ENTELECHY

Entelechy n, [LL entelechia, from Gk] 1. the vital force or principle directing growth and life. 2. a realisation or actuality as opposed to a potentiality.

On leadership and change

By Guy C. Gattegno

Work practices and the "overseer" mentality

In both public and private sectors across Australia, a great deal of effort has been devoted to creating cooperative relationships between management and employees. Through workplace reforms, numerous attempts have been made to minimise "them" versus "us" attitudes. By involving employees in the creation of working arrangements better suited to individual workplaces, these efforts generally aim to develop new and more flexible work practices, capable of ensuring greater job satisfaction for employees as well as improved productivity for the enterprise.

However, these efforts will have negligible impact unless deep-seated, and often insidious, beliefs and misconceptions about the world of work are aired, critically examined, and where necessary, eradicated.

In the beginning...

No perspective on work practices is complete if it doesn't start at the beginning with Frederick W. Taylor and "scientific management". Taylor developed this system in the U.S. at about the turn of the 20th century and to this day it bears his name. Taylor's consuming passions were rationality and efficiency, specifically

as the means for regulating workers' daily lives, simplifying individual jobs and maximising results, and ultimately as moral principles for improving people's lives.

Essentially, Taylorism was a system for increasing productivity through careful rationalisation of work flows, processes, and individual tasks, particularly on the factory floor. Taylor's principles, and those advocated by other American pioneers (such as Eli Whitney) of the "science" of managing production in order to maximise output, left an indelible legacy on Western economies that persists to this day.

At their best, these early efforts at "scientific management" yielded the fundamental innovations of the industrial age, such as mass production and the assembly line. There can be little doubt that these contributed in no small measure to the improved

standard of living now enjoyed by hundreds of millions in industrialised societies. It is equally well established that, during World War II, the awesome capacity of the U.S. to manage production of ships, planes, tanks, trucks, etc. in their thousands, was instrumental in ensuring victory for the Allies.

The dark side of Taylorism

But Taylorism has also had its more harmful side effects. Whether or not intended by their proponents, these scientific management systems led to the fundamental division of labourand the dichotomy between "workers" and "managers" (or, perhaps more aptly, "overseers"). Workers were employed to do the work, and managers to do the thinking, planning and organising.

To understand how such an "overseer mentality" could take root, particularly in the U.S. at the turn of the last century, it is necessary to appreciate the climate in which early management theorists developed their proposals, and the beliefs and attitudes held by factory owners and other "captains of industry" to whom these ideas appealed most.

- Before Australia became a penal colony in the 1780s, North America (or, more precisely, the thirteen Colonies) fulfilled a similar function for Britain. People convicted of certain crimes were shipped to the New World as "indentured servants". It is doubtful that, for individuals enduring these periods of enforced servitude, motivation to perform at their best was particularly high.

- Beginning in the 1600s, hundreds of thousands if not millions of Africans were transported to North America and sold into slavery. Being treated as "goods and chattel" and made to work against their will, they not surprisingly acquired the reputation for being "lazy and shiftless". Slavery did not end in the U.S. till the 1860s, in the aftermath of the Civil War.

- In the middle decades of the 19th century, large numbers of Chinese workers were imported into America, to build railroads and provide the labour for other similarly backbreaking, dangerous and dehumanising "infrastructure development projects".

- Towards the end of the 19th and well into the 20th century, successive waves of immigrants reached the U.S. from Europe, and were often consigned to the most menial, unskilled, low-paying industrial jobs available. Because they were largely unschooled and often spoke little or no English, it was easy to think of them as stupid and unreliable.

The rise of the "overseer" mentality

From all these experiences of individuals being made to work against their will or under demeaning conditions, it was not difficult to form an opinion, either explicitly or sub-consciously, that workers were basically untrustworthy, and had to be closely supervised if not coerced to produce work. Hence the need for stern overseers.

It should come as no surprise that, in the early decades of last century,

militant unionism arose in reaction to such a dim view of workers. In its nobler intents, unionism aimed to protect individuals' rights, ensure an honest day's pay for an honest day's work, and improve working conditions. However, in its efforts at self-preservation, the union movement has also been guilty of deplorable excesses. Not the least of these has been its vested interest in maintaining, and even exaggerating, the dichotomy between management and labour, between "them" and "us".

Taylor's legacy

To this day, the prevailing view of labour/management relations has remained adversary, antagonistic. Why do we still have an elaborate body of legislation, rules and regulations to deal with the world of work and to define socially acceptable relationships between employers and employees? Why do we still have Industrial Relations Commissions and Tribunals to resolve conflicts between "workers" and "bosses"? Why else do we still have strikes and other work-related disruptions whenever our carefully constructed monuments to industrial harmony break down?

Taylor's legacy, however, is at once deeper and more subtle than this.

Doing the work, or doing the job?

Most of us still conceive of "work" in terms of distinct job functions. Over the years, we've become conditioned to thinking along the lines of, "At work, my job is to do X, and it's Charlie's job to do Y." In this, we've been helped considerably by unions, whose self-interest demanded the proliferation of rigid job categories, each to be performed by a different worker. Artificial distinctions between jobs often meant that the worker wielding the wrench was not allowed to use a hammer, and vice versa.

Thus, at a most fundamental level, the legacy of Taylorism is that we still carry around with us the concept of "job" as central to, indeed synonymous with, "work".

Yet a job is an artificial creation, invented in the 19th century as a way of packaging into simple, discrete (and generally repetitive) elements the work required in the industrial age factory or office. Eighteenth century workers in Europe, for example, did not conceive of themselves as job holders, but as craftsmen, artisans, labourers or tradesmen who performed constantly changing work. What needed to be done at any given time and in any given place was determined primarily by the season, the weather, or the demands of the moment. The atomisation of work into separate jobs, to be performed by different individuals during fixed-duration workdays or workweeks, was in fact widely criticised when it was first introduced in the 19th century as an inhuman way of making people work.

The tyranny of jobs

Confusing jobs with work means that people spend time and energy "doing their jobs", instead of getting the necessary work done. In an organisation structured around jobs, people are hired because of their presumed abilities to fill certain slots, not because of their worth to the enterprise. Individual workers are furnished with job descriptions which, by defining their duties and responsibilities, also delineate everything that lies outside their roles. Job holders' performance, and hence their remuneration and their future career prospects, are assessed against predetermined sets of job-related objectives, not against their contributions to the overall success of the organisation.

Perhaps most offensively, the role of the manager or supervisor as "overseer" was invented a century ago to supervise and control the work of people who held jobs.

Working in an "un-jobbed" environment

Throughout the industrialised world, today's enterprise is rapidly evolving from a rigidly hierarchical structure of jobs into a "de-jobbed" environment, characterised at any moment by a body of work that must be completed. Rather than "doing their jobs",

individuals employed by such a post-industrial entity will have to be given the means, the latitude and the motivation to do whatever needs to be done to bring about their shared vision for the organisation. Rather than being structured into distinct work units, departments and functions, the new organisation will be built around largely autonomous, self-managed, flexible project teams and clusters of individuals. These will form, exist, renew themselves and disband over time, according to the demands of the work to be performed. Rather than overseers and supervisors, such an organisation will require coaches, facilitators, leaders.

Only in such ways will the invidious overseer mentality that still permeates the world of work be abolished.

 plans, then go

QUIZ: How entrenched is the overseer mentality in your organisation?

_____

You may think that the overseer mentality has long since disappeared in your organisation. The quiz that follows, unscientific though it certainly is, may confirm your view or, alternatively, may yield surprising results.

Think about the statements below then, for each, tick either the "Yes" or the "No" box. When you've completed the quiz, turn to the next page for an assessment of how flourishing, according to your own perceptions, is the overseer mentality in your organisation.

		YES	NO
In your organisation...			
1.	Individual work units are clearly delineated.	❑	❑
2.	Work units and other elements of the organisational chart are arranged primarily as a hierarchy.	❑	❑
3.	Everyone has a specified individual as a boss, and everyone knows who his/her boss is.	❑	❑
4.	Most people have job titles and/or job descriptions that define what they do.	❑	❑
5.	People know where others stand on the "ladder of success".	❑	❑
6.	A manager's job is to ensure the best possible performance from the people who report to him/her.	❑	❑
7.	There is a performance management system in place, to help managers assess individual achievements.	❑	❑
8.	Rewards (pay raises, promotions, etc.) are linked to individual performance against predetermined objectives	❑	❑
9.	Managers are responsible for achieving results through others.	❑	❑
10.	Managers place very high value on "no surprises".	❑	❑
11.	People periodically produce detailed work plans, then go about implementing them.	❑	❑
12.	Managers concentrate on process, which enables them to control more closely their subordinates' behaviours.	❑	❑
13.	No matter what they say, managers are basically averse to their subordinates taking business risks.	❑	❑
14.	Employees are generally only given the information they need to perform their jobs.	❑	❑
15.	Only senior managers and executives are treated as if they had an ownership stake in the business.	❑	❑

How to score your responses to the quiz:

For each "Yes" box that you have ticked, give yourself **one point.**

If your score is:

0 - 3 points   Congratulations!   Your organisation already belongs in the "de-jobbed" firmament.   It is ready to start reaping the benefits of its early transition to post-industrial structure, management philosophy, systems and work practices.

4 - 7 points   There is hope for your organisation yet!   In fact, only a few obstacles stand in the way of its transformation into a "de-jobbed" enterprise. Focus on ways to eliminate these obstacles, if you want it to evolve into a true workplace (as opposed to a location where people do their jobs).

8 - 11 points   The overseer mentality is alive and well in your organisation, which has a fair way to go to attain post-industrial nirvana.   Major surgery seems indicated but, do not despair, the difficulties are not insurmountable!

12 - 15 points   To put it bluntly, the overseer mentality rules your organisation.   If it is to survive the next several years, it will need to undergo wholesale changes.   This will be painful, particularly for current stakeholders but, if it doesn't make the transition to a totally new (and as yet only dimly perceived) form, your enterprise may well follow the dinosaurs into oblivion.