Ignorance-exposing Vulnerable Involvement, The Trust-creating Practice that Makes Executives Job-competent

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Abstract

Executives’ acquisition of job competence suffers from power tempting its use to conceal their ignorance and associated incompetence as dark secrets and to survive in jobs by abuses and subterfuges. Such competence requires sensitivity to the unique contours of circumstances which inter alia require local know-how and phronesis (Greek for practical wisdom) unknown even to insider executives, as with promotion they take charge of unfamiliar units/functions. Ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement in deliberations is required to gain employees’ trust, to learn through know-how and phronesis sharing, and to become job-competent, but this requires jeopardizing one’s authority until becoming job-competent. A multi-case study of five automatic processing plants by a management-educated and experienced semi-native anthropologist untangles that only few of their outsider executives, 4 of 27 studied, chose such involvement and became job-competent. As the import of outsider executives is now common, this problem is worsening and calls for solutions that are suggested, besides recommendations for further study.

Keywords: Executive job-competence; Ignorance exposure; Vulnerable involvement; Outsider executives; multi-case longitudinal ethnography

Introduction and Theory

With the “practice turn” in the social sciences, organization studies rediscovered the concept of practice but major executives’ practices that made them job-competent were missed. Ample literature was devoted to educating executives by management science theories and findings but Shoter and [1] concluded that “...it is not the generalized knowledge of science that is required in prudently leading people and

Handling human affairs, but a special sensitivity to the unique contours of the circumstances in which leaders happen to operate each time [2].

They and many others emphasize the decisiveness of tacit know-how and phronesis acquired by practicing jobs [3–11]. “Practical wisdom and judgment, rather than seen as “things” hidden inside the mind, are best talked of, we suggest, as emerging developmentally within an unceasing flow of activities, in which practitioners are inextricably immersed” [12]. Wrote: “our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing” and according to [13] learning “phronesis requires experience” (original emphasis, i.e., coping with tasks and challenges; know-how and phronesis are “constituted and reconstituted as actors engaged in the world of practice” [7]. However, executives can avoid unknown practices; Shoter and Tsoukas’s “inextricably immersed” assertion is not valid for executives who may not immerse themselves in activities that expose their ignorance [14], while due to promotion or because of outsidersness [15] they take charge of functions/units which they did not experience and have little if any of their tacit know-how and phronesis. This is especially true of outsiders [16–19]. They may learn the processes by which the products or services are produced, but might not learn how these processes function [20]. Such ignorance of tacit knowledge precludes honing broader abilities into sharper ones required for effective management [21]. To learn the tacit know-how and phronesis of unfamiliar functions/units, executives must engage, indwell, and assimilate in employees’ problem-solving [22] as managerial problems are often incorrectly formulated and/or ill-defined, lacking essential information, and have no single correct answer; only trustful sincere cooperation with knowledgeable locals teach tacit know-how and phronesis and generate correct formulations and solutions [23].

However, locals’ sincere cooperation with and help for the executive’s learning requires her/his ignorance-exposing trust-creating vulnerable involvement [24,25]. Trustful relations between managers and employees are essential for knowledge sharing, learning, problem-solving, decision-making, and innovating [26,27]. Unfortunately, ignorance exposure required to create trust diminishes one’s authority [14], hence executives often avoid it, use bluffs, abuses, and subterfuges to conceal and camouflage ignorance, and scapegoat others for their own mistakes and failures caused by ignorance. These low-moral deeds are dark secrets, i.e., their very existence is secret, veiled on organizations’ dark side by conspiracies of silence [28–31]. A contrary example is CEO Grove’s [32], hesitations and then admitting ignorance of computer programming to Intel’s programmers when he wanted to learn it prior to leading a corporate transformation which required such know-how. Other explanations for ignorance exposure by executives are habitus [33], past successes [34] and prospects of successful learning due to referred expertise, expertise in other action domains that facilitates learning [35]. Ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement leads to virtuous trust and learning cycles, ignorance-concealing detachment or seduction-coercion [36] causes opposite cycles, summarized thus:

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Received December 18, 2015; Accepted January 02, 2016; Published January 12, 2016

Citation: Shapira R (2015) Ignorance-exposing Vulnerable Involvement, The Trust-creating Practice that Makes Executives Job-competent. J Socialomics 5: 144. doi:10.4172/2167-0358.1000144

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Virtuous Trust and Learning Cycle versus Vicious Distrust and Ignorance Cycle

| Component                                                                 | Virtuous Cycle                                                                 | Vicious Cycle                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Involvement habits and/or much                                           | Detachment habits and/or little                                                  |                                                                                    |
| pertinent expertise encourages                                             | pertinent expertise encourages                                                   |                                                                                    |
| executives’ choice of ignorance                                           | executives’ choice of either detachment                                          |                                                                                    |
| exposing vulnerable involvement                                           | or coercive-seductive autocratic control that conceals ignorance                 |                                                                                    |
|                                                                                       | Both choices causes distrust and                                               |                                                                                    |
| Ignorance exposure creates trust,                                          | secrecy that inhibits executives’ learning, causing                              |                                                                                    |
| openness and knowledge sharing that                                        | mistaken decisions, indecision, failures, destructive conflicts, and use of     |                                                                                    |
| enhances executives’ learning, correct decisions, and successes        | Subterfuges                                                                    |                                                                                    |
|                                                                                       |                                                                                 |                                                                                    |
| Successes further the above process;                                     | The above further secrecy and                                                   |                                                                                   |
| Executives gain interactional expertise                                   | learning inhibition; further failures                                          |                                                                                    |
| enhancing innovation                                                       | and executives’ incompetence encourages                                         |                                                                                    |
|                                                                                       | conservatism                                                                     |                                                                                    |
|                                                                                       |                                                                                 |                                                                                    |
| The resulting innovation-prone high                                       | Conservatism spares some mistakes                                               |                                                                                    |
| trust enhances learning from innovation                                   | but culture causes others & minimal                                            |                                                                                    |
| mistakes, furthering executives                                           | learning from them, brain-drain, and                                           |                                                                                    |
| learning and encouraging more                                              | furthers a low-trust culture of secrecy and ignorance                            |                                                                                    |
| involvement                                                               |                                                                                   |                                                                                    |

Called high-trust innovation-prone cultures “organic” as against conservative-prone cultures called “mechanic.” The former are rarer, as suggest literatures on organizations’ dark [38], rarity of effective managers [39,40], managerial low-moral careerism [41-43] and corporate cultures (below).

Executives may change a high-trust plant culture into a low-trust one [44,45] or cause an opposite change [46].

A CEO may shape a high-trust culture among executives [47] but may not impact mid-levelers conforming to the field’s contrary gravity [33] and/or shaping different units’ cultures (Parker, 2000). Leader efforts to create high-trust cultures may take years [48,49] and may fail if employees perceive managers as “out of touch” with organizational realities and detecting a lack of integrity, discrepancies between their policies, discourses, and practices [45,50,51]. Thus, a major question is how can this situation be changed so that executives will opt for ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement, learn local know-how and phronesis and shape high-trust cultures which would minimize mismanagement and maximize efficiency, effectiveness, and innovation?

Answering this question requires ethnography that explains executives’ choice of trust-creating ignorance exposure or it opposite. Anthropologists have rarely studied executives [63] as they face a major barrier: they cannot be executives and thus heed the advice of sages of old: “don’t judge others until you have stood in their shoes”; field-work as an employee [52] or an observer-interviewer [28] cannot achieve this. I overcame this barrier by a unique semi-native longitudinal anthropology: A native anthropologist studies his/her own people and being too close to them s/he may adopt their biased or particularistic views [64], while outsider ethnographers often miss locals’ sincere views and/or other decisive insiders’ knowledge [65]. I avoided both by studying five automatic cotton gin plants and their parent inter-kibbutz regional cooperatives (1-KRCs), each owned by dozens of kibbutzim and managed by their members called pe’iliym (singular: pa’il). Like them I was a kibbutz member, had a college managerial education and had experienced for 18 years work and management at my kibbutz’s automatic processing plant that partially resembled the five cotton gin plants studied, hence enjoying much referred expertise; I knew some pe’iliym even before the study, as well as the kibbutz context that socialized them [66,67] usually organizational ethnographers lacked such knowledge [59]. I approached pe’iliym as their peer and interviews often turned into openly discussed common problems and I gained access to their documents. I entered the field as an anthropologist, without choosing a research design in advance, aiming at thick description [68] based on variegated data collected while participating in local life and sensing subjects’ feelings, building mutual trust with informants, and achieving openness such that my analysis is based on complete, reliable, accurate, and sincere information.

Longitudinal semi-native anthropology: method and cases

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The focal plant and the case studies

For five years I intermittently visited the focal Merkaz high-capacity automatic cotton gin plant (a pseudonym, as are all names hereafter) and its 1-KRC’s industrial park, holding both casual talks and
lengthy open interviews of up to an hour and a half with 168 current and former plant managers (hereafter PMs) and staff plus 24 executives of its parent I-KRC, both pe'ilim and hired employees, as well as cotton growers, some of them more than once (interviews recorded in writing: many were home interviews with a protocol of 565 folio pages). Intensive participant observation was made as a shift worker along the focal plant’s 3.5 month high season when it operated non-stop 24/7 and included visits to the other two shifts. My registrar job enabled me some writing during the shift and further details were added after it, resulting in 791 pages observation journal. Then I toured four other gin plants, observed their premises and interviewed 63 present and past executives and managers (331 page protocol). The longitudinal ethnographic with free access to documents made it possible to check information and assertions, avoiding outsiders’ naivety. Thick descriptions of managers’ practices let me judge them as if I stood in their shoes. Moreover, I analyzed and re-analyzed my data several times over the last 30 years, returning from aggregate dimensions to 1st order concepts [65].

Merkaz had two processing units in some 2000 and 2500 square meter halls full of large noisy machines connected by huge pipes and operated by some 240 electric motors of some 3000 horse power. The two together were capable of processing 650 tons of raw cotton daily during the high season, September-December, but mismanagement decreased production to an average of some 380 tons daily during my participant observation season. Raw cotton was brought to the yard and then to processing units in compressed stacks of eight ton on 6 X 2.5 meter metal stretches which stood on 6 one-meter long iron legs transported by specially built tractor-pulled hydraulic carriages.

The main product, bales of quarter-ton cotton fibers, were stored in 3 stores, some 2000 square meters each, until shipped to spinning mills, mostly abroad, while the other product (seeds) was lorry-transported to oil extraction plants. Merkaz’s permanent staff included 10 pe’ilim and 17 hired employees, supplemented by some 70 hired workers in the high season. 7 pe’ilim managed the plant: the PM, his deputy, the technical manager (hereafter TM), his deputy, the store manager, garage manager, and office manager. The plant was a part of Merkaz I-KRC owned by some 40 kibbutzim with some 12,000 inhabitants and handling much of their agricultural input and output in six plants with some $US 350 million sales (One billion in current prices; [69]). It was administrated by some, 200 pe’ilim and operated by some 650 hired employees. Kibbutzim received uniform salaries for pe’ilim’s work, whose formal term of office was five years, in accord with the supposedly egalitarian rotatzia (rotation; e.g., [70] norm at kibbutzim, but senior pe’ilim violated it, retaining jobs for decades or moving from one managerial job to another, hence it enhanced oligarchization instead of curbing it [71]. Interviews of Merkaz CEO and 23 executives raised the suspicion that they were mostly ignorant of plants’ uncertainty domains of technical, operational, and skilled manpower problems [38]. When touring plants I discerned obliviousness to inefficiencies and ineffectiveness, and found that growth and technological virtuosity received preference to obtain power, prestige, privileges, and tenure [72,73]. Coping with the problems of plants’ uncertainty domains, inefficiencies, and ineffectiveness, was learned exclusively on-the-job, hence I held mini-seminars with nationally renowned veteran ginning experts, learned plants’ problems and acquired considerable “know-that” before learning “know-how” [20] by participant observation as registrar. I was so knowledgeable that technicians and foremen asked me why I would not succeed their intelligent and educated but ginning ignorant PM Shavit. Then I studied less intensively four other gin plants and found that only 4 of 27 outsider executives studied, three PMs and one CEO, were effective knowledgeable job-competent. These findings corresponded with critique by top ginning expert Arbiv, a past TM of Northern Gin Plant who became an R&D engineer at the US labs of the world’s largest ginning equipment manufacturer:

“The manager of the Valleys Gin Plant who also headed the national Gin Plant Association reached the conclusion that a good technical manager is just a good mechanic and did a bad service to the entire industry. Take Gornitzki from the Valleys Gin Plant – he’s an excellent mechanic but during his first five years as technical manager he had no idea about cotton. Fortunately for him, he had two senior shift foremen who did know something about it and saved him... And do you think he knows anything about it today? Did you see the automatic feeder he designed? Did you see how he failed with the feeder he wanted to construct by himself to save US $20,000 and avoid purchasing it from an experienced manufacturer?”

Observing this failure and a few others when visiting the four plants, including the failed Gornitzki’s feeder, clarified the large gap between a good mechanic and a professional TM of high-capacity automatic gin plant. This gap was indicated by another top-level expert based on his twenty years of experience as the head of national cotton fiber grading laboratory, a graduate of a professional school in Mississippi whose lab’s grading decided Israeli cotton fiber bales’ market value

“Only very few people knew the [ginning] trade at each gin plant there was the administrative [plant] manager who did not last long, a pa’il whose circulation decided continuity rather than the gin plant [needs], this was the worst defect, because until one learns the subject... a plant manager needs at least 5-6 years. The professionals who did the ginning, its changes and innovations were hired mechanics, often good mechanics who knew nothing about cotton – there was a huge gap between [knowing] the technical side and understanding cotton. The Gin Plant Association provided some training which was minimal, some [professional] Americans were invited to train these technicians, but often the latter did not have enough know-how to overcome the complex problems.

My data corroborated these portrayals of gin PMs and TMs, but my explanation of the etiology of their ignorance and incompetence differs meaningfully. Here is one example before my explanation: in 1968-9 some US gin plants invented a raw cotton transportation system using a special lorry called Mover which self-loads an eight-ton compressed stack, and then transports and unloads it into an automatic feeder which feeds the cotton into the ginning process (Figure 1).

An Israeli cotton industry delegation saw this system at work in 1971 but it was only adopted a decade later. During this period the booming Israeli cotton industry heavily invested in expanding the locally invented and built tractor-pulled carriage transportation system. Merkaz alone used some 100 such carriages and some 2000 metal stretches which transported cotton from as far away as 50 kilometers, meaning a two hour drive instead of a lorry’s 45-50 minutes. In the early 1980s the efficient Mover system plus automatic feeders spared some 85 drivers plus 12 workers at the two processing units. Cost could not explain the Mover system’s delay for a decade; enlargement of the less efficient transportation system to suit needs was no less costly, while sparing of its extra operation costs would have repaid the investment in Movers + automatic feeders within a few years (Figure 1).

A summary of previously published findings on managerial ignorance

Previous publications depicted and explained ignorance and job-
explains the costly deferring of the above innovations [19,31,34,74,75]. All these executives were pe'elim "parachuted" to their jobs, a term used in Israel for the direct import of high-status outsiders to executive offices without prior experience of lower echelons, in the present case the ginning industry [18]. Deficient of pertinent know-how and phronesis for jobs, which were formally restricted to 4-5 years in accord with the kibbutz rotatzia (rotation) norm, they mostly avoided trust-creating ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement, retaining their jobs, and defended authority by concealing/camouflaging ignorance through either detachment or seductive-coercive autocracy of secrecy, scapegoating, abuses, and subterfuges that led to mistakes and failures [29,36,52]. These however, often did not cause replacement for various reasons: Failing CEOs helped CEOs camouflage/conceal failures, nepotism, and other ties ensured PMs' unquestioned support for CEOs, retention of failed PMs saved the face of nominating CEOs and a CEO ignorant of his own ignorance [76] missed the PM's ignorance and how his "riding" on successes of vulnerably involved mid-levelers camouflaged and concealed his mistakes and failures. Major mistakes by PMs and consequent debacle made their firing inevitable but even then in the case of PM Shavit's debacle the CEO delayed succession for almost a year to save his own face as nominator and mentor and create an image of normal rotatzia rather than firing the failing manager, which let Shavit further his managerial career elsewhere [31,34].

Worse still, the contextualizing of PMs' practices found that the majority choice of avoiding trust-creating vulnerable involvement was encouraged by the dysfunctional rule of 1-KRCs by "parachuted" CEOs who mostly remained detached and ignorant and defended jobs by abuses and subterfuges rather than seeking effectiveness through trust creating vulnerable involvement and learning: among the 10 CEOs in the 5 I-KRCs studied only one, Dan of Northern 1-KRC, chose ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement in deliberations of its gin plant and encouraged similar involvement and virtuous trust and learning cycles among PMs and TMs, leading to distinctive efficiency and effectiveness (below). All other CEOs were more or less detached and ignorant of major plant problems hence they often did little if anything with plants' mediocre functioning or even failure due to PMs' ignorance out of either detachment or seductive-coercive involvement. In the case of PM Shavit's debacle during my participant observation, not once did I see the Merkaz 1-KRC CEO visit the dysfunctional plant throughout the 3.5-month fiasco that drastically reduced production. The institutionalization of norms of rotatzia and "parachutings" served CEOs' rule by legitimizing the import and replacement of pe'elim as PMs and TMs according to their loyalty to the bosses. Importees mostly followed in bosses' footsteps, engendering vicious distrust and ignorance cycles of secrecy, subterfuges, mistakes, and failures. However, total failures which might have encouraged CEOs' replacement spared the import of pe'elim rescuers who due to pertinent expertises, habituses, and career advance prospects through excelling in, jobs chose vulnerable involvement, created high-trust local cultures through virtuous trust and learning cycles, and succeeded. Successes empowered them (Klein, 1998), so that ignorant superiors who felt threatened, suppressed them, and they left (see Thomas's case below). New pe'elim were imported, opted for ignorance concealment, failed, and were replaced by rescuer pe'elim who succeeded by trust and learning cycles, were empowered and suppressed, and so on; this seesaw prolonged rule by dysfunctional ignorant CEOs and PMs. The next section presents the opposite cases.

Managerial Learning and Job-Competence: Trust-Creating Ignorance-Exposing Vulnerable Involvement

As mentioned, much research indicates that trustful relationships are essential for knowledge sharing, learning, problem-solving, decision making, and innovation, as also suggested by above findings of mismanagement by distrustful job-ignorant executives. However, research also indicates the elusiveness of learning-enhancing high-trust cultures, requiring anthropological study of executives' practices to explain trust and learning cycles [75]. Ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement is a prime signal of one's trust in others' benevolence, but other trustful practices are also needed, i.e., proofs of integrity, predictability, and competence (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006) by making right decisions and actions which are "morally correct [as] the interests of society take the degree of precedence that is right, just, and fair over the interests of the individual [57]. However, societal, communal, and organizational interests may differ, and what is right, just, and fair also depends on professional/generational/spatial norms and group/subjective views. These views and expectations are impacted by actors' habituses [33] which have been shaped by both present and earlier cultures/sub-cultures [77].

In addition, trustworthy behavior tends to mutuality and creates ascending spirals: Ego's signaling trust, for instance, by sharing information, is reciprocated by Other's imparting his know-how; as Other proves trustworthiness Ego furthers trusting acts such as allowing Other more discretion [78]. Accordingly, leaders create high-trust cultures by open and sincere communication through vulnerable involvement, learning, and making morally correct and organizationally right decisions and actions, allowing employees discretion that enhances autonomy, competence, participation in problem-solving, and relatedness [79]. In these cultures employees
are largely motivated by trust of and consent with officers who behave ethically, while communicating agreed-upon goals to which employees commit themselves [80]. They prove their integrity by minimal use of seductive and coercive means, use trustworthy practices and care for employees’ long-term interests such as tenure, resulting in sharing of knowledge, effectiveness, adaptability, and innovation [58,72,75,81] let me demonstrate these in the few cases of vulnerably involved PMs.

High-trust culture of three excelling vulnerably involved northern gin PMs

After studying Merkaz I studied four other plants by interviews and observations of 5 CEOs, 8 PMs, 10 TMs, and 40 of their staffs, and through these interviews and documents I also acquired information on 10 additional PMs and 5 CEOs. Of all 22 PMs studied only one, Gabi of the Northern Gin Plant, learned ginning thoroughly by vulnerable involvement helped by a practical engineering education and much mechanical experience and encouraged by the high-trust culture created by his vulnerably involved predecessor, the pa’il who founded the plant but learned ginning less than Gabi lacking mechanical knowledge. He participated in installing equipment and running a trial operation, was vulnerably involved in major problem-solving efforts, enlisted qualified TM Arbiv, cared for staff members’ professional development, and for their personal needs, not only fair salaries but other needs as well. For instance, a young promising technician who later succeeded Arbiv decided to marry his fiancée but they could not find an apartment in the nearby town; when interviewed 20 years later he remembered the first PM using his ties in the dominant Mapai party and personally begging officials until finding an apartment. Gabi continued this caring policy but due to referred expertise he involved himself more in the staff’s problem-solving beside hired TM Arbiv. Northern plant excelled for Gabi’s eight years until succession, not only attaining less than 3% downtime in most seasons versus Shavit’s Merkaz 32% downtime in my participant observation season, but also on all other efficiency and effectiveness measures, primarily fiber quality which was cotton growers’ prime concern as it decided fiber prices. The other nine Israel’s gin plant managers acknowledged Gabi’s excelling and chose him as their Association head and representative vis-a-vis the authorities.

I did not witness his management, coming to Northern years after his succession and leaving kibbutz, frustrated by the region’s kibbutzim choice of a new I-KRC CEO who replaced committed effective plant managers with his ignorant low-moral careerist loyalists as did most CEOs [38]. I interviewed 12 of Gabi’s role partners, including two CEOs, two of his successors, and their CEOs, as well as Gabi twice at length, since he knew a lot about other gin’s PMs and CEOs. Gabi’s expertise is also explained by a habitus of involvement, retained from participative management of his kibbutz field crops branch, and by his referred expertise as an ex-mechanic of cotton equipment which all the other 21 PMs lacked. His thorough learning of ginning enabled him to nurture highly professional TMs and staff, not only Arbiv and his successor but also others such as the deputy TM with whom I toured the plant. Arbiv left for the US, attracted by a generous salary to the R&D lab of the world’s largest ginning equipment manufacturer. Then Gabi promoted Arbiv’s deputy to TM, whose dozen years’ experience made him a major expert as testified by Merkaz’s expert TM Thomas (below) and other TMs. The TM’s deputy did show me many small assets into sharper resources that advanced the plant’s prime goal [21].

I did not interview Dan but Gabi and others testified to his considerable involvement and lack of any attempt to distance himself from lower echelons; his involved backing was essential because Gabi used unconventional practices. For instance, almost all gin plants imported pe’ilim to replace hired TMs, while Gabi retained hired TM Arbiv nominated by his predecessor and when he left Arbiv’s hired deputy became TM. By this insider promotion of the best ginner Gabi enhanced the high-trust culture and its dictum “what’s best for the cotton will always receive the highest priority” to which the other two PMs and the two TMs adhered. Unlike low-moral power politics by most studied PMs [52], high-moral Gabi proved integrity, his deeds followed his words [83], commitment to the fiber quality goal was rewarded by promotion and remuneration and by taking the hired TMs to professional meetings of gin PMs and TMs in which they were the only non-pe’ilim present, a deed that aroused bitter criticism of both Gabi and his successor by other PMs. Gabi and employees “constituted and reconstituted” ginning know-how and phronesis by “engaging the world of practice” [7] and the managers successfully honed knowledge assets into sharper resources that advanced the plant’s prime goal [21].

All these findings point to the critical role of trust-creating ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement in engendering a high-trust culture in which executives freely admit ignorance, assured that no employee would use it against them, and learn from and with knowledgeable employees to become competent and achieve effective job functioning. However, the creation of such a local culture requires the collaboration of mid-levellers. This untangles the analysis of practices that led Merkaz’s TM Thomas to professional excelling.

1 In some 35° Celsius November days with 10-15% humidity due to eastern winds, Merkaz operators even did not lit boilers to dry the raw cotton.
TM Thomas excelled by practices that nurtured a shop-floor high-trust culture

Merzk T. M. Thomas exemplified managerial trustful practices which accompanied vulnerable involvement and produced a shop-floor high-trust culture that enhanced effective plant functioning and innovation. Northern PM Gabi continued his predecessor’s shaping of such a plant culture, while Thomas created a shop-floor high-trust culture beneath the plant’s low-trust culture ruled by ignorant PMs Shavit and his predecessor Yuval, whose seductive-coercive amateur autocracy resembled [44] “parachutist.”

Thomas (aged 35) was called to the rescue of Merzk, where ignorant detached pa’al TM Avi had failed miserably [19]. Officially, Thomas was called the “Second TM” and Avi retained his formal status to serve the bosses’ power interests [38]. As an experienced mechanic of agricultural machinery and a garage manager Thomas’s vulnerable involvement continued an 18-year habitus of repairing machines by diving into their bellies and learning their secrets in a community of practitioners [8]. He had done this from the age of fourteen, when he worked three hours a day during high school, and then in the army as tank technician. He enjoyed psychological safety [84], did not worry about coping with the plant’s technical problems, while a kibbutz garage democratic habitus of consulting others before deciding complex major mechanical questions encouraged vulnerable involvement in ginning practitioners’ problem-solving efforts that enhanced his learning.

However, his self-assurance that encouraged involvement also enhanced conflicts with two senior veteran technicians, one of whom was Levi the informal deputy TM considered by all employees heir apparent of veteran TM Muli, and the other was Levi’s assistant. When Muli left “parachutist” Avi replaced him and as he soon failed, Thomas was called to the rescue, and became de-facto TM with Avi assisting him. These two “parachutings” frustrated the two technicians who expected promotion and incited clashes with Thomas for a year and half until they left. Thomas admitted making greenhorn mistakes while diving into the bosses’ bellies and learning their secrets in a community of practitioners.[8].

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Discussion, Conclusions, and Plausible Solutions

A semi-native multi-case anthropological study of outsider-managed automatic processing plants emphasizes the decisive role of acquiring local tacit know-how and phronesis by trusting ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement in practitioner communities’ problem-solving for executives’ job-competence. Such involvement engendered virtuous trust and learning cycles which made executives job-competent, taught local practices, their languages, and endowed interactional and contributory expertises. The “parachuted” executives studied mostly chose otherwise, causing vicious distrust and ignorance cycles; outsiders’ impact[15] choices by expertise deficiency, and power tempted its use to conceal ignorance and incompetence as dark secrets and to survive in jobs by power and information abuses, scapegoating, and subterfuges. Executive job-competence requires sensitivity to the unique contours of circumstances, which require local know-how and phronesis, some of which is unknown even to insiders, as with promotion they take charge of unfamiliar units/functions. Ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement in employee’s deliberations is required to gain their trust and knowledge sharing, to learn this know-how and phronesis and to become job-competent, but this requires jeopardizing one’s authority until becoming job-competent.

Job-ignorant executives mostly retained their authority and jobs and advanced careers despite job incompetence by “riding” on mid-levelers’ successes. The latter created trust and learning cycles and high-trust innovation-prone shop-floor cultures by vulnerable involvement and cooperative relationships with like-minded employees who were allowed much discretion for problem-solving[78]. These employees shared their know-how and phronesis acquired by hard work and learning from experience only with trustworthy superiors whose ignorance exposure proved a genuine wish to learn and solve problems for the common good. Only socialized leaders committed to organizational goals, and not personalized leaders were trusted and became truly job-competent, but contrary to kibbutz socialist ideology, I-KRC practices encouraged personalized leaders by promotion largely decided by ties with and loyalty to higher-ups rather than by successful functioning, while the rotazit norm shortened terms and made the learning of local knowledge less worthwhile[31,70,74].

Incompetence was prevalent among outsider executives, up to 85%: only 4 of the 27 studied were vulnerable involved in problem-solving by givers and technicians’ communities, learned their language, and acquired interactional expertise and contributory expertise. They led Northern to excel over all others by a high-trust innovation-prone
culture dedicated to best serving cotton growers. All the rest avoided being “inextricably immersed” in “an unceasing flow of activities” in the gin plants, in which “practical wisdom and judgment” developed [1]. Detached PMs managed to conceal ignorance and incompetence by “riding” on the successes of subordinates: 7 of the 10 TMs studied were vulnerably involved knowledgeable job-competent. The large difference between 70% of TMs who succeeded by trustful involvement that endowed job competence versus only 15% of executives, is not a sampling bias; these statistics include all TMs versus all PMs and 5 CEOs. Moreover, it includes the two plants, Northern and Southern, known in the industry as the best managed, thus the 5 plants sampled were above the average with managerial competence. In accord with our theory, the large difference is explained by different habitusses, referred expertise, and career prospects that encouraged contrary choices: TMs came from the inside or from minor kibbutz managerial jobs, mostly habituated of vulnerable involvement in practitioner communities, enjoyed referred expertise, and their prospects for career advancement in the kibbutz field were meagre, hence palpable job success was essential for outside promotion like Arbib’s and the offer to Thomas; these factors encouraged vulnerable involvement. PMs and CEOs, on the other hand, came mostly from full-time managerial jobs in which avoiding failures by conservatism and loyalty to higher-up advanced careers; this discouraged taking risks of ignorance exposure and encouraged common managerial job-defensive strategies [28,29,52].

The PMs studied mostly emulated their appointors, CEOs who mostly ruled I-KCs over time with no ignorance-exposing vulnerable involvement nor trustful learning primarily because whenever a threat of total failure became imminent due to mistakes and failures of ignorant PMs Thomas-like rescuers came from the kibbutzim [38]. Thus, a prime remedy is avoiding the “parachuting” of CEOs and PMs, manning executive jobs by trustworthy knowledgeable insiders whose local and industry knowledge, referred expertise, and considerable acquaintance with staff members encourages trust-creating vulnerable involvement leading to successful high-moral leadership in accord with literature that points to insider superiority [86,87]. Moreover, often outsiders are brought as saviors [18] while inside-outsiders or outsiders with inside knowledge and personal acquaintance have better chances of creating trust and succeeding than outsiders without these resources [17].

Preventing failed “parachutings” requires anti-oligarchic succession norms for CEOs, since a major reason for failures is oligarchic self-perpetuation in dysfunction phases [88]. Rotatzia proved oligarchy-enhancing in the kibbutz field and failed in other organizations as well [70]. Succession encouraged by Golden Parachutes is mostly oligarchic; these are allotted independently of a CEO’s functioning on the job [89] with no say to non-director executives and managers who know, best whether s/he deserves generosity. Successes of democratic firms [46,86,90] suggest that a democracy which includes knowledgeable insiders in succession decisions side by side with directors can curb oligarchic tendencies by periodic tests of trust in a CEO, say every four years like the reelection of US presidents. However, the many cases of successful leaders who managed to function effectively for more than eight years support allowing executives more than two terms. This is plausible by allowing up to four terms for those trusted by extra-large majorities, over 67% for a third term and over 88% for a fourth term [34].

A third measure can be the defining of new yardsticks for executive selection that minimize the chances of their opting for ignorance concealment:

1. Having, a habitus of vulnerable involvement aimed at learning local problems,
2. Having referred and interactional expertise that fit a firm’s major problems,
3. Previous successful trustful servant transformational leadership [80].

These yardsticks may also be useful for comparing insider versus outsider candidates, but further study of their relative weight in foreseeing who among candidates will choose trust-creating vulnerable involvement is in order. Research is also required of the relative weight of the various factors that impact this choice:

1. Involvement habitus
2. Relevancy of expertise
3. Previous leadership style
4. Perceived career prospects of alternative advancement routes
5. Organizational contexts that encourage/discourage each choice

A radical change of attitude to the study of competence acquisition by executives is needed to further untangle, for instance, how they acquire “special sensitivity to the unique contours of the circumstances in which [they] happen to operate each time” [1,2]. Beside the factors studied here this sensitivity is seemingly impacted by personal histories and cultural contexts thus requiring more longitudinal ethnographies; these can result in an organizational science that matters [4]. Such studies must be much longer and extensive than a usual organizational ethnography, and they must be phronetic, seeking a concrete, practical, and ethical answers to major troubling questions concerning powerholders of one’s society, much as the Aalborg Project was for [4] and the study of kibbutz for myself [74].

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