

# Ian's Monthly Newsletter

September 2008

## “Managerial and bureaucratic expertise...turns out to be one more moral fiction.”

### This month:

- No such thing as managerial expertise!
- Why get up in the morning?
- Why don't we work less as we earn more?

OK, so this sounds a bit challenging to those of us who have been or are managers – even bureaucrats – and even more challenging for those of us who claim to have expertise in advising managers. If managerial expertise is no more than a moral fiction then those who advise on it are really no more than peddlers of fake medicine.

The quotation is taken from *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>1</sup>. What leads him to say this? He says managerial expertise turns out to be a moral fiction, “because the kind of knowledge which would be required to sustain it does not exist.”

Now, before you stop reading, thinking that this is going to be a Philosophy 100 seminar, it isn't. What MacIntyre has to say challenges us to think about our underlying belief system. What do we really believe about how to get things done in organisations? He is concerned that we think about people as people and not, as we discussed in an earlier Newsletter, as ducks. So, despite the quotation above, he is, in my view, one of the good guys.

Most of us, I guess, don't think about the assumptions that lie behind the way we, or our bosses, exercise managerial responsibilities. And many of us may well take with a pinch of salt much managerial 'knowledge' as we are taught it (assuming we're all still into continuous personal development!) We get on with our responsibilities as best we can. Us greybeards (speak for yourself Johnston)

know what works and what doesn't, don't we?

But whether we like it or not we do have in our heads assumptions about the way organisations work, the way to get things done.

MacIntyre disputes both the way management claims to use facts to make decisions and the claims management make about knowledge of how to get things done.

He says that it is a conceit that decisions about what to do can be reduced to calculations. There are aids to decision making but all decisions are choices and thus have moral content. There are no value free decisions. But let's leave that to one side.

What he is more concerned about (if I read him correctly) is the subsequent assumption that having made a calculation as to what to do, we can then get things done through people using tools and techniques based on knowledge (i.e. facts) about how to get people to behave in desired ways to get desired outcomes. This isn't just an argument that you *shouldn't* treat people as means rather than ends in themselves; it is a claim that with any degree of certainty you *cannot*. This is good news - although it doesn't stop people trying, nor people believing that you should and can.

In one of the earliest Newsletters I said that I was struck by how little we really know about living in organisations and

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that, although material conditions had improved, we hadn't really got any better at living in organisations 100 years on.

So, where does this leave us? It appears to leave us without knowledge about how to lead or how to manage. This sounds like it might be a counsel of despair – if there are no facts how to we manage? – but it is in fact the opposite.

Although, from the perspective of leaders it means that there are no facts to support decisions about leading people (if we do A then B will follow: there are no levers we can pull at the top that will certainly lead to action we can specify in advance<sup>2</sup>), what there is, is wisdom, of course. Wisdom is a form of knowledge too. But the difference between resorting to a fact and adducing wisdom is that the application of wisdom requires judgement – a choice made by the leader. One won't find Solomon's choice of cutting the baby in two in many management textbooks<sup>3</sup>.

Now, what this means is that we need leaders who see their role as creating the conditions for their people to thrive, that is leaders who consider their people as ends rather than means. And, fortunately, there are some who do. But, as we have so often seen before, and this is such an important but, this requires each and every one of their people (i.e. you and me) to make decisions for ourselves about what is of value, of importance for ourselves and to act on those decisions.

Enlightened leaders need enlightened followers if their leadership is to be have lasting value and be more than a passing phase of charismatic excitement. It turns out that enlightened leaders liberate their people. This is risky territory indeed for leaders. But then it's risky territory for each one of us too.

So, something for you to think about/reflect upon.

*What are your working assumptions about how organisations work and how achievement is attained through people?*

*Are we – each one of us – treating our staff, colleagues or bosses as ends and are we each doing our level best to create the conditions for us all to flourish as people?*

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1. After Virtue: a study in moral theory, Alasdair MacIntyre, Duckworth, 1985. Anyone wanting to know more should let me know. I should point out that MacIntyre is something of a maverick. In some ways he claims that the Enlightenment wasn't all that it's cracked up to be.
  2. In fact he says that all such claims of managerial success are more about good luck.
  3. Or if you know of one please tell me.

*Yet more on the search for meaning: Oblomov, the man who considers at length, "Should I get up?"*

I'm sure we have all at times lain in bed of a morning and thought, "Should I get up?" Well, Oblomov, in the book of the same name by Ivan Goncharov, does just that.

In my version it's page 176 before he finds a reason sufficient to get out of bed. And this isn't one long mental disquisition – he stays in bed for ages, arguing with those who seek to give him a reason to get up. It's a very comic novel. And you can guess that the only force in the universe that gets him voluntarily out of bed is love. Reason enough we might say.

## Whatever happened to Keynes' 15-hour week?

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And one morning, while reflecting on the delights of Oblomov and lying in bed reading the paper wondering if I really did have to get up, I was confronted with this question as the heading in an article in *The Guardian*<sup>1</sup>. Larry Elliott, the economics editor, starts off by confronting us with this dilemma, "Nobody every dies saying, 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office', or so the saying goes...But if we would rather be spending more time with our loved ones than in making money, why don't we?" Keynes predicted that as we acquired more money we would work fewer hours and have more leisure.

I remember having this prospect held out before me as a child at school. By the year 2000 we'd all be living in cities as high as the sky and with plenty of leisure. So much for predictions and a reminder that those of our time will be just as wrong, we've not got any better at the prediction business.

Elliott offers some explanations as to why Keynes turned out to be wrong. One is that "many of us actually enjoy work". He doesn't spend much time on this and focuses on the observation that we seem to be driven to keep up with our richer peers and this means we need to earn more and more money as the more successful of our peers blaze a trail before us and therefore we put in more hours and get into more debt in a vain (sic) attempt to keep up. Apparently, doctors measure their success against doctors, chief executives against chief executives etc<sup>2</sup>.

The message seems to be that if you want more leisure and to spend more time with your family you should join some profession or trade where people do just that. Probably an illusion as even they will all be trying to better themselves relative to one another just like most of the rest of us.

Two alternatives present themselves. Enjoy work for its own sake (Personal Job Alignment) and stop keeping up with your own version of the Jones's!

1.1 September 2008, p26. It's a review of *Revisiting Keynes*; MIT Press  
2. The writer of Ecclesiastes agrees with this view, "Then I saw that all toil and skill come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind." Ecclesiastes 4.4