

This month:

- **The work bargain**
- **A Psychologist meets and engineer**

How far do we have to compromise? The bargain that is employed work

As members of society we all have to conform sufficiently to the laws and conventions of that society. While there is much debate about how constraining these laws and conventions need to or can be, the ultimate penalty for non-compliance is loss of one's freedom to function in that society, i.e. prison or restraint under mental health legislation.

Given that joining an organisation is something with have some say about, what are we doing when we join an organisation as an employee to our personal freedom; what are we doing in addition to our societal obligations; what are we either giving up or committing ourselves to?

(We might ask similar questions about all relationships we either find ourselves with (e.g. family) or choose to join (e.g. marriage).)

Here's a provisional list of what we agree to:

- Act within the rules of behaviour – these may be explicit or inherent
- Meet at least the minimum requirements of the job
- Having our performance managed explicitly – usually, but not always, with sanctions of various sorts for poor performance and possibly rewards for good performance
- Be enjoined to – and to an extent determined by the organisation – have freedom to refrain from

promoting the company and sharing its vision

This last is of particular significance for those companies that need the innovation and creativity of their staff (see previous Newsletter). The best get this 'freely given' and also unrecruit those who don't give it.

If we are managers we also have to manage people within the rules, culture and legal framework towards the objectives we are given, want to pursue or those we can get away with. (More on this below.)

And here the ultimate penalty for breaking these rules is the sack (plus some societal penalty if you happen to have broken a law as well.) And voluntarily withdrawing our agreement means we'll end up having to leave.

So, what do we get in return? The basics include:

- Money
- A level of security about the future – the extent of this varies hugely, of course, and may or may not include security into old age and some security for our immediate family
- Money while we're sick (at least for a defined period)
- Being paid for being on holiday
- [Let me know what else you'd add]

We might also get

- The satisfaction of working with

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others to achieve something we believe to be of value – to express ourselves

- Status – inside and outside the company
- Training and development
- The opportunity to lead and inspire others
- Possible rewards for good performance
- We might get opportunities to travel the world...or, if unlucky, the UK
- [Let me know what else]

Let's face it, that's not bad. It certainly makes those of us who are self-employed realise what comparative value we place on not submitting ourselves to (or, less tendentiously, we might say not agreeing to) the requisite organisational behaviours. One wonders what people have to complain about. And yet many people do complain.

Many complaints are about the bargain not being good enough¹. Much Trade Union activity might be said to be about this, e.g. pay rates, leave entitlements, redundancy policy. But much of the complaining, if not most in developed countries, is about the nature of life in the organisation, e.g. stress, bullying, lack of direction, poor communication. These are now typically many of the things you'd see on a staff satisfaction survey.

For, however good the bargain is and the benefits are², we know that working in organisations is not typically fun. In the last Newsletter we looked, after all, at the diagnosis of corporations as psychopathic, so this isn't a surprise.

How can we make this bargain better? Well, we'd have to start by agreeing what we all thought 'better' might mean in this context. We will have to have recourse to our basic values. Perhaps we want to be treated as the individual human beings we are; sounds obvious enough. But is this possible? Take as an example, an area where we are constrained in our ability to treat people in an openly human way. If we are managers we will probably have had to deal with someone for a disciplinary or other performance matter. In doing so, we will have had to retain a formal distance from the employee and work within the frameworks of the company and the law. What these frameworks don't really allow is for the discussion to take place at a personal or human level. HR managers throughout the land would have heart attacks hearing a manager say, "Can we put all this formal stuff to one side and talk about this just between the two of us as human beings. What's really the matter here?" Chasms of need, personal dysfunction, etc potentially open up.

Yet to be treated as we say we want, this would have to be the kind of discussion we had.

Now, it is of course entirely possible that we say we want to be treated as the individual human beings that we are

but do not sign up to what that means about being open to discussing who that individual human being is (with all their vulnerabilities and weaknesses) with someone else. Because that is what it would mean. And let's be honest, few of us are up to that in their lives outside work let alone at work.

But even if we aren't prepared to go that far, we do all want to be treated as humans who need mutual respect to function at our optimum. And it is almost always this lack of respect for people as individuals that leads to the things people complain about.

Now, I'm not saying that the bargain can't be better. As I've said, a Trade Unionist reading this would say that making the bargain better is precisely what they are about as is, for example, the Social Chapter of the EU.

When I started writing this I had intended, following on from the last Newsletter, to work towards what making this bargain better meant for the rights and obligations that we want to give or impose on corporations and other employing organisations.

What becomes clear in writing this is that we are once again in the territory where rules and regulations, however well formed, cannot deliver the benefits we want. What we want is about human relationships. And human relationships in organisations of all shapes and sizes are framed by ideas and values – the very things that both make us human and about which legislation is such an inappropriate tool. And interestingly, as we know well enough, this means that when the basis bargain is rubbish the actual experience can be wonderful – because the value equation works so well.

So, once more it is purpose and values that are primary – and in organisations, community of purpose and value.

If this is not what for most of our time focuses us as leaders then we shall not lead organisations that have the work bargain balanced in the way that it both can and should be.

¹ I actually typed 'food enough' first time and there is a sense in which we do feed ourselves physically (money for food), emotionally, intellectually and spiritually through our work.

² There's another debate I'd really like to get into here and that's about whether this bargain weakens us all by taking away too much responsibility for our own lives in their totality. Another Newsletter perhaps.

A psychologist interacts with an engineer

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I have been working with a government department recently (in a large EU country just off the Atlantic coast of Europe – client confidentiality.)

I interviewed a senior person about his approach to improving processes in the department. He gave a very detailed account of process analysis and redesign. He was very frustrated that other people couldn't see how straightforward it all was. He turned out to be an engineer by training (and aptitude.)

Next up was another very senior person who was looking at precisely why it was that people had trouble with the processes and suggesting how this could all be made easier. He was very frustrated because the process change people didn't understand why people behaved why they did. He turned out to be a psychologist by training (and aptitude.)

It would be too much to say that for both of them the problem was the other person but it felt a lot like that.

Now, we've probably all been through things like Belbin or Myers Briggs or some such and we know this stuff in principle.

What's interesting to me is that we never seem to get this in practice! I seem to spending ever-increasing amounts of my time explaining people to one another as the start of trying to achieve anything.

So what? Well the so what here is, I think, about getting Personal Job Alignment. If we want to align ourselves with our role at work and with the culture of the organization, we also have to understand our colleagues and to an extent, why they are the way they are. And that means understanding why we are the way we are with them too.

So, a little exercise for us all this month. Think of the person in your organisation you understand least – the person who just doesn't get it, for example. The exercise: why don't they get it? And what don't they get about you and why?