

## Inhumane surveillance and –management



### - Today, yesterday and in the past

While just recently reading the newspaper Stockholm City, an in one way objectionable image caught my attention. A young man, completely dressed in a typical German Stasi-uniform from the pre-reunion era, explicated his thoughts on the new Swedish FRA-law proposal through a sign saying: *FRA = STASI*. This provocative but nevertheless interesting point of view awoke some thoughts on the Stasi-management and on society control through surveillance. It also reminded me of one of my favourite movies.

This Stasi behaviour is presented through the German film *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006) and the content is analysed from a quasi managerial, organisational perspective. Citizens are seen as subjects in the country and organisation East Germany. Not only the surveillance theme will be connected to management issues; people management and the general view on mankind and on the subjects will be analysed as well.

### The failure of Stasi

Introductory, it must be established that neither the way Stasi managed the citizens of East Germany, nor the methods used by the film's leaders in order to manage individuals, can be seen as successful management today. When using modern views on management, embodying personal integrity, human capital and knowledge assets, the Stasi management would obviously be unusable. The view on mankind may be the biggest reason, and is presented later in the text.

The knowledge-based organisation is nowadays widely spread and the people are in focus (Bratton and Gold 2003). These management perspectives may not have been as debated during the Stasi era as they are now, but the failure of Stasi, caused by raging citizens tired of being under surveillance, is still a fact. Of course it can be argued in favour for the efficient and exhaustive monitoring carried out by this Ministry of State Security, but the outcome is very difficult to value from a democratic point of view. The question of what went wrong is easily answered: espionage to the extent used in East Germany sparks intense dissatisfaction and even fear among people. The fact that this could be avoided through a totally changed strategy, such as counter terrorist surveillance exclusively, will not be further discussed in this analysis.

### Mankind – the Subjects – the Germans

Before describing the film more in detail, the view of mankind, or the subjects' role in the film, is to be discussed. General knowledge about Stasi is here sufficient. Michael Foucault (1989) brought up the connection between power and the subject and expressed himself as follows:

*“...The word subject also carries connotations of subjection, of being an individual constituted within or by power structures ”*

These power structures are represented by Stasi and the monitoring performed. The subjects are the individuals constituted by this power, namely the citizens. It can easily be established that the view on the subject, in this case the citizens, would be difficult to praise for any management theorist of today. Stasi as whole obviously had big difficulties in trusting the subjects and therefore monitored them. This form of mistrust needs controlling, far more extreme than proposed by Taylor, has no comparisons. Mary Parker Follett's theories stressed the weakness in Stasi's way of looking at the subject. She meant that the focus must be to have power *with* the subject instead of power *over*.

Further on, the subject is divided into different groups and sub-groups in the film. A Stasi-report is discussed in the film:

*"Did you know that there are just five types of artists? Your guy, Dreyman, is a Type 4, a hysterical anthropocentrist. Can't bear being alone, always talking, needing friends."*

This form of separation between the subjects is of course extreme. Even though the mankind always has been divided into sub-groups, such as the academic group, as defined as the knowledge worker by Alvesson (2000), no direct connection to management theories was found.

## **People Management**

The movie opens in Berlin in 1984 with Stasi Officer Wiesler giving a lecture in surveillance and questioning. All his personal characteristics are shown directly: discipline, self confidence and a high level of control issue. If calling Wiesler a leader who uses leadership methods, he can also be classified as a manager with managerial qualities, since the two expressions are so closely related. Wiesler will from here on represent Stasi as whole. The management performed by Wiesler is weak when compared to modern people management theories. It lacks of collaboration, as defined by Gosling and Minzberg (2003), which is clarified in the opening scene. Wiesler's inhumane methods and view on the subject are questioned by one spectator, who is silenced without any discussion. A comment is written next to his name on the list of audience. Neither cooperation nor negotiation is used from Wiesler's side throughout the film, which stresses the lack of the, for a manager, important mind set called collaborative. In fact Wiesler does not even show traces of candor, an expression for honesty and openness with Welch (2005) as its biggest proponent.

The personal management methods used are often almost inhumane, and can in few cases be applied in corporations of today. Management by fear, as defined by the project group Mbyf (2008), can be either direct or indirect. Wiesler apply both techniques, the first through threats and direct threatening facial expressions, and the second, more complex management method, through surveillance without direct contact with the recipient.

The line between private life and work is non-existent for Wiesler. Of course he does not represent every Stasi officer, but is nevertheless an interesting case. If a Human Resources manager would analyse Wiesler's balance, the result would be disheartening. Wiesler works almost all the time, and when he does not work, he becomes no positive energy from his private life. The organisation Stasi almost assumes that their officers' work-life-balance is non-existing. This is of course a non-profitable situation, which is made even clearer when Wiesler at the very end, starts to involve his personal thoughts in his job. Friedman, Christensen and DeGroot (2000) express themselves as follows on this topic.

*"When a manager helps employees balance their work lives with the rest of their lives, they feel a stronger commitment to the organization"*

## Surveillance Management

The movie continually shows methods used by the police to control the society, each one characterized by Wiesler. By mapping the lives of the citizens, Stasi search for individuals with lack of loyalty to the party. In particular one artist is being controlled. Wiesler sets up surveillance equipment in the apartment and creates a headquarter in the building's attic. The Stasi-way of observing the specific artist in the movie, and consequently managing the society as whole in reality, can be linked to philosophic theories from the last century. The question of managing a society through control and surveillance, applied and exemplified by Stasi, has been a frequently debated issue in the past. This phenomena and type of management was discussed by the French philosopher Michael Foucault (1975), whose theories on the subject are discussed above. In his work *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la Prison*, (Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison), the carceral society was evaluated through prison metaphors. One specific object methaforically symbolizes Foucault's line of thinking on the control question - the *panopticon*. This object is rather a type of prison architecture, giving prison guards the possibility to observe each and every prisoner thoroughly at the same time, meanwhile the sight of the prisoners is constrained. This theory was oroginally developed by Jeremy Bentham in 1787. The typical structure of the building is shown below.



Foucault means that the panopticon symbolizes the permeative tendency to observe and control, which can be found in every society. Wiesler and his surveillance, consisting of a huge number of microphones and cameras, is strongly connected to this way of optimally observe prisoners. Noone knows if he or she is under surveillance or not, but there is always a possibility. In the movie, the prisoners are however represented by citizens, guards by the officers and the architects of the panopticon by the government. If transferred to a organisation, this would be totally centralized and in one way Taylor like. Foucault further means that power comes from knowledge (Sköld, 2008). Stasi trusts and confirms this theory through a massive collection of knowledge about the citizens, and do thereby look at themselves as powerful. This Stasi management can almost be refered to as omniscient, where the government has intentions of getting total knowledge about the characters of a society, and consequently in one way playing God's or any other religious leader's role. The following quote, as stated by the artist under surveillance, underlines the omnocience.

*"The state office for statistics on Hans-Beimler street counts everything; knows everything: how many pairs of shoes I buy a year: 2.3, how many books I read a year: 3.2 and how many students graduate with perfect marks: 6,347"*

According to the “random definition” given by Sköld (2008), management includes:

*“Recording and storing facts and information for later use...”.*

This is without any doubts exactly what Stasi did, but on a national level instead of organisational. And maybe they accepted this definition a little bit to literal. The man in the newspaper article who was described in the introduction compares Stasi’s data collection with the management methods used by FRA. Maybe he should take a look at the difference in storing data between the two organisations. I doubt that Stasi will use the inhumane surveillance methods used by Wiesler, in terms of mapping millions of peoples private lives and imprisoning them for having opinions not going in line with the government’s.

After watching the film and discussing the total surveillance society and –management, many questions are awoken. Does surveillance management exist today, and if, then where and how? How can this type of management be transferred to firms? Such questions will partly be answered in the film “Management through Surveillance”. Publishing date 2008-10-26.

**Tobias Nylander**

tnyl@kth.se

---

#### **Sources:**

The film: Das Leben der Anderen (2006)

Alvesson (2000), Alvesson, M., *Social identity and the problem of loyalty in knowledge-intensive companies*. The Journal of Management Studies. Vol. 37. No. 8. (2000)

Bratton and Gold (2003), Bratton, J., Gold, J., *Human Resource Management – Theory and Practice*. 3rd edition. Palgrave Macmillian (2003)

Foucault (1975), Foucault, M., *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la Prison*, (1975)

Foucault (1989), [www.twobench.es.wordpress.com](http://www.twobench.es.wordpress.com), Title: Foucault: subject and power

Friedman, Christensen and DeGroot (2000), Friedman, S., Christensen, P., DeGroot, J., *Work and Life: The End of the Zero-Sum Game*. Harvard Business Review. 1 July (2000)

Gosling and Minzberg (2003), Gosling, J., Minzberg, J., *The five Mind-sets of a manager*, Harvard Business Review, 1 November (2003)

Mbyf (2008). Group Mbyf’s blog, [mbyf.wordpress.com](http://mbyf.wordpress.com)

Sköld (2008), Sköld, D., [http://davas.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/m3t\\_f2.pdf](http://davas.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/m3t_f2.pdf) and [http://davas.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/m3t\\_f3.pdf](http://davas.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/m3t_f3.pdf) (2008)

Welch (2005), Welch, J., *Winning*. Harper Collins Publishers (2005)