

**Doing harm by doing good?  
Are we systematically but inadvertently  
destroying social cohesion in our lives in  
organisations?**

**This month:**

- **Organisations where we freely give of our creative gifts**

I was recently studying a notice board in the HQ of a client. (Notice boards are places where you are supposed to take notice, after all, although I never saw anyone else as much as glance at it while I was there.) The large main notice drew staff's attention in a very clear manner to those things that they should not tolerate at work – bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. What was understood by each of these terms was spelt out in detail, together with the appropriate action to be taken by both the member of staff and management.

This set me thinking.

The first thought was how one person's harassment was another person's (a manager's) reasonable attempt to get an employee to do something they didn't want to do. Perspectives determine reality and thus different perspectives clash and, once formal mechanisms are established, require some process of resolution. I'm sure we've all got our own stories of such situations arising.

But that wasn't what was troubling me.

The second thought was that here was a notice that was telling people, rightly, what they should not tolerate. And bullying and harassment have been too common in organisations and probably still are. Staff have always been alert to their presence and the power balance with managers needed to be corrected.

But look as I might I couldn't find any

notice that was telling or encouraging staff in what they might be doing to create the environment in the workplace where they could thrive as people and provide excellent services to their customers. That is, there was nothing about everyone's responsibility to behave in ways that might avoid the unacceptable behaviours in the first place.

We seem in many organisations to be beset by addressing problematic and unacceptable behaviours only by setting out to eliminate those behaviours, as if those behaviours didn't occur within a given culture, a nexus of relationships between people that have tolerated if not supported those behaviours in the past.

Now, lest anyone think that I'm suggesting anything other than that these behaviours are unacceptable, I'm not. What I am suggesting is that if what we do is predominantly highlight the elimination of negative behaviours, we will tend to have negative behaviour highlighted. I know that sounds obvious but highlighting what is not allowed tends towards a living culture where people are more focused on what shouldn't be done than on what should.

And this harms relationships. Managers may start to be more concerned about not being thought that they might be accused of harassment or staff think

whether they should be seeing any particular instruction as harassment.

While pondering this I came across an article<sup>1</sup> by Edward Stourton (more commonly known as a Radio 4 journalist) about his new book on Political Correctness. He had started out being very sceptical about PC and had ended up seeing the benefits. For me there are three main issues around PC, how the words we use shape the world we see, mutual respect or consideration for others and the use of coercion. Whilst I'm fascinated by how the use of words does shape our understanding and experience of the world, it's the other two that are relevant here.

One of the values that PC seeks to promote, one might say it's predominant value, is mutual respect or consideration for one another. It requires us to think about the language we use and the impact of our choice of words on others, particularly on those from whom we are different.

And here's the connection with life at work and unacceptable behaviours. What we need to promote is a level of mutual respect for one another as human beings where unacceptable behaviours are unacceptable, not because there are policies and procedures but because we all just behave that way based on our underlying beliefs about how we should relate to one another.

Now it has to be said that one of the problems with the PC movement as I see it (and it is a movement, that's an intrinsic part of its success) is the coercive nature of some of its implementation. Paradoxically, it's as if the PC proponents are unable to live the value they are seeking to promote, i.e. they can show an alarming level of disrespect for people who are seen to be the 'problem', those who do not see the world as they 'should'. This coercion leads to the same problems identified above about focusing on the elimination of unacceptable behaviours – people focusing on things to avoid rather than on positive behaviours; too much, "You can't say that!" and not enough, "We should be being like this."

And that brings us back to life in organisations – less contentious territory. The questions we now face, if this brief analysis is anything like plausible, are whether it is possible to promote positive cultures, if so the how, and what does it mean for us as individuals? The answer to the first question is yes. To the second, it's really, really difficult and requires a level of sustained focus on developing a positive culture generally that most organisations never even try. Here's not the place to spell out how it can be done, except to say that it can.

What does this mean for us individually? This will, of course, vary according to our roles and responsibilities and the opportunities that are thus available to us. At its most basic it means that we need to be aware of the influence of the negative on ourselves, we need to be alert to how a trend or mood may affect us unawares. And we need to do what we can to point to the positive behaviours, the positive benefits that the 'focus on the negative' is really about. Those of us with leadership roles carry a greater responsibility. It is our job to lead the development of cultures in our organisations that live the beliefs and values we all want to see. (And, yes, that is me giving myself a timely reminder!)

---

1. Financial Times, 8 November 2008

## “Building a company fit for a human being”

Gary Hamel has featured in these pages before. The heading above is the title of an address he gave and just the title struck an obvious chord. (You can see an extract of the address on [www.managementlab.org](http://www.managementlab.org) - well worth a look.)

Hamel's perspective is about the need for leaders to reconstruct their entire idea of what management is if they are to lead organisations that are going to deliver competitive advantage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

He identifies the need for employees to display their creativity, imagination and passion at work. He recognises – and this is the main thing that most leaders simply don't get – is that these aspects within an individual are things that have to be freely and willingly offered.

You cannot require people to be creative. You can try to exhort them. You might even try to bribe them. But any of what one might call the traditional tools available to management will not deliver what must be freely given.

On the Management Lab website it says, “We are all prisoners of the same calcified management systems

Continues on page 3

[thinking-it-through.com](http://thinking-it-through.com)

4 Buttercup Close  
Harrogate  
HG3 2WU

T:  
01423-508781

M:  
07775602475

E:  
[ian@thinking-it-through.com](mailto:ian@thinking-it-through.com)

W:  
[www.thinking-it-through.com](http://www.thinking-it-through.com)

---

© Ian Johnston 2008

that shape the way we behave and even the way we talk, so it is hardly surprising that we find it difficult to imagine an alternative set of structures, tools or techniques that might replace them.”

I strongly agree with the first part of this but it's with the latter part, it's the talk about structures, tools and techniques that I have a problem with. I think it is the way we talk that has to change first. Sorry, but this does, now I come to think about it, link back to that bit above about how what we say shapes how we see the world. We need to find ways of talking about our work that speak a different reality, so to speak. We need to be able to speak to ourselves, our colleagues and, if we have them, our staff in ways that bring about a different way of being at work. We need to describe where we work in ways that mean that we will freely give of our creativity, our imagination, our passion, not for some instrumental reason but intrinsically because we are giving of who we are in a place where we can be a human being.

Sitting here writing this, I realise that I have just set myself – and you, dear reader – a somewhat huge challenge. Thoughts, suggestions etc welcome. I have a feeling that we're going to be coming back to this one!

*The professions: you must do something you really like*

Back to the FT again and a piece from their website (13 October 2008) about what advice to give one's children about choosing a career, particularly in these financially uncertain times. This may be relevant to some of you right now.

I thought I would just include a couple of comments that chime with the importance of Personal Job Alignment.

“You might decide on a career that you think is safe. But you should only do something you really like.”

“It's not enough to do something because you want to have a safe haven. You must have a passion for it. The ones who do are the ones who prove successful.”

So, what we need are people who are passionate about what they do and organisations that live in a way that their passion is freely given. Right, let's get to it!