

## From being thought of as a duck to being thought of as an asset—is that better?

In the July Newsletter I wrote about how organisations use people instrumentally, leading to ideas about the importance of 'getting all your ducks in a row.'

I was thinking about this on holiday (sad but true, but then I have fun doing this). I was reflecting on how the different people in the villa where we were staying talked about their work. In particular I was keen to hear how they were treated as individuals. This led me to reflect on what has happened to the 'people' departments in companies.

I find it very telling that the 'people' function in organisations saw it as an advance to move from being 'personnel departments', where at least the word person stands out, to 'human resource departments', where people are a resource to be used for the purposes of the organisation.

Now, lest someone remind me, I was all for this at the time. I saw it then as part of getting these departments to be 'more proactive' on behalf of the organisation. And that's the point. Might it be that this change arose precisely because people were being seen by personnel departments as persons whereas organisa-

tions needed a more sophisticated approach, i.e. seeing people as a resource? Did they thereby lose sight of them as individual people?

Often, as if they really did see people as persons, organisations, again tellingly, state proudly that their staff are their greatest asset. Now, it is true that for many companies, e.g. service companies or professional services companies, the people are the capital—human capital.

But how do you feel about being an asset and having your asset value managed? Presumably by a re-named HR department called the Human Asset Management Function. Assets are, of course, assessed in relations to their value to the company.

Organisations, and even governments, have over time sought to convince people of the value of their work e.g. the heroic nature of physical work seen in communist realist painting. It might be an interesting thesis for someone.

These reflections led me to think of whether there is a better way.

Read the next page...

### Never work again—an exercise

Here's an exercise to try. For two whole days do not use the word work to differentiate what you do that you get paid for from what you do for other reasons, fun, family duty, etc. Think about what you do that you get paid for as just another aspect of how you spend the time you have available each day. It's our approach to what we do that matters. There is much in our non-work lives that we wouldn't choose to do or find onerous (we don't all like ironing!).

There are so many bad connotations of the word 'work' that just using the word frames our approach to what we do that we get paid for in an often unhelpful way. Try it, go on, start now.

September  
Monthly Meeting:  
Wednesday  
26 September  
2007

### NEW VENUE IN LEEDS

We shall be meeting at The White House, Wetherby Road, Roundhay, Leeds

SEE WEB SITE FOR DETAILS

### NEW TIME

I'll be in the bar from 6.30 p.m.

### Book review

**"Myself and other more important matters" by Charles Handy**

**An excellent read for anyone interested in being oneself at work. Based on the story of his own life Handy reflects on and grapples with many of the personal and organisational issues that we have discussed in this Newsletter and at our meetings.**

## Is there an alternative?

Is it possible to conceive a way of being and working together where:

- We achieve high quality outcomes/outputs (the best of the fruits of capitalism-growth and prosperity)
- We treat one another as persons (and thus not instrumentally for organisational or personal gain)
- We take individual responsibility for our lives in their totality (including our lives at work)?

That is, could we avoid using people instrumentally (however hard we try not to through enlightened leadership and shared values) and the consequent alienation or disassociation? And thereby doing away with the need for Personal Job Alignment!

Charles Handy, who is alive to these concerns, says (see book review) that we do not need to invent new forms of organisation. He points to professional services organisation (partnerships), community interest organisations and even artistic organisations. However, I suspect – and experience from friends and colleagues suggests – that being an employee in these organisational forms does not feel intrinsically different from working elsewhere.

Scale clearly has an impact. It is easier to take decisions that take into account the interests of all staff in very small companies/partnerships etc. the larger the organisation (and it doesn't have to be that large) the more difficult this becomes. And in any event organisations of whatever form have to respond to the rationale for their existence.

Hierarchical organisations have developed as a way of using human capacities (physical and intellectual) to deliver high volume outputs (be they products or services) of consistent and improving quality across years and years, delivering financial returns for the investment made.

Hierarchical organisations – whether public sector, shareholder or private equity – are the engine of economic growth. Of course, we could give up the idea of economic growth and accept that there is such a thing as 'enough' but this would require a spiritual transformation of a magnitude we are not going to see sometime soon.

But what about employee owned firms, like Unipart, Arup (two multi-nationals) or Lush (a smaller company)?

Over the last 15 years firms owned by staff have consistently outperformed the FTSE all-share index. And according to the Employee Ownership Association, 81% of staff in such firms said they took more responsibility under a co-ownership structure.

The government avoiding offering the alternative that NHS Foundation Trusts could be producer co-operatives. It is interesting to think how different it might feel to work in such Trusts if they had become 'employee owned'. There would presumably be a radically different view at the top about in whose interests the Trust was being run. The government is now not just allowing but positively encouraging the use of community interest and other vehicles for the future of NHS community services.

These organisation look to be a better bet. How do they respond to challenges of treating individuals as persons, delivering the necessary outputs and promoting people taking responsibility?

On delivery the FTSE performance speaks for itself. The survey results seem to indicate high levels of responsibility within the business. There is also some evidence that people are happier

in these types of organisation.

So, there may be a better way than is the current common experience. This approach doesn't meet all the ideals set out at the start and that's not a surprise. Taking responsibility for the whole of our lives is perhaps just an ideal. But the responsibility for our lives at work remains with us. Employee owned businesses may make this easier but it is still necessary work for each of us.

The two paths we have identified before – for the organisation's leadership and for individuals as employees – remain essential.

It is true, i.e. beyond doubt, that Chief Executives define the culture of their organisations (whether they like it or not) and therefore carry the major responsibility for creating organisations their staff should want to live in. What is required to lead and transform cultures is well documented. The problem is that too few leaders attempt it and too many leaders either just don't do it or act in bad faith, intentionally or otherwise. Where the owners are the employees one can see that Chief Executives might be much more inclined to promote a collective culture that responds to the needs of employees and makes the most of their talents. The alienating effect may well be dampened.

And as individuals we still have our work to do of making sense of our lives at work. Whatever the organisational form, this cannot be avoided.