

NEW ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITIES

Aging and the Changing Nature of Organisations and Leadership

Robert Burke

The aging of the population, and with it better health, suggests that people will be 'available' productively in the workforce for much longer periods than ever before, at least in the "developed" world. In the under developed world there is no choice as people of all ages are immersed continuously in the work of their own survival lifelong. Three issues arise from this. One, what will it mean to be an older person in the near future? Two, will older people really be able to leave the workforce by choice? And, three, if not, what do we do with them when they can no longer work?

The second question addresses what could be meant by 'new organisational capabilities' and the third 'the changing nature of organisations and leadership'. For the first question we will need to rethink and reflect on our perspective of society itself.

Our traditional notions of organisation and organisational leadership will undertake a new journey of discovery about what it means to be human and the nature of what the reality of work itself means, for example, will retirement be an option in the future.

What will the workforce look like in 2020 and beyond?

If you started work, up till the early to mid nineteen sixties, it was clearly understood that the retirement age for women was 60 and for men 65. There was no debate about this it was a situation that society was comfortable with it. No guilt was associated with retiring at the given age and it was expected that the remaining 'few' years of your life should be a reward for your contribution to the organisation and to society in general. A job for life was generally available and expected, and a generous pension was often available from your organisation for your loyalty to it.

It was also a time when you had choices about which job to take and the education system allowed you to be a 'generalist' or a 'specialist' as there was a need for both, as there is today. The digital age hadn't fully emerged and face-to-face communication was highly regarded. Life and work seemed to mingle easily and it was not uncommon that the two went hand in hand socially as well as professionally.

The world's population was less than half of what it is today and even for a young person it was not too difficult to buy a house in close proximity to your work in major cities.

During the 1960's many of the activist groups and political causes, such as the women's movement, the peace movement, the environmental movement, and the human rights movement, emerged, as did the culture of "youth rights" and the beginnings of significant shifts between intergenerational relationships.

You knew then what it meant to be an older person. It wasn't perfect and it had its problems and challenges then as it does today, but what will it mean in the near future?

Increasingly older people are relying more on the digital age and many find the internet gives them a greater opportunity to remain in contact with family and friends, albeit electronically, as

other pressures make it difficult to maintain contact personally as they had done previously, the irony of what the digital revolution promised. The intergenerational divide has resulted in gated communities and this is likely to increase becoming over time both a physical divide and a cultural divide.

The question to consider is 'With the gap between 'younger' and 'older' narrowing in favour of the 'older' how can older people avoid being needed in the workplace if they wish it or not? They will be a resource – a needed human resource. Comfortable retirement will no longer be looked on as a reward for years of service and loyalty. It will more often be seen as a cost that should be your responsibility only with little input from the organisation other than compulsory superannuation. Human Resource executives are feared as long-term loyalty is not expected, or even wanted, only productivity is wherever that comes from, be it downsizing, upsizing, right sizing, or whatever fad for productivity we have created. Brand 'me' has become the mantra.

It is very difficult for a person over 30 to get work as an apprentice despite the shortage of skilled tradespeople. There is a mindset, or worldview, that as you age you become less valuable as an employee. In the workplace an aged employee is often not seen as an asset being accused of being "behind the times", "stuck in a rut" and "inflexible" etc. This can often be true, regardless of age, but not always and is a paradox and a dilemma for leadership.

Unless society changes its perception on aging I think the answer is clearly older people can't avoid being essential to the workforce and retirement may become a thing of the past. Aging is increasing but older people are not what organisations want – *yet*. A major new industry is centered on avoiding ageing. We are bombarded by magazines, television, radio and films and we are encouraged to avoid aging, at least physically, by surgical 'extreme makeovers' as well as by drugs and other methods from changing the colour of your hair to rid it of grey to surgery.

Given the plethora of courses, models, tools and leadership techniques available to enhance organisational effectiveness one could be forgiven in thinking that if you invested in these the successful operation of an organisation would be relatively easy.

If you employ people with the 'right' skills and capabilities, regardless of age, get 'buy-in' from them through vision, mission, value statements, and with the creation of the 'right' culture and provide leadership skills accompanied by 'feedback' in the form of direct and anonymous feedback then you have all the hallmarks for a successful organisation that will achieve 'alignment' culminating in financial and organisational success.

This said, from my observation, there are very few organisations today that don't do any, if not all, of the above but still fail to achieve the outcomes expected.

There is a difference between competence and capability regardless of age. Capability is manifested in effectiveness under pressure. Knowing what to do to be a leader does not mean that a person *can* lead. Knowing how to lead does not mean that a person *will* lead, especially in tough situations. Capability means the ability and motivation to perform skilfully under duress, my friend Malcolm Davies writes. Capability is what separates outstanding leaders from the rest.

A leadership challenge in this tough situation is what capability can we expect from the leaders of our organisations and societies under the pressure and duress aging of the population manifests for all ages the young and for the older? Avoidance to address this is not an option.