

Leadership, Groups and Collaboration



THE SECRET LIFE OF ORGANISATIONS

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Some time back I did some work with a major Australian company in New York. At our first meeting I noticed that most of the expat Australian managers were sitting on one side of the room and the local American managers were sitting on the other side. I pointed out this anomaly. Howls of protest erupted – “it is just a coincidence” said some, “can we leave the psycho babble out of this?” demanded others. But it was no accident. When the managers became more honest it transpired that there was a large gap between both camps. Some American managers even referred to the “ugly Australians” who were “crude, bullies and showed no respect for our local culture”! That experience and others have made me realize the pomposity of some of the sanitized Australian self-image, and made me grateful that we are not a large enough country to be an imperial power.

On top of managing the shop well, modern business leaders must deal with three great challenges: how to get our organisations to keep changing and adapting in order to survive and thrive; how to get our organisations to be creative and innovative about the future, and; how to get our people to work really well together and to bring out the best in each other. I reckon progress with the latter challenge is a precondition for success with the other challenges.

I think of it as the “secret life of organisations”. Of all the work I do with senior leaders the part that they often find the most controversial and confronting is exploring their relationship with the group and examining the underlying dynamics of the group and their role in creating those dynamics. All sorts of defences come to the fore: “I’m not planning on sending anyone here Christmas cards at the end of this” says one prickly CEO, while another anxious one opines that “standing around holding hands and singing Kumbaya never changed anything!”

We saw it with the recent floods in Queensland. We see it with the best sports teams. We see an extraordinary level of collaboration and teamwork, of connectedness and community, and we witness the power and achievement which they make possible often in the face of daunting odds. Businesses, and even society, cannot expect this level of altruism and self sacrifice on a regular basis, but I reckon that we can expect and enjoy greater collaboration and teamwork and more positive working relationships than some organisations are able to muster.

Maybe it is our Western culture, or maybe it is our human nature, but senior leaders regularly report that they experience a level of honesty and collaboration during our leadership interventions which is greater than anything they have ever experienced with colleagues in the workplace. Then they make a classic mistake – they start referring to their workplaces as the real world and the workshop experience as artificial. As far as I can tell that view is completely flawed – the collaboration and empowerment of our interventions is the real deal, and the individualism and disunity of some workplaces is a maladaptation resulting from a lack of effective leadership!

The reason the “real world” of the workplace can seem more difficult for working well together is that our organisational relationships and relational dynamics accrue a history, become systemised and take on a secret life of their own. We have a tendency to sweep them under the carpet. Organisations develop all sorts of polite conventions not to address them, especially since the top brass is often responsible for instigating some of them. It takes more than good will by a few individuals or a ropes’ course on the weekend to change them. It takes sustained attention and leadership! And it is important, not just so work colleagues are “nice” to each other, but so organisations can resolve tough problems together, make difficult choices together, deal with consequential changes together, and learn to be creative and innovative together.

Some unhelpful and quite typical dynamics which can be found in groups and organisations are: polarizations around dominant personalities; informal factions and coalitions often formed along these fault lines; all sorts of norms and

standards and rules often imposed from the top; inner groups and outer groups; lots of role playing and mask wearing; scapegoating of weaker parties; work avoidance, especially avoidance of any efforts to make the group work better together or any tough or adaptive or creative challenges which will exacerbate the tensions in the group; suppression of emotions; power plays, value conflicts, gender conflicts and racial conflicts; excessive judgementalism and; resistance to leadership. But this is the ‘secret life of organisations’ – on the surface it is all “mate” and “g’day” and “going forward”. Effective leadership addresses these dynamics, brings them to the surface, and helps to build more healthy relationships.

Some people use fancy words for all this, like building a “container” or a “holding environment”. Whatever it is called it seems to me that it is a foundational piece of leadership work to help people to connect and collaborate.

