The agenda of the organization 2: Interventions*

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Many contemporary organizations, though doing well in productivity, are in chaos. Stress amongst managers and employees is still rampant and the assertion that 'people are our best assets' is confirmed more in words than in actions. What interventions are needed to best add value to the agenda of the organization and influence employee performance for the better? A philosophy of employee care includes looking at how managers take responsibility for performance management, deal with their own and others' stress and how the dynamics within organizations can be understood and harnessed for the welfare of the company. It also includes reviewing, articulating and implementing policies and systems that affect individuals in the organization and the organization as a whole.

Key words: Company polices; employee care; stress.

INTRODUCTION

A metaphor employed by Noer1 illustrates how many view contemporary organizations:

'We're like a bunch of ants clinging to a slippery log, careering down a raging, flood-swollen river. We're scrambling all over, having meetings, writing reports, pushing some of our fellow ants overboard, all the while arguing about where we are going and who should steer! No matter how hard we try to control it, reengineer it, or downsize it, that log is going where it wants to go. I know there are lots of rocks and waterfalls downstream, and I'm not sure if either we remaining ants, or the log, are going to survive the trip.'

This image raises issues of who is in control, who is guiding and who is leading. We expect our managers to do that. Managers give vision and, if not providing the pathway ahead, at least are offering processes by which employees can find that way. But maybe not. It seems, from what we read about leaders, that they may be even more confused than the rest of us and more subject to the stresses and strains of modern company living.

There is no doubt that stress plays its part. Springett2 has summarized modern organizational stress in five areas:

- **Connectivity**: the requirement to connect to more and more and keep in touch with a greater number of contacts;
- **Information**: the need to keep up to date with the vast amount of information in all professional domains;
- **Competition**: trying to keep ahead of the competitors in the field even in areas of life where traditionally there was little or no competition, *e.g.*, Health Service, Education.
- **Time compression**: the fact that there is simply not enough time to do what we want to do (one harassed manager suggested it was easier for him to give blood or money than donate time) and
- **Discontinuity**: the realization that how we did it in the past may have little relevance to how we will do it in the future; there is not the same continuity between past, present and future that there used to be.

In a recent Institute of Management study into the stresses of modern managers, Charlesworth3 concludes that her research 'confirms that stress affects all levels and types of manager ... almost 90% of respondents of the 1996 survey believe that stress is having an adverse effect on morale, health, work effectiveness and relationships. The great majority are experiencing physical symptoms attributable to stress – four-fifths having

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difficulties sleeping and a similar proportion feel constantly irritable or impatient.

Trying to deal with stress and its personal and professional implications gives rise to a number of strong feelings: anxiety, frustration, irrationality, aggression, drug/alcohol abuse, health problems and burnout. These move through the organization to cause problems at all levels. But whose problems are they — even if they come to reside in the unsuspecting laps of employees? Are they contextual problems rather than individual ones? Are we wrong to tackle them at an individual level? There is an opinion that we get the employees we deserve and that if we could sort out the managers, the employees would be fine. Who needs mentoring, training or counselling? Is it the organization? The management in the organization? Employees? It seems, to me, that a few basic principles might point in a healthy direction:

First — and it is by no means a novel idea — organizations get what they expect. If you expect the minimum from employees, why be surprised when you receive it? 'Feedforward' is a term being used to indicate how we give feedback in anticipation of behaviour and our recipients then conveniently live up to expectations. McGregor’s mid-60s work on Theory X and Theory Y (our understanding of human nature) despite being updated and restated by Pfeffer is still a long way from being believed.

Secondly, employees treat others as they have been treated. There is a cascade effect in how people deal with others — by and large, they hand on to others how they have been dealt with themselves. Hampton-Turner does a masterly job in showing how the principle of caring for employees pays dividends. He concludes, ‘It was found in a major study of a US bank that the relationship between the bank’s service staff and its customers was repeated again between the HQ of the bank and its service staff and was repeated in the relationship between top management and supervisors. It is probable, though the research did not go that far, that the pattern was repeated again between the HQ of the bank and its branches’. The bottom line for managers is: employees will treat the customer as you treat employees.

Thirdly, we can no longer view the performance of employees as an isolated event that occurs because of their own internal abilities; it is connected to organizational culture, to motivation, to relationships at work and home. Much employee behaviour is a response to the situation in which employees find themselves, not bad-mindedness, poor attitudes or the need for training.

Fourthly, it seems important to acknowledge that the emotional, arational, shadow side of people and organizations is not only conducive to organizational life but could well be the mainspring of how valuable they are, if used well. Not surprisingly, many managers consider that a totally rational approach will be seen, understood and implemented by employees, and they then wonder what went wrong.

Fifthly, perhaps we should adhere to the principle that managers are responsible for the performance of their employees. For too long we have recruited managers because they are good at something else other than managing people and the performance of people. The sooner we return to the description of managers as ‘those who are responsible for the performance of employees’ the sooner we may have some leadership, direction and vision from both managers and employees. Egan starts his book by posing a dilemma: You are driving in the country — you come to a bridge you have never seen before. You have some concerns that the bridge is safe to take your car across. There is a man standing next to the bridge. You roll down the window and ask him his opinion on whether the bridge is strong enough to bear the weight of your car. He says, ‘I’ll tell you about this bridge and then you can make up your own mind. The bridge was designed, engineered, constructed and currently maintained by a firm all of whose professionals have been selected, trained and developed in the same way as your average manager is’. Would you cross the bridge?

The agenda of the organization is best served by managers who take on the responsibility of managing the performance of others. This is important for several reasons:

• Most of us do not use our full potential. Maslow suggested that most people utilize approximately 15% of their potential and talked about the ‘psychopathology of the average’. We need others to help us learn how to get in touch with and harness unused talent.

• If there is poor performance it is a management issue: nothing is only one person’s problem. Where there is poor or bad performance it is the responsibility of managers to do something about it. And ‘doing something about it’ does not mean passing it on to the next unsuspecting department.

• We want to avoid collusion within the organization. John Harvey has written two very powerful essays called, ‘Eichmann in the Organization’ and ‘Organizations as Phrog Farms’. In the former he takes Eichmann as an example of what is common practice in many organizations — that we lose our sense of ourselves and collude with all sorts of inhumane and horrible practices, do deals that suit no-one in the long run and eventually turn into frogs (what he calls ‘phrogs’). He warns against what is called ‘Bystander behaviour’ which has the following features:

(i) people are aware that something seems wrong in a situation;
(ii) they do not actively take responsibility for their part in maintaining the problem or preventing its resolution;
(iii) they claim they could not have acted otherwise and
(iv) they are discounting their autonomy and power to influence the situation.

Typical statements used by bystanders are:

• Its none of my business;
• The situation is more complex than it seems;
• I do not have all the information/am not qualified to deal with this;
• I don’t want to get burned again;
• I want to remain neutral;
• I’m only telling the truth as I see it;
• I’m just following orders;
• My contribution won’t make much difference;
• They brought it on themselves;
• I don’t want to rock the boat.

Harvey’s views collusive behaviour as one of the factors of least value to organizational health and worries, not so much about conflict within the organization, as when people too easily agree with one another.

PHILOSOPHY OF EMPLOYEE CARE

From the above it can be seen that I consider four areas to be key in order for the agenda of the organization to take on the priority-status it deserves. These four are:

• Training managers to manage employee performance and take on responsibility for developing more effective behaviours.
• To understand organizations and how they work. There are a number of ways to gaining insight into organizations, e.g., a psychodynamic concept of organizations (defences, transference, unconscious elements), the shadow side of organizations (Egan\textsuperscript{8}). Systemic understandings of organizations can be helpful here, e.g., inter-relatedness of change systems.
• By providing individual interventions, e.g., one-to-one executive coaching, mentoring systems, supervision and consultancy to managers and teams.
• By providing organizational interventions, e.g., a philosophy of employee care, systems of employee well-being, policies and statements about employee rights and responsibilities, e.g., sexual harassment, equal opportunities as well as commitment to an organizational culture of excellence based on people.

These insights, knowledge and skills work out in five systems that can help organizations move and develop: (1) individual crisis issues interventions; (2) individual developmental issues systems; (3) group developmental growth; (4) training and development throughout the learning organization and (5) organizational change and transition as needed.

For managers, HR and Personnel, it means new mindsets as they think differently in order to act differently. These mindset changes revolve around a movement between areas:

• From individual thinking to organizational thinking;
• From individual assessment to assessment in a context;
• From interpersonal relationships to systems relations;
• From uni-role involvement to multi-role involvement;
• From personal accountability to organizational accountability;
• From non-evaluation to evaluation;
• From single intervention to organizational intervention;
• From personal change to organizational change.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, I suppose we are no better or worse off than most organizations in the past. We are different and we face different issues and problems, one of which is how to get what is good for the organization to the top of most agendas within the organization. We will then, as in most healthy families, have a good balance of: individual rights and group rights, no sacrificing of either individuals or of the organization, a love for our organization (company, firm), and a better physical, emotional and psychological place to work. That cannot be bad.

REFERENCES