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How to use poetry in the workplace

You may not think poetry has a role to play in the world of work. Yet, researchers use it as a tool to understand workers' deeply personal and emotional workplace experiences and the managerial practices that underlie them. To celebrate National Poetry Day, Anne Theunissen writes about the benefits of using poetry in the workplace – for workers and leaders alike.

National Poetry Day is celebrated in the UK on 2 October to promote the reading, writing and performance of poetry. While one may not think of this form of art as something that plays a role in (academic research on) the world of work, poetry has been **used for decades** as an educational tool to develop key leadership skills.

Researchers **use poetry** to better understand and express workers' deeply personal and emotional workplace experiences and the managerial practices that underlie them. This article shows how both poetry's form and content facilitate organisational learning and may support leadership and workers in the workplace.

Expressing workers' experiences

Although poetry is not widely deployed in the field of management and organisation studies, a limited number of researchers have turned to this medium to broaden our understanding about the functioning of organisations. These **scholars** have used poetry as a form of qualitative data collection and analysis as well as a different way of writing to better understand and express workers' experiences.

Some of them use **interview transcripts** of conversations with workers as a basis to write academic poetry. In doing so, they draw on their empathetic, affective connection with their research

participants in the data collection process and use their embodied feelings and affective responses as a sensemaking tool.

Feminist researchers believe that **poetic inquiry** is particularly suitable to give voice to the marginalised and oppressed, because it is rooted in resistance. It challenges standardised modes of analysis and writing that have neglected emotion-based ways of knowing and affective forms of knowledge production.

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Poetry allows researchers to capture what was said in between the lines instead of confining themselves to the use of literal interview quotes. This offers a possibility to express highly sensitive experiences that may be difficult to convey or too painful to talk about in standard, more literal forms of communication.

Other researchers examine poetic material that has been produced by **workers themselves**, or write poems based on their **own workplace experiences**, thereby treating it as a legitimate source of knowledge about organisational life.

Whereas some of these poems are about positive emotions, research has illustrated that recurrent themes in the poetic work produced by employees centre on feelings of **anger, rage and despair**. This may be indicative of the impossibilities of expressing these emotions in a workplace context, as well as of their broader underlying causes, such as a **poor work/life balance**, precarious **work contracts**, and **inequality in the workplace**. Although addressing these challenges is not straightforward, poetry can help leaders to refine leadership skills that may be useful in tackling these issues.

Poetry as a tool for leadership

Management scholars **have explored** how the use of poetry in management learning equips (future) leaders with essential skills. One of the areas in which poetry can be of use according to researchers, is in **refining critical thinking** and **stimulating creativity**. Managers often deal with dilemmas, uncertainty and complex decision-making processes. As poetry draws on metaphors, ambiguity, imagination and symbolism, it evades simplistic thinking and promotes a mindset in which a multiplicity of interpretations and potential pathways is embraced. Scholars **argue** that these qualities are particularly useful for agile, long-term strategising.

Another example of a leadership skill that poetry may help to develop is **emotional intelligence**. Being attentive to workers' emotions is an essential managerial quality, and scholars hold that engaging with poetry, which provides a deep insight into people's personal experiences and inner lives, **invites empathy** and a better understanding of the feelings of others.

This allows leaders to not only focus on the rational and factual aspects of their organisation, but to also pay attention to the affective experiences of workers. Showing that leadership cares about workers' feelings may help to prevent worker behaviour that is driven by negative emotions, such as **loud** or **revenge quitting**, which are a sign of poor worker wellbeing and may harm organizations by causing increased turnover and the loss of talent.

Besides equipping leaders with essential skills, poetry may also become a vehicle to communicate about **difficult or sensitive topics**. For example, **collective poetry writing** may be used as the starting point of fruitful conversations on a company's strategy, and workers' **poems on workplace anger** allow to relieve pressure and avoid direct confrontation while providing management with information that may otherwise never reach them.

Poetry may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about leadership and workplace learning, but it holds considerable promise. The time may be ripe to take it more seriously, and what would be a better occasion to start exploring poetry's potential than National Poetry Day?

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