

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY: WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

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Abstract: *Keats, the romantic poet, was the first one to have used the words Negative Capability. This term from English literature found its place first in psychoanalytic literature and then into management. It has come to mean being comfortable with not knowing or half knowledge and having a beginner's mind - with humility, awe and curiosity. It is seen as an important disposition needed by a leader especially during turbulent times. Dispersal and containment are the two important aspects surrounding negative capability. This paper reviews the existing literature on negative capability and suggests possible future directions of study. It suggests the possibilities of the personality issues that might make developing negative capability difficult, discusses its importance in the context of theory U, and process oriented Psychology.*

Key words: negative capability, leadership, change, learning, Theory U, Process oriented psychology

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Negative Capability: What is it all about?

To write this paper I needed to have negative capability. To stay in the realm of not knowing without panicking and getting into an activity trap, to give myself the time and space so that thoughts could emerge. It was an edge between knowing and not knowing, between terror and faith. I had to learn to dance between the polarities of my positive capabilities and negative capabilities to produce this term paper. A term once relevant to poets, writers, artists, then for psychotherapists and today for leaders and organizations, in fact every one of us wanting to learn and grow.

Introduction

“I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”(Keats 1817 cited by Bate 1963 pg 17&18)

Keats used the word Negative capability in a letter which was interpreted and reinterpreted many times over. It has been associated with ancient wisdom of Gita and philosophy of Buddhist, Taoist sayings (Todd 1973, French 2000, 2001). It also has a strong grounding in psychoanalytical theory and is used extensively in the context of a therapist leaving his need to understand and find a solution, leaving the past and waiting for new patterns to emerge. (French & Simpson,1999;Simpson, French & Harvey 2002; Simpson 2006). With Bion’s use of the term as the basis, Negative capability now has found its way into management literature. (French, 2001).

Negative capability has assumed importance in the context of organizations because of the ambiguities and anxieties faced by organizations. Frantic and frenzied activities to achieve targets, deadlines, pressure to perform, prove to oneself, to others, be seen as successful, give neither time nor space to think and reflect. The principle of performativity pervades all levels and has become a dominant discourse in organizations (Simpson et al, 2002) Efficiency is measured by input/output, performance by the tangibles delivered or ROI. Inaction is looked down upon. Intangibles frowned at. Not knowing is seen as a deficiency

and our need to control makes us jump into chaos to wanting to bring things immediately under control without giving space for the process to emerge and lead us to insightful action (Wheatly, 1992). We can see this phenomenon not only in the way we work but also in our every day lives, even in the way we bring up our children.

Our neurotic need to be correct (Todd 1973) and be in control (French & Simpson 1999; French, Simpson & Harvey 2001) in Bion's words, is a 'curious business' by which we 'closure off what [we] don't want to see or hear' (Bion, 1978: 9), giving in instead to the temptation 'always to engage upon something familiar' (Bion, 1990: 5 as cited by Simpson, 2006 pg249). Therefore, negative capability is ignored and excluded from "dominant organizational discourses" (Simpson et al, 2002 pg1222). Today's environment in organizations evokes insecurity in employees which can be identified with the primitive fear of annihilation (Krantz, 1998) and therefore the "heroic notion of knowledge" (pg93) becomes a defense against vulnerability, making negative capability a very negative trait.

This paper reviews the existing literature on Negative capability and suggests future directions for exploration. It discusses the role of negative capability in leadership, change and organizational learning. It looks at the types of personality that problems that could create a difficulty in developing negative capability, the role of negative capability in Theory U and Process oriented psychology.

Literature Review

Defining negative capability

Bate (1963) said that in life, where we do not have answers for everything, where there are many uncertainties, we need not justify our half knowledge but have an open, receptive mind, negating one's ego. This is negative capability. One who can be in uncertainty without becoming "irritable after fact or reason" becomes a man of achievement, especially in literature.

Todd (1973) describes Negative Capability as being without prejudices, forgone conclusions, having a beginner's mind where one enters the field afresh every time and being able to live with failure. He takes a philosophical stance when he equates Negative Capability to the Buddhist notion of no mind and is extreme when he says that negative capability is a "thirst for mystery. It is life."(pg2)

French (2000) defined negative capability as the ability to hold back /restrain emotions for the sake of work and thereby giving one self an opportunity to use emotions as a source of information to understand the work. It is to give a “free rein to imagination” ie; the disparate, absurd, inchoate, illogical, impossible” (French et al, 2001). According to Simpson et al. (2002) negative capability is reflective inaction, being able to stay with pressure and not disperse into defensive routines thus giving space for new thoughts or perceptions/meanings to emerge.

It is a state of mind, a disposition (French & Simpson1999, French 2000, French et al 2001; McAra-McWilliam, 2007). It entails a shift from “technical control to management of meaning” (Simpson et al 2002 pg1215) and it is about being human.

The most important words used by Keats in his famous sentence are “Irritable” and “Capable” of being in uncertainties (Bate 1963 pg 18). Irritability is getting easily annoyed. The root meaning of capable is “containing”, “to be able to hold” (Todd, 1973 pg4). So in a nut shell Negative capability is the staying power, being in the moment, containing the impulse to act, giving room for new perceptions, ideas, thoughts, patterns, solutions and interventions.

Positive Capability and Negative capability

Positive capability is skills, competencies, knowledge from past experience (Simpson et al, 2002) and has been likened to Aristotle’s notion of practical intelligence (Rose 1999 as cited by French 2000). According to French et al. (2001), positive capability, though is the other polarity, is required for negative capability because one needs to know that he/she does not know and a certain confidence to accept that. One must have a knowledge base (positive capability) to cross the edge between knowing and not knowing (French & Simpson, 1999). A proper combination of both can make space for creativity. Charles Siemon (1892 as cited by French 2001) said that the answers are at both extremes. Organizational reality lies in both the extremes and a “good enough positive capability could actually help in having good enough negative capability” (pg 489). So we must learn to flow between these two polarities

Containment and dispersal: The two important words for negative capability.

Negative capability is about containment. It is the capacity to experience one’s emotions and those of others and hold them till there is a better understanding of the situation and insights emerge (French 2001). It is containing anxieties, conflicting ideas, staying calm suspending action without forcing for results (Heffron, Barbara & Weston 2005).

Containment is an internal psychological process and happens when there is projective identification or intense, overwhelming emotions (Vansina –Cobbaert, 2008) and it is important for the person to know that he/she is being a container. He /she will have to manage difficult emotions/ feelings/ anxieties on behalf of the system so that they can be worked with (Cilliers, 2003). When containment is not possible, we disperse our energy looking for instant, immediate solutions and quick fixes.

Dispersal is a behavior we engage in when we cannot tolerate the emotional impact of uncertainties. It is a defense against anxiety, flight from intense emotions, (Simpson et al, 2002) a distraction from the task at hand and can be in the form of explanations, physical actions and emotional reactions. Individuals, groups, organizations can have a valence for a particular form of dispersal (French, 2000). According to him basic assumptions, social systems as defense mechanism are examples of dispersal in a system. Groups fritter away energy by falling into either of the basic assumption groups pairing, fight/flight, dependency, oneness or me-ness. This results in the issues remaining unaddressed (Chattopadhyay, 1986). The dispersal patterns, according to French, over time, can become entrenched in the culture of the organization.

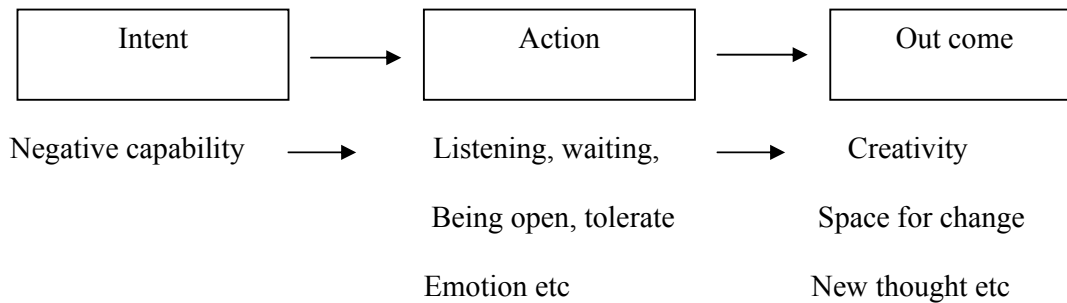
Negative capability – Can it be measured?

Negative capability is being promoted by practitioners as a competence to be developed. But according to French & Simpson (1999) it is a disposition which helps one wait in patience till a pattern emerges, be present between the edge of knowing and not knowing. According to Raine (1986:322 cited by French 2001; Simpson et al, 2002) Negative capability is an in borne aspect of human potential, a 'gift', a native virtue of mind (Caldwell, 1972:7) or intra-psychic inheritance; (Leavy , 1970:187), a natural talent.

A study of the literature indicates that a person with negative capability would display the following capabilities: ability to wait, critical and rigorous listening, humility, capacity for empathy, flexibility of character, open to impressions and sensations, tolerate ambiguity and paradoxes (Simpson et al, 2002); ability to let go of one's ideas, beliefs and prejudices, have a beginner's mind, a sense of awe and humility (Todd 1973); respect for others, be comfortable with failure, ability to contain frustration(French 2001). Capacity to work in the present without “memory, desire or understanding” (Bion 1989 cited by Simpson 2006 p

249); openness of mind(Bate,1963); capacity to reflect (McAra McWilliam 2007) , patience and receptivity (Simpson 2006).

It is an interesting paradox to look at negative capability as a competence to be developed. Exploring this diagrammatically: (Spencer & Spencer 1993)



There is a possibility that it becomes difficult to measure the outcome which is what a competence should be – measurable. It would be difficult to measure thought, space created or creativity. And it would be paradoxical to measure this competence because it belongs to the realm of what one is supposed to leave in ambiguity, without becoming “irritable for fact”.

Benefits of practicing Negative capability or should we say ROI:

Practicing negative capability allows space for opening up relationships, emotions and feelings. According to French et al.(2001) it creates a transitional space to think through difficult situations which might result in new insights. So according to them not knowing and not acting, but continuing to think, leaves room for creativity. Bion called the shift from not knowing to knowing a transformation (as cited by French & Simon 1999). Scott (1969:xii-xiii as cited by Simpson et al, 2002 pg1217) said that “the deepest in human mystery gives way only before negative capability”. A poet might create a poem, an artist a painting, a leader - facilitate change and take better interventions, a psycho analyst, transform (French, 2001).

Negative capability helps us relate better to people because we approach them with humility, without prejudices and expectations. It gives one access to the wisdom of the unconscious, helps develop better awareness about relations to others; (Betts, 2007) and teaches a new management of meaning (Simpson et al, 2002). Learning, and growth happen at the edge of knowing and not knowing (French & Simpson 1999). If a system develops a

capacity for negative capability it will discover new ideas and possibilities (Needleman as cited by French 2001).

Negative capability and leadership

Leadership is about decisions, actions, achievement, a doing mode and being in control (French et al 2001) and a leader's performance is judged accordingly. Leaders take decisions based on their positive capability (Simpson et al 2002). But along with positive capabilities a leader must have negative capability which is "reflective inaction" (pg 1210). It is leadership based on not doing and not knowing (French et al 2001). They also say that when a leader takes action from his positive capabilities, decisions are grounded in what he knows. Acting from negative capability prevents him from taking decisions based on what he does not know.

When an organization faces problems, the pressure to act is very high on a leader. He /she is seen as the one who is all knowing , omniscient and can deliver (Gabriel, 1991; Lasch, 1978; Zaleznik, 1966 as cited by Brown 1997). He / she can get into an illusionary state of thinking that he/ she knows what he/she is doing (Simpson 2006), the aim being not to look like a fool, leading to hubristic acts (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985 as cited by Brown.1997 ; Simpson 2006). Instead, if the leader takes time for reflection, stands on the ground of not knowing, stays at the edge of the unknown he/she will gain from creative insights (French et al, 2001). Leaders need to be reflective, contain the pressures and emotions that rise and take decisive action based on what emerges. By exercising Negative capability, leader becomes "like the strings of lyre, an instrument - not for music or poetry, but for organizational inquiry, learning, creativity and action."(Simpson et al. 2002, pg1218). Such leaders are called "chameleon leaders" (pg 1219) because they adapt allowing their minds to change, listening and waiting without directing and doing.

The ambiguities and uncertainties in the business environment call for a balance of positive capability and negative capability (McAra McWilliams 2007). It calls for "creative leadership" which is at the edge of knowing and not knowing, certainty and uncertainty (French et al 2001), doing and being. According to them both positive and negative capabilities in a leader, together, form a "unified whole". Together they help cross the edge between unknown and the known. And once the unknown becomes known, French et al say that it can be developed into a positive capability, promoting learning.

Negative capability and change

This issue has been mainly dealt with by French (2001). According to him organizational change initiatives meet with many forms of both conscious and unconscious resistance. There are many emotions that arise like sadness, fear, anger, anxiety, cynicism, apathy, denial or enthusiasm (Krantz, 1998) all of which are good sources of information (Armstrong 2000; Fineman 1993 as cited by Simpson et al, 2002) about the pulse of the organization. When feelings are held and contained, it gives space and safety for members of the organization to adapt and accept change (Anderson & White 2003). It is about holding the emotions of self and others and absorbing them so that it can facilitate change in self, the other and the organization. Exploration of the inner world in relation to the change, room for the probable scenarios will be possible (Vansina-Cobbaert,2008). Gaining insight is a precondition for change (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). And change demands that the organization has the negative capability along with technical capability to respond and resolve the confusions creatively (French 2001).

Negative capability and roles

French (2000) dealt with negative capability and organizational roles. When employees take on new roles they enter into uncertain space. Having the disposition of negative capability can give the required transitional space to adapt oneself to the new role. According to him some roles need deeper levels of negative capability whereas for some it could be a secondary requirement. And roles which entail taking responsibility for others would need higher negative capability eg: An executive coach, manager, a teacher.

Negative capability and organizations.

In our society of instant gratification and immediate answers (French 2001), every one in the organization with no exception are expected to show that one is a competent performer. They are expected to possess all knowledge, skills and expertise. Not knowing is not an option and those at the edge can end up feeling fearful, incompetent and experience a sense of loss of control.(French & Simpson 1999). This could lead to distorted information being present to management, truth being withheld, mistakes being hidden and a façade of all knowing being created. Everyone gets stuck in the position of having to know, creating an unrealistic situation and there by stress. It creates an unbearable pressure to disperse (French 2001). This could prevent the organization from inquiry and learning. The stress could force people to leave. Quoting French & Simpson, “When the importance of not knowing is

ignored, knowing becomes a primary casualty". Emphasis only on positive capabilities can impede inquiry, knowledge development and learning.

Developing negative capability

Most of us have been taught the value of skills that would lead us to doing and action and we take that habit to organizations (Argyris, 1980). Organizations thus become victims of habits and our socialization of values. The way we do things, the processes become reified blocking negative capability (French et al, 2001). Individual or group psychotherapy, experiential learning approaches like GRC, organizational role analysis, spiritual exercises like notes for reflection meditation (Simpson et al. 2002) discussing the undiscussable so that we do not get into defensive routines, not allow conformity, group think (Argyris 1980). ; giving oneself a variety of experience, self awareness of one's different states of mind (Betts, 2007), knowing one's own valence for a particular way of dispersal (French & Simpson 1999), learning to work with emotions in organizations (French et al, 2001) help develop negative capability. Other ways are to recognize and work with one's internal pressures which create a strong urge to act, slowing down and valuing the process of listening (Heffron et al 2005) and learning to wait (French & Simpson 1999). One of the principles used by process oriented psychology is the holographic effect. Going by that if the leader in the system does his work to develop negative capability it will open the doors for the organization as a field to develop the capacity.

What next : Suggested directions of study

Negative capability has been studied by very few authors. In fact one can safely say by three authors and is a field wide open for study. Little empirical research has been done in this area. Questions like what sort of leaders will have negative capability? Will transformational leadership, spiritual leadership need more negative capability than other styles of leadership? Can every one develop negative capability? What is the connect that seems so obvious between negative capability and Theory U? between Process oriented psychology? —these and many more.

Can every one develop negative capability?

Those with, low self esteem, narcissistic personality neurotic anxiety and Alexithimics will find it difficult to cultivate the disposition of negative capability.

Narcissistic leaders

Narcissistic leaders could be prone to self aggrandizement, sense of entitlement and anxiety and have grandiose plans instead of being in touch with reality (Brown, 1997). According to Kets deVries (2003) excessive narcissism leads to hubris. Hubris is excessive pride and arrogance that comes with power. Myopic vision, and prejudiced self will allow them to see only what they want to see. Also according to Kets deVries narcissists having followers who idealize them, does not help the situation. They would find it difficult to be in a place of reflective inaction, listening, waiting patiently and thus not have a disposition of negative capability.

Low Self esteem

In case of people with low self esteem the need to prove themselves would dominate their actions. They could get into an activity trap and doing could mean achieving. Not doing, inaction could fuel self doubt and further make them question their capability leading to a downward spiral. It can bring about a sense of incompetence and being at the edge of not knowing can bring in a fear of loss of control (French & Simpson 1999), sense of futility (Bate, 1963). The practice of negative capability requires a certain degree of loss of self and one must be able to trust one self that one would be able to recreate. (Simpson et al, 2002) This could be difficult when one does not believe in one's capabilities in the first place. To stay grounded in not knowing needs a strong sense of self.

Narcissism and low self esteem are like the two ends on a continuum. On either of the extremities it would be difficult to have a disposition of negative capability.

Neurotic anxiety

When one is prone to neurotic anxiety, response to pressures due to uncertainties will be inappropriate and exaggerated. The response depends on one's idealized (control events), despised (turn to others for help) or repressed self image (withdrawal from action) (Diamond & Seth 1990). Anxiety affects people's ability to think and collaborate (Krantz, 1998) and therefore people who have neurotic anxiety might be unable to give the space required for patterns or ideas to emerge during uncertain times.

Alexithymia

One of the qualities required by a person who has negative capability is to be able to hold his own emotions and of others as a container and to be empathetic. Alexithymia, a condition where one is emotionally color blind (Krystal 1979 as cited by Kets de Vries 2003) , cannot find words to describe emotions. Their inability to recognize emotions, lack of self awareness of their own emotions or being empathetic makes them action oriented. They like to play safe. They would possibly not be able to develop a capacity for negative capability as their way of dealing with conflict is getting into action mode, getting stuck in routines and social conformity.

Extreme state of anxiety to being emotionally color blind are like two opposite ends of a pole. And yet again, either of the extremities will make it difficult to have a disposition of negative capability.

Negative capability a pre-requisite for moving along the U of “theory U”.

Otto Scharmer, proposed Theory U in the context of bringing about deep change at personal, organizational, societal or global level (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers 2004). It advocates the U process of Sensing, Presencing and Realizing for bringing about deep change. Rather than getting into action mode theory U calls for “retreat and reflection”. Like negative capability it calls for “open heart, open mind and open will” (Scharmer, 2010). To be able to sense which is the first step in theory U, one needs to suspend old patterns , habits, prejudices , judgments , assumptions , mental models (Hayashi 2010; Senge et al 2004) similar to what one has to do when exercising negative capability. Presencing and realizing are the next two steps to create change. Reflection must lead to new ways of action. As Senge et al say that moving along the three stages of U needs a readiness for the experience of intense disorientation when we unhinge ourselves from the taken for granted way of seeking, seeing and sensing things. Change then can be transformative. To begin the journey along the path of U, it seems that negative capability is an important disposition to be possessed as a basic prerequisite.

Negative Capability and Process oriented psychology:

Parallels can be seen between the language used to explain the concept of negative capability and the language used in Process oriented psychology developed by Arnold Mindell in the 1970s.(Diamond & Jones,2004)

- A beginners mind (French & Simpson 1999) is considered a meta-skill (Mindell, 2003) in Process oriented psychology. It means that the mind should be open, unbiased, free and spontaneous. It is being curious, open, eager, approaching everything with an empty mind (Diamond & Jones 2004). One's knowledge, a desire to understand, can be a block to see what is staring into our face.
- Dancing between polarities is fluidity without being bound by a set of ideas.; have a free mind unattached to any one identity can lead to a creative mind (Mindell, 2003)
- Edge is the "boundary between every day identity and unknown experience."(Diamond & Jones 2004 pg 125). It is confining oneself to an experience. (Mindell 2002). Recognizing it is important to work with it.

It would be interesting to explore the use of process oriented psychology to develop one's negative capability.

Conclusion

Each and every one of us lives with uncertainties and therefore all of us need to have negative capability to survive (French 2000). It is an important quality that is needed both at individual level and organizational level. Words like play, learn, explore, discover which are rarely used as a part of organization's discourse (McAra McWilliam, 2007) must be brought back into the lexicon of management. It is important to build negative capability along with positive capability in individuals, groups and organizations. Leaders must learn to hold the anxieties, fears, emotions of self and others thereby create space for new thoughts, ideas and bring in a spirit of inquiry and reflection in the organization. But it is to be seen if people suffering from neurotic anxiety, alexithymia, those with low self esteem and narcissism would be able to develop this capacity. It seems to be deeply connected to theory U and is possibly an important disposition to have by those who wish to traverse the path of Sensing , Presencing and Realizing. The study of negative capability can expand and will benefit with some qualitative research, to establish its importance in organizations paradoxically, with "fact & reason".

Heard melodies are sweet ; but those unheard Are sweeter;

therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone,

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