

Life and Organizational Spaces

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In “Understanding Through Communication,” Lois Timmins makes the strong point that life space is acquired through birth, kept through determination, and lost through weakness... When a person has a life space, he/she either occupies it or loses it... When a person has a life space, he/she feels self-confident, assured, satisfied, well adjusted, full, responsible, self-controlled, powerful, engage, committed and aware; he/she feels a purpose in life. We humans have to work hard for our life spaces.

Each individual has (or deserves) a unique personal space that is a physical, organizational, psychological and values territory, which is of his/her own. The space and the richness of such a domain vary in scope and in many other ways from one person to another. Outside of this personal space, we move in a common territory where the rights of others need to be considered and where constant adaptability is required. Occasionally (or perhaps even frequently), an individual becomes an aggressor encroaching in our territorial rights or infringing on our intimate concern.

The life space concept is easier to understand than to describe. The easiest part to portray is the territorial aspect. Territory or domain includes the person’s possessions (clothes, books, pieces of furniture and technologies). Beyond that person’s physical domain, space includes an area that extends over the body and is surrounded by an invisible boundary. It was the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim who referred to the family as a special setting providing unique face to face relationships. The titanic figure of American educational philosophy addressed the concept of life space as a scenario where private things took place and where everything that goes beyond these boundaries become public.

One of my favorite German sociologists, Georg Simmel (“Secrecy and Group Communication”) elaborated that the personal space of a famous person is larger or at least more complex than that of an average person. He said that people typically show deference to important figures by remaining

at some prudent distance from them. The famous journalist Theodore White (“The Making of a President”) made the same point of the large personal space accorded to important figures. The life space becomes a kind of “hideaway cottage.”

Some scholars claim that our territorial concerns are genetic-inborn and ineradicable! Others say that they are learned, designed, built, constructed and culturally determined. Apart from the different approaches, it is generally established that a sense of territoriality is a powerful force in life, work, and organizations.

Respects for someone’s personal space means keeping a fitting distance from the other and it involves managing adequately emotional distance and dynamics. This can be achieved by avoiding gossip (beware of the gossip-oriented individual!), refusing to make put down comments, not asking nosy questions, offering unwanted advice, manipulating others for strictly personal gain or attempting to submerge our identity in order people.

Respecting our own personal space and that of other people creates the condition for the right of our own values. **The social psychology proposition is that respect for our own personal space involves honoring our physical, psychological and organizational work territory, and allowing us to be the best within those conditions.**

When two people are together in a vital way, they design a social space that belongs exclusively to them. People honoring their social space respond by walking around rather than violating privacy, by refraining from interrupting at very important moments.

Healthy relationships of any type will keep inviolate each partner’s physical, psychological and organizational space. However, because we live in a crowded world of imperfect people, it is inevitable that some people, knowingly or unknowingly, intrude on our spaces unless we vigorously protect it. Yes, of course sometimes we have to invade the personal space of others because there is an emergency of some sort, because protection, coaching or mentoring may be needed, or simply as an expression of love and sacrifice. Yet this should be done at all times.

Social scientists acknowledge that to learn to defend the personal, professional and organizational space is an important venture for any individual. Within organizations, the requirements are to nourish healthy relationship, produce ennobling work and service, show creativity and dare to take risk to innovate. The expectation is for high impact performance, while reaching out to others, establishing vital agreements and alliances, influencing with knowledge, wisdom decision-making, daring to go public for having a high impact on different, diverse institutions, and why not say it, striving for a better society.

After all, we all need to devote ourselves to a worthy and significant purpose, regardless of age.

As George Bernard Shaw says, “the true joy of a life is being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as the Mighty one...” Amen.

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