

Rainer Zeichhardt

Management and Punk: Business Outside the Box

Introduction: Punk is Hip!

The phenomenon “punk” has become part of the business establishment. Just to name a few examples for empirical evidence: Since 2009 the business-lifestyle-magazine “Business Punk” has made reference to the “work hard play hard” motto by publishing “stories about the loud and fast life that is raging behind the business and about movers and shakers in enterprises” (www.business-punk.com). Investment banker Hörhan (2010) explains in his bestseller “Investment Punk” why he is privileged to celebrate a successful and very unconventional life- and working-style while the narrow-minded middle-class citizen is just running on a treadmill of dependency by repaying loans his whole life. And in 2010 Matthias Isecke-Vogelsang caused a real media hype in Germany because he was not only an acknowledged teacher and even director of a school in the Hanseatic City of Lubeck but also an avowed punk with a green mohawk haircut and studded belt (Mader 2010).

Management and punk? What does this mean and mainly: does this fit?

In the first instance the subjects appear not to correlate with each other. *Management* describes the systematic action of legitimate individuals or institutions – ideally applying planning processes, efficient execution and controlling principles (Steinmann et al. 2013). *Punk* stands for the opposite – subversively acting individuals without any intentions of formal principles (O’Hara 2001).

But in the second instance, when having a closer look, it seems that there are interesting links between both phenomena not only in the field of management practice but also at various points of management theory (Ryde 2013).

This article explores the link between management and punk. First it explores the constitutive elements of punk as a form of art and its sociological aspects. The article then identifies how punk can be understood in a management context by integrating it into different management approaches. Based on this conceptual analysis the article makes some suggestions as to how punk could be used not only as a fashionable cipher but rather as an innovative tool for management on an organizational and individual level.

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Last but not least this disquisition will offer a link for further discussion of punk and management in a framework of Gestalt theory and the aesthetics of management and organization (see Biehl-Missal & Fitzek in this issue).

Management by Punk – a Framework

Parameters of Punk

Punk is an object of interest in different scientific disciplines (e.g. Davis 1996; Meinert & Seeliger 2013) – but not yet explicitly in management research. From a sociological perspective, punk is a movement of rebellion and denegation of and revolution against authority that can lead to subversion of formal structures in extreme cases: anarchy and chaos. In this understanding, punk can convey different messages from disenchantment with politics to environment protection (O’Hara 2001).

In contrast the discipline of social psychology is focusing more on the social functions of punk: In this discourse punk is an impression of a specific ideology characterized by non-conformity, individuality and difference. Being a punk means living the life of an outsider, celebrating the violation of existing rules and nihilism, proclaiming the maxim of simplicity, applying a “no-future” attitude and separating one’s own position from the establishment by provocation through appearance. In this context the punk movement can be classified in the range from aggressive and highly destructive vandalism to peaceful creative behavior by declining materialism and adopting principles of self-organization and DIY (do it yourself).

Culture sciences discuss the phenomenon of punk in the field of ambivalence between art and commerce. On the one hand punk can be seen as a kind of subculture and underground youth movement evolving a specific aesthetic, but on the other hand punk has become a mainstream fashion style using different symbols of punk just as accessories. Finally punk is discussed in a discourse of musicology and music history as a special style of music reduced to short, simple and raging songs played by band members celebrating a self-destructive punk-rock lifestyle (McNeil & McCain 2006; Cogan 2006; Robb 2012; Savage et al. 2012; Bestley & Ogg 2012).

Last but not least it should be noted that punk is not only discussed as a phenomenon in specific approaches of different scientific disciplines but also from a meta-perspective as a phenomenon in the scientific world. Furness (2012) explores a special type of academic: the “punkademic”.

Summing up over all the disciplines, the following constitutive elements of punk can be worked out: rebellion, subversion, non-conformity and simplicity. Furthermore, there is evidence about the ambivalence of punk in terms of the

tensions between destruction, aggression and anarchy on the one side and self-organization, creative DIY and a critical expression of opinion on the other side.

Basic Conditions of Management

The phenomenon “management” is discussed in the wider discourse of business administration, management- and organization theory as a central sphere of the value chain. In this context management is often systematized as a process with different functions like planning and controlling, organizing and leading personnel (Steinmann et al. 2013). Issues in this context are for example hierarchy, rules of formal organization, different forms of power and leadership styles. Management research offers a broad range of concepts to analyze and optimize structures, cultures, processes and human behavior in organizations (Colquitt et al. 2013).

The most important and unifying element of management research is primacy of efficiency. While classical approaches have often focused just on the economic rationality of operationalizing efficiency by performance figures, modern approaches in the tradition of the interdisciplinary discourse of organizational behavior emphasize also elements of efficiency on a social and individual level – for example employee satisfaction, working atmosphere or realizing personal interests (Robbins & Judge 2013).

Management and Punk – (In)Commensurable?

This very short illustration of punk and management already suggests the problem of how to integrate both phenomena into a consistent paradigm (Burrell & Morgan 1979). Considering the basic assumption of efficiency in management execution and management theory, a disquisition demands a specific understanding of punk.

Defining punk as total destruction of systems and radical underdetermining of hierarchy would not fit with the central idea of efficiency. Extreme anarchy and overall subversion seem incommensurable with this basic management principle.

In contrast, punk in the sense of non-conformity, creativity and self-organization will open an interesting basis for a discussion of fundamental but functional change from a management perspective. In particular, management concepts following the paradigm of non-positivist management research can contribute commensurable and interesting insights to the connection of management and punk in theory and practice.

Management, Punk and Efficiency – a Conflict Approach Between Stability and Subversion

An overall framework for the discussion of management, punk and efficiency can be opened by conflict theory. A basic assumption of modern conflict theory is the ambivalence of management between the poles of stability and subversion. Considering this field of tension and the principle of economic and social efficiency raises two important issues: firstly, what would an optimum level of conflict look like and, secondly, how is it possible to create it (Tjosvold 1991; Hatch 1997, 304ff.)?

Modern conflict theory defines conflicts as ambivalent and proclaims that a status of harmony as well as a situation of escalation will lead to inefficient outcomes: absence of conflict means inertia by stabilization of the status quo; extreme conflict causes chaos and subversion of systems and relationships.

In this field of extreme poles, conflict theory declares a specific – but unfortunately not nearly operationalized – level of conflict somewhere in between stabilization and subversion. The basic idea of conflict management is to reach a level of conflict that forces inertia and nudges creative dynamics but at the same time limits the potential for dysfunctional destruction. Based on this understanding, two general recommendations of management strategies can be derived to provoke efficient outcomes: A status of harmony in organizations requires the initiation of conflicts to break the deadlock and to start creative change; on the other side a status of extreme conflict needs efforts of de-escalation to protect the system as a whole.

This concept of conflict management opens a framework for the discussion of punk: In this context the punk phenomenon can be understood as a specific conflict strategy that provokes creative processes in organizations. This also stresses the sole compatibility with an idea of “productive punk” to reach efficient outcomes. Punk in an extreme, aggressive and destructive manner is incommensurable because it will lead to total chaos and anarchy which means, from the perspective of conflict theory, inefficient subversion.

All this shows evidence that productive punk can be used as a specific tool for conflict- and change-management in organizations (see figure 1).

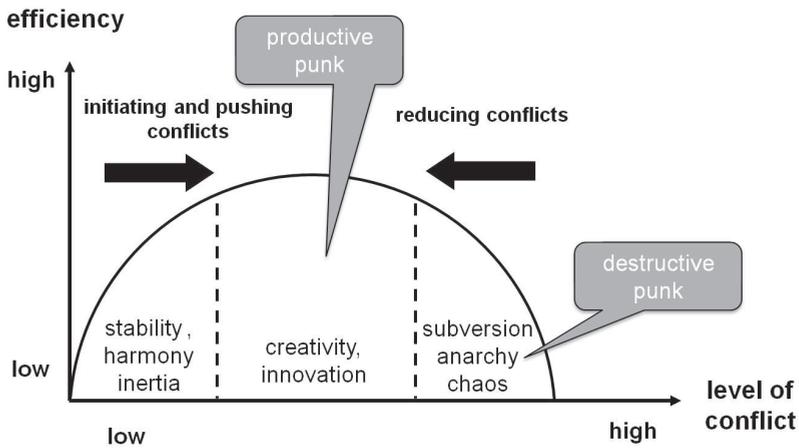


Fig. 1 Management by punk – conceptual framework

The following will show how punk can be concretely implemented in organizations to upset the status quo but without running into a vicious circle of chaos.

Institutionalized Punk in Organizations

The first issue addresses the opportunities and threats of an institutionalization of punk in organizations to foster productive outcomes. How is it possible to initiate structural conflicts with punk to set free the potential for creativity?

Modern organization theory opens a fertile frame of reference for this discussion through the acceptance of formal and informal organization at the same time (Schreyögg 2008, 339ff.). Following this understanding, formal structures, rules and hierarchy are not the only elements of organizations. Informal phenomena like culture, micro-politics, collegueship or obligingness are also important for running a system efficiently. From the perspective of traditional organization theory it is a paradox to stress the efficient potential of non-formal elements, but modern approaches show evidence that informal phenomena can adjust immanent insufficiency of formal structures.

Punk as Useful Illegality

The acceptance of informal organization offers a link for institutionalized punk. In this context the phenomenon can be adopted with its classical meaning: Punk as an informal emergent element that forces authority and rebels against formal structure to upset the status quo. But keeping in mind the principle of efficiency: punk rather stands in the tradition of Luhmann's (1964, 304ff.) "useful illegality" which implies avoiding or breaking formal principles but finally with functional outcomes for the organization.

What does this mean for management execution? Illegality generally cannot be formally implemented or demanded in organizations by management. To use punk as rule-breaking conflict strategy in the sense of efficiency, it must be managed in a subtle manner which enables the functional potential but limits dysfunctional outcomes.

Organized Anarchy and the Garbage Can Model

Non-positivist management research has already known for a long time some very popular concepts that can provide interesting insights for this discussion. The framework of *organized anarchy* developed by Cohen et al. (1972) overcomes the distinction between formal and informal spheres and takes it literally: this understanding fits precisely with the constitutive elements of productive punk because it describes an efficient level of conflict by tolerating emergent processes but just to a certain extent.

The same applies to their *garbage can model of organizational choice* which stresses the efficiency of neglecting formal planning principles that can lead to professional decisions by accidental occurrence and a combination of actors with problems and solutions meeting in the right place at the right time.

It is obvious that this model implicitly combines different elements of punk: From a positivist point of view it is an anti-management model; it is a way of efficient decision-making by just living in the moment, keeping it simple and letting things run.

Implementation of Productive Punk

The implementation of punk in organizations in the sense of *organized anarchy* and *garbage can* is not an easy task because both concepts originally describe emergent and not intentionally applied phenomena. And in the field of tension between stabilization and subversion it is an ambitious aim to achieve a moderate level of functional conflict: That means provoking punk behavior of organization members but at the same time reducing tendencies of escalation and destructive behavior on the one hand and preventing stabilization of the system on the other hand.

Nevertheless the concept of “management by punk” on an organizational level is realizable in different ways. A first alternative is the institutionalization of punk as *temporally* and *spatially* desired non-conformity. Following this understanding, management should establish specific areas and time-slots in organizations that permit explicitly punk behavior of organization members. Empowerment to be punk means that members can do and avoid doing what they want under certain conditions. Managed in this way, an efficient level of conflict can free creativity in the sense of Koestler’s (1964, 35) *bisociation*: light bulb moments by lateral thinking and changing perspectives.

In contrast to institutions like *carnival* or *company festivities*, where moments of catharsis stabilize the system (Zeichhardt 2009), punk is different: following the assumption of efficiency, punk produces outcomes that are usable for organizational change and development by organizational learning.

Open Space Technology

The *open space technology* formulated by Owen (2008) can be adopted to implement such an idea of institutionalized punk practically. Open Space is a purpose-based method of group moderation that follows explicitly the paradigm of informal efficiency. This specific method brings people together to work on an important task which is formulated as an overall theme. Open space is only organized by free working zones and a starting and an ending point. Apart from that, open space begins without any formal agenda, there are no rules, and there is no hierarchy: just the trust in the principles of self-organization and DIY (do it yourself).

A central working zone of open space is a kind of *market place* where participants can come together to open new subthemes and to present solutions of group work on a bill-board. Participants can decide autonomously to which workshops they want to contribute and how long they want to work there. Open space permits the sharing of ideas by celebrating an atmosphere of informality so that participants can generate decisions by bringing solutions to problems and vice versa.

For efficient management it is important that all results and decisions of open space will be documented on charts or mind maps collected on the central bill-board at the market place so that all material of the workshop can be evaluated and used by management for further change activities.

To sum up, open space technology obviously seems to be the consistent implementation of organized anarchy and the garbage can model covering constitutive elements of productive punk.

Liquid Feedback

Punk on an organizational level can also be implemented in a virtual context: Modern tools are online wikis and *liquid feedback* (see the official website <http://liquidfeedback.org>) – an open-source based software that allows decision making in organizations free from formal hierarchy. Like the open space technology, organization members can open relevant themes on a virtual bill-board, subject to approval by a virtual community.

The process of decision-making occurs free of authority because the voting for ideas is anonymous. Everyone can open a new task and everyone can rate the

ideas of others independently so that decisions are influenced only by convincing content not by formal power and micro-politics.

To quote an extreme example in practice: The management board of *Synaxon* (<http://synaxon.de>), an enterprise of IT services, implemented liquid feedback in 2012 to realize basic democracy and extreme empowerment of employees. They did it in a fundamental way: The managers obligated themselves to authorize and realize the ideas the employees voted for. The final consequence of liquid feedback in this understanding is total self-organization and inversion of hierarchy, which implies potential anarchy. For management this is highly risky: In the sense of punk as an efficient level of conflict it is a fine line between functional and dysfunctional outcomes because there are no longer any boundaries of punk behavior defined. The future will show how successful this enterprise will be but first results show efficient outcomes (see <http://www.synaxon.de/blog>, 21st May 2012).

Punk and Leadership

Further insights into the connection between management and punk can be deduced by discussing both phenomena from an individual and inter-individual perspective. Management research offers different approaches of leadership theory (Robbins & Judge 2013, 401ff.) for analyzing punk as specific behavior.

Manager, Leader, Punk

Initially punk can be located in the contrasting juxtaposition of two typical types of chief executive officers: manager vs. leader (Yukl 2013, 22f.). While a *manager* mostly focuses on administrative and operational tasks in organizations, a *leader* is primarily seen as a visionary entrepreneur willing to take risks. In management theory leaders are often characterized by extraordinary attributes: Leaders are creative artists, game-changing revolutionaries or outliers...

Following this definition, a punk seems to be a non-conformist leader rather than a conservative manager. Richard Branson, chairman of the Virgin Group, is a famous prototype for a leader – and is obviously seen as business punk: Branson was the first person in the year 2009 on the cover of the first issue of the German business-lifestyle magazine “Business Punk”.

Punk as Leadership Strategy and Leadership Style

Punk as leadership behavior can be discussed in the framework of conflicts between stability and subversion presented above. In this understanding, productive punk is a set of specific leadership strategies aimed at reaching an efficient level of conflict in organizations.

Initiating conflict covers an origin parameter of punk: provocation. This means

concretely activating people to think outside the box, nudging people to solve problems by changing perspectives.

Punk can be widely used as *paradoxical intervention*. To quote some examples in the spirit of punk: non-conformist acting in narrow-minded discussions, using simplicity to rethink complex situations, being rebellious in lethargic groups, behaving aggressively in deadlocked relationships...

If punk behavior is not only used as a strategic tool for leaders but consequently as a leadership style in a narrow sense, a business punk can take the role of a *devil's advocate* or *organizational fool* (Kets de Vries 1990). The principal field of action of such an institutionalized punk involves balancing the hubris of authority, questioning the status quo, challenging inertia in organizations and preparing conditions for efficient change by specific punk behavior: rebellion, non-conformity, simplicity, and empowerment by self-organization.

Conclusion

This discussion has shown that there are links between the phenomena of management and punk. Based on a framework of conflict theory, this article has illustrated that a concept of *management by punk* can lead to efficient outcomes. The basic assumption of efficiency is commensurable with an understanding of productive punk which leads to a middle level of conflict between stability and subversion of systems. And this implies an important limitation for change management: Productive punk will lead to a gradual change rather than to a radical transformation of systems.

All in all, *management by punk* is a tenor of efficient change in that it accentuates the positive effects of conflicts by accepting informality, rebellion, non-conformity, simplicity, and self-organization on an organizational and individual level.

The discussion has also shown that punk has become part of the business establishment. There is a current interest in using innovative tools and concepts (see Ryde 2013; www.creativores.com/punkmanagement.html). But nevertheless in management theory this is not really a brand-new issue: Non-positivist management approaches have already been discussing extraordinary phenomena for years – but they have not yet discussed explicitly a phenomenon called punk. As this article has pointed out, punk can be integrated consistently into traditional constructivist management approaches like organized anarchy and garbage can.

However, there is a conspicuous link between the discussion of management and punk and the novel discourse of management, aesthetics and Gestalt theory (Biehl-Missal & Fitzek in this issue). In this context punk could be further

discussed as a specific art-based intervention in organizations. In particular, the punk phenomenon shows connectivity to constitutive principles of Gestalt theory: punk leads to shifting perspectives and provokes creative thinking outside the box.

Summary

The article shows from a constructivist perspective that there are immanent links between the two phenomena of management and punk. Based on a framework of conflict theory, the article illustrates a concept of *management by punk* that can lead to efficient outcomes for organizations.

The following guidelines for management practice can be deduced from the academic discussion:

- 1) *Management by punk* is a tenor of efficient change.
- 2) Punk is a specific conflict strategy that leads to an efficient level of conflict between stability and subversion of systems.
- 3) Punk accentuates the positive effects of conflict behavior by accepting informality, rebellion, non-conformity, simplicity, and self-organization.
- 4) Punk can be institutionalized in organizations in a sense of organized anarchy which allows punk behavior of employees limited to creative zones and time-slots.
- 5) Punk can be used as a leadership strategy to challenge the status quo of organizations and relationships by provoking others to rethink and change perspectives.

Keywords: Business, management, punk, efficiency, conflict, change, organized anarchy, provocation, non-conformity, self-organization.

Zusammenfassung

Im Beitrag wird gezeigt, dass die Phänomene *Management* und *Punk* in einem konstruktivistischen Managementdiskurs kommensurabel diskutiert werden können. Ausgehend von Erkenntnissen der Konfliktforschung wird ein Konzept *Management by Punk* hergeleitet, das konstitutive Elemente des Phänomens Punk in das Spannungsfeld von Effizienz sowie Stabilität und Subversion von Systemen integriert.

Zusammenfassend lassen sich folgende Leitlinien als Empfehlungen für die Umsetzung von Punk in der Managementpraxis ableiten:

- 1) *Management by Punk* beschreibt eine offene Grundhaltung gegenüber positivem Wandel.
- 2) Punk ist eine spezifische Konfliktstrategie, die im Spannungsfeld von Stabilität und Subversion von Systemen zu einem effizienten Konfliktniveau führen kann.
- 3) Punk betont die positiven Effekte eines Konfliktverhaltens durch Akzeptanz von Informalität, Rebellion, Non-Konformität, Einfachheit und Selbstorganisation.
- 4) Punk lässt sich in Organisationen im Sinne einer *organisierten Anarchie* institutionalisieren, wodurch Punkverhalten von Organisationsmitgliedern in räumlichen und zeitlichen Grenzen als erwünscht forciert werden kann.
- 5) Punk kann als spezifische Führungsstrategie der Provokation dazu eingesetzt werden, einen festgefahrenen Status quo auf Organisations- und Beziehungsebene

aufzubrechen und Organisationsmitglieder zum kreativen Umdenken und zum Perspektivwechsel zu verhelfen.

Schlüsselwörter: Business, Management, Punk, Effizienz, Wandel, organisierte Anarchie, Provokation, Non-Konformität, Selbstorganisation.

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Rainer Zeichhardt, b. 1976, Dipl.-Kfm., Dr. rer. pol., Professor of business administration at BSP Business School Berlin Potsdam, CEO and co-founder of Dahlem Research & Consulting Group GmbH. Focus on research, education, consulting and coaching: organizational behavior, new leadership approaches, human resources development and change management.

Address: BSP Business School Berlin Potsdam, Villa Siemens, Calandrellistraße 1-9, 12247 Berlin, Germany
E-mail: rainer.zeichhardt@businessschool-berlin-potsdam.de

