

Exclusive: Stressed middle managers want better-defined roles

This is the headline in a news article in the Health Service Journal for 11 October this year. It goes on to report that, "In a poll of 357 managers, a third said they were not clear what was expected of them and a quarter said they were 'usually' stressed or anxious at work."

One might say that this is hardly an 'Exclusive'. So many surveys continue to report the same thing.

All this stress is so bad for people, their organisations and the people that their organisations serve, whether public or private, that it continues to startle me that some of the most basic obligations of leadership—or even just competent management—get overlooked, undervalued or forgotten.

Part of the reason may be that there is always something else, some other, better, more modern way of leading, where the old verities no longer apply.

On the other hand, the answer may be just that doing the basics right is

just hard, very hard. Doing the basic things right is not of itself glamorous—although the results can be.

This point is made by Robert Hiller in his reflections on what the top 10 global leaders do (also below).

This in turn led me back to the basic issue of our stressed managers. They are not clear what is expected of them. And if they are not clear about this then they are probably not clear about what they can expect of those around them, those they need to rely on to get things done. And then we're surprised people are stressed?

I want to make the claim that being clear about roles and responsibilities is a moral obligation of all managers, particularly but not exclusively at the top. And that failure to meet that moral obligation harms people.

Read the article on the next page and let me know if you agree or not.

Robert Hiller on leadership

"The top 10 global leaders from the survey 'hire for emotional intelligence, create a mentoring mentality, place the right people in the right jobs, coach their managers, prepare to solve problems, groom global talent, learn through integration, apply peer pressure, empower young employees' - and, if they are GE, do it all worldwide. But what's new or revolutionary about that? What kind of management would do the opposite?"

The sad answer to that last question is that, for many employees, that is precisely the kind of management they have. Of course, mismanaging people is a failure of leadership. But present enthusiasm for soft words obscures the truth that leadership is composed of hard deeds. It's easier to talk about 'building a leadership brand' or 'what your leader expects of you' (both Harvard titles) than, say, to take the initiative to develop a new product line against opposition from above.

People and companies need top managers who lead through others, who are 'leaders of leaders'. That's another pious phrase that, of itself, gets nothing done."

From *The Observer* 28 October 2007

No November Monthly Meeting

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 12 December

Film Review: The Lives of Others

It would be preposterous to suggest that living in organisations is like living under the Stasi in the former East Germany but...if you haven't seen the German film 'The Lives of Others' I suggest you rent the DVD now. In essence it is about relating to one another as persons—being human—in one of the most difficult perversely rationalist states (state of being as well as political/economic state) that humans have experienced. At least certainly in recent times—life under the Inquisition probably had similar characteristics. It is an example of the tyranny of ideology and it can be a tyranny that envelops organisations if they are not careful.

What's the relevance here? We have seen in discussion and recent Newsletters the fundamental importance of getting the human relationship between persons right if we are to live in organisations the way we would wish. If that's too tenuous just watch the film as it's very good.

The moral obligation to be clear about roles and responsibilities at work—a proposition

I once had an argument with a Professor of Sociology about the benefits of clarity about roles and responsibilities at work. He believed that clarity was overvalued and that in a messy actual and conceptual world (I think he meant himself) things worked better if boundaries were left fluid and unclear. People would then have the space in which to be themselves (or, whatever they wanted to be, the basis of a different argument altogether.)

I want to argue that this is profoundly wrong and indeed that there is a moral imperative to being clear about roles and responsibilities and that this is closely related to Personal Job Alignment. Indeed for the vast majority of people, managers in particular, Personal Job Alignment is heavily contingent, to my mind, on clarity of roles and responsibilities.

Many of you will know of the Organisation Development work I did in Leeds in the early 90s on implementing what was called levels of work or levels of responsibility (1) and may be thinking, "Here he goes again!" Partly. This approach was intrinsically based on the importance of clarity about roles and responsibilities, that belief itself based on the psychoanalytic belief about the importance of having clear personal boundaries.

But I want to take a different tack. I want to propose to you the moral case for clarity and what that case implies for all of us living in organisations. I want to make the case that this clarity is a starting point for relating to others at work *in their work roles*. Getting on with people is in essence a separate matter. But the clarity I am speaking of makes that getting on with people, if not easier (it may in fact make it more difficult, not all people like clarity about their responsibilities) then potentially more fulfilling and promotes Personal Job Alignment. It does this because it increases our ability to see ourselves in the job role and this in turn makes it easier to see the extent to which the role aligns or not with our energisers (Step 2 in the PJA process).

So, what is this moral case and how does it help with promoting PJA?

The moral case (2) is based on the fact that such clarity

- is concerned with the relationships between people and the relationships concerned are those of inter-personal obligation
- recognises the importance of matching ability with work
- is experienced as beneficial in ethical terms by people

Getting this clarity creates a system of expectations about who is responsible for what and how decisions get made. (3) Having such clarity, such a system of expectations:

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- Grounds relationships at work and provides the basis for the necessary conversations (e.g. see the previous Newsletter)
 - Allows for individual responsibility and creativity/liberation because it is about the nature of the role rather than being a list of tasks
 - Requires dialogue therefore promotes human interaction
 - Promotes dealing with reality

But what of my Professor of Sociology? He says that he would find all this clarity constraining rather than liberating. His desire not to be tied down may relate to his being an academic working in a University, which should be seen more as a community than a hierarchical organisation.

And I am not saying that all these benefits are guaranteed. Or that getting such clarity and working with it is easy – it isn't. It means being explicit about what a job role is and isn't. It means not fudging for the sake of someone's feelings. It means being real and that ain't easy.

What I am saying is that for leaders and managers this is the right way to be and the right road to follow. It is the right thing to do in our pursuit of organisations we aspire to live in. it's the way to get better organisations – better in terms of outputs and better in terms of places to be.

It's a moral imperative.

Footnotes

1. For those who don't know, this is based on the work of Elliott Jacques (A general theory of bureaucracy), Rowbottom (Organisational Design) and Kinston
2. I've adapted these three bullet points from an old handout by Warren Kinston but can't find it written in any text of his.
3. This is what all organisational structures are supposed to do as a minimum but judging from the HSJ article far too many fail to meet this most basic requirement.

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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.