

Clarity of roles and responsibilities: good or not so good?

Last month's Newsletter prompted a great deal more response than usual, so I'm using this month's Newsletter to carry on the debate. Feel free to join in—I know some of you will anyway!

You may remember that last month I made the—somewhat large—claim that there is a moral obligation to be clear about roles and responsibilities at work. I set out the reasons for that moral obligation and the benefits that followed.

One response was: "Yes and No. A friend of mine coined a phrase "the corporate abuse of the individual". We have all experienced that phenomenon—usually unwittingly dished out by a manager who just did not pay attention. The Job Description and Objectives have been the blunt tools used to deliver the clarity."

Yes we have all probably experienced this at some point. And many of us have seen getting such clarity used as a way to constrain and limit the potential or ambition of individuals (and in one case I can remember, even whole professions).

Explicitly managing the structure of expectations in an organisation can make people feel that they are being engineered—a word that implies both impersonal detachment and being used instrumentally—like a cog in a machine. And it's these very things this Newsletter has been helping us to see and resist as employees and avoid as managers.

So, the first point I want to make is that a system of expectations will exist (call it the culture—see the March 07 Newsletter) and that system probably contains unreal expectations and levels of ambiguity that are open to, and of-

ten lead to, abuse. So, not attending to the issue of the system of expectations (what I was calling clarity about roles and responsibilities and how they inter-relate) leaves us where we are, which isn't that happy a place according to every survey on life at work.

But, perhaps the second point I should make is what I should have included in last month's article. We should all know it's not just the tool you use but HOW you use it.

Anyone implementing a new structure of responsibilities/expectations can do it without paying attention to individual needs and aspirations, that is, without relating to their staff as persons, with the most likely response that their staff feel like they are being caged rather than liberated.

Or they can do it with a view to introducing harmony—what we might call Job Alignment. We could then have a situation where, as a correspondent put it: "managers and staff can choose Life and Job Alignment rather than cynicism regarding organisational dysfunction and then finally despair..." A very succinct way of putting what this Newsletter aspires to!

As I've said, to do this one needs to relate to one's staff as persons. It was in the October Newsletter that I wrote about the importance of managers (indeed all of us at work) relating to one another as persons. I also described what I see as the necessary condition for the dialogue that underpins this.

Another correspondent pointed me to St Benedict's Rule—that which sets out, to over-summarise, the precepts for living successfully in a monastic community. An early and

December Monthly Meeting

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 12 December

At The White House, 55 Wetherby Road, Roundhay, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS8 2JU

See website for a map.

Book Review: Journey by Moonlight by Antal Szerb

"You start off as Mr X, who happens to be an engineer, and sooner or later you're just an engineer who just happens to be Mr X."

Here's a real treat of a novel about a Hungarian whose life falls apart on his honeymoon in Italy. OK, that may not sound the best introduction, but Szerb recounts how his (anti-)hero confronts his bourgeois Budapest 1930s life and the constraints he has imposed on himself, not least at work where he conforms to what is required (he's wearing that jacket again and it doesn't fit) and the consequences—see the quote above.

There's much much more to it that this aspect—and I haven't finished it yet but will read it again when I have. Not done that for a very long time.

profound work on living in community. These problems of how we relate to one another are not new and there s much we can learn from those who have thought this through before. Our hierarchical organisations have fundamentally different internal relationships and purposes—the fact that they are purposive being a major one of them. But we as humans, as persons, are the same.

It does come done to how we relate to one another and we can learn from many cultures and traditions about this.

Should organisation consultants be re titled the “ secular priesthood”

This question from the same correspondent. Well, given the increasingly pastoral nature of the work and given the importance of relating to people as persons, this sounds like a fine idea!

One final though for today: The more I write the Newsletters the more the focus of Personal Job Alignment seems to be on the organisation or our managers. This may be understandable—they do have the major effect on the culture in which we live at work (and many readers are senior managers!)—but we should never forget the work we as individuals have to do, particularly those first two steps of seeing ourselves and seeing ourselves at work.

Remember: The important story is that each of us has our own work to do to make sense of our lives at work and that stress free work can be the outcome.

Ian Johnston
4 Buttercup Close
Harrogate HG3 2WU

T: 01423 508781
M: 0777 560 2475
E: ian@thinking-it-through.com