

Are liberated companies a concrete application of Sen's capability approach?

Abstract

The capability approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen focuses on the enhancement of people's capabilities, i.e. their real freedom to choose a life course they have reason to value. Applying the CA to the organizational context, the focus of human resource management is transformed, shifting away from the needs of the organization to the freedoms of the individual. This shift happens also inside the so-called 'liberated companies,' firms with an organizational form that allows employees the complete freedom, along with the responsibility, to take any actions they decide are best. In this paper we show the contribution of the capability approach for management and for organizational ethics by focusing on this innovative model of 'liberated companies.'

Keywords: capability approach, freedom, happiness, liberated companies, organizational ethics

Introduction

Several authors have explored the application of Amartya Sen's capability approach in management (Cornelius and Skinner, 2008; Gagnon and Cornelius, 2006; Gandjour, 2008; Gries and Naude, 2011; Kuchinke, 2012; Orton, 2011; Trani et al., 2011; Zimmermann, 2011), and in business ethics (Bertland, 2009; Downs and Swailes, 2013).

Considering the recent diffusion of 'liberated companies' (Getz, 2009) and the application of Sen's capabilities approach to management theory, this article tries to answer the following question: Are liberated companies a concrete application of Sen's capability approach?

There are several reasons why we associate liberated companies with this approach. For Sen, it is important that people have freedoms or capabilities, as these are valuable opportunities for a person to lead the kind of lives that they want, to do what they want to do and to be how they want to be. Having these 'substantive freedoms,' people can choose those options they value most (Sen, 1999). A 'liberated company' allows an employee complete freedom, as well as the responsibility, to take actions they decide are best (Getz, 2009). In other words, liberated companies allow employees both to choose which actions to undertake and which skills they want to develop. This is coherent with Sen's definition of capabilities as the 'substantive freedoms' a person 'enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (1999, p. 87).

Getz (2009) defines a 'liberated company' as one with an organizational form, called the *F-form*, that allows employees complete freedom to take actions they decide are best, in order to enhance productivity and performance. This freedom granted to employees recalls the aim of Sen's 'development as freedom,' which is at the basis of the capability approach (Sen, 1999).

Liberated companies revolutionise the Human Resources practices for three main reasons. First, letting employees enjoy a degree of freedom and take responsibility over actions encourages them to do their best for their firm, so that both the employees' and their organization's performance will be enhanced. Second, employees are given the freedom to take actions in order to meet their psychological needs - such as respect, trust and self-realisation. Furthermore, the liberating leaders build environments that allow employees to move into jobs with growth opportunities and to acquire the skills to succeed in them (Getz, 2009). Considering Sen's definition of capabilities as 'the ability to achieve' (1987a), we will show how 'liberating leaders' enhance employees' capabilities. To arrive at this conclusion, we proceed in the following way.

First, we describe in detail the conception of both capabilities and functionings according to Sen (1987a, 1992, 1999) by comparing his thought to that of other scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum (1995, 2000, 2003). Second, we further explore what already exists in management literature about the capability approach, focusing in particular on those authors applying it to enhance employees' capabilities and development inside organizations (Downs and Swailes, 2013; Zimmermann, 2012). Third, we explain why 'liberated companies' (Carney and Getz, 2015) can be considered a concrete and contextualized application of Sen's capability approach, given the importance of the concepts of both 'freedom' and 'responsibility' within them. Finally, we describe the contribution of 'liberated companies' for management and for organizational ethics, by introducing a list of capabilities contextualized to organizations.

Furthermore, through this article we make three contributions. First, we add to the literature on Sen's CA in the managerial field. Second, we answer the call of Getz and Carney who recall that "liberation management is looking for theory" (2012b, p. 12). Third,

we identify a list of capabilities in liberated companies, which could foster future empirical research.

The Capability Approach

The economist Amartya Sen introduced the concept of ‘capabilities’ in the 1980s in relation to the issue of poverty in developing countries (Deneulin and McGregor, 2010) and as an alternative to the utilitarian basis of modern welfare economics and liberal political thought (Burchardt, 2004).

Nowadays the concept of ‘capabilities’ is applied in ‘the capability approach,’ a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society (Robeyns, 2005). It can also be used to empirically assess aspects of an individual’s or group’s well-being, such as inequality or poverty, and as an alternative to mainstream cost-benefit analysis or as a framework to develop and evaluate policies ranging from welfare state design in affluent societies, to development policies by governments and non-governmental organisations in developing countries (Robeyns, 2006).

In particular, according to Sen, evaluations and policies should focus on what people are able to do and be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they are better able to live the kind of life that they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2005).

The strength of the capability approach lies in offering a radically different ideological narrative to neo-liberalism by focusing on the shaping of the socio-economic context so as to enable citizens to have the opportunity to choose for themselves what constitutes, to use one of Sen’s phrases, a ‘flourishing life’ (Orton, 2011).

The core characteristic of the capability approach is that assessments of the well-being of a person, or the level of development of a country, do not primarily focus on resources but on the effective opportunities that people have to do and to be; that is, on their capabilities.

This approach is used in a wide range of fields, especially in development studies, welfare economics, social policy and political philosophy. In academia, it is used for applied and empirical studies and discussed in philosophical terms. It has also provided the theoretical foundations of the human development paradigm (Fukuda-Parr, 2003; Fukuda-Parr and Kumar, 2003).

The three main elements of the capability approach are functionings, capabilities and agency (Deneulin and McGregor, 2010). Sen defines functionings as “the various things a person may value doing or being” (1999, p. 75). They are the activities and states that shape a person’s well-being, such as being educated, taking part in the community, caring for others, having a good job, being healthy, and so on.

Capabilities refer to the freedoms one has to do these activities or reach these states. Sen defines capabilities as:

“the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another . . . to choose from possible livings” (1992, p. 40).

In Sen’s vision, a capability consists in a combination of functionings, either potential or achieved (Robeyns, 2005). In this last case, we can talk about realised functionings, in as much as they are directly observable.

Sen also discussed basic capabilities, which are related to the freedom to do those basic activities fundamental for escaping poverty. The importance of basic capabilities is “not

so much in ranking living standards, but in deciding on a cut-off point for the purpose of assessing poverty and deprivation” (Sen, 1987b, p. 109). The difference between basic capabilities and the general notion of capabilities refers to the fact that the former are used for studying well-being in developing countries, and therefore refer to real opportunity to avoid poverty; instead, the latter serve to analyse well-being in affluent countries.

The idea of the capability approach, including both the concept of capabilities and that of functionings, is expressed in Sen’s own words:

“A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead” (Sen, 1987a, p. 36).

In Sen’s view, freedom is one of the most basic aspects of human life and is closely related to capabilities. Indeed, in an alternative definition, Sen defines capabilities as the ‘substantive freedoms’ a person “enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value” (1999, p. 87) and he defines freedom as “the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value” (1992, p. 31). Hence, for Sen, it is important that people have freedoms or capabilities to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and to be the person they want to be. In other words, it is the very act of freely choosing to allow people to love what they freely choose.

In order to measure processes, actions and the nature of opportunities, Sen developed the idea of ‘instrumental freedoms.’ He describes, in particular, five instrumental freedoms, universal in nature and sensitive to cross-cultural concerns. These ideas “were developed for economies and societies as a whole, but have important resonance and potential application in work organizations” (Gagnon and Cornelius, 2006, p. 75). Sen’s (1999) instrumental

freedoms are: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security.

Finally, for Sen, the concept of agency is the ability to pursue goals that one has reason to value. Individuals, within the CA, are considered as “agents who have diverse valued goals and commitments on behalf of themselves and of their society” (Alkire, 2005, p. 125). The concepts of freedom and agency are strongly related. In fact, according to Sen, agency is crucial for achieving freedom. For example, he highlights the importance of women’s ‘well-being’ and women’s ‘agency’ in the development context (Sen, 1999, p. 189). A focus on wellbeing leads to better treatment for women, while a focus on rights promotes freedom and equality. Therefore, ensuring wellbeing must come first. Subsequently, it is important that people become ‘dynamic promoters of social transformations’ (Sen, 1999, p. 189).

Sen and Nussbaum’s conception of capabilities

In recent years, other scholars have further developed the capability approach, including Martha Nussbaum. The approach of Nussbaum is very close to that of Sen, especially in criticizing mainstream theories such as utilitarianism. However, Nussbaum and Sen also have different opinions on a number of issues, including different goals for their work on capabilities.

Nussbaum aims to develop a partial theory of justice by considering the capability approach as a moral-legal-political philosophy in order to deduce the fundamental principles that a state should guarantee to all. To do so, Nussbaum, provides a well-defined but general list of ‘central human capabilities’ to incorporate in every constitution. Her work is universal, as she argues all states should adopt these capabilities.

Conversely, when Sen began to develop on the capability approach, he did not have a clear aim in mind. Certainly he was interested in conceptualizing freedom as a basis not only for human development but also for social justice, as he suggested in his article 'Equality of What?' (1980). He was interested in the equality question in liberal political philosophy, claiming that there are good reason to focus on capabilities rather than considering Rawlsian resources or utility (Sen, 1980). Furthermore, in the course of his work on poverty and destitution in developing countries, Sen found empirical support for a focus on what people can do and be, also in relation to social choices.

Hence, Sen's work on the capability approach is closer to economic reasoning than Nussbaum's and is linked to quantitative empirical applications and measurements. At the same time, Nussbaum's work is closer to traditions in the humanities, such as narrative approaches. Her work engages with poetic texts in order to better understand people's feelings, desires, decisions and motivations.

These differences are translated into the kind of capability approach that Nussbaum and Sen have developed. Indeed, if Sen's notion of capabilities is that of an effective opportunity (as in social choice theory), Nussbaum's notion of capability pays more attention to individual skills and personality traits, as features of capabilities.

Furthermore, Nussbaum (1988, p. 176; 2003) has argued that Sen should endorse a definite list of capabilities if he wants to apply the capability approach to gender inequality and social justice. Nussbaum has herself proposed a concrete list of capabilities, specified in more detail in several recent publications (1995, 2000, 2003). This list is composed of the following ten categories: (1) life; (2) bodily health; (3) bodily integrity; (4) senses, imagination and thought; (5) emotions; (6) practical reason; (7) affiliation; (8) other species; (9) play; and (10) control over one's environment. However, Nussbaum (2000, 2003) has

always stressed that peoples should adapt her general list of capabilities to their specific needs.

Sen is disinclined to provide a fixed list of capabilities to go with his general capability approach (Sen, 2004a, 2004b); he argues that it would be a mistake to build a mausoleum for a ‘fixed and final’ list of capabilities usable for every purpose and unaffected by the progress of understanding of the social role and importance of different capabilities. In fact, according to Sen, “we cannot make one final list of capabilities, as these lists are used for different purposes, and each purpose might need its own list” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 106). He also points out that a list of capabilities must be dependent on the geographical, cultural and social context, and the sort of evaluation that is to be done (Robeyns, 2003). Finally, in Sen’s view, public reasoning can lead to a better understanding of the role of specific capabilities.

Another difference in the CA between Sen and Nussbaum relates to Nussbaum’s attempt to use capabilities to justify constitutional principles that citizens have the right to demand from their government. Conversely, Sen’s CA is not as focused on claims against the government: instead, it refers to a broader range of aims.

Finally, Nussbaum does not support the difference between agency and wellbeing operated by Sen. In fact, in Nussbaum’s view, “all the important distinctions can be captured as aspects of the capability/functioning distinction” (2000, p. 14). Moreover, practical reason, in Nussbaum’s approach, has an architectonic role that goes beyond its contribution to wellbeing; therefore, it is probably the main site of agency (Robeyns, 2005).

Despite all these divergent points, some common ideas may be found in Nussbaum and Sen's positions on the CA. For instance, both point out that people find more fulfillment when they choose which capabilities to make functional. Nussbaum affirms that some of these are fundamental, whereas Sen wants to avoid making such a ranking . For both, the opportunity to freely select which capabilities to functionalize makes people happier.

Martha Nussbaum has also described basic capabilities as innate abilities, in as much as they form the basis for developing superior capabilities. Moreover, she developed two other categories of capabilities beyond the basic ones, i.e. internal and combined capabilities. The former are the states of a person allowing them to express a precise capability, if the context allows for this accomplishment. The latter are the internal capabilities together with those external provisions (for example laws within the society or structures within a public institution or work organisation) that allow the person to implement the capability (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 775; 2000, pp. 83–85). Both Sen and Nussbaum hold that politics should focus on combined capabilities, even if their categories and terminology are different.

Returning to the importance that Sen gives to context for the application of capabilities, we will see in the next section how the CA has been applied to the field of management, including business ethics.

The capability approach in management literature, including business ethics

Sen (1993, 2004a, 2004b) deliberately refuses to specify how the capability approach might be used, insisting that it has multiple potential applications. In the literature, it has been used to analyse a range of management situations including workplace equality (Gagnon and Cornelius, 2000), human resource development (Cameron and Eyeson, 2012; Kuchinke 2012, Subramanian et al., 2013), employability (Orton, 2011), careers of senior managers (Cornelius and Skinner, 2008), disability policy (Trani et al., 2011), health care (Gandjour, 2008), entrepreneurship (Gries and Naude, 2011) and business ethics (Bertland, 2009; Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2016).

In particular, in the business and virtue ethics literature, one of the research questions is if the capability approach can provide the theoretical justification for virtue ethics in business (Bertland, 2009). In other words, a manager should be able to encourage the

development of others within organizations by helping them to be what they want to be and to become aware of what they can achieve: in Sen's terms, a manager should be able to enhance employees' capabilities. Hence, the capability approach answers the question of what it means for a manager to serve a community (Berland, 2009). Remaining in the area of ethics, Downs and Swailes claim that:

“The CA insists that every person matters but also insists that they are ethical individuals. The ethical individual, far from being completely self-serving, sees themselves as a social being with obligations to others. Hence, it assumes that they would want to work in ways that would benefit others” (2013, p. 277).

Downs and Swailes also hold (2013) that the CA can be extended into the area of the organization-employee relationship. Fundamentally, they claim that:

“CA transforms a managerial view of human resource management that positions it primarily as a means of serving organizational effectiveness into one in which the focus is shifted away from the needs of the organization to the freedoms of the individual” (2013, p. 273).

In particular, they think that talent management programmes, particularly those fuelled by the narratives of scarcity and metaphors of war, ignore important social and ethical dimensions to the detriment of both organizations and individuals. The capability approach, based on the idea of freedoms, not resources, restores ethical considerations in talent management and provides principles to be put in practice by corporate leaders and human resource managers (Downs and Swailes, 2013).

Translating these observations into the organizational setting means working not only for the greater organizational good, but letting people flourish and function in the capability sense. Organizations must thus consider what they are doing to help employees thrive within an environment where their talents enable them to function as they wish.

In the literature, other studies have also concerned the question of capabilities in the workplace (Bonvin, 2012; Zimmermann, 2011, 2012). Zimmermann (2012), analysing collective responsibility in the workplace from a capability perspective, draws attention away from the performance factor to capabilities. She shows how a shift in perspective results from using the capability approach in evaluating corporate activity. Here, instead of focusing on economic development, attention is given to the dimension of human development. Moreover, her findings show that companies are best placed to promote workers' capabilities when they promote, in addition to social dialogue, a sense of the collective based on shared values other than those strictly linked to market demand, and offer a forum for participation and open discussion of work-related issues (Zimmermann, 2012, p. 23).

Considering these findings and the managerial literature about the capability approach, here we present 'liberated companies' as firms applying Sen's capability approach.

Do liberated firms fit with Sen's capability approach?

In one sense, Sen offers the capability approach as a way to highlight the importance of people's freedom, fulfilment and happiness. Recently, in the organizational context, many researchers have aimed to promote a more humanist management in favour of employees' well-being and fulfilment at work (e.g. Järlströme et al., 2018; Shen, 2011; Shen and Zhu, 2011).

These 'New Forms of Work Organization' (NFWO) (Picard and Marti Lanuza, 2016) are constituted, for example, by the seminal reflections of Peters (1988, 1993), the works from Human Relations movement (e.g. McGregor, 1960; Maslow, 1943; Lewin, 1952 or Herzberg, 2008), the participatory model of management (Gilbert et al., 2017), the 'third type of company' (Seriex and Archier, 1984), the adhocracy and the mission organization models (Mintzberg, 1990), the model of agile management (Barrand, 2012) and more recently, the

holacracy model (Robertson, 2015). The promotion of more humanist management has also found a place in the model of ‘liberated companies.’

This innovative model was born with *Freedom, Inc.*, written by Isaac Getz and Bryan M. Carney (2009). The authors visited many companies during four years of research, and then wrote about new ways of working.

Getz and Carney (2009) describe that type of leadership, called *liberating leadership*, necessary to build an organizational environment that liberates employees’ initiative and creativity. Through liberating leadership, people are treated with trust and respect, allowed to grow and to self-direct. These leaders stimulate their employees’ initiative, engagement, and intrinsic motivation by reshaping their organizational environments based on freedom and responsibility.

Getz (2009) defines a ‘liberated company’ as one with an organizational form, called the *F-form*, that grants employees the complete freedom to take actions they decide are best, in order to enhance productivity and performance. This freedom recalls the aim of Sen’s ‘development as freedom’ that is at the basis of the capability approach (Sen, 1999).

This new form of work organization targets performance through promoting the well-being and happiness of employees at work. It has been adopted by many companies (e.g. Sew Usocome, Favi, Poult, etc.) and studied by numerous scholars in France (Ramboarison-Lalao and Gannouni, 2018).

Getz claims that:

“In order for the F-form to be adopted, a specific type of leadership—we call it *liberating*—needs to be embraced by the company’s head. Inversely, the non-adoption of the F-form can be traced to the company head’s non-embrace of some aspects of liberating leadership” (2009, p. 34).

In particular, he analysed companies with liberating leaders who used guiding criteria in addition to those of achieving freedom and responsibility for employees in their liberation campaign. From this collective set of criteria, he derived the unique type of leadership: the 'liberating leadership' (Getz, 2009).

We stress that the logic of liberated companies is in line with Sen's thought that people are happy when they are free to do and to be what they want (1992, 1999). In liberated companies, indeed, "employees have complete freedom and responsibility to take actions that they, not their bosses, decide are best" (Getz, 2009, p. 34).

Although there are some universal principles linked to 'liberated firms,' each leader must apply them to their unique set of circumstances. However, through an empirical study conducted on two liberated firms, Sew Usocome and Favi, Getz (2012a) argues that liberation management goes through four main steps.

The first step consists in "dismantling the symbols and the practices which prevented workers from naturally feel equal" (Getz, 2012a), for example, by eliminating the organizational chart. Getz (2009), in his research, mentioned the strategy of SAS in approaching this step. Specifically, SAS' CEO, Jim Goodnight, chose to treat employees extraordinary well in order both to increase company's success and to promote equality. In fact, he provided everyone with benefits such as "free food, numerous families parties, a recommended 35-hour work week and flexible work schedule, on-site health-care, fitness and wellness facilities, departments helping employees with their children's education, elderly parent care, and more" (Getz, 2009, p. 40).

The second step is related to the ability of the "liberation leader to share their vision of high performance with all their collaborators for them to agree with," so each collaborator is free to define for themselves the actions to take (Getz, 2012, p. 33), in order to "manage without managers" (Picard, 2015, p. 70). The CEO of Vertex, for example, started to share

his vision during recruitment, claiming: “Welcome to Vertex. You are free to leave” (Getz, 2009, p. 41). In this manner, he allowed employees to feel free to follow other paths if they are more closely related to their aspirations.

The third step concerns “creating a self-motivating environment” (Getz, 2012a, p. 34). As highlighted by Getz (2009), in W.L. Gore & Associates, “Bill Gore encouraged self-direction in his employees by asking, ‘Have you made any mistakes lately?’ When the answer was ‘No,’ he replied, ‘You haven’t been taking enough risks’.” (p. 43).

Finally, the fourth step “aims to sustain liberation management in the long term” (Getz, 2012a, p. 34). For example, “In his 25 years with FAVI, Zobrist didn’t dismiss any of the many people whose jobs became useless—because they were bureaucratic—in his freedom-based company. He did, however, promptly fire three people for malfeasance. This applied not only to those who abused material assets but—as importantly—those who abused people” (Getz, 2009, p. 46).

To sum up, these main four steps can be explained through these four universal principles: (1) “stop telling and start listening” so as to remove the practices preventing employees from feeling intrinsically equal; (2) start openly and actively sharing your vision of the company so people will ‘own’ it; (3) “stop trying to motivate people,” in order to build an environment that allows people to grow and self-direct and to motivate themselves; (4) “stay alert,” as the leader must become the culture keeper if he wants to keep the company free (Carney and Getz, 2015, pp. xvi-xvii).

All these features belonging to ‘liberated companies’ and to ‘liberating leaders’ can be linked to Sen’s capability approach as applied to management and in organizational ethics. Specifically, the first step can be associated with the promotion of both freedom and equality in the CA. Sen, indeed, was interested in creating a theory of freedom both for human development and the promotion of social justice, as he stressed in his contribution ‘Equality

of What?' (1980). The second step can be related to Sen's affirmation that it is important for people to have the freedoms or capabilities to do and to be what they want. In fact, in Sen's view, a person is happy when they are free in this way (1992, 1999). The third step may be connected to the act of freely choosing - found in Sen's CA - which allows people to love what they freely choose. Finally, the fourth step is connected to the strong emphasis on freedom offered by Sen (1999) in explaining the CA; this freedom should be granted to all people in the long term.

Other reasons allowing us to connect liberated companies to Sen's CA can be found in the shift from traditional hierarchical classical companies towards liberated ones, which we will examine in further depth below.

Shifting from traditional to liberated companies

Getz (2009) examines the design criteria used by liberating leaders to build the F-form in their companies by considering Deci and Ryan's theoretical framework of a "nourishing, non-controlling environment for self-motivation" and its three universal needs of being treated as intrinsically equal, of growth and of self-direction. In discussing the factor of motivation, Deci and Ryan refer to self-determination theory (STD). Although the STD emerged in 1970s and the first definition of SDT appeared in the mid-1980s (Deci and Ryan, 1985), it began to gain momentum a decade later. In comparison to other historical and contemporary theories of motivation, SDT distinguishes among types of motivation. A peculiar trait of SDT consists in its separation of autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. The former includes both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In this case, people integrate the activity's value into their sense of self; therefore, they are autonomously motivated and experience a self-endorsement of their actions (Deci and Ryan, 2008). The

latter implies both external and introjected regulation, and pressures people to behave in a specific manner.

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), people are programmed for mastery and happiness, which flourish in the presence of three factors: “relatedness,” “competence,” and “autonomy.” Relatedness is defined as the “desire to love and care, and to be loved and cared for”; competence as a “propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it”; and autonomy as a “desire to self-organize experience and behavior and to have activity be concordant with one’s integrated sense of self” (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 231). Therefore, when people are treated with consideration and are provided with support for growth and self-direction, they satisfy the three universal needs and become self-motivated (Decy and Ryan, 2000). Hence, people who are completely free and responsible to self-initiate actions are self-motivated.

Given this picture, liberating leadership recalls Burns’ ‘transforming leadership,’ before Bass and others turned it into ‘transformational’ leadership, as a model for organisational effectiveness. It also has clear links to spiritual leadership and to servant leadership. With reference to transforming leadership and liberating leadership, they aim to improve people’s motivation (Burns, 1978). The transforming approach, indeed, reforms people’s expectations and aspirations. Conversely, in proposing ‘transformation leadership,’ Bass (1995) assessed leaders’ activities in terms of their influence on the followers. Like liberating leadership, spiritual leadership aims to strengthen motivation. In fact, according to Fry (2003), spiritual leadership is based on altruistic love and on behaviors grounded on motivating oneself and others to have a sense of spiritual existence. In the same manner, servant leaders must put people first, and listening to their needs and desires (Whetstone, 2002).

All things considered, it is possible to note some differences between traditional hierarchical organizations and liberated companies. These dissimilarities can be found in three differences in the organizational design, which can be connected to the four universal principles mentioned above.

First, while liberated companies are characterized by the principle of ‘liberty,’ the former are characterized by that of control. The latter aims to align the individual’s goals with those of the organization (Solari, 2016). Moreover, it does not allow employees the freedom to express themselves and to satisfy their need for autonomy.

Another difference emerging between classic companies and liberated ones concerns the use of tasks vs. the self-motivation. The task refers to a precise set of activities, established *ex ante*, to be performed. Tasks are typical of traditional hierarchical companies, where a specific set of behaviors, roles, and actions is fixed and standardized. On the contrary, in liberated companies, self-motivation can arise in as much as employees are free and responsible to self-initiate actions.

Finally, the third different organizational design principle concerns ‘participation’ in liberated companies vs. ‘competition’ in bureaucratic organizations. Participation is connected to the second universal principle of liberated companies: “start openly and actively sharing your vision of the company so people will ‘own’ it” (Carney and Getz, 2015, pp. xvi-xvii). This second step – as mentioned above - is connected to the ability of the “liberation leader to share their vision of high performance with all their collaborators for them to agree with” (Getz, 2012, p. 33). In traditional hierarchical companies, it is difficult to find leaders who share their vision of the company with their employees; on the contrary, they usually choose by themselves the actions to undertake.

Recently, the philosophy of liberation management has drawn the attention of many business leaders around the world, who see it as a way of transforming their firms into

workplaces based on freedom and respect (Carney and Getz, 2015). Freedom- and responsibility-based company models are spreading worldwide, but liberated firms are most numerous in France and Belgium, including Michelin, Airbus, Decathlon, ministries, social security branches, and hundreds of SMEs.

Although the promotion of worker well-being and equal opportunity is gaining ground worldwide (Solari, 2016), we think that Carney and Getz' contribution in this direction is attracting more and more attention especially in the European context for cultural reasons. This increase in concern for workers has led to different concrete applications across states. While in Anglo-Saxon countries it is expressed as a mere managerial method, in European countries it fits into the broader social debate on worker participation and corporate governance, especially in French-speaking countries.

In fact, in the English language literature, only a few studies (e.g. Peters, 1988, 1993) have explicitly addressed the concept of liberation management/liberated firm. Conversely, in France, the innovative model of 'liberated firm' emerged in 2012 (Getz and Carney, 2012) and the phenomenon of the 'liberated firm' is fascinating an increasing number of managers, leaders and also scholars (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2017; Jacquinet and Pellissier-Tanon, 2015; Picard, 2015).

In France and in Belgium, some authors have also raised criticisms about liberated firms. For example, according to Gilbert et al., liberation management can be considered as "both being in continuity and in rupture with the participatory model" (2017, p. 47). Picard (2015) critiques participation as an emancipatory project in liberation management. Jacquinet and Pellissier-Tanon (2015), by comparing Google and Favi, show the risk of manipulation of workers by the liberation leader. Verrier and Bourgeois (2016, p. 79 and following) argue that liberation management is a vehicle for a 'psychologizing approach' focused on

individuals; in particular, they criticize “the lack of regulation of the interactions” and the binary logic of “all-or-none” related to liberation management.

However, other authors, such as Ramboarison-Lalao and Gannouni (2018) have explored through their empirical research the assumption that the liberated firm is a force for well-being and technological change at work. In this way, they contribute to both the theoretical and empirical understanding of liberation management, answering the call of Getz that “liberation management is looking for theory” (2012b, p. 12).

There are several good reasons for English language researchers to be interested in the idea of liberated companies. These are different from traditional and hierarchical organizations, and some large companies are able to implement this radical approach by carefully following the four steps mentioned above.

In the next section, in order to answer Getz’s and Carney’s call for a theory of liberation management, first we will place liberated companies within the debate over virtue and business ethics, then we will introduce a specific list of capabilities connecting liberated companies with Sen’s CA.

The implications of liberated companies for organizational ethics

Liberated companies within virtue and business ethics

As demonstrated by Bertland (2009), the capability approach provides a theoretical justification for virtue ethics in business. Considering Sen and Nussbaum’s thought related to guaranteeing the human dignity of every person, the capability approach provides a foundation for virtue ethics by using the notion of human dignity. Indeed, according to Bertland:

“The capabilities approach starts with the fundamental moral insight that humans are free and have dignity. This becomes the fundamental justification for the approach. Since all humans have this dignity, it makes sense that an ethical system must promote this dignity. Therefore, an ethical system must encourage the free development of human capabilities to enhance their dignity” (2009, p. 28).

In *Ethics and Excellence*, Solomon underlines the importance of the community for fostering virtue (1992, p. 145) and shows how virtue ethics builds integrity through the ‘order’ and the ‘whole’ of a person’s character. In relation to this, Solomon insists on virtues and integrity, considering the latter as ‘wholeness.’ He claims that integrity stands for “wholeness of virtue, wholeness as a person, wholeness in the sense of being part of something larger than the person – the community, the corporation, society, humanity, the cosmos” (Solomon, 1999, p. 38).

Solomon, influenced by the Aristotelian approach to business ethics, furthermore considers corporations as communities, stating also that “business people and corporations are first of all part of a larger community” (2004, p. 1022) and that “the first principle of business ethics is that the corporation is itself a citizen, a member of the larger community, and it is inconceivable without it” (2004, p. 1028).

Considering Aristotle’s reflections on the responsibility of business within society, Solomon highlights also that: “Corporations, like individuals, are part and parcel of communities that created them, and the responsibilities that they bear are not a product of arguments or implicit contracts but intrinsic to their existence as social entities” (1992, p. 184).

Joining these observations to Sen and Nussbaum’s theories, the main aim of business should not be making money, but letting people develop their capabilities and giving them the freedom to choose what they value. Hence, in the functionalist sense, the challenge of

modern organizations is to find ways of organizing and structuring themselves so that employees are able to live well together, flourish and develop their capabilities.

This would also be an application of both the common good principle and the personalist principle. In the first case, Finnis states that the common good includes “such an ensemble of conditions which enhance the opportunity of flourishing for all members of a community” (Finnis, 1986, p. 165). Indeed, the common good refers not only to the ‘public interest’ or to the ‘common welfare,’ but is broader, since it includes everything that can contribute to authentic human development. This development, or human flourishing, has to be achieved by each person in accordance with basic human goods and individual preferences.

In the second case, the personalist principle applied to business organizations consists in treating people within companies with benevolence (Melé, 2009). Benevolence goes beyond taking care of people’s needs and legitimate interests. It seeks what is good for others and favours their integral development. In business organizations, benevolence is expressed in promoting professional and human development. We can affirm that benevolence is practiced in liberated companies insofar as they foster the development of human potential by enhancing employees’ capabilities.

Liberated companies and employees’ happiness. We argue that the “liberation campaign” advanced by Carney and Getz (2015, p. 75) aims to humanize companies, letting people do and be what they want. In particular, we read this phenomenon as an attempt to move from an ‘economism-based business ethos’ to a ‘humanist business ethos’ (Melé, 2012). But what does ‘humanizing companies’ mean?

Many authors in business ethics have dealt with the concept of happiness (Audi, 2012; Bertland, 2009; Hartman, 2008a; Hartman, 2008b; Solomon, 2004), considering the

Aristotelian vision of happiness as ‘human flourishing.’ Throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls the end-state for humans *eudaimonia*, which is usually translated as ‘happiness’ or, more precisely, ‘flourishing.’ This Greek expression meant the highest end that a human person can realize: “what is the highest of all goods achievable by action” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), I, 4, 1095a). According to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* requires rationality, of which humans alone are capable, and is a state of good character.

Solomon considers happiness in Aristotelian terms – hence, as flourishing or doing well – and claims that:

“becoming the sort of person one wants to become includes to a very large extent what one does ‘for a living’ – is what happiness is all about. Happiness is ‘flourishing,’ and this means fitting into a world of other people and sharing the good life, including ‘a good job,’ with them” (Solomon, 2004, p. 1024).

Here we share Deneulin’s and McGregor’s critique (2010) of Sen’s capability approach by considering the logic of ‘living well together’ inside organizations, especially in relation to the Aristotelian concept of happiness, according to which people cannot be happy alone.

In fact, Deneulin and McGregor update the *telos* of ‘living well,’ which is at the heart of Sen’s version of the capability approach, with the *telos* of ‘living well together’: “which includes consideration of the social structures and institutions which enable people to pursue individual freedoms in relation to others” (2010, p. 501)¹. In reference to this, according to Aristotle, people can become what they are only within the community (NE 1094a25 – 1094b10).

We consider the capability approach as compatible with the Aristotelian concept of happiness as *eudaimonia*. However, what both Solomon and Sen add to Aristotle is that flourishing increases when one chooses what capabilities to develop. In this sense, Sen’s work may be regarded as neo-Aristotelian, as the CA reflects on the merits and shortcomings

of utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Rawlsian ethical theories, rather than being a wholesale acceptance of virtue ethics. In Sen's capability approach, happiness is one component of a 'good life.' The development of human potential inside organizations can be translated as the development of employees' capabilities. This is what happens in 'liberated companies.' Here we list the main capabilities that 'liberating leaders' let employees develop.

The list of capabilities in liberated companies

For Sen, a list of capabilities must be context dependent (Robeyns, 2003). With this in mind, we propose a list of capabilities that may be present within 'liberated companies.' Before offering our list of capabilities in companies, we put our paper in dialogue with recent ideas on listing capabilities in scholarship.

As highlighted above, Sen and Nussbaum have two different positions related to listing capabilities. It is possible to find risks in both positions with reference to democratic decision-making. In Sen's case, it is not clear how the processes of public reasoning should take place; moreover, not all applications of Sen's CA allow for democratic discussion. Accordingly, in these contexts, the procedures for selecting capabilities should be set clearly beforehand. Some problems emerge also with Nussbaum's position. In her case, the capabilities are too general in nature, which can lead to problematic lists in the case of undemocratic local decision-making.

According to Qizilbash (2002), most of the existing lists of capabilities can be reconciled. He underlines that few academics have focused in depth on the kind of democratic institutions that the CA, in practical terms, would need. Moreover, he stresses that the content of different lists depends on their context and strategic reasons behind them.

Several scholars, with different backgrounds and aims, have proposed lists of capabilities (see for example Alkire and Black, 1997; Erikson, 1993; Nussbaum, 1995, 2000,

2003). Nevertheless, none have yet proposed a list to be applied in companies. We offer below our capabilities –applied to liberated companies– and explain the methodological process used to develop it.

Firstly, we highlight that most of the lists of capabilities set forth in the literature to date have a universal valence, as they are applied to the social context. Therefore, they include some general capabilities that should be guaranteed by the social welfare system. Conversely, since we aim to apply the list of capabilities in liberated companies, we focus only on work. We do not consider some capabilities such as life, health and bodily integrity – mentioned by Martha Nussbaum in her list (1995, 2000, 2003)– in as much we hold they should be guaranteed by the social system.

Secondly, focusing in depth on liberated companies, we start from the four general principles elaborated by Getz (2012a) in order to define a list of capabilities that gives people freedom. It is possible to find a correlation between peoples' capabilities and the four principles mentioned above (see table 1). The first step 'stop telling and start listening' can be associated to competence, responsibility, time autonomy and equality in as much as liberating leaders allow employees to develop their skills, to be responsible, to manage autonomously their time and to feel equal within liberated companies. The second step, 'sharing your vision of the company,' allows employees to be part of the decision-making processes. The third step, 'stop trying to motivate people,' leads employees to self-direct and to motivate themselves. The fourth step, 'stay alert,' consists in guaranteeing employees the opportunities to flourish in the long term within liberated companies. We will examine each capability in further depth below.

Thirdly, to best connect liberated companies with CA, we point out the importance of analyzing the concept of 'free work' in depth. Since work is embedded in people, in order to give people freedom to do and to be what they want (Sen, 1992, 1999) in the context of

liberated companies, it is necessary that work is free. Specifically, we argue that work is free when the job carried out by individuals reveals their thoughts, emotions and capabilities, to the point to realize them as people.

Finally, we compare our list of specific capabilities with the more general ones already proposed by other authors. We focus especially on the lists of both Nussbaum (1995, 2000, 2003) and Robeyns (2003) in as much as they introduce capabilities related to both human development and human dignity, both strongly related to the concept of ‘free work.’

With this in mind, we propose the following list of capabilities:

1. Competence
2. Responsibility
3. Time autonomy
4. Equality
5. Inclusivity
6. Self-motivation
7. Human flourishing

Competence. It is the ability to achieve the desired results thanks to the development of the necessary skills and knowledge. Being endowed with recognized competences allows individuals to be free both toward the external context (changing work) and the internal context of the organization, by freely choosing the manner in which they conduct their job. Competence is also the basis for being able to show our own creativity at work.

Responsibility. This capability gives employees freedom of choice and empowerment, thus reinforcing their initiatives, engagement and intrinsic motivation. Responsibility implies autonomy, which is the possibility to self-organize work and “to have activity be concordant with one’s integrated sense of self” (Decy and Ryan, 2000, p. 231).

Autonomy and responsibility are the basis for individuals' self-realization, which implies also more general capabilities, such as the sense of imagination and thought and practical reason, mentioned by Nussbaum in her list (1995, 2000, 2003). These capabilities derive from the growth and training paths of individuals; therefore, they are acquired outside the workplace. However, we claim that it is possible to acquire these capabilities even within organizations if people are granted responsibility and autonomy. These capabilities, indeed, allow people to be endowed with practical wisdom and to evaluate situations case by case as they see best.

Time autonomy. This regards the possibility to exercise autonomy in allocating time. Time is one of the strongest bounds in organizations, and it could be a managerial tool to control people and put them under pressure. Conversely, the possibility to self-allocate worktime within companies allows people both to make better decisions and to better manage their work-life balance. Moreover, this capability allows people to conduct their job in the best possible and most gratifying manner. This capability was introduced by Robeyns in her list related to gender inequality (2003), in as much as women have a lower level of time allocation compared to that of men.

Equality. This capability can be articulated as a principle of justice in the workplace, one which lets employees feel intrinsically equal (Carney and Getz, 2015). Operationally, this principle implies a complete liberation both from certain organizational constraints (for instance the organizational chart and its hierarchy) and from HRM practices related to rewards and career advancement based on unfair meritocratic principles. In fact, all these elements are designed to shape people's behaviors to managers' preferences so as to control employees (Solari, 2016). Overcoming these organizational constraints in terms of 'quality' allows individuals to freely express their human potential.

Inclusivity. It concerns workers' opportunity to be part of the corporate decision-making processes. This encourages managers to better understand the point of view of other

people so to have a common vision related to the functioning of the organization. This capability is coherent both with that of affiliation included by Nussbaum in her list (1995, 2000, 2003) and with the capability of respect analyzed by Robeyns (2003). Nussbaum (1995, 2000, 2003) also introduces the capability of ‘control over one’s environment’ which is consistent with what we define as ‘inclusivity.’ In fact, in the organizational context, this includes both people’s participation in the corporate decision-making processes and the opportunity to build a long-term working relationship.

Self-motivation. In order to reach self-realization, people should be free to autonomously decide the paths to follow in their lives. As a consequence, they should autonomously find what motives them to follow the direction they choose. Therefore, organizations should guarantee employees an environment that allows them to grow, to self-direct and to motivate themselves (Carney and Getz, 2015, pp. xvi-xvii).

Human flourishing. This capability can be considered as a possible result of the other capabilities just mentioned. It is achieved by giving employees the freedom to do and to be what they want to do and to be, that is to accomplish what they value (Sen, 1992, 1999). Moreover, it contributes to increasing self-realization and employees’ well-being. Human flourishing allows people to grow through their work, therefore, to conduct what we call ‘free work.’

One of the limits of this list of capabilities is it can be applied only in liberated companies situated within developed Western countries. These countries are characterized by a high degree of valorization of the individual and are endowed with well structured social and economic conditions. Indeed, in other countries which have neither the same development models nor the same levels of valorization of the individual, it is more difficult to implement a liberation campaign within organizations, because of the lack of appropriate

social, cultural and economic conditions. This lack of freedom reflects both on the social system and within organizations.

Insert Table 1 about here

Conclusions and future research prospects

In this paper, we explore Sen's capability approach in the context of management and organizational ethics as the way to enhance people's capabilities within the workplace so as to guarantee worker's well-being, flourishing and happiness. Freedom to do and to be what people want is the real opportunity for people to accomplish what they value (Sen, 1999).

In business ethics, a debate exists about people's well-being, flourishing and happiness inside organizations, especially with reference to virtuous behaviours (Audi, 2012; Bertland, 2009; Ferrero and Sison, 2014; Hartman, 2008a, 2008b; Melé, 2009; Moore, 2005, 2015; Solomon, 2004; Whetstone, 2003). In particular, Bertland (2009) makes explicit reference to Sen's capability approach to provide the theoretical justification for virtue ethics in business.

In this article we showed the contribution of Sen's capability approach for management and for organizational ethics, introducing a list of capabilities contextualized to liberated companies.

In one sense, Sen's capability approach restores ethical consideration within organizations and, in particular, we propose a concrete application of organizational ethics through liberated companies.

Future research could aim to develop other theories and other concrete forms of application of organizational ethics that let people both flourish and grow within companies.

Moreover, in the future, scholars could continue to study in depth the connection between Sen's capability approach, liberated companies and organizational ethics.

Finally, considering that the topic of capabilities is spreading in managerial literature (John and Biorkman, 2015; Maley, 2018), another future research prospect could consist in testing a concrete application of the list of capabilities here described in companies and deducing their effects for organizational ethics.

Notes

¹ They derived the term 'living well together' from Paul Ricoeur's 'structures of living together' (1992).

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Authors	Nussbaum (1995, 2000, 2003)	Robeyns (2003)	Sferrazzo and Ruffini (this paper)	
Aims of the list	Universal	Gender inequality in Western societies	Liberated companies in Western societies	
Dimensions	Capabilities	Capabilities	Liberated companies' steps	Capabilities
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Life 2. Bodily health 3. Bodily integrity 4. Senses, imagination, and thought 5. Emotions 6. Practical reason 7. Affiliation 8. Other species 9. Play 10. Control over one's environment 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Life and physical health 2. Mental well-being 3. Bodily integrity and safety 4. Social relations 5. Political empowerment 6. Education and knowledge 7. Domestic work and nonmarket care 8. Paid work and other projects 9. Shelter and environment 10. Mobility 11. Leisure activities 12. Time-autonomy 13. Respect 14. Religion 	<p>Step 1: stop telling and start listening</p> <p>Step 2: sharing your vision of the company</p> <p>Step 3: stop trying to motivate people</p> <p>Step 4: stay alert</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Competence 2. Responsibility 3. Time autonomy 4. Equality 5. Inclusivity 6. Self-motivation 7. Human flourishing

Table 1. Comparison of several lists.