The agenda of the organization 1: 
A framework*

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It is difficult at times to know if the welfare and well-being of an organization is being best served by the individuals who make decisions on its behalf. Sometimes decisions made are driven more by the needs of individual persons rather than by the needs of the organization. Company politics, conflicts, work relationships, territory and turf, individual status and power and personality issues all influence what happens and how decisions are made. Major decisions in areas such as downsizing, re-organization and corporate strategy are often made by individuals. Do these decisions best suit the agenda of the organization or reflect the agenda of the individual? Who looks after the organizational agenda? Noer's (1993) model is used to illustrate how what is best for the organization, and not just individuals within it, can be attained.

Key words: Agendas; company well-being; organization.

INTRODUCTION

At any given moment, in any given organization, public or private, many agendas vie for supremacy. Personal agendas conflict with team agendas, turf and political agendas intertwine and separate, financial and competitive agendas clash with caring-for-employee agendas, hidden and unconscious agendas live alongside and compete with open and well-known agendas. The contemporary company is a veritable criss-cross of divergent and agreeing agendas. All of us know of instances when personal needs overwhelm organization value: of the new idea that is sabotaged because, while it adds value to the company, it takes away power from a manager; of two Board Directors who leave a trail of disaster behind them because of their continual fighting; of the disappointed aspirant concerned more about getting his own back than contributing to the added value of the organization or of the defensive HR manager who is too busy watching his/her back to look to the future of the company.

While the company becomes the battleground for competing agendas, who will look after the agenda of the organization? Who will be concerned for its growth, its welfare, its health and what truly helps it develop? Just as in the past it was all too easy for the individual to be sacrificed to the organization, so today, in our age of individualism, the organization can be sacrificed on the altar of individual needs.

Organizations today

Meandering in and out of organizations today, it is easy to pick up the impression that employees and managers are not sure what is happening. On one hand they are told, and there is lots of evidence to support it, that the recession is definitely over and business is booming. On the other hand, many of them are experiencing the remnants of re-organization. They are faced with a dilemma just like the boy asked a question by his Sunday-school teacher, 'What is small, grey, gathers nuts and climbs trees'? To which he replied, 'Miss, I know the answer should be God or Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel to me'. What is the expected answer, what are my senses telling me? What are the business gurus pontificating about, what am I feeling? What do I read in the papers, what are my work colleagues saying? Its difficult to know what to trust to come to sensible conclusions. Perhaps part of the answer is being able to hold the contrasts, the opposites, together. So while production soars, people suffer. Many are in the state depicted by Carlos Fuentes when he began his novel with the words:

'Have we come here to laugh or cry Are we dying or being born.'

In business today, we are not quite sure which to do. Noer,1 always good at metaphors, picks one from a frustrated leader outlining the 'state of the art' in his organization,
First, we decide we are going north and we get on a free-way and drive like Hell - one hundred miles an hour. Then we come to an intersection and we decide to head east and we barrel off in that direction, but that doesn't seem to get us anywhere so we turn around and speed back west, and finally we decide to go back to basics and head south again as fast as we can drive! All the while we are debating who should steer as we watch the gas gauge moving towards empty.

When we look at the latest statistics on downsizing we come up with quite a grim picture: production is up but there's a lot of pain sloshing around in modern companies. Sahdev and Vinnicombe\(^2\) in a study for the Cranfield School of Management, reviewed HRs' perceptions of survivors' responses to downsizing. They looked at a number of areas under three headings: what had decreased, what had increased, what had stayed the same. It will come as no surprise to learn that over 75% said that stress had increased, as had the workload (80%), customer focus (55%) and cost consciousness (75%). Staying much the same were commitment to targets, relationships with colleagues, feedback on performance and relationship with boss. Decreased were loyalty, motivation, security, career opportunity, trust, control over workload and fun. The report raises questions about whether downsizing, or at least the way restructuring has been handled, has attained the ends it was meant to and whether or not the long-term results will be helpful.

Noer,\(^3\) in the USA, has thrown his hat into the ring and decided from his experience of working with companies, that they needed help in organizing the whole process of re-organization so that the agenda of the organization, its health and well-being, can be at the forefront of the process. His research on survivors of re-organization echoes that of the Cranfield study and his 5-year follow-up shows little change in employee reactions over time. His model, to help organizations 'heal the wounds' of layoffs and re-structuring, can be applied to helping attain the agenda of the organization. Stage 1 recommends revisiting communication and all aspects of it. Don't overmanage or overcontrol communication and make sure it takes place personally. The best communication is relational and is clued into the emotional side of what is happening. 'The system should be flooded with information' writes Noer,\(^3\) 'verbal, nonverbal, oral, written formal, informal, up, down, laterally, over and over again'. Stage 2 focuses on the emotions in the company and especially the grieving process that needs to be dealt with by almost everyone: those leaving, those staying, those moving, changing teams, new leaders. It is here that Bridge's model\(^4\) can help when he suggests that all transitions (the psychological side of changes) begin with an ending and good managers and leaders facilitate themselves and their employees being able to deal with 'letting go and moving on'. Noer introduces a key term in his Stage 3 — breaking co-dependency. For too long organizations and individuals have entered into a co-dependent relationship (the term comes from families in which there is an alcoholic member) where companies create psychological contracts with all sorts of unwritten promises — we will look after you, you have a job for life, your career is safe with us — and individual employees are satisfied to index their happiness and future by how they are dealt with by the company. Stage 4 highlights how to set up new and more modern kinds of relationships that support autonomy within employees and help organizations to not create systems that make employees dependent on them.

The agenda of the organization

Using these four steps: (1) open communication to enable all agendas to be on the table; (2) facilitating emotional expression within the organization to help individuals deal with letting go and moving on; (3) breaking dysfunctional and unhealthy relationships so that employees can be autonomous and (4) creating new-style relationships for a more business-like type of relationship, can help the organization think through what is of true value for its future. Perhaps in this way both agendas, that of the individual employee and that of the organization, can merge and what is truly for the welfare of the individual can be for the welfare of the organization, and vice-versa.

REFERENCES