

Biographical self-steering

Adriaan Bekman

Reflecting on one's own biography, one's own life course, is a source of biographical self-steering. In our work with clients, we pay attention to the biography of people and organizations. The biographical course of people and organizations is a mix of underlying laws and unpredictability. Every biography has phases that we go through, but every biography is also unique. This applies to human development, organizational development, and societal developments. Biographical development teaches us who we are and who we can be. I want to illustrate this in this article.

The human biography

Life between birth and death may unfold in phases. There is childhood, youth, adulthood, creating and shaping work and family, the crisis of "is this it?", gaining a certain wisdom, supporting others, dealing with physical discomfort, saying goodbye. We all go through such processes, each in our own way and with our own challenges and surprises. Success and failure are closely related.

The ancient Chinese described three phases: the learning phase, the fighting phase, and the wisdom phase. Each phase lasts 21 years, and the transition from one phase to the next is accompanied by crisis phenomena. The ancient Greeks recognized seven-year phases in the biography, each with a specific transformation, such as puberty or the 42-year crisis.

As a young person, you have ideas about how you would like to live your life. The reality you encounter often does not correspond with this. Life is full of twists and turns and surprises, both pleasant and unpleasant. You may find karmic travel companions in the relationships you have in life. Looking back, I can see that my life has been a complete surprise and has turned out and is turning out completely differently than I initially imagined. And yet I also recognized many elements of biographical regularities.

I will take my own work biography as an example.

Up until high school, everything went according to plan. After that, it didn't.

My decision to study sociology in Rotterdam was a surprising choice, made on the spot at the age of seventeen, when I had intended to apply for economics.

On my own initiative, I worked for Shell International for eight years, where I had the opportunity to introduce and supervise organizational development in two Shell companies, something I learned more about as I went along.

At Shell, I encountered Bernard Lievegoed's NPI and then spent 28 years there doing consulting work in several countries with very different organizations, being part of a community of NPI consultants.

At the request of Erasmus University, Stenden University and Hanze University of Applied Sciences, I worked with students on OD and leadership.

I initiated the IMO Institute for Human and Organizational Development, which since 2005 has grown to 60 colleagues in 11 countries, inspired by the methodology of evidence-based guidance for people and organizations in their development.

Wrote many books and articles, gave lectures worldwide, coached people, set up and supervised learning programs. (see www.het-imo.net or google/bekman)

A biography reflects the meaning of one's own life, connected to people, sometimes for a lifetime. In retrospect, you can recognize a common thread, a lasting motive or impulse, something that always reappears. A biography is developed by the often-unexpected choices you make. Growing confidence in your own biography can balance the fear of life.

The organizational biography

Every organization goes through biographical phases. Bernard Lievegoed described these phases.

First, there is the pioneer phase, in which an organization starts working, improvising as it goes along. The pioneer(s) is/are the linchpin around which everything revolves. They create a working community in which customers are served through close cooperation and short lines of communication. Growth occurs. Then a crisis arises: improvisation no longer works; we have to start organizing. Lievegoed called this the differentiation phase. Standardization, systematization, organization, coordination, mechanization. The organization becomes a functional hierarchical body with functions and tasks, procedures, and management. Growth continues and a new crisis arises. Employees lose their connection with the organization and the meaning of what they are doing is no longer clear. Lievegoed argues that in this phase, which he called the integration phase, people must be placed at the centre of administrative attention and involved in company development, whether they are customers, employees, suppliers, leaders, or managers. Attention also shifts from the inside to the outside: what do we contribute to the social well-being of the community: leadership with a focus on process, dialogue, and meaning.

Societal development

In these three phases, we also recognize what the philosopher Cornelis described as three phases in the development of society. After the natural community phase comes the organized infrastructural phase, followed by the interactive self-management phase.

The Dutch community is a good example of this. Several independent communities, small republics, joined together. Many people who lived in the surrounding kingdoms and were exiled came to the Netherlands. The Dutch travelled the world to trade. After 1648, a national infrastructure was built in which roads, municipalities, churches, schools, and hospitals were built and formed.

Now that Dutch life has become multifaceted and complicated, everyone is challenged to practice interactive self-steering in order to find their way in all their institutionalized, organized existence.

For individuals, organizations, and society alike, it is a mix of laws that are enacted and unique paths that are created and followed. We now live in a world of natural family communities such as family businesses, organized communities such as the tax authorities, and now also initiative or impulse communities such as Doctors Without Borders.

It is not surprising that there is increasing attention nowadays for self-steering teams, self-steering middle managers, and self-steering leaders. Teams also go through stages of development. From a group of separate individuals to a team where the members know each other better and have a common task, to an entrepreneurial self-steering team. And every team also follows a unique biographical path.

Finally, an example.

Four gentlemen are studying together how society can manage money better.

After years of study, they are confronted by a dialogue partner who says to them: "When are you going to do something?" They decide to take the initiative by creating a credit facility for new alternative entrepreneurs who find it difficult to get started with the established banks. After the announcement, the first customers present themselves. They work with "the guaranteed principle": the young entrepreneur must provide guarantees that will pay off the debts in case of failure. The credit initiative grows into a small bank where savers make their money available to specific young companies. The Dutch Central Bank grants a banking license. The small bank is successful and decides to invest more in wind energy, in the organic chain from farmer to trade to shop to consumer, and in innovative cultural initiatives. They finance projects in these areas. Gradually, an organization emerges, a new building, a web and greater visibility. Credit initiatives abroad come forward and become part of this bank. Growth continues and the bank develops into a comprehensive European institution with funds, certificate holders, and payment accounts for individuals and businesses. Sustainability, culture, and social issues are promoted in conjunction with each other among customers. The Dutch Central Bank follows this initiative favourably, but after substantial growth, it imposes new requirements. A crisis ensues, which is averted by central specialists who review and monitor banking activities in the various countries. The decentralized bank is

given more central control. The employees have a strong sense of purpose in their work for this bank. After a short time, they can represent the impulse and ideals of this bank. Customers are also strongly committed. The growth of private and corporate certificate holders as part of an internal certificate market eventually leads to a breakdown in the relationship between the bank and certificate holders due to blocked trading. The bank certificates/shares are listed on the stock exchange and can be traded there.

Triodos Bank has been existing since 1980, now in five countries with 750,000 customers, and has successfully mastered several fundamental transformations. For me, it is an example of how personal biographies in an organizational biography are linked to societal biographies, with powerful interactive self-steering as the guiding principle in all areas. As a supervisory board member for 14 years, I was part of this impressive process.

By reflecting on our biography, we can learn about the essential things that have shaped our lives. We can use that compass to steer us forward in a transforming world.