

Intellectual Shamans

Management Academics Making a Difference

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I The intellectual shaman

Think for a minute about the people who attract you most. You want to spend time with them, listen to what they have to say. If they are academics, you want to read what they have written, go listen to their talks, even take their courses. In the particular context of this book, I am thinking of academics in the various disciplines associated with management, but you could be thinking of people in any field or from your personal life – or any number of academics whose stories I did not have room to include.

These people have a light that shines out and becomes a form of what physicists might call a ‘strange attractor.’ It is a light of intellectual curiosity, a willingness to take risks, that guides them through their work and the questions they ask. It is a light that leads them to question the status quo and provide new ways of thinking or operating. It is a light that leads them to want to make the world a better place and, in the case of management academics, to do the research, thinking and theorizing, teaching, and writing that advance that desire. It is a light that enables them to see across boundaries and make connections that others have not made – and then make sense of those connections.

I am going to call these people ‘intellectual shamans.’ We all know some of them. **Intellectual shamans are scholars who become fully who they must be, and find and live their purpose, to serve the world through three capacities: healing, connecting, and sensemaking, and in the process seek or come to wisdom.** I explain these ideas in much more detail as we go along. For the moment, consider the following quotations.

Healer:

Well, ... I'm in this very privileged profession. We get to do what we love, and I think that we want to derive meaning from our work.

So that's the first piece. But then there's another piece where I think that it's not just about me deriving meaning, [because] I can derive meaning actually from a lot of things. But I also think that what I do in the business school and what we are doing in the business school, what we're teaching in business is just wrong. So I think the business paradigm as we know it is broken. So it's not about me deriving meaning, ...it's our obligation...to create a better society. If the business paradigm is broken, then it's our obligation to provide something to fix it. *Tima Bansal*

Connector:

But there are no limits to human cooperation. [. . .] Because so many of the stories that we lifted up showed that perhaps business could emerge as one of the most powerful forces on the planet, I decided to [study] business as an agent of world benefit. Business as a force for peace in high-conflict zones. Business as the force for eradicating extreme poverty. Business as a force for eco-innovation. Where is it happening, what does it look like, what are the enablers, what are the ecosystems that help unleash the strengths of business and the service of our global agenda? *David Cooperrider*

Sensemaker:

Business schools get all this stuff wrong, and I think [there will be problems] until we get business right. [Business is] a deeply human enterprise. It's how we create value and trade with each other. It's how we create meaning for each other. It's how we spend a third to half our lives. Until we come to see that as a human activity full of emotion and rationality and spirituality and sexuality and connection with others, until that's in the center, not at the edge: imagine if financiers had...to make the human case for their theory, rather than other people having to make the economic case for theirs. I think the world would be a much better place. *R. Edward Freeman*

THE INTELLECTUAL AS SHAMAN?

Tima Bansal, David Cooperrider, and Ed Freeman are intellectual shamans, and I come back later to the contexts in which their ideas make better sense. They are three of the twenty-eight management academics interviewed for this project, although many others could also be considered intellectual shamans. Throughout this book I explore what it means to be an intellectual shaman and, by extension, to be shamanic in our modern world. Underlying this analysis is the idea that we can all, if we want and if we work at it, become shamans – intellectual or otherwise – and do our bit to help heal the world.

As the quotes above indicate, intellectual shamans are, through their work, healers, connectors, and sensemakers.¹ But there is more to it than that. They did not necessarily start their lives as shamans; these individuals have undertaken the task (some would call it the spiritual task) of finding and living out their core purpose in the world – and in doing that they are trying to help make the world a better place. Their implicit and sometimes explicit message to all of us is to do the same. They (and we, if we hope to achieve our full potential) have had to ‘fully become who they are.’ In that becoming, and in shaping their purposes, they serve the world in some important way. As *intellectual* shamans within a broadly defined management academy, they do this through the tasks of healing something intellectual or idea-based, be it theory, research, or practice; of connecting, which means mediating across boundaries or boundary-spanning; and of sensemaking. But they might be operating in any number of other realms of academia – or simply other realms.

Intellectual shamanism can be formally defined as intellectual work (theory, research, writing, and teaching) that integrates healing, connecting (intermediation or the mediating of boundaries), and sense-making to serve the greater good.

Intellectual shamanism seems to be achieved by finding and fulfilling one’s purpose in life, when that purpose is oriented toward the greater good. As I will explore in depth later, it means becoming

fully who one must be. In the course of that becoming, many (perhaps not all) intellectual shamans become wise elders – sages. Wisdom, as I define it, also has a tripartite definition: **wisdom is the integration of systems understanding, moral imagination, and aesthetic sensibility in the service of the greater good**, which in the case of intellectual shamans is reflected in their healing orientation.

Too frequently in today's frantic race to achieve whatever our profession sets up as the standard, we forget to think about what it is we were really meant to be, the work we were really meant to do that will truly inspire us or others, or what will actually be useful to the world. This state can be particularly difficult and painful for intellectuals today, as the race to achieve ever higher now readily measured numbers of publications in so-called 'top-tier' journals with high 'impact factors' (meaning that other academics cite them, not necessarily that there has been any impact in the managerial or 'real' world) intensifies. Worse, too often as intellectuals we are afraid to be willing to take the risks necessary to follow our own intellectual – and healing – paths. Yet shamans, intellectual and otherwise, if they are nothing else, are healers.

Using the stories of twenty-eight well-known management academics in a range of management disciplines, I hope to illustrate the path to the healing work of intellectual shamans. This work is much needed in today's broken world, and can, I believe, be undertaken by anyone. Here I focus on the intellectual world of management academics. The lessons we draw from the intellectual shamans profiled here apply broadly to any line of work in which there is a willingness to serve the world.¹ⁿ

SOME BACKGROUND: SHAMANS AND INTELLECTUALS IN MANAGEMENT

Very little management scholarship deals with shamanism at all, with the notable exception of two papers by Peter Frost and Carolyn Egri.^{1,2} There is, however, substantial scholarship on shamanism in the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, among

others. Although the subjects of this book are individuals I call *intellectual* shamans because they work as academics, I believe that we all – every one of us – have the capacity to work in shamanic ways if we find our true purpose and are willing to follow it, and if it serves the world in some way, however small. As we explore the work of intellectual shamans in the chapters to follow, I hope that you can draw from their experiences some of the principles that can help you, the reader, find your own shamanic healing path. Though this book is focused on intellectual shamans, I believe that its fundamental message has much broader implications for all of us if we want to make the world a better place.

There are twenty-eight individuals represented in this book explicitly, but there are many, many more intellectual shamans in the management academy, some of whom you probably know if you too are a management academic. Of course, there are also numerous shamanic people of other types in different walks of life. For example, in looking at the work of the individuals who built the foundations of what I call the corporate responsibility infrastructure, I termed such people ‘difference-makers.’³ In her book *Edgewalkers*, Judi Neal calls people who work in corporations trying to make a positive difference, and spanning boundaries in doing so, ‘edgewalkers.’⁴ Others call people who build new things within existing enterprises ‘intrapreneurs.’^{5,6} Peter Frost and Carolyn Egri directly apply the term ‘shaman’ to organization development specialists.^{1,2} Further, many people today are talking about social entrepreneurs who serve in much the same capacity by starting up their own socially oriented enterprises.⁷⁻¹⁰ Sometimes such individuals are called civic entrepreneurs^{11,12} or institutional entrepreneurs.¹³ Some are artists, others psychologists, others volunteers or workers in many different areas.

Not everyone in these lines of work is shamanic, for it is the healing, connecting or boundary-spanning, and sensemaking roles, that characterize the shaman. And it is the light that shines from them that helps us identify them, even though this is hardly a scientific concept. It is clear that people with a shamanic – healing, make a