

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

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“People are our greatest resource!!!” Yeah, right...

In one way or another, nearly every organisation trumpets its belief that its employees are its most valuable asset. Yet many of the Western world’s largest and best known corporations have spent the last few years “restructuring”, “rightsizing” or “re-engineering” themselves --- euphemisms for drastically reducing the size of their workforce.

One of my previous employers had this to say in a major policy document (inevitably titled *The Way Ahead*). This captured the essence of its annual senior executive strategic planning exercise: ***“Human resources... are fundamental to [our] vision, and they will be planned, developed and managed... as a major component of the strategy of keeping [us] in the lead [within our industry].”***

Yet, less than two years after this ringing declaration was made I, along with thousands of other staff members (including many who had devoted their entire working lives to the organisation), found themselves retrenched, given early retirement, or otherwise eliminated from the payroll.

To be fair, what took place within this organisation can hardly be viewed as atypical. Banal in outline yet undoubtedly traumatic to many of the individuals involved, this story can be repeated with only minor variations for hundreds, if not thousands, of the world's largest employers.

Why is this happening across such a broad spectrum of enterprises? What went wrong with the compact between employer and employee, which seemed to have served both well for much of the 20th century?

Compliant or committed?

In an earlier issue of this newsletter (Vol.1 No.1), I drew a sharp distinction between an attitude of **compliance** and one of **commitment** on the part of employees.

Compliance was seen as "being a good (if unremarkable) soldier", "going along to get along", and generally doing the minimum required to stay out of trouble and keep one's job. Commitment, on the other hand, was described in terms of taking full responsibility for one's behaviour at work, and doing one's utmost to contribute to the continued well-being and success of the organisation.

Micro "moments of truth"

It isn't necessary to construct and apply elaborate theories of organisational behaviour, or to conduct extensive research into employees' relationships with their workplace, to determine whether, in a particular organisation, compliance or commitment prevails. Simple observation of day-to-day on-the-job behaviour is enough.

In any enterprise, hundreds if not thousands of "micro-decisions" are made every day by the people who work there. Taken

separately, each may seem inconsequential. Taken together, these “micro moments of truth” exert a powerful influence on that organisation’s ability to function, and therefore, its continued success.

Consider a typical, almost simplistic example:

An outgoing piece of mail has been incorrectly addressed. One of two choices is open to the employee who notices this:

1. He/She can shrug it off: ***“Who cares, it’s not my job anyway!”***
2. He/She can intervene to ensure that the letter goes out addressed properly: ***“Oops, this isn’t right! I’ve got to do something to fix it...”***

Without question, this constitutes a small and seemingly insignificant occurrence in the life of the organisation. Yet my contention is that, rather than the bold strategic moves CEOs seem so enamoured of, it’s the cumulative effect of micro-decisions that often decides the fate of an enterprise. Which of the two choices that, on innumerable occasions, people make over frequently trivial matters, ultimately determines whether a particular organisation continues to survive or even flourish, or whether it ultimately disappears.

In turn, how “micro moments of truth” are resolved depends in large part on whether a climate of compliance or commitment predominates. People who are merely compliant are unlikely to seize the initiative and take action in order to fix a problem. They are more likely to think, ***“Who cares, that’s not my job...”***

People who are committed to the success of their organisation are sufficiently energised to make “the right” micro-decision. They confront errors or oversights, enlarge on what is going

right, anticipate what might happen next and do something about it. They take responsibility for their work and how they affect others.

How a climate of compliance can arise

There are many reasons why a climate of compliance evolves until it pervades an organisation, leading the employees to consistently skew their micro-decisions towards the "It's not my job" choice.

An optimistic view of human beings would suggest that the way most of us behave at work is that, initially at least, we set out --- full of good will and confidence – to do our best, to perform well, and to contribute to the success of the organization which employs us. Most of us have no desire to "leave our brains behind at the gate" when we arrive at work!

Unfortunately, in many instances, such optimism turns out to be misplaced, and our sense of fairness is soon betrayed. If this occurs steadily over time --- whether in the name of organisational progress, political expediency or competitive economic necessity --- we simply "turn off". We withdraw ourselves from our work, giving our employer only the minimum level of involvement needed to get by and stay out of trouble. We adopt a sullenly compliant attitude, and respond to all "micro moments of truth" by shrugging off any appeals for increased diligence.

In effect, we've become institutionalised by the organisation we work for.

Organisational depression

A pervasive attitude of compliance is only a short distance away from what may be termed "organisational depression". This condition is characterised by an essentially defeatist outlook, an

all embracing sense that individuals have little control over their work environment. From such a perspective, events occur if not at random, at least as a consequence of forces within the enterprise far too powerful to be harnessed by any one person. Similarly, the perception grows that individual tasks are allocated and performance demanded for reasons which are frequently unfathomable and seldom benign.

Once this feeling of deep depression takes root, it becomes very difficult to turn the organisation's culture around, to restore a sense of optimism and shared responsibility.

Esteeming the individual

In certain countries such as the U.S., rugged individualism is prized and encouraged. In other countries, such as Japan or Australia, individualism tends to be viewed with suspicion and adherence to group norms is more highly valued. For example, stereotypes of Americans abroad often mistake expressions of individualism for aggressive or overbearing behaviour, when in fact the person concerned was merely giving form to an unshakeable belief in him/herself.

Within business organisations, it is very difficult to create or sustain a basically hopeful and optimistic outlook among employees without emphasising that the individual is in fact highly valued.

In this respect, what is important is creating the conditions in which the individual feels that he/she truly matters and that he/she can contribute in tangible ways to the success of the organisation.

At the same time, the environment needs to give the individual the conviction that, at and through his/her work; he/she can grow and develop himself/herself. Such self-improvement need not be

measured exclusively in terms of promotions or increases in salary (though employees most certainly welcome these!). Ensuring a consistently high level of job satisfaction, providing opportunities for work-based learning, or even maximising the non-monetary recognition of superior efforts; all these are significant means of acknowledging the worth of the individual.

Ennobling work

It is important to maintain employees' optimism in outlook, to make them feel that they matter as individuals and that they can make a difference to the performance of their organisation. This requires that the dignity of their work be enhanced. This does not necessarily mean that the work itself needs to be changed, only the way it is perceived --- both by the person doing it and by those around him/her.

To be inspiring work must be capable of rallying people's latent aptitudes and energies. To be a source of fulfilment, work must be able to set employees free to exercise their intelligence and initiative in an atmosphere devoid of resentment or anxiety.

Peter Senge, in his 1990 book *The Fifth Discipline*, tells us:

"The president of Herman Miller (a major U.S. manufacturing company) said recently, 'Why can't work be one of those wonderful things in life? Why can't we cherish and praise it. Versus seeing work as a necessity? Why can't it be a cornerstone in people's lifelong process of developing ethics, values, and in expressing the humanities and the arts? Why can't people learn through the process that there's something about the beauties of design, of building something to last, something of value?'"

Only when work becomes widely perceived in such transcendent terms will the declaration that people are an organisation's greatest resource become more than empty rhetoric.



