

Žižekian ideas in critical reflection

The tricks and traps of mobilising radical management insight

Žižekian ideas
in critical
reflection

Tony Wall

Centre for Work Related Studies, University of Chester, Chester, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how deeper psychosocial structures can be examined utilising a contemporary provocative theory within workplace reflection to generate more radical insights and innovation.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper outlines a provocative theory and then presents case examples of how deeper structures can be examined at the micro, meso and macro levels.

Findings – Deeper psychosocial structures are the forces that keep the status quo firmly in place, but deeper examination of these structures enable radical insights and therefore the possibility of innovation.

Research limitations/implications – Deep psychosocial structures shape and constitute daily action, and so work-based and practitioner researchers can be tricked into thinking they have identified new ways of working, but may be demonstrating the same workplace behaviours/outcomes. Workplace behaviours, including emotional responses to apparent change, are key indicators of deeper structures.

Practical implications – Ideas and processes for examining deeper structures can be integrated into daily reflective practices by individuals, within organisational processes, and wider, system processes. However, because deeper structures can appear in different forms, we can be tricked into reproducing old structures.

Social implications – Examining deeper structures increases the possibilities for more radical insights into workplace structures, and therefore, how to potentially mobilise innovations which may better serve people and planet.

Originality/value – This paper is the first to examine the work of Slavoj Žižek in the context of work-based learning.

Keywords Reflection, Work-based learning, Critical reflection, Slavoj Žižek, Management practice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Ghoshal's (2005) seminal and scathing critique of conventional management learning and education claimed bad management theory was harming the practice of management, and that management scholars were promoting a destructively "profits first" mentality. There are echoes of this critique today, connecting closely with the "practice turn" (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001; Ram and Trehan, 2010; Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013; Aguinis *et al.*, 2014). As such, there are communities within the management education field that appear to be receptive to alternative learning and change approaches and methodologies, and are perhaps more tentative over their role in guiding manager action (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, 2015).

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In terms of contemporary approaches to workplace learning and change, there is a wider variety, and include action inquiry (e.g. Torbert, 2004), action learning (e.g. Trehan and Rigg, 2015), action research (e.g. Gearty *et al.*, 2015), work-based learning (e.g. Boud and Solomon, 2001; Raelin, 2008; Wall, 2013), reflective practice (e.g. Helyer, 2015), work applied learning (e.g. Abraham, 2012), appreciative inquiry (e.g. Cooperrider *et al.*, 2008; Ridley-Duff and Duncan, 2015), synergic inquiry (e.g. Tang and Joiner, 2006) and combinations of these (Wall, 2013). Though each may have arguably distinctive features, or represent discrete practices or techniques, such practices have been conceptualised as “families” of action- or change-oriented approaches (Wall, 2013).

Alongside these families of approaches and methodologies which generate more relevant knowledge for the workplace and wider economy, there is a related but different movement which is much more subtle. This movement focusses more closely on the relationality between academy theory and the manager (the user of the theory). For example, Ramsey (2011, 2014) proposes the idea of “provocative theory”, which moves managers’ relationships with theory from utilising it in explicit, precise, directive or evaluative ways, towards utilising theory in more metaphoric ways to spark or generate insight. Here, the substance or content of the theory is not as important as the ongoing insights the theory stimulates. Similarly, Paton *et al.* (2014) refer to the idea of “relavating”, which argues for the academy to move beyond generating theory or research which is immediately economically useful (or relevant), towards helping managers understand the potentially disruptive power of ideas or theory.

However, a major critique of many approaches to workplace learning and change methodologies is their focus on the immediate and practical, or technical outputs and outcomes, which in turn may omit examination of wider/deeper power structures (e.g. Sun and Kang, 2015; Trehan and Rigg, 2015; Wall, 2015). From a pragmatic (managerialist) stance, such an omission of deeper forces risks the potential for insights into how to make bigger leaps into performance and making sure change or performance enhancement initiatives are sustained. Yet, understood from within the “critical turn” in management studies (e.g. Willmott, 2005), such an omission of deeper forces risks the potential of more radical insights into how to potentially disrupt inequalities or social injustices in the workplace, including the functioning of organisational structures and the related implications of such on the lived experience of staff.

The potential for this critical dimension to disrupt power structures and facilitate innovation has become more or less represented as a central characteristic of contemporary methodologies such as Critical Action Learning (Trehan and Rigg, 2015). Such approaches go beyond cycles of reflecting-acting, to introduce ideas which help the work-based learner or researcher to examine deeper forces which appear to be shaping practice and therefore the experiences of people within it, and the outcomes and outputs generated as a result. This paper therefore aims to deepen and expand the utilisation of “critical” ideas within the context of work-based learning, and particularly the use of a contemporary and controversial theorist, Slavoj Žižek, in reflective practice – a core dimension of the above approaches and methodologies (Gearty *et al.*, 2015) and work-based learning (Helyer, 2015).

The paper does this by first introducing and exemplifying some key ideas utilised by Žižek to examine practice situations, and then applying the ideas to three case studies to demonstrate how managers can mobilise the ideas in practice to generate new insights and therefore decide next steps. In this way, this paper is not only contributing to understanding of how critical dimensions can be infused into contemporary workplace and work-based learning practices for managers (after critiques by Sun and Kang, 2015;

Trehan and Rigg, 2015; Wall, 2015), but it is also documenting how theory can be engaged in the mode of “provocative theory” in order to stimulate manager action (Ramsey, 2011, 2014). Žižekian ideas are now outlined.

Žižekian ideas

Wall and Perrin (2015) argue that it is an “impossible ambition” to capture the totality or intentionality of Žižek or his ideas given his particular philosophical commitments which will be outlined below. However, it is practically helpful to think of Žižek as a “leftist”-Marxist who attracts major acclaim and criticism from across the globe. Žižek’s work offers an “iconoclastic interpretation of the ubiquitous and deeply naturalised nature of ideology today [...] min[ing] the (only apparently) obvious and prosaic in order to produce startling insights” (Taylor, 2010, p. 3). His political/philosophical commitment is to examine the troubles in our so called paradise, that is, the particular ways of operating that become naturalised or taken-for-granted. To explain this, he often refers to a comment by Donald Rumsfeld, the then US Secretary of Defense:

“There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don’t know.” [...] But what Rumsfeld forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the “unknown knowns”, the things we don’t know that we know – [...] [which acts as a] frame, of our experience of reality (Žižek, 2014a, b, pp. 8-10).

In this way, Žižek encourages examination of a consciousness influenced and shaped by a particular “doctrine, composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts [...]” (Žižek, 1999, p. 63), that is, ideology. This is not just a case of analysing the assumptions we make as we engage in our practice, or about awareness-raising that our reflective practices may generate. Rather, and to the contrary of the Marxist dictum “we know not what we do”, Žižek pays close attention to the idea that “we *do* know what we do, and *still* do it!”. In order to explain the processes that manifest such status quo, he combines a complex combination of philosophical thought (e.g. which encourage us to examine the implicit structures in language and behaviour) and analytical method (e.g. which encourage us to examine at the antagonisms in practice) – which together, emphasise the problematic of easily reading any situation and how to navigate the structural forces within it (Butler, 2005; Taylor, 2010; Wood, 2012).

A selection of ideas will now be outlined in a way which aims to “relevate” and aid “provocative” modes of relationship with the theory as opposed to ensuring a fully representative account of the ideas. A detailed explanation of the influences on Žižek and his theory is not within the scope of this paper, but the following section will identify some key ideas from his work which are useful in the context of work-based learning reflection (see Wall and Perrin, 2015). To see an outline of the Marxist, Lacanian and Hegelian influences and dimensions in/through Žižek’s work, and a detailed exposition of the underlying theory, see Žižek (1989, 2014a, b). A central theoretical idea in Žižek’s work, is his interpretation of Lacan’s Borromean Knot, that is, a metaphor for the interrelated mechanics of how we make sense of an interact with our world (Myers, 2003; Wood, 2012; Žižek, 2014a, b), and includes the interrelated dimensions of the Symbolic order, the Imaginary order, and the Real.

Framing or meaning-taking (from the Symbolic order)

Žižek follows a line of philosophical thought that argues that as we engage in practice, we engage with or evoke clues, rules or points of reference, for example, through

language (e.g. Lacan and Mouffee, 1985). Žižek agrees with Lacan (2006) and Foucault (1997) that it is impossible to access a reality “underneath” social constructions, and dismisses Habermas’s (1976) idea of trying to resolve how a society “distorts” reality through its use of language. Here, the point is that there is no direct or fixed relationship between what we try to capture or represent (the signified) with the words or speech we use to do so (the signifiers).

However, “the language we use on a daily basis is by no means innocent, but is always loaded with particular ways of engaging with the world” and it is this which “shape how we engage [...] in any sphere of life” (Wall and Perrin, 2015, p. 7). As soon as I have referred to “the customer”, I have activated a particular structure or form to that person standing in front of me – and expectations of how I should act in relation to the customer. If I use the word “business partner”, different forms and expectations are activated. In each case, I have drawn differently from the Symbolic order, those pre-existing categories or constructions.

Making sense of (Imaginary) selves (from the Symbolic order)

When drawing from the Symbolic order, it is not just the signified that we are structuring, we are also structuring, according to Žižek, the person attempting to capture that signified – and hence it can shape how we see ourselves and the way we think we should act in the workplace. For example, as soon as we say “customer” or “king”, we have already activated particular expectations of what that thing is – and importantly – how we should relate to and with it. This is the realm of the Imaginary, or the realm of “images of who we are and therefore expectations of how we think we should act, including how people relate to the others and things around them” (Wall and Perrin, 2015, p. 31). Žižek exemplifies this with the comment “No man is a hero to his valet”. This is not because “the man is not a hero, but because the valet is a valet, whose dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes” (Hegel cited in Žižek, 2000, p. 48).

The trauma of the Real and how it mobilises action

Of central importance to Žižekian thought is the idea that we desperately need these social constructions to, first, be able to deal with and navigate the psychic overwhelm of “brute” reality (Žižek, 2009); and also second, avoid the psychic trauma of lack or no-thing-ness (Žižek, 2002, p. 69). This is problematic because any image or capturing is only ever a “violently” simplified version of what we are trying to represent (Žižek, 2008), but we treat it as real. This means that as we try to capture things (e.g. through language), something always escapes. This something which resists all symbolisation is the realm of the Real (Žižek, 1989). Importantly, that “something that escapes” into the Real, combines with our need for unity, and propels us to keep on trying to capture it – an unconscious desire. This repetitive motion towards the cause of desire is a source of “enjoyment”, a kind of “pleasure from pain” (pleasure of seeking unity from the pain of never getting there).

This is a wide and far ranging phenomenon and one the main consequences of this repetitive process is that any discrepancies from that unified image are bracketed out in a way so we may not be aware of – or even more interestingly – absolutely be aware of – any discrepancies, but “still carry on”. In other words, I might be aware that my behaviour is at odds with what I am saying, but I will ignore it to get a sense of security in my self-image. For example, an international professional body for higher education

recently released a report which examined student satisfaction under the context of a higher fee regime. The body stated:

Education is, of course, about a lot more than simply being “provided” with teaching, resources and facilities. It is not a simple consumer relationship, but a partnership which requires effort and engagement from the student and it is the responsibility of their institution to encourage and facilitate this. *Nonetheless, this survey provides us with an opportunity to investigate their sense of value-for-money [...] (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014, p. 33, emphasis added).*

In other words, the body declared that education is not about a consumer relationship, but then proceeded, nonetheless, that it can be measured on the basis of value for money (a notion entirely embedded within a consumerist ideological perspective). It is this process (with its avoidance of trauma and generation of pleasure) that is crucial to understanding how we may try to change or innovate our workplace practices, for example, through critical reflection, but essentially reinforce the existing power structures in places and therefore the same outcomes.

Indeed, Žižek argues that a form of critical or cynical distance fundamentally reinforces the power structures that can be at play; he says “the cynic practises the logic of disavowal (‘I know very well, but [...]’)” (Žižek, 2009, pp. 68-69). For example, questioning the idea of “student as customer” is already engaging in the constructions and expectations activated in the words chosen to describe the issue. In many ways, such logic reflects the “12th century proverb cutting my nose off to spite my face, or perhaps a Chinese proverb looking for a donkey while sitting on its back” (Wall and Perrin, 2015, p. 4).

As the theoretical ideas here concern the link between wider structural (ideological) forces and how that filters through to individualised expectations of self and the world around them, the ideas can be applied at the level (micro), organisational level (meso) and broader systems level (macro) (Wall and Perrin, 2015). The next section now examines three cases: a micro-level case example (a senior training manager re-conceptualising conflict training), a meso-level case example (a management team re-conceptualising roles within a restructure), and a macro-level case example (re-conceptualising educational reform). The examples are based on real life cases of work-based learners, but the examples and specific details have been anonymised to protect identity.

Micro-level case example: a manager re-conceptualising conflict in training

A senior training manager within the training department of a large, national quasi-public organisation involved in public safety and security, was undertaking a work-based learning degree. Given recent expenditure on a new conflict management training course, he was interested in evaluating the course and had utilised a range of learning evaluation tools such as feedback sheets and more informal observational methods. He found the learners were generally satisfied with the learning experience, and he had received ideas for enhancing the course. However, he was concerned by the behaviours he witnessed during the training, which he thought might be cause for concern when practiced in real life contexts beyond the training room. Based on his 20 years of experience in the field, his view was that the behaviours he was seeing, were likely to provoke even more aggressive responses than were desirable in the context of conflict resolution.

He reflected on the training and his attention moved towards the central concept (construction) that provided the frame and structure for the day: CUDSA (e.g. see Richter, 1999). This acronym stands for Confront the behaviour, Understand each

other's position, Define the problem, Search for a solution and then Agree. The first stage in the CUDSA model, and of course the day, was "confront" the behaviour. He reflected on the possibility that this construction or notion of "confront" seemed to establish the tone and understanding of what conflict was, for the rest of the day. Specifically, his reflections identified that perhaps conceptualising conflict with reference to the idea of "confronting" gave the impression of managing conflict as a much more direct and aggressive set of behaviours. He knew this may be the case in certain circumstances, but that this direct and aggressive approach was only one small set of behavioural responses.

He considered the possibility that in drawing from the Symbolic in this way, the training was activating particular expectations of what conflict and conflict management were, as well as expectations of the person involved in that professional activity (Imaginary). It was an important insight for him that although CUDSA was explicitly about diffusing and calming tensions, i.e. explicitly not always about a direct and aggressive approach, the behaviours that manifest in the training were very much "this is how we say to do it, but nonetheless, try these direct and aggressive behaviours". It seemed that that which escaped Symbolisation into the Real, returned to motivate a particular set of behaviours to maintain a consistent unity to what conflict was and what it meant to manage it. Since then, the manager has attempted to re-conceptualise conflict in terms of situational peace and well-being, drawing on different concepts and behaviours to resolve interpersonal tension (Posthuma, 2014). Initial attempts demonstrated a different repertoire of behaviours, though those trainees wanting to attend a "conflict management" course still seem to be caught in the original conception of conflict.

Meso-level case example: a management team re-conceptualising roles within a restructure

A senior strategic business unit director of a large, national financial organisation, was undertaking a work-based learning degree. She was facing dual pressures – on the one hand, she was being pressed to develop a more entrepreneurial culture within her department to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive marketplace for financial products, but on the other hand, she was being pressed to reduce the administrative costs within her department. The director worked with her senior team to explore options, usually in team meetings. One of the conversations that emerged from team discussion was around the roles of the staff within the unit; many of the financial specialists in the unit would offer advice to customers when (and only when) the customers called or made contact with the advisor. She considered in her reflections that her staff were being conceptualised as a "Customer Advisor", and this tended to be associated with a reactive role, and confined to the existing financial products that the customer already had.

She considered that drawing from the Symbolic in this way perhaps prefigured the way staff engaged with their work, and the expectations they thought existed of them in that role (Imaginary). The senior management team discussed alternatives such as "director", "lead", "consultant", "executive", "specialist", "relationship lead", "business partner" and so on, considering the possible expectations that were being activated in each. Over a period of five years, the team experimented with a variety of options, and considered that the different roles did activate different expectations over time. For example, consultants were expected to take a leading role to tackle immediate financial product demands, but the relationship with the clients

seemed to be shorter term. This of course also implicated definitions of roles and associated salaries. However, most significantly, the director's reflections considered the possibility that although the changes in role seemed to have localised effects, changes within the wider organisational structure had not developed the same understandings of the role, and therefore mitigated the establishment and then sustenance of the changes.

For example, re-designing the roles to take a more proactive leading role, for example, as a consultant, there was a greater expectation that the member of staff would be easily contactable, especially by mobile. However, the wider organisational structure (including finance and the CEO) did not believe these staff needed mobiles in their "Customer Advisor" roles. In other words, the original conception of who these members of staff were and what they did, though formally changed, was still gripping hold of these members of staff. Indeed, the senior manager also reflected that her heated discussions about the "Customer Advisors" not being "Customer Advisors" anymore reinforced the original conceptions. As Žižek points out, when we try to engage in critical thought utilising the original constructions we are trying to disrupt, ideology has already tricked us to think and act within those terms. In other words, it was like "looking for a donkey while sitting on its back".

Macro-level case example: conceptualising educational reform

A senior manager in a multi-million pound educational organisation was undertaking a work-based degree. She was leading the commercialisation of educational products in her organisation, and was responsible for generating new income generating opportunities. As part of her reflective journey on her degree, she had become increasingly concerned with the tensions that were often present in developing corporate training and education solutions for corporate clients. For example, she often worked with corporate clients to develop solutions, having to work flexibly and quickly to meet their needs, but always working within the national quality frameworks set by government bodies – sometimes creating dilemmas of not quite meeting the perceived expectations of the client because of the regulatory environment in which she work. For example, one client wanted a form of endorsement for small chunks of learning, but such requests were not possible.

It was particularly important because this corporate work would be even more important for the future sustainability of the organisation. As the business grew, she had to recruit more staff to deal with the demand, and adopted the "business translator" model. This was a professional who would be aware of expectations in terms of the educational quality dimensions as well as the expectations in terms of the corporate client – often explained to be the solution to the cultural divide or cultural clash between education and business (Cooper *et al.*, 2008; Dhillon *et al.*, 2011; Wall, 2010; Wedgewood, 2008; White, 2012). Although this model helped with dealing with the demand, the manager found the model problematic. First, the translator experience the same tensions as before, of not quite being able to deliver what the corporate clients wanted because of quality frameworks. And second, the relationships between the educational delivery staff (who were involved after the translator has finished their role) and the corporate clients were problematic because of different expectations related to working timeframes and different language.

It seemed that the Symbolic constructions of education and commerce were powerfully kept in place, if not reinforced with the translator role which meant the constructions were firmly held in place, perpetuating the tensions and difficulties.

In her reflections, she considered that the tensions surfacing were not necessarily specific to her role or the translators role, but were a consequence of wider political trends which conceptualised education as a product, that is, education rendered as commodity in a capitalist economy (as drawn from the Symbolic). This was enforced not only by her own organisation, but wider systems, including governmental policy, which was promoting more of a free market for educational products and demanded that educational establishments operated like businesses.

Importantly, this was a global trend and was evident in the global competition and rankings in which educational establishments participated. This was a sombre reflection for the manager, as she considered that whatever action to re-envision education differently would be held in place by wider national and global structures. However, it did not stop the manager from trying alternative ways forward, including experimenting with alternative working practices to re-position “clients” as “learning partners” to open up more exploratory discussions about learning rather than narrowly focussed technical learning. It has also spurred the senior manager to consider what role she has in trying to change the wider system, including taking board roles on influential governmental organisations in which she can voice her concerns and ideas.

Discussion and implications

Within the spirit of the “practice” and “critical” turns in management (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001; Willmott, 2005), the examples above demonstrate a number of analytical points which can be infused into reflective practices as part of approaches or methodologies of work-based learning and change such as action learning (Trehan and Rigg, 2015), action research (Gearty *et al.*, 2015), work-based learning (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Raelin, 2008; Wall, 2013), reflective practice (e.g. Helyer, 2015) and work applied learning (e.g. Abraham, 2012), amongst others. The points are founded in ideological analysis, that is, identifying powerful structures and the processes by which these are kept in place – ideas which go beyond cycles of reflecting-acting – and therefore offer the possibility to navigate such structures differently for different effects in management practice.

Specifically, the examples highlight three key critical points. First, that management practices are socially constructed, drawn from a Symbolic order which is only ever a chosen signifier, and hence there is always the possibility for alternative constructions and associated effects in management and workplace settings. For example, conflict is “confronting”, and more, and staff are Customer Advisors and more. Second, these constructions not only implicate the objects being constructed, but the people doing the constructing – they activate expectations of the people using them: a consultant is expected (as understood within a particular professional context) to have intense engagement with his/her client around a particular engagement, but then limited engagement beyond this. Specifically, this implicates managers, their teams and staff, their management peers, and their own managers or directors.

Third, and perhaps most significantly in terms of how ideology works to maintain the status quo, there is unconscious activity which is activated when we draw from the Symbolic, where we gain “pleasure from pain” in attempting to create a unified image of ourselves and the world – a process which propels us towards the predominant constructions. In other words, when a manager says “A Customer Advisor is not a Customer Advisor”, they have already been tricked and have become trapped in the ideological positioning of the person as a “Customer Advisor”. Indeed, O’Flaherty *et al.* (2011) highlighted the same phenomenon in the context of

introducing sustainability education within a radically individualised, competitive educational system, which acts against collectively. As shown in the third case example, some may even decide that their current role is complicit in living out the power structures and that sometimes the only option is to move to another part of the Symbolic order to take action.

The ideas presented in this paper are an additional reflective lens through which the management professional or researcher can mobilise thoughts, ideas and insights into different ways of seeing a situation at different analytical levels, including the micro, meso or macro. In this way, the paper also illustrates how management scholars, practitioners and scholar-practitioners can utilise theory in more provocative ways which stimulate new insights or possibilities to help spark cycles of experimental management practice, and learn from the process. As such, therefore, power is given to the management scholar, practitioner and scholar-practitioner to be able to make sense of the world as they see it in ways which make sense to them, and which is therefore a much more fluid and dynamic approach to management inquiry (Ghoshal, 2005; Ram and Trehan, 2010; Aguinis *et al.*, 2012, 2014; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013).

Within the context of management practice, this approach therefore highlights a “dialectic space more central to the use of theory and constructs” (Wall, 2016) in ways which enable deep consideration of self and context in management contexts. For Ramsey (2011), this form of engagement with theoretical ideas promotes a more provocative stance, shifting from the substance or content of a theory to how it “speaks into management practice”:

[...] such a provocative theory suggests a shift in our emphasis on the substance of academic theory to the potential use of that theory [...] [it] provides space for management learners to experiment with and evaluate ideas, rather than emphasizing the development of sound understanding of those theories (Ramsey, 2011, p. 480).

As such, the use of Žižekian ideas in critical reflection can be considered a “dance” (Ramsey, 2014, p. 479), whereby the ideas are informing deeper structural analysis in the context of moment-by-moment relations with others. As Wall (2016) states:

Perhaps this is what a Žižekian gaze [...] does, or might do? And perhaps we can find even more engaging dance moves (insights/actions) when apply the same to ourselves and our own behaviours? [...] Dancing with Žižek [...] may run against the typical demands placed upon us in society, particularly within commercially oriented educational contexts (Wall and Jarvis, 2015), but at least we will have both explored and created our own interpretations, gestures and outcomes en route.

Conclusion

This paper introduced and exemplified how work-based learners and reflective practitioners may utilise Žižekian ideas, as a set of provocative ideas, to examine the deeper power structures that might be prevalent in shaping practice situations, across micro, meso and macro contexts. In this way, it aimed to tackle critiques of work-based learning and in reflective practice (a core dimension of many contemporary action-oriented approaches and methodologies) to highlight how deeper structures might be examined and therefore inform reflective analyses and action taking. This paper contributes the first examination of such issues in relation to the context of work-based learning, and encourages the utilisation of other provocative theory to generate additional and more diverse practical insights for managers.

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Corresponding author

Tony Wall can be contacted at: t.wall@chester.ac.uk