Repair and Repurpose

Worryingly, I am now of the age where I hear myself saying: "When I was younger…." It is amazing how quickly you become your parents, but then I hope it is a sign of the pending onset of wisdom. We wait to see.

When I was younger, my philosophy generally was one of 'repair or repurpose'. If my car broke down, as often it did, I could generally repair it, stripping out the old component, cleaning it, hopefully repairing the faulty part and then replacing it, quite often with the result that it would now work once more. If not, I would reluctantly replace it with a new part, wondering what I could do to repurpose the old one to give it a second life. Today, cars are generally more reliable, components are no longer repaired but integrated into units that are simply and more efficiently replaced, with speedy logistics systems meaning that a new unit can be quickly sourced, and the old unit promptly sent for recycling.

Our approach to the effective utilisation of assets has changed, quality has been enhanced, waste reduced, and reliability increased. With the addition of "human resource" to our business lexicon, many organisations now have an approach to talent management that has been innovated utilising manufacturing or logistics models, where components can be codified, categorised and expedited through systems and processes that have been designed from a unit commodity perspective. If, however, as many annual plans state, "people are our greatest asset", why is it that: so many UK organisations are less productive than many of their international competitors; the UK has such high levels of sickness/absenteeism, and employees report amongst the highest scores anywhere in the world of feeling disengaged and under-valued?

One reason could be that our humanity has become veiled under the label of "human resource". This has both depersonalised and de-'personnel'ised our individuality and homogenised it into a woolly construct called 'culture'. In my experience, numerous managers spend inordinate amounts of time working on improving their organisation's culture without understanding what culture is, what the many ingredients are that create a culture or what needs to be done to get the culture right.

Many Governments, on the surface, would appear to have repeated this transformation with the construct of 'society'. Empowered by 'populist' movements (constructed on principles of 'if you're not with us, you're against us'), Governments are increasingly accused of adopting "nanny state" interventions imposed on 'society's behalf' in order to protect them. Consequently the rights of an individual have been eroded, undermining their ability to act in their own self-best interest; utilise their own wisdom, judgement, skills or experience to deal independently with a matter; or repurpose themselves when circumstances change and the rationality that once founded their reason for existence is no longer valid or of value.

It is inevitable that our personal mortality will come to prevent our own continuation on this planet. Likewise, it is just as likely that organisations, once strong, successful and vibrant, will face existential challenges as they mature. Equally as likely as populations continue to grow, despite the tragedy of the current pandemic, is the fact that even now there will be new pathogens evolving to challenge humanity's right to existence. Why then, in a recent poll of leaders from both public and private sector organisations conducted by Professor Julian Birkinshaw of the London Business School, were only 19% of the organisations surveyed well

prepared for this pandemic? Why did 39% only have 'some plans', whilst the rest had either no plans or were unaware of the plans they had in place? Pandemics are not new. Since 2014 many people in the UK and around the world, who have been marking the Anniversary events of the First World War, have also been remarking on the ensuing Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918 and 1919, and the catastrophic consequences that pandemic had on both humanity and the economy. More recently, the world has received warnings in the form or SARS and MERS. Of the many potential reasons, one might be the traditional limited thinking of the people occupying the many Board rooms across the UK. In times of austerity it is easy to fixate on financial matters, concentrate on cash and profitability, and forget the overarching purpose of why a mutual organisation exists and what it needs to do to succeed long term as well as immediately. Failure to focus on both is potential failure, full stop. It is good to observe then in a recent press release issued by AFM, that the volume of claims paid across AFM members has increased by 39% in just two years, demonstrating the strength of their commitment to their key purpose of serving their members and local communities.

Enlightened business leaders have been advocating that now is the time to transition from traditional "mindsets" to alternative models and paradigms, where bureaucracy and control mechanisms are replaced by emergent system leadership styles, where formalisation and codification is transformed to personalisation and professionalism, where efficiency and cost models are reframed into reliability and value models, and where financial profitability is redefined within the more virtuous bottom line measures of meaning and purpose.

Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe, in their seminal work on building high reliability organisations, identify five core pillars that are common to successful organisations in times of crisis: Preoccupation with failure; resistance to simplification; sensitivity to operations; deference to expertise; commitment to resilience. Their pillars lie on the foundation of mindfulness (the mental state achieved by focussing one's awareness on the present moment, whilst quietly accepting and acknowledging one's own feelings thoughts and bodily sensations) which, by virtue, requires leaders to contemplate the pillars not just from a state of logic and rationality, but from one of emotion and feeling too. It is difficult to ensure a comprehensive risk register if both halves of risk are not considered. If fear, sorrow, empathy etc. are denied their place for legitimate discussion, then the psychological safety factors of the organisation's key stakeholders are not fully accounted for, even though they can have a significant impact on an organisation's Balance Sheet and P&L leger.

Four key steps can be taken to address psychological safety so as to build Board, organisational, operational and personal resilience:

- **Connect with Curiosity**

The importance of digital communication has never been as evident as it is now. The internet, with its resilient ability to agilely and capably reroute the transfer of data through its numerous networks of connected systems, is a worked example of how system leaders should be thinking about their organisations in the future. No silos exist within the internet, artificial intelligence is growing and demonstrating its capability to continuously learn and improve, and traditional evidence bases are being challenged from a widening diversity of thought. Yet, at the same time, we are starting to see how traditional human traits of likes and prejudices are putting in place barriers, setting communication channel preferences and narrowing down the potential of this amazing facility.

Society is a human construct. We need to be connected and we are re-learning through enforced lockdowns, that isolation can be detrimental to good mental health, causing fatigue and weathering an individual's resilience. The vast majority of people need human interaction, but some interactions are better than others. Leaders need to broaden their networks in order to extend their connectivity beyond the traditions of custom and practice. Once engaged, they need to listen with fascination, show genuine curiosity, respect the diversity of thought, build collaborative outcomes and, above all, listen with mindfulness to both the rational and the emotional.

I saw this extension of connection in action. At a Leadership Conference I attended at the King's Fund the week before the UK's lockdown, a middle grade Doctor confessed to me whilst listening to a speaker from a financial mutual: "I was thinking this person's opinion can't be important, he's from the mutual insurance sector! I am so glad I caught myself thinking that, so I could mindfully switch back on my brain, listen well and learn something new from my new connection."

- **Temper Hope and Optimism with Realism**

Hope is a key component of resilience, but hope based upon false optimism can reduce our resilience when the facts of reality crush unfounded expectations. Vision is a tool used by many Boards to inspire people and express that hope. Good vision stimulates behavioural responses, appealing to the emotions of success, releasing chemicals into the brain that create a positive state of happiness which, by default, strengthen us, increase our productivity and enable us to progress to a state of self-actualisation. It also enables us to create that sense of identity and belonging needed to be an accepted part of a society or system that both contributes to it and receives benefit from it.

An individual's sense of identity is not solely impacted by an organisation. It is made up from cultural, racial, gender, social and many other constructs. The intersectionality of our identity is unique, difficult to understand by others and therefore proves challenging for many leaders to comprehend. Some don't even try. Human interaction, especially in challenging times, is something that leaders need to invest time in. A leader's intelligence should not be measured by their I.Q. therefore, but by the tools and techniques they deploy to gather intelligence from the key stakeholders in their networks. Again, digital technologies are coming to the assistance of leaders, enabling them to gather big data sets on the likes, dislikes, hopes and emotions of the people with whom they interact. One local authority I recently spoke to is using wearable technology and self-reporting systems to monitor the health, wellbeing and resilience of their workforce. Hope, connectivity and identity are all elements of the digital tool being used, which also looks at whether employees feel they are led and empowered with purpose.

In his book 'Good to Great', Jim Collins identifies one important pitfall to avoid. The 'Stockdale Paradox' derives from the Vietnam War experience of Admiral Stockdale, the highest ranking Officer taken as a Prisoner of War by the North Vietnamese. The paradox challenges a conventional wisdom that optimistic people are more resilient. In Stockdale's observations, realism is an important contributor to resilience. Optimists would often set targets that were not within their gift to control (I will get home by Christmas) and consequently often had their hopes dashed and therefore lost faith and resilience. Realists knew they would one day get out and so set their vision to do what was required to just get through this one day, thereby maintaining their faith. Terry Waite, once held hostage in the Lebanon himself, gave similar testimony to service users in an NHS Trust I once chaired. The lesson is clear, visions that

provide hope for the future must also sit in the reality of today, inspire actions that can be taken in the here and now, and that are within the personal gift of the individual, and create a sense of identity and belonging with others.

- **Meaning and Purpose**

Organisations have a mission and purpose, as do individuals. Viktor Frankl, an eminent Austrian neurologist and holocaust survivor, in his moving best-selling book 'Man's Search for Meaning', states: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: … to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstance, to choose one's own way". The challenge for leaders is to ensure the alignment of the two and to ensure both are seen as virtuous to each other.

As an Organisation Development consultant in my earlier career, I was privileged to work with the Chief Actuary of a large Life Insurance business. His concern was the trend he had identified in his actuarial data for men of a certain age to die prematurely following retirement. His subsequent research suggested a causality between purpose, meaning and identity that come from being employed with the individual's resilience post retirement. If this is true, and of significant impact to actually influence health after retirement, it might be extrapolated that purpose, meaning and identity can have an impact on an individual's resilience and health whilst in work, creating either a negative (deficit generating) impact or a virtuous (surplus generating) one. An eminent University contact of mine shared with me the significant impact being furloughed was having on him, challenging for the first time in his life his sense of identity, belonging, meaning and purpose. Leaders therefore need to remember the importance of these factors when communicating decisions about people's futures, balancing the expediency of the organisation's need to remain resilient immediately with the long-term mission and purpose of the organisation. It is in times of crisis that an organisation's mission, vision and purpose statements are truly tested and proven either to be valuable or valueless.

- **An Empowered Workforce is a Powerful Workforce**

Much is written on the subject of empowerment, yet it is still one of the most under used leadership practices in many organisations. One reason for this is that the steps above have not been completed properly. To empower individuals you need to understand them first in the context within which they are connected, not the traditional hierarchical structures written down on charts but in the context of power, influence, interest, politics and legitimacy. Legitimacy is of particular importance as it is a significant cause for confusion in many leaders seeking to understand how power, influence, interest and politics are being played out in their organisation.

We know much about how formal organisations work, through maintained governance systems and operating procedure. Informal organisations come most to the fore however at times when a crisis occurs. In these circumstances, back channels open up and identified key individuals break rules once written for less volatile times for the preservation of norms and the imposition of control, in a hope that they ensure the delivery of the higher purpose and the sustainability of the organisation. In this case, the higher purpose authorises the legitimacy for the individual to do so. Sometimes however rules and conventions are challenged for no legitimate reason on behalf of the organisation. These might be for immoral or unethical reasons such as the exploitation of an individual or of a circumstance in the hope of personal not organisational gain. These occasions should be seen not in terms of rational but rather emotional criteria: fear, greed, revenge, hate, paranoia etc. which are not legitimate to be openly and freely expressed by an individual.

In this context then, getting the balance of empowerment right is difficult. Hierarchy depersonalises work, codifies relationships, oversimplifies decision making and limits an individual's engagement in that decision making. Hierarchy enables a preoccupation in leadership with failure that produces a fear of making mistakes in the individual instead of an openness to success and learning. It desensitises leaders to what is really going on at an operational level; challenges the expertise of individuals and denies them the use of their own professional judgement. Further, it ignores the psychological safety and resilience of individuals and thereby removes agility, adaptability and resilience at an organisational level. Leaders therefore need to take a personal accountability for being mindful of the need to empower people within the five pillars identified earlier by Weick and Sutcliffe. In this way, leaders can have a positive impact on the resilience of their organisation, enabling the transfer of real power within it, that of their empowered employees, to address any crisis that might be thrown at them with agility, dexterity, meaning and purpose.

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