In Pursuit Of Passion: A Frame Analysis Of The Popular Management Literature

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Abstract

As business organisations move into late modernity many are shifting their emphasis from rational bureaucratic style management to one that incorporates qualities such as passion. However, despite their increasing popularity buzz-words or lay concepts such as passion are notoriously difficult to reinterpret into theoretical language. This research examines how passion has been constructed in the popular management literature. Using frame analysis, two macro frames were identified. One constructs passion as an extrinsic quality, one that leads to desired ends. The other constructs passion as an intrinsic quality, a desired end in itself. Although an important first step toward making passion more conceptually coherent, the analysis of these frames highlights a number of tensions that need to be resolved. In this way passion can become a useful theoretical construct in the sociology of work, bodies and emotions.

Introduction

While passion is just one of many concepts and buzz-words being promoted in the popular management literature, it is an interesting exemplar. Of particular interest is the contrast between its ubiquitous incorporation into this literature and its near invisibility in the academic business/management literature. At one level this is surprising given that a number of consultants and leaders who author papers and books in the popular management literature are also academics. However, it could possibly be a reflection of the difficulties of theorizing a concept that is perceived to be as intangible as passion. Widespread in everyday language, concepts such as passion have what Rapley terms ‘multi-referential lay constructs’ (2003: 26) that create conceptual and practical difficulties for any reinterpretation into theoretical language. The popular management literature avoids this dilemma by maintaining its lay constructs. Instead of defining passion it is most often discussed metaphorically, associated with other terms such as motivation, commitment, energy, purpose and love. In many instances passion is merely used in titles for impact to entice readership, possibly through its association with the lifestyle economy. Beyond its use as a buzz-word however, it is also discussed as a serious, even necessary, aspect of management and leadership.

This article investigates how the pursuit of passion is being constructed in the popular management literature: how this literature persuades, motivates and mobilizes its readership around the worthiness of a concept such as passion. In examining this question, I have used an analytical method called frame analysis. An argument for applying frame analysis more extensively in management or business research has been made by Creed et al. (2002) who viewed it as particularly useful for sorting out underlying logics and for contextualising different positions in their research on socially responsible investing. In convincing managers, or a group of people, of the worthiness of pursuing passion, the popular management literature engages in three core framing tasks: 1) diagnostic framing whereby the problem is identified and responsibility attributed; 2) prognostic framing in which a solution is articulated, and 3) motivational framing which provides the rationale for solving the problem (Snow et al. 1986). Co-existing under the ideological rubric of neo-liberal economic rationalism, two main logics, or macro frames in the construction of passion are identified: extrinsic frames and intrinsic frames. From conceptualizing the pursuit of passion in this way, I argue that several tensions are revealed, tensions that need to be addressed if passion is to be reinterpreted into theoretical language and used constructively in management research.

Passion and Management

Passion is interesting because of its apparent incongruity with the rational business of corporate strategies, achieving best practice, and maximizing returns to shareholders. Indeed as Gephart argues, ‘rationality has been the driving force of modern management’ (1996: 42). By 1982, however, Peters and Waterman were exploding the need for a new...
management style that would go beyond the bounds of the rational model. This idea slowly took hold and throughout the 1990s there was a growing acceptance of ideas such as Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence and emotional quotient. In the last decade there is evidence to suggest that there has been a slight loosening of management's separation between reason and emotions. Emotions are now widely discussed as having a role in management, particularly in leadership, in constructing successful teams, and in the interface between management and other employees (e.g., Allenbaugh 2002).

Although the separation between reason and emotion might have been challenged, the hierarchical relationship has not. In business, emotions are useful only if in the service of achieving a 'rational', business-oriented goal. Managers can have a passion for success for excellence, or to win as long as it helps the business grow and secure returns to investors. Within the popular management literature it is evident that the overarching ideological premise behind passion reinforces these goals. Passion is not inimical to neoliberal economic rationalism, it is part of its evolution in late modernity.

Although relatively rare, the relationship between emotions and reason in management practice is now being discussed in management theory. In acknowledging that old forms of management relating to a bureaucratic ethic or compliance to superiors have become redundant, theorists are identifying some of the features of the new form of management required of postmodern organisations and knowledge intensive companies. In this literature it is argued that the focus on rationality associated with the older management styles is being decentered and placed alongside other human faculties such as passion (Gephardt 1996: 90). The leaders and entrepreneurs that replace the traditional managers are expected to both have this level of passion and use it strategically. As Bruch and Goshal (2003) argue, the time has come to link emotions to performance goals and objectives: to find, in their ideal organization, the passion zone. This is a zone of high energy which is released via a strategy called 'winning the princess' – that 'object of desire' required for engaging 'people's dreams and openness to heroic effort' (2003: 8).

Organizations need to be or have something that their employees can associate with and be prepared to 'desire', to want, beyond reason. The metaphor used in the passion zone are indicative of the overall lack of critical reflection in this literature. There is no recognition that such a misogynist conceptualisation of passion is aimed at a particular audience, one that is presumably heterosexual and male. Nor does it consider the ramifications of explicitly tapping into the libidoal economy to improve performance, which is somewhat surprising given the extent of the literature on the inappropriate uses of sex and sexuality in the workplace.

Although passion is often used as a metaphor for engagement or commitment, there is also acknowledgement that passion can be more, that it can encompass a person's identity and sense of self: it is, as Gubana (2004) argues, about 'who you are'. Employees – including, perhaps especially, managers – then, are expected to engage their whole selves in their work. What is required in the postmodern organization is the whole person: mind, body, emotions, reason, and spirit. The mechanisms through which corporate and work identities converge or are (re)constructed are therefore complex and nuanced. One of these mechanisms is the way in which discourses are framed to produce particular identities. It is through investigating these frames that the impact of these power dynamics is revealed.

Methodology

This research examined how the pursuit of passion is being constructed in the popular management literature (PML), which consists of books, journals and magazines written for actual or aspiring managers, leaders and entrepreneurs. The sample was drawn from an internet search of databases (Factiva and ABI/INFORM), business book publishers (Abebooks and Wiley) and business magazine archives (Forbes, Far East Economic Review, Fortune, Business Week, The Economist and Business Review Weekly). With the search term 'business and passion' raising thousands of citations (eg 2074 for The Economist alone) a series of exclusions were applied to narrow the field to avoid articles where passion was a buzzword or catchphrase and focus on those where passion was integral to the subject, for example in case-studies, practical suggestions and (occasionally) theory. The PML analysed included 30 books, 39 journal articles and 124 magazine articles. In identifying how the PML used the three core framing tasks to
encourage its readers that passion was worth pursuing, it became evident that two macro frames were being utilised.

Framing the Pursuit of Passion

There are two macro frames within which the pursuit of passion is advocated. One of these frames views passion as an extrinsic quality, a means to an end. The end, in this literature, is using passion to enhance competitive advantage. The other macro frame is where passion is framed as an intrinsic quality, as an end in itself. People and corporations that organise themselves around their passion will find more meaning and inherent satisfaction (and therefore success) in what they do. Within these macro frames the three core framing tasks highlight the different reasons for pursuing passion. Cutting across these frames are the two audiences for whom the literature is written: individuals and corporations. Table 1 provides an overview of the frames and how the components compare to one another. The discussion briefly elaborates on how, for each macro frame, the pursuit of passion is constructed as being an advantage to both individuals and corporations.

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<th>Table 1: Core Framing Tasks for Each Macro Frame</th>
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<td><strong>Macro Frames</strong></td>
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Passion as an Extrinsic Quality

In this macro frame, passion is viewed as a means to an end. The problem that passion addresses is that of making corporations and corporate leaders more competitive in a global knowledge society, one that is fast-paced, communication-based, reliant on information technology, and requires post-rational thinking. Passion is framed as one of the solutions for bringing the corporate world into the twenty-first century where survival is seen to depend on overcoming any lack of capacity for creativity, innovation, and change. While passion is viewed as the solution to these problems it is framed in a particularly instrumental way. In addition, while it is not necessary for corporations or individual leaders to actually be passionate, although it is preferable that they appear to be so, they do need to generate and advocate passion in their employees. For corporations and their leaders, then, passion can be either symbolic or real.

There are definitely linkages between the individual and corporate pursuit of passion as an extrinsic quality. A passion-advocating organisation requires leadership with passion-related skills otherwise the capacity to generate and advocate passion amongst employees would be severely restricted. On the other hand, but to a lesser extent, a corporate leader within this frame also requires a synergy with the corporation if the best outcome for both is to be achieved. Nevertheless, leaders can also develop and use their passion-related skills even without corporate support. This will provide individuals with a competitive advantage and, while they are with a corporation, this may have flow-on effects to that corporation.

Passion as an Intrinsic Quality

Where passion is framed as an intrinsic quality, it becomes an end in itself. There is an assumption that being passionate about your work or having a passionate corporation will in itself be enough to make life better. Within this frame, the problem that passion addresses is the hollowness of hypermaterialism in contemporary society. There is a deep scepticism surrounding the benefits or sustainability of the quest for financial gain for its own sake. Drawing on examples that demonstrate the schism between happiness or the quality of life, and a single-minded focus on money or profit, the literature argues that passion can help bridge this gap (Albion 2000). The prognosis for this lack of meaning, then, is to find and be driven by passion. Within this literature are texts that provide guidelines for achieving this, often including offers of assistance for those individuals and corporations that care to use the consultancy services on offer.

Finding one’s passion (whether individual or organisational) can occur in two ways. One is to uncover the passion. This strategy assumes a view of identity that is essentialised and pre-social. In this literature, individuals are seen as being born with a passion for something, it is ‘in the blood’ or a ‘family trait’ (Erickson 1997), or an aspect of the self that ‘resides naturally within’ (Toogood 2002: xvi). Uncovering this passion involves drawing on intuition, the sub-conscious and introspection (Wallman and Flower 2003). The second way to find one’s passion is to discover it. This assumes a view of identity that is socially constructed, where discovering passion is part of the project of the self (Chong 2000). However, beneath this view is often an acceptance of passion being embodied and even innate in some way. What is socially constructed is what we are passionate about. Within this frame there can be no symbolic passion: it must be real and connected to identity. When connected in this way, work will have more meaning and corporations will be more meaningful places to work.

There are linkages between the individual and corporate pursuit of passion as an intrinsic quality. To achieve the best results, a passion-driven corporation would have passionate employees. On the other hand, passionate employees may or may not work in passion-driven corporations. As there are as many ways of being passionate as there are objects of passion, there are likely to be numerous outlets to express it in an individual’s work. Nevertheless, passionate employees would undoubtedly thrive in work environments where their passion is supported. This is unlikely to occur in a passionless corporation.
Revealing the tensions

Within both the intrinsic and extrinsic frames individuals and corporations are encouraged to view passion as a positive quality. In doing so, the popular management literature manages to avoid dealing with any of the tensions in the construction of passion that might reveal some of the complexities of it as a theoretical construct. There are three tensions that are worth noting from the analysis.

Firstly there is tension between passion being natural against it being socially constructed. While it is likely that there is an element of both, this needs to be clarified and not either separated as in the intrinsic frame or confused. Hackett and Spurgeon, for example, speak of passion both as an innate and a learned skill, one necessary to ‘cajole and drive teams and individuals to own and commit to change and a new direction. ... These skills are not taught in textbooks, but are probably innate. They are what separates leaders from the rest. These skills need to be developed (emphasis added, 1998: 70).

Where does this leave individuals who do not have innate passion? Will there be some kind of employee selection ‘test’ to eliminate those individuals who do not have this innate capacity (e.g., Gubman 2004)?

The second tension is between the individualisation of passion and the view of passion as a shared goal. There are two issues here. One is that there is the risk of passion being imposed on individuals where they might feel an obligation to align themselves with corporate passion to keep their jobs. While the literature mentions an instrumental passion, there is little discussion of how such ‘false’ passion might affect an individual’s well-being or work identity. On the other hand, the process of incorporating passion into the sphere of work could well be the trigger for employees to leave a corporation to seek work more aligned with their own passion. The extent to which this might undermine the goals of constructing a passionate workplace is not well discussed in the PML.

In contrast, the third tension arises from the incorporation of the whole person – mind, body, emotions, reason and passion – into a corporation. While the PML generally assumes that this is a good thing, there is little acknowledgement of the power relations

that exist within organisations. There is evidence, however, that this might be changing; for example, a recent article in the Financial Review (Hooper 2005: 1,17-19) asks ‘whether the companies that employ us have the right to mess with our innermost being.’ What is the effect of having one’s passion co-opted? To what extent might this be an exploitative play by organisations to get even more out of their workers, or are workers being supported as ‘whole people’ through improved HR practices? Is this actually a more human way of working?

These questions are pertinent to the organisational practices of postmodern corporations. While frame analysis has identified the ways in which passion is being constructed and some of the tensions associated with this, the next stage is to conduct research with individuals and corporations that are passionate and have used change management strategies (such as those outlined in the PML) to develop their passion. In disentangling some of the tensions, passion might move from its location as a lay construct to become conceptually coherent and applicable to theories of work and work identities.

References


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