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ALAIN DE VULPIAN . TONNIE VAN DER ZOUWEN

Socioperception and the Emergence of an Economy of Meaning

The key role of socioperceptive people in transforming organisations and society

Abstract

How do empathy and socioperception affect organisations in the Western world? Action research¹ involving in depth interviews with 50 change agents operating in a dozen European companies showed that these men and women have highly developed socioperception skills. They pick up and interpret the weak signals that foretell changes to come, perceive dangerous or beneficial latencies, sense various possible future scenarios, and act in a correspondingly informed manner. For these reasons, they are efficient and effective agents of change, knowing when and how to involve specific stakeholders. We explain the process of the evolvement of socioperception due to developments in human psychology and sociology, drawing on longitudinal field studies from Cofremco². They show a resurgence of empathy and socioperception in the Western world. This article describes how the renewal of socioperception creates a new social fabric and how this may influence companies in the transfor-

1 Performed by the Society for Organizational Learning France and published in the online journal *Reflections of SoL*, see SoL (2011).

2 Cofremca is a team of sociologists created by Alain de Vulpian in 1954. It principally serves as an observatory of socio-cultural change and a laboratory for future-oriented action for companies, administrations, and governing bodies. Cofremca and its European and American partners within the RISC (Research Institute on Social Change) collaborate from the 90s in the network Sociovision. Cofremca originally used the term “intraception”, a concept approximately equivalent to “socioperception”. Socioperception is the sensing of the sociological state.

mation from an economy of added value towards an economy of added meaning. For organisations in transformation we provide directions for action to make better use of their socioperceptive capital and show how this may influence companies.

I. Emergence of Socioperception in European Society

The Way We Used to Be

The great German sociologist Norbert Elias analysed the social evolution that brought the countries of Europe from a feudal society to the society of the early 20th century³. Over the period of several centuries, changes in the interlinked chains of relationships and behaviors among different social sectors, including knights and nobles, merchants, bourgeoisie, and peasants, the “process of civilization” is reflected.

Medieval man, represented by the knight, was driven by his impulses and emotions. He was combative and aware of his body; his freedom was only restrained by the violence of those stronger than him. Society was violent, and any centralizing power was uncertain. According to Elias, the process of civilization began at the end of the Middle Ages, took shape during the 16th and 17th centuries, and blossomed in the 19th century. The increasing power of certain lords, who dominated their peers to become kings, and the taming and domestication of nobles drawn to the court, initiated the process that subsequently enabled the State to become the sole legitimate purveyor of violence. Self-control of violence, of sexual impulses, of the emotions, became a social necessity, first for the nobles, then for the rising middle classes, and finally for the population as a whole. People had to restrain their behavior, deliberately shaping their emotions by observing themselves and their entourage.

Elias emphasized the growth of guilt: embarrassment, disgust, and feelings of shame attached to the evocation of bodily functions, the body itself, the interaction of bodies, and anything that could be

³ See N. Elias (1939).

likened to animal behavior. Cool regard, intellect, and distance became acceptable and prized. Fine language, witty remarks, and courtesy distanced people from the immediacy of raw emotions. The intellect stood back from raw, pulsing life. The other became an object to be weighed, evaluated, judged from the outside, and categorized rather than experienced as a person. The spread of literacy among the populations of 19th-century Europe reflected the final stage in this evolution. Cofremca baptized this sociocultural current, which was to become deeper and more extensive throughout the following decades, “polysensualism”.

The Resurgence of Sensations, Emotions, and Impulses

The end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th saw a bifurcation in this process of civilization. Painting (impressionist, surrealist, abstract, etc.) prefigured a return to the warmth and disorderliness of impulses, sensations, and emotions, and a decline in admiration for intellect and clear ideas. Freud incarnated and reinforced this movement. From the beginning of the 1950s, socio-anthropological field research began to describe the ways in which ordinary people experienced this U-turn⁴. In-depth interviews with Swedish and French subjects showed that younger and more modern respondents were more intimate with their sensations, emotions, and impulses than their older peers.

Mental Self-Awareness and the Pursuit of Happiness and Emancipation

Restraint and self-censorship continued to loosen their hold. More and more people expressed their emotions and impulses through their words and actions, and in doing so discovered and became more conscious of them. They developed an intimate connection with their interior life. They became increasingly self-aware, not only physically but also mentally.

4 A. de Vulpian (2008). Towards the Third Modernity: How Ordinary People Are Transforming the World. This book refers to this research and analyses the process of modernization that is currently under way.

During the 1980s, growing numbers of people stood back from and evaluated their lives. This process eventually led them to reorient their strategies, modify their objectives, and manipulate their emotions and impulses. This skill led to a major underlying trend, already several centuries old, in the evolution of western culture: the pursuit of happiness and emancipation. People progressed in this direction as they learned to identify the constraints that held them down, the actions that freed them, and the sources of happiness or suffering that they experienced. They soon became aware, in ever larger numbers, that the great Happiness, the Grand Passion, the Glorious Evening of the Revolution, and any other mythical object of their dreams are illusory targets, and that it is the accumulation of small pleasures, wellbeing, and affection that brings real contentment.

Resurgence of Empathy

Field observations of Cofremco show that a resurgence of empathy accompanied the recovery of buried sensations, emotions, and impulses. People started to live not only in deeper contact with their own selves, but also with others. They began to perceive others as living entities with sensations, emotions, impulses, and intentions. Beginning in the 1960s, more and more people enjoyed “putting themselves in the other’s place” and felt they could perceive or become aware of other’s sensations, emotions, and mental processes. Through trial and error and a learning process, many improved their empathetic skills.

Empathy is a natural ability of humans and some animal species⁵.

Recent findings in the neurosciences gave us a glimpse at the mechanisms in the nervous system through which empathy is constructed⁶. As Norbert Elias showed, the process of civilization and the standardization and intellectualization of education that dominated during an earlier period of history had put this ability to sleep. The

⁵ Frans de Waal (2005), Antonio Damasio (2010)

⁶ For example, in the 1990s, Giacomo Rizzolatti, director of the department of neuroscience at the university of Palermo, identified and described the role of mirror neurons.

emerging current of social evolution beginning during the 20th century has reawakened it.

A Broadened and Deepened Form of Reason

We have mentioned perceiving and feeling, but reasoning is not necessarily absent from the processes we have described. Its presence became increasingly evident from the early 1970s and especially in the 1980s. The culture of Rational Thought, a child of the Renaissance, the Age of Reform, and the Enlightenment, was strengthened by the spread of literacy and secondary education. In the 1970s, this field expanded. It no longer centered exclusively on words, clearly defined ideas, concepts, and arguments, but began to deal with the analysis and understanding of the emotions and interior life (one's own, other people's, and that of society as a whole). The result was increased integration of reason with the emotions and a greater ability for people to stand back and critically analyze their own conduct and that of others. This permanent form of apprenticeship for life and living continues today.

2. People Who Have a Strategic Approach to Daily Life: From Empathy to Socioperception

Imagining and Anticipating Potential Futures

In our field research, we have seen an increasing number of people who live like strategic opportunists and succeed quite well in steering a wise course through life. Here is a rough profile: In a complex and uncertain environment, these individuals orient themselves through the joint use of reason and emotion, tempering one with the other⁷. They cultivate their capacity for empathy, thereby enriching their emotions and feeling more acutely the happiness and suffering of others. But they control their compassion at a reasonable level, not losing sight of their central egoistic ambition to live a life that they find acceptable. The cultivation of empathy enables them

⁷ The neurologist Antonio Damasio (1994) has shown that humans do not maintain the ability to pilot their lives in a well-informed manner unless the rational and emotional parts of the brain work together.

to perceive or imagine the picture of themselves that forms in the minds of others with whom they interact. On the basis of these theories, they anticipate the behaviors and reactions of others.

Thus people develop an understanding of social systems, progressively perceive the motivations of others (individuals and groups), anticipate behaviors, and sense latencies and dynamic currents underlying the everyday course of events. These people are thus able to scan the strategic areas of life that interest or suit them and are ready at any moment to make the most of the opportunities or parry the threats that crop up (see fig. 1).

Thanks to their ability to unite emotions and reason, deepening their empathy and their perception of social systems, these strategic opportunists improve their view of possible futures. They increase their socioperceptive abilities, that is to say, are more apt than previous generations to perceive the interlinking chains of relationships and capture the weak signals that foretell blockages, fluctuations, or bifurcations, and to conceive of the potential impact of this or that action on their own lives, happiness, and scenarios of the future. They thus become equipped to pilot their lives in a well-informed

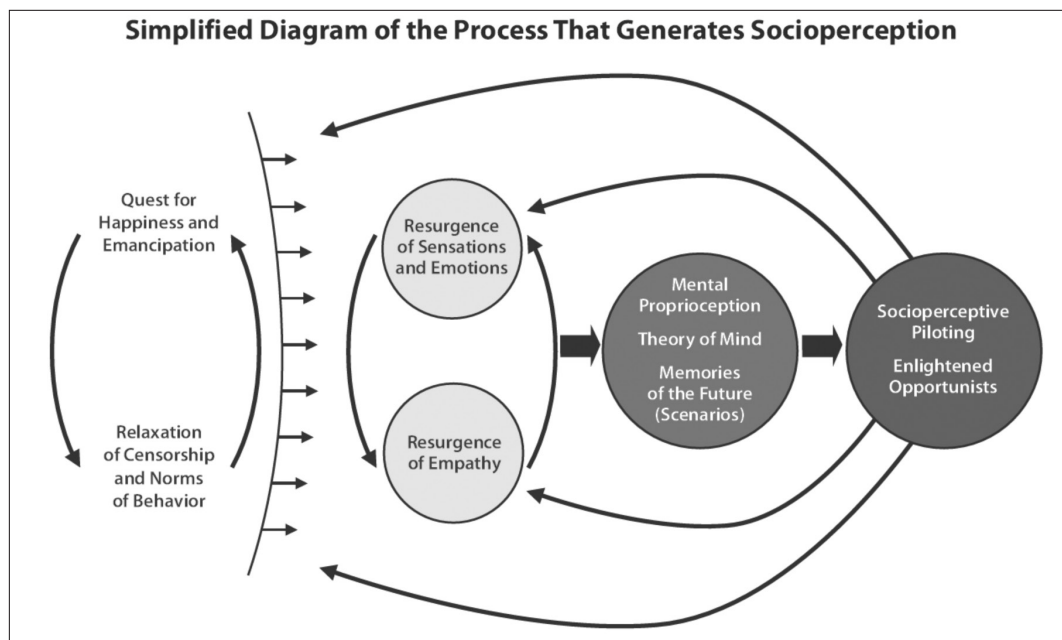


Fig. 1 The process that generates socioperception.

manner, in a society where individual behaviors and relationships are becoming less programmed and more freed of control by conventions or authorities than ever before.

When people are motivated by a quest for happiness and emancipation, and when censorship and social norms are relaxed, a mutually enriching resurgence of sensations, emotions, and intelligent empathy occurs. This combination supports a mental form of proprioception, feeds into theories of the mind, and enriches the range of memories and available scenarios of the future. People immediately improve their socioperceptive piloting skills, and become alert to opportunities in their own lives. As they continue their learning, they become increasingly aware of their sensations, emotions, and empathies. The result is a rise in the level of emancipation and happiness in society as a whole and the continued deconstruction of earlier forms of censorship and social norms.

3. Socioperception as Fabric for the New “Society of People”

Progress in Socioperception and the Development of Self-Organizing Societies Feed into Each Other

Research results show that simultaneous to the rise of this group of strategic opportunists, a self-structuring society began to emerge that is profoundly different from the one that dominated the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Since the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, as people have become more integrated and a whole as individuals, they tended to desert hierarchies and the massive compartmentalized and convention-bound society in which they once lived. Some, like the youth protestors of 1968, do so in a spectacular manner, but the majority tiptoes away, seeking to find and express their personalities. As they do so, they drain energy from the organizations, institutions, conventions, and hierarchies of which they were once part.

Nevertheless, they do not leave in order to isolate themselves. They leave in search of others of their kind or with whom they feel in tune. Through connections and break-ups, networks and small groups form and reform, within which people interact and create systems of their own. Small units eventually interact with each other,

becoming interdependent and creating units of a higher order. And so it continues, as the new society organizes itself into fractal architecture with complex interlocking layers. Since the middle of the 1970s, a new social fabric with a complexity analogous to that of a living organism has come into being. Since the middle of the 1980s, the proliferation of sophisticated interpersonal communications equipment (web-linked portables, internet, cell phones, etc.) has accelerated this transformation.

The enrichment of socioperceptive skills is linked twice to the development of this new social fabric. People who use these skills act as facilitators, managing the adjustments that large-scale changes bring and becoming fertile sources of small pleasures by helping individuals see each other. Concurrently, finding one's way in this complex, living society is in itself an apprenticeship in socioperception. Those who are more perceptive than others benefit by becoming more influential within society.

A Divided Society Works on Itself and Starts to Be Self-Regulating ... but Not Sufficiently

At the beginning of the 21st century, we can say that two societies coexist and interact: the old “society of hierarchy”, fragmented but massive, in which power centers seek to conserve their top-down control, and the new, heterarchic “society of people.” The society of people is subtly insinuating itself into the earlier form of society and establishing itself in the nooks and crannies of organization charts, while small power centers in businesses and other kinds of organizations, political parties, and religious institutions all seek to defend positions of authority acquired in past times.

As their level of socioperception rises, ordinary people learn to protect themselves from the manipulations of centralized powers. Socially adept, they know quite well how to go about cultivating their personal happiness and the sense of meaning they need. Even when they think society is not going well, they are often satisfied by their success in managing their own circumstances. They are not trying to make the whole of society happier, but their personal search

for small pleasures and meaning, taken together, have this final effect.

Some go further and, feeling the suffering around them, take action to attenuate it, correct current social pathologies, and contribute to the self-realization of others. Throughout the West, the multiplication of individual initiatives, networks, associations, and NGOs gave rise to a sort of informal infrastructure that works to remedy the misfortunes, dysfunctional processes, and sources of violence within our societies. This social immune system, which acts as both a prevention and a cure, plays an essential role in the relatively peaceful equilibrium of Western society at its current stage of development. It seems to support the construction of a mutually supportive society.

However, this self-regulation of the society by ordinary people is not always sufficient. Some pathologies remain untreated. The self-organized approach lacks the advanced empathetic and therapeutic interventions that could provide a higher level of adjustment, a sort of governance that sees ahead and provides early warning and management of harmful processes. Fortunately, public authorities, organizations, and businesses at all levels (local, national, and global) are learning to be empathetic, socioperceptive, and therapeutic. They will work with and through the social immune system of the new society of people and learn how to develop suitable forms of intervention.

Key Role of Socioperceptive Innovators

Increasing numbers of leaders and innovators sense the direction of current changes; they seek to produce innovations that are in tune with these shifts, winning favorable reception and in turn reinforcing the movement toward change. They are aware that our current era is favorable to sociological innovations that improve people's lives and facilitate the functioning and self-governance of society; they have a keen intuition for latencies and societal dynamics, and can pick out weak signals and shaping trends; they have a natural systemic perception of reality, seeing chains of actions and interac-

tions and anticipating three steps ahead. As a result, these new leaders are open to ideas for innovation that have a good chance of reinforcing latent demand. Such innovations feed into new social formats; for example, blogs, forums, and social networks; search engines, internet portals, web sites, Google, Yahoo, Wikipedia; pragmatic, humanist change agents in companies; systems providing free-access bicycles, car sharing, and new ways of working, etc. This “sociogenic” proliferation places great weight on the society of people, to the detriment of the society of localized powers.

4. Contrasting Attitudes of Companies to Socioperception

Companies have adopted diverse and variable postures with regard to socioperception. From the early 1970s, a number of pioneering major companies turned out to be extremely socioperceptive. The new socio-economy that developed around the turn of the century, between 1990 and 2000, is the fruit of free-floating socioperception. However, during the same period, old-fashioned companies focused on short-term financial profitability and now have little or no socioperceptive and anticipatory capacities.

Large Pioneering Groups or Companies Blazed the Trail toward Socioperception

From the early 1970s, senior managers at a number of pioneering companies felt that a radical change was under way in their business environment and sought to discover ways to cope with a different future. Certain cases seemed to us particularly striking.

Per Gyllenhammar (chairman of Volvo) noticed that Swedish workers were becoming independent and autonomous persons who would no longer accept the mechanistic Taylorist approach to work. However, he did not want to bring in foreign labor and saw that this new capacity for autonomy on the part of Swedish workers could be turned to an advantage by combining self-organization with supervisory management. Volvo created autonomous, independent workshops in which a team was left totally free to organize itself and manage its own work to achieve its production objectives.

At the beginning of the 1970s, L'Oréal was an intensely organic company, that is to say, it was a major actor made up of small, living entities within which relationships developed more on a spontaneous basis than through intellectual organization. François Dalle, the chairman, understood and drew his colleagues' attention to the spontaneous development of "parallel hierarchies" (today we would say "networks") within the group, and saw the opportunities they offered for influencing future developments. He also perceived how to turn his teams into gigantic listening posts, offering willing ears to women's concerns and orienting product innovation toward the systematic search for the seeds of the future (see figure 2).

During the 1980s, a good number of other important companies followed in these initial steps, but the movement was rapidly thwarted.

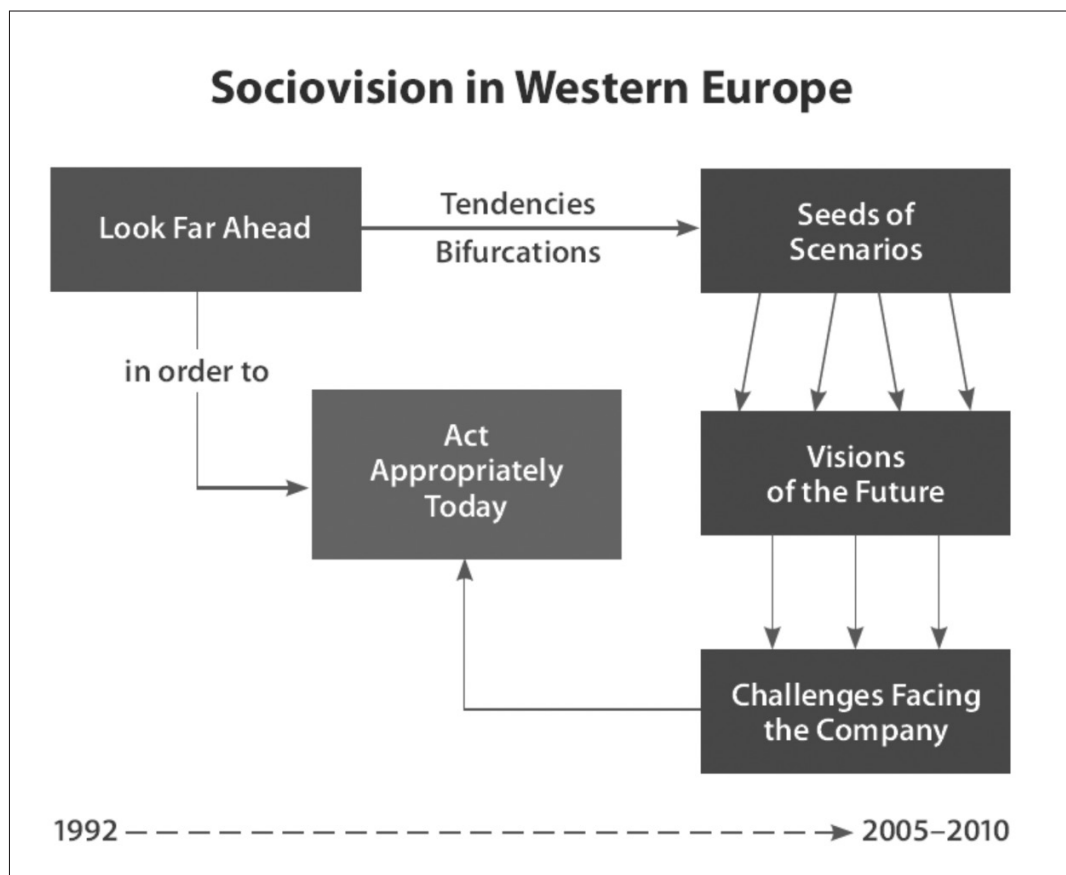


Fig. 2 Sociovision in Western Europe

A New Socio-Economy of Meaning and Self-Directed Adjustment Emerged

Beginning in the 1980s under the impulse of a number of socioperceptives, a socio-economy based on meaning and self-organized adjustments began to emerge, in synergy with the development of the society of ordinary people. This new socio-economy sought to lead the structures of the old economy toward the future. Made up of small, often networked units, like living organisms, it produced efficiency and vitality from the hopes and aspirations of entrepreneurs, collaborators, customers, and society itself. These included start-ups working in the fields of information technology, biotechnology, and nanotechnology, as well as new services in partnership with associations, NGOs, consultants, individual entrepreneurs and their networks, think tanks, and nonprofits. Such organizations have proliferated widely over the past 30 years.

The emerging socio-economy is profoundly marked by the new society of people, its sensitivities, and its values. It responds to this group's expectations, offsets its insufficiencies, takes care of its problems, supports its development, and enriches its interactions. Field research carried out in France and the United States during 2000⁸ shows that these new, organic forms share the following characteristics:

- All participants are involved in their development.
- Added meaning is more important than added value.
- Strategies arise from the collective intelligence of the entire social group.
- Organization is transversal and heterarchical, that is to say, the leadership circulates.

These organizations start out as little groups of people who perceive possible channels of emergence and are intensely motivated by the mission of promoting a new service or idea. They often struggle to work their way into standard institutional forms. Some find themselves ill treated or even strangled by investment markets, but they are warmly welcomed by the society of ordinary people.

⁸ See rapport Sociovision "Les entrepreneutes. Nouvelle économie, nouvelle société". (February 2001)

Old-Fashioned Businesses Became Blinded by the Champions of Hyper-Financial Capitalism

Between 1990 and 2000, large, traditional companies were subject to a double pressure. The emphasis on short-term financial profit forced them to tighten every available screw and close their eyes to society's shifts. Simultaneously, new social attitudes and modern mentalities worked their way into the companies, multiplying the number of change agents within them and making their top-down management style increasingly problematic.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, a hyper-financial form of capitalism centered entirely on the short term, has made its appearance in the United States and spread rapidly. An imperfect laissez-faire policy that did not take account of moral hazard gave extraordinary freedom to players in the financial world, who began to take extreme risks in order to generate extreme profits. The result was a particular form of capitalism centered on financial speculation and the maximization of short-term profits – a virtual casino. Financial actors invited many companies into their casino. They introduced a new type of shareholder into many boards of directors, voracious moneymen little interested in the vitality and sustainable development of the business. Many companies gave overwhelming power to the shareholders and generously rewarded the senior managers who served them. Finance, once the lifeblood of growing industries, thus became a parasite on the economy and a source of sickness for many companies.

In this context of financial and stock-market excess, senior managers of a good many large, old-style companies focused on short-term financial profitability rather than on the evolutionary development of their business activity, markets, social context, or even the health of the company. Many firms chased profits unmercifully, reducing costs, tightening screws, and cutting quality by automating, in a desperate search for efficiency. As highly paid consultants reengineered their organizations, a Taylorist management culture of hierarchies, centralization, technocratic domination, internal competition, and bureaucracy re-emerged.

Parallel to these developments, modern society was extending its influence into businesses of all sorts, its networks quietly reaching into the gaps and interstices of management and organizational charts. Employees, especially the younger ones, became more autonomous and anxious to create their own version of a decent and enjoyable life, while customers' and citizens' dissatisfaction grew and the health of the planet continued to deteriorate. Within companies, unhappiness at work increased, provoking protests and disputes. Active socioperceptives who became aware of the negative effects of the dominant organizational model reacted. Some became pragmatic agents for humanistic change, while others took the path of blockage and protest. Both groups tended to organize into networks and exerted pressure on their companies. In this context, depending on circumstances, any major company can find itself turned into a scapegoat.

5. Outlook on the Future: Renewal of Anticipatory Socioperception

As outlined above, large companies today face the need to sharpen their socioperception and anticipation capacities. The dominant winds are pushing large, traditionally managed companies to adapt to the evolution of society. At the same time, ordinary people continue to deepen their sense of empathy and their socioperceptive skills. There's been no reversal to this trend in recent years; quite the contrary, the new socio-economy of meaning and self-adjustment continues to gain ground. The tacit contract between companies and society has been extended and refined. **Today, to be truly successful, a company must attend to the health and wellbeing of society and the ecological equilibrium of the planet.**

Many managers have become sensitive to the presence of change agents within their companies, as well as agents of blockage and protest. The action research for "Ten Years of Organizational Learning"⁹ has shown that they see the usefulness of the former and are inclined

⁹ SoL France (2011)

to support them. An idea worth considering is that if a company becomes more open, blocking agents could become change agents; and if a company remains closed off, the opposite could happen.

Even now (2013), the future of hyper-financial capitalism is still uncertain. Depending on whether it recovers its full strength or whether it will be tamed sufficiently to serve the economy, short-term financial pressure on companies will increase or dwindle. But even if financial forces remain strong, based on their recent experiences, the ability of companies to resist will probably be greatly strengthened compared to the years between 1990 and 2000.

Taken together, these changes encourage to anticipate the rapid evolution of large, traditional companies in response to social changes. They will invent ways in which they can make use of the situation. The ones that cling desperately to outdated management styles, organization, and orientation will be negatively affected by the course of events, unless enough of them persist to tip parts of our society into serious disorder. If they want to facilitate their adaptation, they must become socioperceptive. To that end, Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, published an influential article in *Le Monde* on January 5, 2010, entitled “It is time for CEOs to change from profit-driven logic to public-welfare logic”.¹⁰

Turning the Spotlights of Socioperception on the Company’s Ecosystem and Stakeholders

The company’s objective is to feel at ease within its ecosystem and to make the best use of it while also maintaining it. This requires a sense for when and how to engage internal and external stakeholders within the ecosystem¹¹. Six sectors seem to require particular attention. Many companies neglect several of them.

1. **The living company and its teams.** Leaders must be aware of their company as a collection of human beings, a grouping with its

10 Klaus Schwab, “Le bonus des traders est un mauvais débat”. *Le Monde*, 4 January 2010

11 See Tonnie van der Zouwen (2012)

own health, vitality, efficiency, and resilience. They also need to understand:

- Which systems in the company produce unhappiness;
- What positive and negative possibilities for change exist;
- What sort of involvement, creativity, and potential have been left unused and what are the opportunities for making use of them;
- What organization and power structures will be in synergy with the society of people and be able to take root in the firm;
- What practices develop a collegial atmosphere.

Today, five paths to achievement seem to attract particular attention:

- Free up self-organization, reduce rationalized organization by experts, combine self-organization with top-down organization.
- Take into account individuals and categories of individuals, and show respect for people.
- Consider mini-communities and social systems to reinforce the organic functioning of the company.
- Give support to and wisely position empathetic and socioperceptive leaders.
- Make use of crises to strengthen cohesion and team spirit.

2. **Consumers.** Companies often base their strategies on superficial views of their customers. They must become aware of their clients' unsatisfied fundamental needs, frustrated self-development, or deficits left by our business activities. This awareness could lead to new products, services, or systems that are not fashion- or trend-based, and that could enable people to develop the sort of lives that suit them. These activities, in turn, would feed the sustainable development of the company. What are the social systems that lead consumers to choose or reject this or that product, or such and such a brand? Which ones lead doctors to prescribe or ignore a new medicine? What new pool of potential consumption could open up in the relatively near future in sectors or regions from which we are absent? We need to understand which new products or services could contribute to supporting this or that underlying movement in society's foundations.

3. **People and society.** Contributing to easing suffering and curing society's pathologies is becoming one of the duties of business (as it is of public authorities and associations). Companies need to find the sources of distress or ineffective processes that are currently or potentially connected to our activities. Understanding their origins and devising interventions or innovations could reduce these challenges.
4. **The environment.** The transition to a decarbonized economy and the development of links with nature and natural processes could increase the prosperity of many companies and lead to the creation of many jobs. Leaders must sense how their companies can contribute to restoring and maintaining a sustainable equilibrium in the planet's ecosystem, and at the same time develop innovations to assure the vitality of their organizations.
5. **The evolving world.** Among the plausible future scenarios of the world, on a horizon of 10 to 20 years, leaders need to identify those that would make a real difference for the company and understand how to adapt major strategies to meet and handle uncertainty. By doing so, they will gain an understanding of which of society's major underlying trends could interfere with the company's development and devise a course of action to deal with them.
6. **The financial system.** Leaders need to survey the evolution of the financial system, understand the ways in which their company could become dependent on it, and anticipate the steps necessary to escape these pressures.

Insights into the Practice of Socioperception

Socioperception is based on a natural ability of the human brain to locate significant variables and determine the path to follow or the appropriate action to take when confronted by extremely complex life situations. This skill is imprecise; it involves trial and error and is influenced by circumstances. It is unequally distributed among individuals. A person can cultivate it, allow it to wilt, or even repress it.

This skill implies, as Antonio Damasio has shown, an intimate collaboration between emotion and reason¹². Be careful not to over-use reason; when we try to make a detailed, rational analysis of a living system, we often end up creating extremely complex interaction diagrams and “hot air factories”, and can lose sight of the target of our action. We must constantly seek equilibrium between emotion and reason, empathy and rationalization.

We awaken socioperception through the circumstance of daily life, by sensing and perhaps sharing other’s grief or joy. We feel how our interactions with others are going, and we foresee how to intervene. We repeat the experience, tell ourselves stories, create an ad hoc theory of the mind, and observe another interaction. As we repeat the experience, we are enriched, fed by a free-floating but persistent attention to events and changes. We make errors of anticipation and correct them. We take a more or less distant view of these experiences. We test generalizations, noticing that some people react one way, some another. We eventually arrive at theories about society, locate evolutionary trends, and sketch out scenarios.

But skilled socioperceptives tend not to remain at the generalization stage. To sharpen their skill, they focus their empathetic attention on the lived experiences of real people in their environment, on the micro social systems that are the bricks of larger systems. A sort of “social biology” develops that examines society not as a thing or a collection of objects, but as a living entity.

Conclusion toward a Culture of Socioperception

In the 19th and the early 20th centuries, socioperception was suppressed by the dominant rationalist culture. Today, the dominant mental models in many companies still hold it in check. The apparent rationality of the authorized version of truth within a company may easily sweep aside the more intuitive truth represented by socioperception. In many management committees, causal analyses and their accompanying facts and figures carry more weight than strategic visions that are perhaps pertinent but have not yet been clothed

¹² See Antonio Damasio (2010)

in rational trappings. Numerous middle and senior managers who exercise socioperceptive skills in their personal and family lives do not do so in their work, because the business culture, work habits, mental models, job definitions, and evaluation systems dissuade them from doing so.

The action research conducted by SoL France has shown, in response to this trend, ground-level reactions and management decisions to correct the situation occur. At the grassroots, change agents build networks of like-minded individuals, strengthening their capacity for resistance and their resilience. Some managers break with the old model by introducing socioperception in certain sectors or departments and then seeking to extend the experience to other areas of the company. Others profit from the radically changed conditions of a crisis situation to encourage a shift. Yet others rely on internal or external change agents to implement a complex strategy of self-transformation over an extended period.

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