that these groups are coherent with its ideology. If the value of the organisation is, for example, respect for the environment, but this institution is capitalised by a financial group that systematically dumps toxic products into the environment, said organisation is undoubtedly falling into grave contradiction.

2. Ethical audits must not fail to examine economic support groups. It is not enough, therefore, to conduct an internal analysis of coherence; it is not enough to provide training to executives and employees; partnerships and support strategies that make the development of the organisation possible and viable also matter. An analysis of these characteristics can place an organisation's economy in critical condition, but it is not enough to receive capital to subsist; the origin of said capital and how it has been obtained must also be explored. The form taken by different processes, together with their end purpose is the central focal point of study when it comes to an organisation's ethics.

3. Coherence as an ethical value constitutes a fundamental ingredient in the internal cohesion of an organisation. Cohesion between the members of an organisation is a key element for its strong development since, when employees feel linked in with a project and the relationships between them are fluid and empathetic, productivity increases.

### **FEELING OF BELONGING AND ORGANISATIONAL SELF-ESTEEM**

All of this forges what has been termed a feeling of belonging and organisational self-esteem. An organisation's style becomes visible when each of the members feels identified with the whole. At this point a company can be said to have character. Identifying with the same values generates community, something that we could also apply to organisational settings. All communities respond to a common dependency with which its members identify.

However, creating a feeling of belonging takes time. For example, it is important to know the level of concurrence between the individual's expectations of the company and the company's expectations of the individual. All workers must be able to answer these questions: What does this company expect of you that you like? What does this company expect of you that you don't like. What does this company not expect of you which you would like it to?

An organisation that does not tackle conflict, dispute or confrontation will never be able to forge bonds between the people working in it. The right to dissent leads to the forging of dialogue between all the actors involved that is impossible to achieve by other means.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, a key factor in the development and growth of an organisation is the self-esteem felt towards it by its employees. Coherence is a value that incites and incentivises this self-esteem. When one is operating within an organisation that not only is respectful of coherence but which also ensures its fulfilment and development, one feels esteem towards the organisation and, consequently, collaborates with it more efficiently.

Personal self-esteem is the condition *sine qua non* for the efficient professional development of a human being, but so is organisational self-esteem. The second transcends the former, because it is related with a whole, with a project. When an employee feels that they are part of a coherent, positive, constructive project that is not only lucrative for said individual but also edifying for society as a whole, they experience an increase in their organisational self-esteem; they feel pride at belonging to this organisation.

## **COHERENCE, A SOURCE OF CONFIDENCE**

A person who acts professionally from a standpoint of coherence is a guarantee for an organisation and, in this respect, a source of confidence, since their decisions and actions are foreseeable within the framework of the organisation. This provides the organisation with stability and security, which are transcendental values.

In a social universe characterised by what Zygmunt Bauman terms liquid bonds and liquid words, coherence is a small guarantee of solidity, of stability. The member of an organisation knows what to hold onto, knows what mechanisms are in play. Undoubtedly, a certain chaotic element is central to an organisation's development and growth, but order, the repetition of processes, the keeping of its word and the fulfilment of programmes and projects is fundamental for its full development.

When a person is located within an organisation that esteems and values coherence, they can anticipate processes and situations; they emotionally offload the fears brought on by incoherence. Nothing causes more suffering than the arbitrary decisions of a management body which, instead of leading an organisation coherently, acts reactively, almost spasmodically, without following any logic, any moral criterion.

The management of coherence is also important. When the environment requires transformations to be made to production processes, to the

languages and modes of communication, the organisation must be flexible enough to emit new messages and warn its members of these conversions. Coherence does not demand loyalty to preterit, antiquated or obsolete practices, but rather transparency with the current system of values; but this must have sufficient flexibility to be updated as and when required.

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