

This month:

- **Alignment in organisations and what it means for us as individuals**
- **Feedback from the last Newsletter**
- **Another recommended read.**

Fraternité : You will be my brother or I will kill you

Awkward truths are rarely welcome. Chambourg, the wit who gave this definition of fraternité, lost his head to Madame Guillotine, thus with an irony not evident to the French revolutionaries, proving the validity of the definition. Pointing out the truth with a cutting wit has its risks in any environment.

Chambourg's fate set me thinking about what this stark episode might mean for relationships between the leaders and the led in organisations. OK, a slightly odd place to start but stick with me. A topic of regular conversation among OD types is how to achieve alignment. How do we get everyone on board to what we are trying to achieve as an organisation? I even have a diagram on the website about its relevance to Personal Job Alignment.

[See bottom of page 3 for a reminder!]

Now, an essential aspect of alignment is defining the desired culture. Well, associated with the need to define a new culture – a new set of organisational beliefs and behaviours – is the necessary strategy to get those new values in place.

When talking to leaders about developing a culture change strategy I have a long list of things that they need to do. All very straightforward stuff in the main – which doesn't mean, unfortunately, that they actually get on with them. There is, however, one item in the list that many managers see the necessity for but don't

like. It says, 'Deal with those who cannot or will not make the necessary change.' Now, it has to be said that most leaders somewhat recoil from this. It offends in some way, as if attacking the moral or other independence of individuals. Yet, if a transformation process relies on people accepting and internalising new values and behaving in new ways, not dealing with those who will not or cannot comply can only end in the new values not being in place and the benefits envisaged by the change process not being delivered.

In the light of Chambourg's definition this now looks a bit like: Being an employee = 'You will believe what we want you to believe or we'll sack you' – we'll be nice about it, of course!

As an example, imagine (this won't be easy) that the NHS wanted to take eliminating mistakes as seriously as, say, the car industry. It would have to institute a level of intolerance of mistakes that some (many?) would not be able to cope with. But if the NHS wanted to reach zero tolerance then these people would either have to change (with every effort to support them etc) or go, as they did in other industries. 'You will share this new value or there's no place for you in this organisation.'

There are parallels here with the comments in the previous Newsletter about Mao. All centrally led revolutions are about new values and their installation. In our history the Reformation

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and how it played out after the Civil War is our most obvious example, and thankfully a long time ago.¹ The essential difference between these top down societal revolutions and transformation/culture change programmes in organisations is that the societal ones seek to change everybody, every citizen. This is why they end up resorting to such extreme measures.²

Within organisations one can always opt out by leaving (at least this is true in principle.) And here's the link with Personal Job Alignment. This issue relates to Stage 3 of that process, 'me and the culture of the organisation'.

In this stage of the process we seek to describe the reality of the culture in which we work and then look closely to see how this set of beliefs and behaviours aligns with our own energisers and beliefs. In the diagram on page 3 I call it making the connection between my identity and the company's identity.

I am also conscious that in an earlier Newsletter I wrote that 'getting your ducks in a row is OK if your employees are ducks...' That article was about the importance of connecting our work to what Heidegger might have called our being in the world as persons. And it remains the case that it is our identity to which we must pay attention. If we do not allow ourselves to be who we are – who we really are, our self-actualised selves – then personal alignment will evade us, wherever we work and whatever we do.

Fortunately, many can make this alignment work for them. It is fortunate because, as we have seen, these are real issues about our identity. But this can be difficult. I was speaking recently to someone who had just had what he described as 'the worst week ever and with what looks like a worse one to come.' I asked why he kept working for this company. It turns out that there is a deep sense of responsibility for those he manages and the services they provide. He seemed to be telling me – and even himself – that delivering the services, giving effect to the purpose of the organisation, was more important than having to put up with the damaging management culture in which he had to function. In a sense he was demonstrating that his identity as someone committed to the delivery of these services was more important than the personal cost.

Returning to Chambourg, he didn't choose death, but, like many others who have stood up to revolutionary violence, we might say that being himself was the choice that he made and the penalty that he took. Let us be thankful that for those of us living in organisations the choices may be difficult but not that difficult.

¹ I'm talking here about revolutions led from the top as opposed to those revolutions in attitudes that take place across societies, e.g. tolerance to difference

² And they'll always fail for the simple reason that we as humans will never agree on a set of societal values. Gordon Brown may seek but he will not find.

Responses to the February Newsletter

Many thanks for the following couple of responses to the last Newsletter. I can only smile at the first and become more convinced about the difficulty in dealing with this issue of perception of morale in centrally funded and managed public systems. And on the comment on leadership, if only!! See also Matthew 20 vv 25-27. More on leadership as service at some point.

On morale:

Just read your article. I remember a staff nurse whose intelligence, wisdom and kindness shone out from her. I used to bump into her regularly and each time I would ask her how things were, especially morale, back on the ward. Each time she would tell me that morale was 'rock bottom' and couldn't sink any lower. After a while I would remind her of what she had said previously and she would insist that indeed things had got much worse.

Coincidentally I bumped into her in the street last week, some ten years since we had previously spoken. After all the usual preliminaries I asked her the magic question. You don't need me to tell you her reply.

On leadership:

In Deming's view the usual management hierarchy is inverted with the workers at the top and the role of management is to support them in their tasks. In this world view the workers are the 'experts' because they know how the work really gets done. The leadership role then becomes one of setting the overall strategy and keeping at it for the long term (He called this constancy of purpose). How many NHS leadership teams stick at any initiative for more than 12 months?

Book Review: Oliver VII By Antal Szerb

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I raved in an earlier Newsletter about another book by this Hungarian author who was murdered in a concentration camp in 1945. This is a shorter book in a comic-cum-absurdist vein.

It concerns a king – Oliver – of a small mid-European state. The king doesn't want to be king and isn't being very good at it either with the economy, based on sardines and wine, collapsing. So, he organises a coup against himself and escapes to Venice, with everyone believing he is in darkest Africa. He wants to see life 'from below' and gets in with a team of conmen. These people accept him, now named Oscar, as a slightly stupid man who may be of use to them.

One day someone from 'home' recognises Oscar as the king. The conmen, still believing Oscar to be just Oscar, immediately see an opportunity for a major scam.

And so Oscar finds himself in a position where he is now impersonating himself as king. Further twists and turns ensue before Oscar finds himself back on the throne as King Oliver all over again.

But this time it's different. As part of the preparation for the coup the head conman, seeing Oscar as being a bit weak, trains him in how a king should behave. This comes as a revelation to Oscar/Oliver, who realises for the first time that his destiny is to be king and that as it is his destiny he has to be a king as a king should be and that that is how he should have been all along. Oliver returns as a great king.

Apart from the fact that the book is a great comic read, why mention it here? Because the book grapples in a serious and comic way with the nature of identity and our personal alignment.

A highly recommended read.

Organisational alignment and how it relates to personal job alignment

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