

Looking back: looking forward

With the start of a New Year (OK, a month late), I have taken a look back over the last year of Newsletters to see what the themes have been and if it's possible to draw together some conclusions that might become a start for this next series.

On reflection, much of what these Newsletters and the discussion at the Monthly Meetings have been about has been the nature of the human interaction between us all at work. In turn this has

implied something about how organisations themselves – and this really means the people who lead them – see their relationship with their own people, and their customers. Without getting all Heidegger about it, it's about our being in the world that matters, both individually, with our colleagues and as organisations.

These reflections prompted the article below. As ever, let me know what you think.

The choice? “Putting lipstick on the pig” or taking our personal leadership responsibilities seriously?

Gary Hamel is a strategy guru whose recent book *The Future of Management* makes the arresting and, given what he thinks the alternative is, potentially liberating proposition that 'management', in its traditional form as we have experienced for the last century, has reached the end of its productive benefit. That is, that top down control, standardisation and motivation through money is not just no longer delivering the goods, it is costing companies more than any benefit they get and – and here's the point particularly relevant to us – leads to demotivation and disengagement. Or, to use his phrase attempts to make the current management paradigm work are just 'putting lipstick on the pig'.

His claim is that all our varied and various attempts to get hierarchy and leadership right within basically the same hierarchical management structures will not make the difference that we need if these organisations are to continue to provide the innovation and benefit to society that they have to date (not forgetting the costs). Or to put it in a way that Hamel doesn't, you can't teach elephants to dance. And let's not forget that with the challenges that we are facing on the planet at the moment we need a great deal of innovation. From Hamel's point of view we need an animal that's not an elephant in the first place.

Now, Hamel doesn't claim to have the

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New Year: New Format

A new computer and new software are the real reasons for changing the format but a New Year is a good reason too, as we all to some extent inevitably look forward to what the New Year will hold for us.

Hope you like it. As ever, feedback welcome.

full solution to this but sees the future in a new technology of coordination (internet enabled networks of coordination) replacing, or perhaps balancing, hierarchy. He says that this isn't easy, "It's hard to stand up and say that ideas can come from anywhere, that leadership must be distributed, that accountability flows downward..." Er, but isn't this the aspiration we all share right now for organisations as they currently are? And does it really require a new technology?

A month or so ago I was sent a copy of a presentation given at yet another leadership conference. And yet again it repeated, somewhat entertainingly it has to be said, the usual things about setting a compelling vision, the first steps etc etc. You can all write our own version of this – or probably have your own versions. But what strikes me about every one of these is that I rarely hear someone address the fact that we have heard all this before but hearing isn't making any difference. The problem is that it's not knowing what to do that's lacking; it's getting on and doing it!

There are, of course, splendid counter examples. *The Economist*¹ had an article recently called 'Doing well by being rather nice' about SAS, probably the world's biggest privately owned software maker. Here's the important quote, "Every aspect of life on the large, leafy SAS campus in Cary, North Carolina, is designed to bring the best out of employees by treating them well." Now, just read that again. And now read it again, with your own organisation – or personal bit of it – in mind.

Of course, life in SAS is no free ride; you have to perform. Jim Goodnight, the boss of SAS, says that his employment philosophy is, "Hire hard, manage open, fire hard." But everyone knows where they stand.

Treat people well.

And then there are the areas of life that seem stuck in a time warp all their own. Take our own dear NHS. I cannot remember a single year in the last 30 odd in which the morale of the NHS has not got worse or been at rock bottom, at least according to someone. Take this, quoted in the Financial Times². "Doctors are better paid and work fewer hours than ever before – but according to James Johnson, who has recently resigned as Chair of the BMA, morale has never been lower." The writer took this, somewhat naively, at face value. When has this never been said?

At one level the truth or otherwise of this statement about morale is beside the point. It's the significance of what it tells us about how (some) people feel and what (some) people feel obliged to say³.

There are two points here. One for leaders and one for the rest of us. As I've said often enough, leaders have serious obligations, moral obligations, to their staff and customers. And as individuals working in organisations we too have obligations, moral obligations, to our colleagues and customers.

So, back to the question. We all (most of us) know what is needed by leaders and by ourselves, so why don't we do it? Is it just too hard? Are inspirational – or even competent – leaders just rare human beings? Are we too conscious of our own failures or our own lack of perceived ability?

Or is it that in taking leadership responsibilities – at whatever level – means confronting who we are and in particular who we are at work. Or to put it another way, without Personal Job Alignment we cannot be at work, *in whatever role* the person we need to be, both for our benefit and the benefit of others.⁴

Notes:

¹ 1 December 2007

² FT, Saturday 19 January 2008

³ There's something intrinsically unhealthy about the culture of national public services that fosters this kind of feeling and behaviour. Imagine a medical leader saying that morale was on the rise. S/he would be driven out of town. We could discuss the social/political culture that has encouraged this sort of behaviour over the years but my concern here is for us as people who live in organisations as they are with our actual responsibilities.

⁴ And just an apology to any fans of Gary Hamel for my somewhat cavalier dismissal of his thesis!



'Tyrants conduct monologues above a million solitudes.' Albert Camus, *The Rebel*

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I've been focusing for obvious reasons in these Newsletters about how we might do things better. But, just for once, how about another kind of role model, one that for whom success is all that counts and success on their terms? For whom the led, Camus' millions, are but pawns whose humanity is invisible to the leader?

Let's look at Mao, still somehow a striking leader despite the fact that he was responsible for about 70m deaths. Someone who was Chairman of a country, let alone a company. And let's see how he compares with some leaders of less august standing from our own experience.

Here is, in summary, his four step approach to leadership.

1. Start with a powerful and mendacious slogan
2. Manipulate the media and message ruthlessly
3. Sacrifice friends and colleagues
4. Substitute activity for achievement

Now, we'll start with Mao and then there's space for a thought about someone or some organisation closer to home – try it!

Mao's *slogan* was 'Serve the People', while he, of course, was the one to define what the needs of the people for service were. As for our more mundane experience, do any of you remember the management slogan 'Putting People First'?

Enter your favourite here

What about, "Our staff are our greatest asset"?

Mao manipulated the message. Despite the horrors of actual life in China people outside the country thought it a haven of peasant happiness. Does this ring any bells? A nationally famous Chief Executive with their organisation falling apart, only known to those in it (until catastrophe hit)?

Enter your favourite here!

It was as dangerous to be Mao's friend as his enemy. Do you know of any leaders of whom it was said, 'How could he do that to me after all I've done for him/her?'

Name your favourite here!

And finally, substituting activity for achievement. Well, what can I say, except, name your favourite here!

Perhaps tyrants are only different from some of the people we experience in terms of degree – a sobering thought. Perhaps the thousands rather than millions are just left with their monologues...

¹ I came across the opening quote not from re-reading *The Rebel*, although I now shall, but from Clive James' *Cultural Amnesia*, which I can recommend as a wonderful and wonderfully entertaining cultural history of the 20th Century cum argument for sustained liberalism.

² With no apology this is my version of an article in *The Economist* 22 December 2007