

Ian's Monthly Newsletter

June 2008



“He who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*.”

You may remember in a recent Newsletter that I referred to someone who carried on working in an otherwise totally unsatisfactory environment because he had a deep sense of responsibility for those he managed and the services the company provided. One might say that his *why* enabled him to live with, put up with or tolerate psychically, the *how*.

The quotation is from Nietzsche the man with the moustache and I came across it in Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. This is Frankl's account of surviving in concentration camps in the Second World War. (Thanks to Alan Gorringer for bringing this book to my attention.) Frankl makes a point to which we all need to pay attention. He says that human freedom is, “to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”¹ And he adds, in case you may feel that there might be a way out of this, that there are always choices to be made. To further complicate matters as Isaiah Berlin points out, “To be human is to choose between competing ultimate values.” That is, there is no general calculus we can use to make the choice for us.²

Who we are and the choices we make

So, what's the relevance of all this to living in organisations?
There are two points here. The first is that

when we start the Personal Job Alignment process, seeking fun at work, we are asked to consider the question of what energises us.

Now, I have to admit that when I first started these Newsletters I don't think I fully realised the depth of this question. For, to get to the bottom of things we can see that the question is another way of asking what gives us purpose in our work (or meaning, to refer back to last month's Newsletter).

To put it yet another way we are driven to consider the *why*, why we do what we do. And this *why* relates to who we are at a very basic level. The *why* we have comes from a self-awareness of the *who* we are. The injunction to ‘Know Thyself’ is not just an injunction to knowledge; it is a form of knowing self-awareness that calls on us as a result of this knowledge to be ourselves, to be who we are in the world.

The second point is that in being ourselves we still have choices about our attitude to any event. We may often hear, or even say, “Oh, that's just me, I always react in that way.” We tend to hear this most often when someone is reacting badly to some event.

I have to admit that my most frequent reaction to this type of comment is to want to reply, “Well, if you don't like reacting that way, then don't!” I appreciate that changing one's response is not the easiest thing in the world. And it's most difficult not to hear

This month:

- **Choosing to be who we are at work**
- **Homework!!**
- **More on the search for meaning**
- **Some choices**
- **A cartoon**
- **Response to request**

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this retort when you find yourself saying it to yourself but no easier to do anything about it!
Of course, the first thing to do is to recognise that we are making choices.

What are the choices when living in organisations?

So, what are the choices that confront us living in organisations? How might we respond to them?

Here are three to be going on with. The first two relate back to previous Newsletters.

- ◆ Choosing to be oneself – or otherwise
You may remember my account of wearing the wrong suit as part of my not being me at work. Through a lack of self-awareness I didn't realise what I was doing. Unfortunately that didn't make it any less of a choice by me. Whether we inadvertently or authentically choose not to be ourselves at work the deleterious effects are similar to our health and well-being.
- ◆ Choosing how we respond to the culture in action
Again in a previous Newsletter I wrote about how it is up to us how we respond to the attendant culture. The example I gave – someone getting upset about a ban on international calls – may have seemed trivial but I am sure we can all recall examples of how we have let our immediate emotional response to some madness or other dictate our behavioural response. It doesn't have to. We can and do choose. We don't have to 'always react that way'.
- ◆ Choosing when and how to tell the truth
Here's a more difficult one. There are times when we all want to say something that needs to be said, for example, about how a colleague is being treated, or a decision being made, but the consequences of speaking out have to be taken into account. Should we speak truth to power? Should we tell what we know to be true to our staff? Should we tell the truth to our colleagues about their behaviour or attitudes? And to what extent does deciding to tell the truth or not tell us about who we are?

There are, of course, myriad choices we have to make daily as part of our responsibilities at work. Many seem pretty technical but in fact most have some moral purchase and our choices in these cases reflect why and who we are at work.

Although I made the point that here is no general calculus to guide us, we do tend to make calculations or assessments. This means weighing up which values are more important to us, remembering that allowing things to happen is equally a choice.

So, here's some **HOMEWORK!**

Reflect on the implicit and explicit choices that you make about how you are at work. Then consider the extent to which those choices reflect your *why* and your *who*.

More on the search for meaning

To repeat from last month's Newsletter about generational changes in approaches to moral values:

"In the 'first' generation parents believed in the gods and saw the gods as the source of moral authority. The children of these parents rejected belief in the gods but accepted the moral precepts as taught by their parents, and accepted parental authority for them. The third generation take on their parents' disbelief in the gods. However, those same parents have no meaningful narrative or account for the source of moral authority and thus adherence to the moral order declines – fatally for Greek society."

And here's a quote from Clive James.

"Only a secular state can be democratic; although the democracy will soon be in trouble if the private citizen is deprived of a moral code, to be acknowledged for its moral example even if it does not believe in its divine provenance."¹

And one might comment that James characterises precisely the problem we face. We have been deprived, or deprived ourselves, of a moral code that we all share and, frankly, no degree of prison rehabilitation, parenting classes, citizen lessons and the (multifarious) rest is going to create one.

When Bishop Nazir Ali says that Islam provides a moral example because of the belief in its divine provenance he has a point.

1. From *Cultural Amnesia*. I've quoted from this book before. Now out in paperback, worth the asking price.

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Some choices: one terrible, one difficult and something existential from Dr Who

The terrible choice

Another recommended read is *Prague Farewell* by Heda Kovaly. Heda not only lived through and escaped from a concentration camp under the Nazis but then suffered from the Stalinist purges of the 1950s. Like Frankl her first choice was to live but what shocked me about her story was the choices she faced others with and their response. When she escaped she made her way back to Prague in the last months of the war. She arrived at the front doors of her friends. All but one sent her on her way, full of fear for themselves that they would be hanged for 'harbouring an enemy of the State'. One's immediate response is outrage at their cowardice. This was followed by the humility of one who has never had to make that choice. (We don't know how lucky we are.) It did make me think of more trivial but nevertheless hurtful betrayals in one's own life.

The difficult choice

Not all choices are between good and bad, however. Such choices are easier in the main. The difficult ones are the choices between one good and another. Take the anonymity of witnesses at trials currently being debated. Legislation is difficult because we want competing goods: a fair trial where people see their accusers and cross examine them; the conviction of murderers; and people not being so intimidated that they will not testify to murder.

The existential choice

And some choices have consequences we can't see and will often never know. In a recent Dr Who – Turn Left – Donna in one version of her life turns left at a junction, meets the Doctor and the world is saved. In another she turns right at the junction and darkness encompasses the universe. A great Dr Who episode. Let's hope none of our choices face us with the same level of responsibility!

Learning to speak the truth

Speaking the truth is not always easy. So, some thoughts on how in a future Newsletter. Meanwhile, here's one approach!



Response to a request

Not much interest in a September meeting. However, anyone wanting to share a pint or two let me know.