OPPRESSION & SUPPRESSION

A Context for Executive Development Coaching

Photo by Javi Lorbada on Unsplash

I wrote this paper a long time ago. It still does a good job of describing what I think and feel about work and organisational life. I could certainly update it again; some of the references are pretty dated…but I decided that it'd be better to just let it be now. And write something else again soon.

The original impulse was an infernal question, posed by one of my early teachers. "What's your coaching niche?" asked Paul Crittenden when he'd heard quite enough of my rambling over lunch one day in 2006.

Just like the question my youngest daughter asked me (having also put up with some verbosity at around the same time; "what do you actually *do*?"), I couldn't answer it. So I wrote this in order to work out what I believed.

Jon Davidge

February 2006 (updated January 2010)

Introduction

"L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers."
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Douglas McGregor, a professor at MIT's School of Industrial Management, defined contrasting assumptions about the nature of humans in the work place in his book The Human Side of Enterprise (1960). These assumptions form the basis of his "Theory X" and "Theory Y" principles. Generally speaking, "Theory X" assumes that people are lazy and will avoid work whenever possible. "Theory Y", on the other hand, assumes that people are creative and enjoy work.

Let me say, right at the outset, that I am decidedly a "Theory Y" sort of person. I truly believe that the overwhelming majority of people I know and have worked with, in business and as a coach, desire to contribute and be creative in their work. Like you, I have met the occasional "Theory X" specimen, lazy and in need of constant supervision. In my heart I believe them to be the exception; probably damaged and embittered somewhere along the course of their working life by some thoroughly inept management. Probably provided by an authoritarian "Theory X" line manager.

And there's the paradox. In an environment visibly full of people who'd love to give their best and get fulfillment from their work, why are there so many authoritarian managers out there making work a needlessly uphill battle?

Equally, why do so many of us leave so many of our talents and capabilities at home every working day?

It seems to me that much of our contemporary working landscape is bipolar. On the one hand, many organisations default under any sort of pressure to oppress the humanity that is contractually tethered to them. On the other, much of the working population is content to suppress its own potential on the way to the office. The combination of these two forces is just plain bad for business.

For me, this is the most fascinating and challenging arena for coaching and personal development in the 21st century. I choose to serve as a coach in this field not just to help organisations lead their people more effectively in pursuit of improved commercial or service performance but also to help individuals throughout the organisation to enjoy their work.

In that spirit of enjoyment, I have chosen to illustrate some of the following with Dilbert[1] cartoons. This is a serious subject and I find Dilbert's observations wonderfully insightful and concise. And funny.

Are you with me? Here's a test…what do you make of Studs Terkel's famous remark from Working (1974), "Work is about a search for daily meaning as much as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short for a sort of life rather than than a Monday to Friday sort of dying."? This is a call to arms for me; especially the idea of "torpor". I hate torpor.   It's what I think lies in that awful place between oppression and suppression and it's my purpose to help people to rescue themselves from it.

Beware: if ol' Studs sends no hint of a shiver down your spine, you're probably not going to like very much of what follows.

Pen Hadow, the Arctic Adventurer, said "I'm electrified by the prospect of being able to do what I feel I was put on this earth to do - to fire up and support people who want to make the most of their talent". I have borrowed this remark as a credo because, for me, it applies both to individuals (their own personal talent) and organisations ("talent" as in "employees").

This paper is about why this is so desirable and how it can be done.

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[1] *All © Scott Adams*

The Landscape

Il lavoro nobilita l"uomo, e lo rende simile alle bestie[2]

Some signs o' the times

Take a look at the backdrop for a moment. Our cultural mentality is generally "sensate"[3], our view of reality designed to satisfy the senses. We tend to identify the good with what feels good. Yet there's an emerging trend towards an "ideational" culture, with abstract principles and the transcendence of materialism to the fore. Even though we do not ever shape our purpose through a single one of these alternative ways of ordering experience, I think we're in a curious and often confusing period of the intermingling of these forces.

This is a time of gap years spent travelling to lonely corners of the planet whilst staying in touch with the Big Brother House. We're not quite out of Kaizen, TQM and business process re-engineering and not quite into spirituality at work.

The word looked up most frequently during 2005 at Webster's online dictionary was "integrity". Over 200,000 searches were performed for this, apparently mysterious, term out of a total 7 million. I cannot help wondering how people responded to the definition they were given. Were they enlightened or baffled further?   In second, third and fourth place in the league table came "Tsunami", "levee" and "conclave".

And here is a snapshot of our popular culture. Today's prime time, terrestrial TV

9PM

9.00 Crimewatch UK Tonight's cases include a man who was shot with a machine gun while protecting a young girl and the attacker who has held up ten people at knifepoint (6509)

9.00 Alternative Medicine: The Evidence Kathy Sykes investigates the truth behind healers, and proposes that everyone has the capacity for self-healing. *See Viewing Guide* (7851)

9.00 Holiday Showdown The Riley family, who spend their vacations sailing around the south of England, share holidays with the Hills from Liverpool, who love partying in Benidorm (1677)

9.00 How to Divorce Without Screwing Up Your Children New series. The divorce counsellor Christina McGhee shows couples how to put their children's needs first. *See Viewing Guide* (9219)

9.00 CSI: Crime Scene Investigation New series. Grissom looks into an explosion at a caravan park and Catherine investigates a body found outside a strip club. *See Viewing Guide* (7092696)

10PM

10.00 BBC News (16509)
10.30 Regional News (940899)
10.35 Crimewatch UK Update

10.00 Have I Got Old News for You Andrew Marr hosts, with guests Shobna Gulati and Ross Noble (r) (87621)

10.00 Supersize Surgery Fran, who's recovering from a tummy tuck, gets new thighs and a reshaped bottom (87667)

10.00 Shameless Kev wakes up on his birthday to learn that his mother has thrown herself from her balcony. Jill Halfpenny guest stars (AD) (6093293)

10.00 CSI: Miami Horatio and his team become involved in a dangerous situation at a jewellers' while trying to track down a gang of kidnappers

viewing in the UK…

A man shot with a machine gun while protecting a young girl…the truth behind healers…partying in Benidorm…How to divorce without screwing up your children…a body found outside a strip club…an explosion at a caravan park. Good grief!

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[2] *Italian proverb. Literally: "Work gives man nobility and it turns him into an animal."*

[3] *Pitirim Sorotkin*

Meanwhile, Back at the Office

If you're wondering if the term oppressive - or the thought of "man being in chains" - is a little too heavy for the effect that organisations can have on people, take a look at the results of a September 2005 survey carried out by Woodman and Cook of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) into workplace bullying.

39% of all managers reported that they had been bullied in the past three years. Middle managers are catching the worst of it. 49% of them said they'd been bullied; nearly a quarter of whom confessed that they'd actually been bullied by their subordinates although most of it is coming from line managers. The loudest complaint is about the misuse of power, followed by a lack of management skills.

The CMI's definition of workplace bullying is "offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, or abuse or misuse of power, which violates the dignity of, or creates a hostile environment which undermines, humiliates, denigrates or injures, the recipient". We're not just talking about a bit of pressure or some mild aggravation here!

This picture correlates to the findings of The Roffey Park Institute in its Management Agenda 2006 in which 45% of the research sample reported bullying.

Bullying is just the tip of the iceberg. There seems to be something about organisational life that can bring out the worst in some people. I think there's a clue as to why this is in the work Philip Zimbardo did in 1971 at Stanford University in the States. He conducted an experiment into aggressive and submissive role playing in which a cordoned off part of the campus was turned into a make-believe prison. Half the students enrolled in the experiment were designated as wardens and the other half as inmates. The two week experiment was shut down after six days because the behaviour of the "guards" was getting dangerously out of hand.

"I think, gentlemen, it's time to plan the annual picnic."

© The New Yorker

Not long ago, the BBC started a reality TV concept along similar lines called The Experiment. This too was curtailed before its scheduled ending when the authoritarian behaviour of the "guards" was judged to be getting dangerous. In fairness, the BBC strenuously deny any bad judgement on their part in the face of some pretty stinging criticism. They claim that The Experiment was shut down prematurely because there was nothing left to learn.

At a training programme I've been working on for many years, we run a project that includes the appointment of a Board of Directors. More often than not, the Board promptly engineers an "us and them" culture and starts

some serious role playing. I have witnessed female members of the Board allocated to secretarial functions and asked to make the tea, management consultants bellowed at and team members fired on a whim so many times that it has ceased to be funny. Admittedly it's a pressured environment and the Board members are invariably highly apologetic in the post project review and they learn a huge amount about themselves in the process.

So it seems to me that role playing is a large factor in organisational oppressiveness. I'll leave the question as to why the roles people choose to play are often such stereotypically counter-productive ones, hanging for a while.

Oppression is certainly leaving its mark on the UK's working population, 67% of whom report high levels of stress - brought on predominantly by workload, office politics and "lack of clarity" - and more than half of whom do not trust their senior management[4]. The World Health Organisation claims that stress induced depression is second only to heart disease in causing a loss of human productivity and that it will become the number one premature killer by 2020. Some of the working environments we've created are not only failing to bring out the best in people, but they're actually killing them off!

Even if you're not prepared to go quite that far, there is powerful, quantitative research material that points unwaveringly at the extent of disenchantment around in our companies. Roffey Park reports that a mere 19% of employees have high morale. Gallup Organisation's research on employee engagement finds that approximately 29% of employees are engaged, 55% are not engaged, and 16% are actively disengaged. This data is based on more than three million employees in companies around the world. Gallup estimates that the actively disengaged employees in the United States cost $350 billion in lost productivity in 2002. It's a sobering thought to me that so few people enjoy high morale and engagement and that so many are actually deliberately working against the interests of their employers - this is the definition of being "actively disengaged".

David Bolchover provides some stark statistics in his provocatively entitled book, The Living Dead - Switched Off, Zoned Out, The Shocking Truth About Office Life (2005). 15% of office workers surf non work-related websites "constantly". 56% send up to five personal emails daily and 7% send more than 20. The NHS reports more than nine million "suspicious" requests for sick notes every year and a third of weekday visitors to Alton Towers have taken the day off sick.

Bolchover concludes that there are just too many "terrible" managers at large who habitually allow "able and energetic people to slump into a slough of despond."

Prepare to be boarded

This is a fertile target market for the forthcoming online "lad's mag",

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4 Roffey Park Management Agenda 2006

"Office Pirates" from Time Inc. a daily blend of "funny videos, strange news and downloads" due for launch this Spring.

Man or Machine?

The environments that seem the most hostile to human potential and performance are those that think and operate mechanistically, neglecting what to me is a self evident truth; an organisation's true nature is that of a "community of humans"[5] or a "micro-society".[6] It's years and years since Henry Ford lamented the fact that when all he wanted was a good pair of hands, he had to take them "with a person attached", yet the expectation that people should be a predictable and controllable resource is still widely applauded. I know plenty of places where there is more than a sneaking suspicion that "individuals would be much easier to deal with if they really were just human resources, a name we gave them in the hope that they would be just as docile as our fork lift trucks or as programmable as our computers".[7]

We do not have to go too far back in human history to find the roots of this orientation. Frederick the Great of Prussia (who ruled from 1740 to 1786) is credited with creating the first army that would be recognised as such today.   He introduced ranks and uniforms, specialisation, standardisation and systematic training. This became the basis not only for the military but also for much classical management theory of the 20th century.

Frederick Taylor, who developed scientific theories of management in the early 20th century, went even further. His principle was to separate thinking from doing. Managers did the thinking (and the time and motion studies) and took total responsibility for the organisation of work. Workers then carried out the tasks unquestioningly.

Taylor was much maligned at the time. Gareth Morgan[8] reports that he was called before a committee of the US House of Representatives in 1911 to account for his "pernicious" practices.   But he was influential and remains so.   Ever heard of "McJobs"?

If you stop and think about your own organisation for a moment, might it be set up along military or, perhaps, "scientific" lines? Do you have to "salute" and do you expect to be saluted? Put it another way; what would constitute insubordination at your firm? How would your middle managers answer that question? Can your employees tamper with your business processes? Do you encourage them to?

There are pockets of authoritarianism in most organisations - even in the least military style environments - or at least this is perceived to be so by employees if not by senior management. I have often been met with shocked surprise and sometimes with outright denial when presenting the results of cultural surveys to Boards.

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[5] *Arie de Geus, ex-Shell CEO, quoted in Liberating the Corporate Soul (Barrett 1998)*

[6] *Charles Handy, Understanding Organisations (Fourth Edition 1999)*

[7] *Charles Handy again.*

[8] *Images of Organisation (1997)*

My experience does not appear to misrepresent the broader picture; Roffey Park find that only 34% of junior managers enjoy a "positive impact" on their performance, job satisfaction and self-esteem from their line managers, the corresponding figure for senior managers is 89%.

Safety in Numbers?

Looking back on my 25 years in business, which were filled with times of great success as well as gut-wrenching disappointments, the most disheartening feeling I can remember was caused by the 5.29 PM rumble of footsteps making for the exit of a magazine publisher where I had just started to work. I understand perfectly well that people have other things to do, trains to catch, loved ones to see. I have never admired working long hours for the sake of it - particularly not for appearance's sake. I just did not, and still do not, get the idea that work was something you set a stop-watch on. What other enjoyable activities do you actually time?

I simply knew that they were not enjoying their jobs and that we were not getting anything like the "deepest levels of creativity" or "highest levels of productivity" from them. Turning that particular business around had everything to do with those intrinsic challenges and almost nothing at all to do with pulling on the more traditional boardroom levers - which, as my friend and colleague John White recently pointed out to me, were "purely ornamental and not connected to anything" anyway.

The more delineated the hierarchy, the greater the opportunity for "group-think" (a state of affairs in which individuals choose to play it safe and mould their ideas and opinions around a supposed consensus) to flourish. Group-think has been blamed for a catalogue of military disasters as well as plane crashes and spectacular business failures - the latest, high profile example being Enron. The point about group-think is that it's generally bad not only for the organisation but also for the individual.

It's bad for the organisation because "if people are afraid, they don't innovate".[9] Richard Barrett says that the two most critical issues for business in the 21st century are tapping into "the deepest levels of creativity" and the "highest levels of productivity" of employees.[10] There have been a variety of studies to evaluate the productivity gains of highly motivated people over unmotivated people.

"Discretionary effort" - or "going the extra mile" - makes a massive difference.

Barrett cites a study that compares the performance of the most motivated and the least motivated people undertaking tasks of varying complexity. The level of productivity was 300% more for low-complexity jobs, 1200% more for medium complexity jobs and so large that it was unmeasurable for high complexity jobs. The numbers are different in the other surveys I've seen, but the patterns are similar.

The voluntary or involuntary suppression of contributory instincts, perspectives, ideas, analysis or arguments is bad for the individual because, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi points out in Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (1992), a fundamental ingredient to happiness is "a sense of participation in determining the content of life".

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[9] *Ricardo Semler, The Seven-Day Weekend (2003)*

[10] *Liberating the Corporate Soul (1998)*
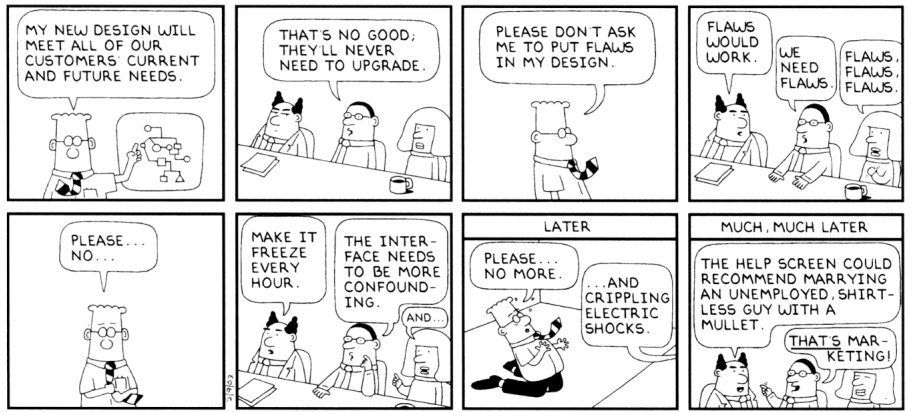
"Are you happy in your work?"

It's that elusive concept of "happiness" that I am chasing down here. I believe that people have every right to pursue happiness at work and at leisure. I also believe that happy people do more and better work. They need less management; often they need no supervision at all. The challenge of having them around you is more about keeping up with them - or trusting them? - rather than motivating them. They assume responsibility for getting results rather than merely "do a job".
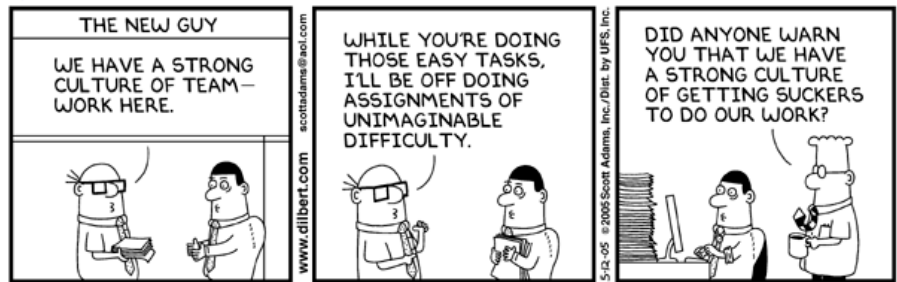
I was a director at a multinational publisher for nearly ten years towards the end of the 20th century that took its obligations to its stake-holders and its customers very highly and enjoys, to this day, an excellent reputation as a well managed creative operation that is a pleasure to work for.

Yet even this organisation managed to spend literally years and hundreds of thousands of pounds developing a vision and mission statement and a roster of core values that left me and my UK team confused and unmoved. I can no longer even recall the mission statement. It was indistinguishable from dozens of others that I've seen since. It did, of course, include the word "leading", though; that much I recall. How many "leading" organisations can there actually be in any one market? The term has lost all its currency.

The core values were reasonable enough, but they had no resonance. They were white-noise; blancmange. We signed up to them and felt no different.

I sat down later and asked an editorial group why they actually did care a great deal about what they were doing, one of the editors piped up that he saw it as his responsibility to keep his publication in business at least until the turn of the century. Since the magazine's title was 2000AD, this captured the spirit of the project perfectly. "Two thousand in two thousand" became the mission statement in practice.

When we talked about values we had to get very specific before there was any noticeable lift in the atmosphere. In the end, nothing made a difference except the value of "bloody mindedness". It summed up the backs-against-the-wall determination of a group of people to succeed against the odds - and they did so. Magnificently.

I learned that it is no good reaching for platitudes or saftey-first slogans if you want to connect to the inner vitality of people with words alone. Only that which is authentic is of the slightest use, no matter how intemperate it might be.

The fact that nobody outside of UK company ever quite understood what was meant lent the cry even more potency, I suspect.

Assuming you've hired people with appropriate aptitudes and capabilities in the first place - not an entirely safe assumption, I know, all that's left to do in order to achieve the best possible collective performance from your work teams is to make and keep them happy. Which is easy enough to say and easier to achieve than you might imagine.

To transform an oppressive organisation, characterised by boredom, routine and resentment into one in which people enjoy their responsibilities and perform at the top of their range, you need to offer and sustain a new level of "psychological contract". As Adrian Furnham wrote in The Guardian this month[11], "If you want loyalty and commitment from your employees, you

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[11] *February 4th 2006*

must show them yours first".

It Serves You Right!

What is this "psychological contract" and "employer commitment" about? I think it's about helping your people to grasp a sense of meaning and purpose in the work they're doing. The first step is to be clear and authentic about the customers or community you are there to serve and just how and with what you propose to serve them. "Delivering value to customers" has been proven to be the most meaningful and effective corporate purpose - as opposed to "building shareholder value" or "building stakeholder value" - when measured qualitatively in terms of employee development and creativity and by hard financial criteria.[12] Customer focused businesses outperform their markets by more than a third in bottom-line results.

I think this is because there are many people working in businesses today who, like me, would agree wholeheartedly with Arie de Geus' maxim that "profit for commercial institutions is the same as oxygen for you and me. Without it we cannot live, but surely it's not the purpose of our life."[13]

Graduates unfit for work, say top firms

The Times 7th February

It seems that, in the materialist times in which we are living, the deep human desire to be of service has largely shifted from "patriotism, religion, ethnic traditions and the habits fuelled by social class"[14] to work commitments.

One of the most common ways that people are seeking to fill the "God shaped hole" in their lives is by working for you. This is a powerful opportunity and an awesome responsibility.

I am suggesting that, if you offer an authentic and clear purpose for your organisation to serve, you can harness the sort of boundless energy and loyalty that earlier generations used to reserve for their God, their Regiment or the preservation of their communities.

But you're playing with fire if you're tempted to fake it or even exaggerate it. Authenticity must be your watchword. You have to put your heart where your mouth is. We're dealing with a predominantly cynical generation here, many of whom have enjoyed unparalleled personal freedoms whilst observing the unfulfilled aspirations of their parents in their own careers. Their default position is "resentful com-

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12 R Ellsworth, Leading with Purpose (2002)

13 In conversation with Claus Otto Scharmer. September 22, 1999 *http://www.dialogonleadership.org/ deGeus-1999.html*

14 Csikszentmihalyi

pliance"[15], characterised by doing the minimum they can get away with and not trusting you any further than they could throw you. To win their trust will not be easy. You can lose it again in an instant. One strike and you're out.

So, if clear meaning and purpose of the organisation are critical factors for a peak performing business, how can we convince our people of our authenticity and win their trust in these unfathomable times?

The value of values.

I think there's only one way. We have to work towards a business culture reflects the core values of our people but the imposed values of top management are meaningless. Even if those espoused are actually reflected in practice - which, according to 74% of the middle managers surveyed by Roffey Park, does not even happen anyway.

I remember the time that a recognition of my efforts - and they were strenuous at the time - had the most powerful and lasting effect on me. I had been leading a made-up project on a training programme and was in the process of crossing a 'Burma Bridge' that the team had built when time ran out. The Course Director told everyone to stop work and return the equipment. No way! I was going over this thing for the team and for me and I ploughed on. He gave me a killing look which, ill advisedly, I returned. I will never forget what happened next. He winked at me. That's all, just winked at me. My most inspiring piece of recognition was over in literally the blink of an eye, almost 20 years ago.

I learned that recognition is not about awards, certificates, salary raises or even promotions. It's certainly not about a routine or formulaic reaction. I suspect that it's not even about a planned response. It's about an authentic expression of regard and, perhaps, gratitude for doing something well that means a lot to you from someone you respect.

Quite a tall order for something apparently so simple because firstly you have to know what has meaning for the other person and secondly they have to respect you - not for your position but for who you are.

Recognition becomes one of the most effective motivators imaginable for the leader that has earned the personal respect of those around him - and I do mean "around". It works just as well in peer relationships and "upwards leadership" contexts.

I well recall a junior sub-editor thanking me many years ago for "taking her magazine seriously". She was a talented trainee, diligently at work on a somewhat out dated title and I respected her thoroughly for her approach. Her recognition that day was a powerful and lasting boost at a difficult period.

If an organisation is going to be bound by a common purpose and energised by the celebration of shared and practiced values, those values have to come from the ground up. This is quite a shock at first, until you stop to think about the type of people you've been recruiting over the years and the sort of values you'd ascribe to them.

In the work I have done as a consultant practitioner with Richard Barrett Associates' Cultural Transformation Tools, the sort of personal values most commonly to emerge from the brief process of elicitation have been "creativity", "enthusiasm", "passion", "caring", "honesty" and "reliability". I have been surprised time after time by the fearful disinclination of senior management to open what they evidently considered the can

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[15] *Richard Scase, Living in the Corporate Zoo (2002)*

of worms of their employees' values. My experience tells me that there's nothing to be afraid of. I'd say the reverse it true. But there is a risk; once you have started down the road of eliciting and harnessing the power of what is dear to the hearts of your people, you have to choose between seeing the journey through or losing them completely.

When organisations take that leap of faith and demonstrate loyalty and commitment to their people and commit to building a culture based on shared values, then the rewards can be great.

People, according to Barrett are "clamouring" to work for organisations that "care for them as a whole person and let them bring their highest values to work". Once your adult employees stop feeling that they're being treated like adolescents at work, then you can give the lie to both Percy Barnevik, who lamented, when CEO of ABB, one of the world's leading engineering companies with over 100,000 employees across the world, that "our organisations ensure our people use only 5% - 10% of their abilities at work" and to Robert Frost, the American poet who noted that "the brain is a wonderful organ; it starts working from the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get to the office".

As the War for Talent (which I recently saw described as "still only a water-pistol fight"[16]) begins to really hot up, then the ability to attract high potential young recruits is going to be of real competitive advantage. And hot up it will. The UK population of 15-29 year olds (graduate trainees, junior management) is just under two million less than the population of 30-44 year olds (middle managers).

It is not just a numbers game either. The law of unintended consequences has been at work to make recent changes in educational emphasis - ironically, largely driven by business raising the qualifications bar ever higher - produce more graduates with excellent A-Levels and 2:1s but underdeveloped social skills making it hard for them to fit into work teams. The good ones, then, are in very short supply indeed. And I'll bet they know it.

Keeping your organisations refreshed and renewed with transfusions of talented new blood will depend increasingly on your ability to persuade them that they will enjoy working for you. The quality of life decisions that they make will depend increasingly on your location, the credibility and authenticity of your corporate purpose and environmental policies as well as transparent opportunities to grow professionally and personally.

What might be the formula for making sure that, the pre-requisites of a meaningful career being in place, your employees enjoy their work and give their best to the enterprise?

"Walking back to happiness…"

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[16] *Brian Hackett quoted in Talent Management Strategies, Business Intelligence (2001)*

The Roffey Park respondents talk about being motivated by being recognised for doing stretching but achievable work that makes a difference.[17] Csikszentmihalyi's rigorously developed conditions for the flow experience of focused, peak performance are closely aligned to the findings of this contemporary study. He found that the work should be meaningful and engaged in voluntarily. It should be challenging and must require skill. It must be seen to be achievable and have a clearly specified outcome. Finally, the employee must know how he or she is doing by getting unambiguous feedback.

I do not believe these basic conditions for employee happiness, fulfillment and the realisation of potential are hard to deliver. At least half the battle seems to be about having the courage to slip out of an authority role and acknowledge an obligation to build and sustain a collaborative culture in the first place.

The problem of "recognition" - or rather, the lack of it - has come up time and time again in my coaching and consulting work. So often this is a cost-free strategy for transforming performance. Jac Fitz-enz of the Saratoga Institute says that the "single most critical variable in performance is for supervisors to show they care for and value their staff"[18] and I believe him. The notion that you demonstrate your gratitude by means of the salary you pay no longer washes. I doubt that it ever did.

Why not seek to understand the parts of your business that oppress your employees? Why not cut them out and transplant in a new psychological contract that strives to treat employees as the organisation would itself like to be treated?

Anita Roddick said "Businesses should be incubators for the human spirit as well as for producing more products." I agree.

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[17] *Roffey Park Management Agenda 2006*

[18] *Quoted in Talent Management Strategies, Chris Ashton (Business Intelligence, 2001)*

The Internal Landscape

If oppression is what is going on - deliberately or accidentally - at a macro, organisational level, what might be happening at the level of the individual?

Why do we bring anything less than our whole self, all of our talent, vigour, enthusiasm, creativity, passion, intuition and good will to work? Part of the answer, I have argued, is that we allow ourselves to be oppressed by any number of forces in the environment - I should add here that the overwhelming evidence derived from surveys across the world is that the primary oppressive force is embodied in your direct boss; you too may be the oppressor of your direct reports! But that's not the whole story.

Most of us are highly adept at suppressing our own abilities all by ourselves, often without even knowing we're doing it.

We start this peculiar habit early in our lives if we make light of our natural and instinctive gifts. The things we're good at doing come easily to us and so we start to believe that there's really nothing to it. Often we'll get on people's nerves by doing whatever it is we do to excess. Can you remember what you were most often scolded for as a child? Or we'll upset them by not understanding why they can't do it as fast or as effortlessly as we can. By the time we've grown into adolescence and swallowed the parables, metaphors and cautionary tales about the virtue and dignity of hard work, persistence, honest toil and try-try-try-again that are prevalent in our culture, we might well have begun to mistrust the very things that come naturally.

Ask yourself, "what am I gifted at?" You can probably start to list some things you're pretty good at, but can you complete the sentence, "I am a gifted…"

It is my experience from coaching and from facilitating a great many leadership development programmes that hardly anyone can answer that question confidently and without lots of, often guided and sometimes awkward, contemplation. "Learning objectives?" Oh yes, dozens.   "Points for development?" Take your pick! "Strengths?" Oh must I? Alright then, er, sense of humour?

In the UK especially we blend our modesty with our fear-of-being-found-out and a dash of not-wishing-to-appear-foolish into an exquisite cocktail of suppressed potential.

Then there's the wholly misleading concept of the "work / life balance" that implies that somehow work is "not life" - how can it be if it's on the opposite end of the scales? - and feeds the cultural stereotype of work as the "curse of Adam" and not a place to reveal one's inner self or do more than is needed to get by. I could understand a "death / life balance" or a "work / leisure balance" or even a "work /

idleness balance"[19], but the "work / life balance" is a dangerous fallacy that is undermining our willingness to seek and find fulfillment at work.

"Cultural stereotype?" Work does have a poor reputation and it's deeply ingrained. The idea that we'd rather be doing something else is very widespread even though work can offer all of the ingredients for fulfillment and happiness. Csikszentmihalyi's long term research measured 54% of reported experiences of "flow" occurring at work against 18% occurring at leisure, yet the appeal of not working remained strong.

Within the cliché of working as inherently-less-enjoyable-than-not-working lies the motivation for unconsciously counter-productive role playing[20].

These phenomena are bound up with the notion of choice; that is, the greatly under-used power that we all have to determine the impact that the external world of objects and events has on how we feel and subsequently behave. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "it is not the external conditions that determine how much work can contribute to the excellence of one's life, it is how one works and what experiences one is able to derive from confronting its challenges."[21]

Confronting and testing the opportunities that the exercise of choice has to offer is a central pillar of coaching. The widespread ignorance or avoidance of these opportunities is perhaps the most common reason for unconscious suppression of talent and potential at work.

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[19] *as suggested by Ricardo Semler*

[20] *the issue left in the air on page 5*

[21] *Flow*

Coaching?

There are almost as many theories of coaching as there are coaches. I stand by the description that Adrian Gilpin, Geoff Shaw and I coined last year in the introduction to a high performance coach training programme we were giving. "Coaching is a purposeful conversation focused on one or more challenges or outcomes, stimulated by insight and probing questions rather than by offering answers or solutions."[22] I'd add, now, a description of the benefit as follows, "during which a client will be energised by the clarity of their thinking".

Ask yourself:

If you fail to deliver what you're expecting of yourself, what will be your excuse?

Socrates was the first reported coach. He invented a method of dialectic questioning that peeled away layers of confusion and contradiction to reveal a clarity of thought that undermined the dogma of his day. He never told anyone he encountered what to do or think - in fact he proclaimed that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing - but he got them thinking and doing.

The workplace, where the forces of oppression and suppression most commonly meet, is my coaching arena because I judge it to be where I offer the most value to anyone wanting to change their experience of life for the better.

It is so often a rough place to be - I've talked at length about the extraordinary stresses and strains of the environment. I've experienced (and created) enough of them of my own over the years to be able to understand what my clients are going through and empathise with what Harvard's Ronald Heifetz means when he says that most senior management is "already operating near the limit of how much distress they can tolerate, of how much disequilibrium, confusion and chaos they can stomach"[23] - but it does not have to be that way.

In fact I'd say you need help if that's the sort of life you are currently tolerating.

The process of coaching enables each client to stop the world and get off for a while; to take a good look at what's going on - to adopt a critical distance from themselves. This is the perspective from which people begin to identify the roles they are playing and the choices they are making. Here it is possible to build and nurture dreams and visions of the future and to figure out what needs to be done to get there.

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[22] *Institute of Human Development*

[23] *In conversation with William Taylor of the Fast Company website*

Heifetz calls this practical yet deeply personal coaching space "a sanctuary" and says "because we get so swept up in our professional roles, it's hard to distinguish role from self on our own. That's why we need partners who can help us stay analytical. And we need two different kinds of partners. We need allies inside the organisation - people who share our agenda. And we need confidants inside or outside the organisation - people who can keep us from getting lost in our role. Leaders also need a sanctuary, a place where they can go to get back in touch with the worth of their life and the worth of their work…Countless people think that they can exercise leadership without partners or a sanctuary. To stay alive as leaders - to tend the wounds that we inevitably receive when we raise tough questions - requires maintaining these structures in our lives."[24] I have looked hard and cannot find a better description of the purpose and importance of coaching in the workplace.

So. Where might you get to with the support of a coach? What's the very least you could expect? I'll answer the last question first. My belief is that you'll then start to answer the first one, the $64,000 question, for yourself.

Timothy Gallwey, thought of as the first coach to release the practice from its sporting confines, coined the phrase "performance = potential - interference".[25] The very least you should expect from a programme of executive development coaching is a fresh and clear perspective of what you have been allowing to interfere with your performance. Armed with such self-knowledge, you'll find your constraints have a remarkable tendency to shrink in the daylight. You can expect to discover that much ingrained, habitual interference has been purely a matter of choice. Your choice, oddly; nobody else's. Starting in the coaching room you'll have the opportunity to make a different call and to start forming new habits.

How deeply into your grain you'll go to dig out the interference and how much you'll shrink it down will just be another choice you'll make.

The development of self-awareness seems to be a pre-requisite to the development of effective, authentic leadership. As they say at my alma mater, The Leadership Trust, "know and control yourself first because then, and only then, can you lead and enable others." It is entirely logical to me that to increase your understanding of your own pinch-points and of the effect that you have on others will serve to improve your leadership behaviour.

I fundamentally believe that much of the oppression that I described earlier is accidental. Role-playing, for example, is the antithesis of authentic leadership, especially when performed unconsciously. I simply do not believe that people behaving in this way have any idea how harmful their actions and words are to the morale, happiness and performance of their colleagues - let alone to their personal reputation! I do not even believe they know they're doing it.

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[24] *ibid*

[25] *Inner Game of Work (& Tennis / & Golf) (Thomson, 2000)*

The development of self awareness need not be taken to extremes in executive development coaching. A working self knowledge is the target. It might not be necessary for you to know why what works for you actually works.   Knowing what works is your platform for leadership development.   At the very least you should expect to become really clear about your priorities - your personal values as well as your strategic business priorities.   And further on this route, if you're prepared to travel along it, will lie clarity of purpose. If not the answer to the question "what's the point of you, then?", the very least you can expect are some new clues.

The tension that will build as you sense - then gauge - the distance between your desired reality and your current reality will fuel your energy levels to the point where, ultimately, you'll have no choice but to get on and do something about it. The very least you can expect is to be supported onto the first rung of the ladder.

Because coaching is ultimately about action and your coach is the person who will make sure you do not content yourself with a to-do list. I recognise the narcotic power of a plan and have indulged in distracting tasks as much as anyone I know - which is why I am good at blocking the exits.   The plans you make in a coaching conversation will lead straight back to the room in which you're working. The first rung on your ladder will be no higher than a foot off the ground. This is not purely due to an obsession with action but is also connected to the choice that you'll find you can make to enjoy the moment, every step of the way.
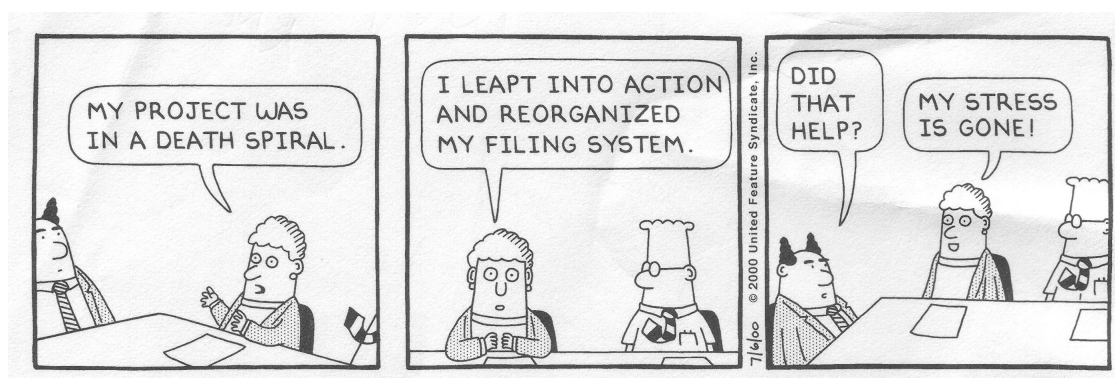
I believe you can take more authentic pleasure and fulfillment from the present than from a fixation with a vision of the future, no matter how well formed it is. The best of all possible worlds awaits those who can anchor their ambitions to their present and know what it is they will do next, immediately, to haul the anchor chain in another link or two and notice and feel the hauling.   Much, much harder to do by yourself than with the support of a coach.

It does not really matter whether you agree with Robert Louis Stevenson's line that "old or young, we're on our last cruise", the imperative for squeezing the juice out of each moment of your life is a performance issue. You and your colleagues cannot fail to benefit from what Graham Lee calls "leadership that carries the wisdom of consciousness".[26]

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[26] *Leadership Coaching from Personal Insight to Organisational Performance (2003)*

As a "Theory Y" man, I maintain that, with the conscious awareness that coaching will bring, your organisation will succeed in overcoming any oppressiveness and you will personally stop suppressing yourself into the bargain. Where might you get to with the support of a coach?

Give it some thought and let yourself know.

End Quotes

Always keep Ithaca in your mind.
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for many years;
and to anchor at the island when you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would have never set out on the road.
She has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.
Wise as you have become, with so much experience,
you must already have understood what all these Ithacas mean.

Constantine P. Cavafy (1911) From *Ithaca*

What looks large from a distance
Close up ain't never that big.

Bob Dylan (1985) From *Tight Connection to my Heart*

May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung

Bob Dylan (1974) From *Forever Young*

Sources, Influences & Some Suggested Reading

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Flow (Random House, 1992) although Finding Flow by the same author is more accessible.

Richard Barrett, Liberating the Corporate Soul (Butterworth-Heinemann 1998)

Rob Goffee & Gareth Jones, The Character of a Corporation (Profile 2003)

Ricardo Semler, The Seven Day Weekend (Random House 2003)

Richard Scase, Living in the Corporate Zoo (Capstone 2002)

Gareth Morgan, Images of Organisation (Sage Publications 1997)

Sumantra Ghoshal & Christopher Bartlett, The Individualised Corporation (HarperCollins 1997)

John W Gardner, Self-Renewal (Norton 1995)

Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (Rider 2004)

Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela, The Tree of Knowledge (Shambala 1998)

Danah Zohar & Ian Marshall, Spiritual Intelligence (Bloomsbury 2001)

Yoram Wind & Colin Crook, The Power of Impossible Thinking (Wharton School Publishing 2005)

Gary Klein, Sources of Power (MIT 1999)

Francis Crick, The Astonishing Hypothesis (Touchstone 1995)

Harry Paul, John Christensen, Stephen C. Lundin, Fish! (Coronet 2005)

The Author (2019)

Jon's background in leadership is a product of long experience, practice and study.

In a 25-year business career, which started as a Procter & Gamble graduate trainee, his first significant leadership test came in his mid twenties when he was sent to Johannesburg to set up and run a subsidiary of The Toronto Star Corporation.

What Jon learned about himself and about leadership from those early experiences stood him in good stead later in his career as managing director of a number of publishing and media businesses – including the task of leading the orderly and timely transition of Robert Maxwell's youth publishing arm into new ownership after the Maxwell's death had left the organisation in chaos with the pension funds missing.

After qualifying from a year-long coach training programme with The Institute of Human Development, Jon began coaching full time in 2003. Early work was focused in the health and publishing sectors.

He trained as a supervisor of coaches and teams with Professor Peter Hawkins at Bath Consultancy Group in 2008.

Jon's parallel career as a visiting tutor at *The Leadership Trust* began earlier (in 1988). He was appointed Associate Head of Training & Development in 2012, also working as a regular course director of senior level and board programmes and as the Trust's senior coaching supervisor. Jon also collaborated on the design, development and launch of three new open programmes: Coaching Skills for Leaders, Leading with Impact and Strategic Leadership.

He brings a coaching approach to leadership development; informed by his own experiences as well as nearly two decades of coaching and mentoring fellow leaders passionate enough to want to develop their craft.

A coaching relationship with Jon is typically going to be high in both challenge and support. Fuelled by his curiosity and an unshakeable belief that work should be predominantly about "a daily search for...astonishment rather than torpor" (Turkel), clients can expect a refreshing and enduring experience from Jon's one-to-one coaching sessions.

His two particular fields of interest are coaching leaders to:

o approach the challenges of adaptive change effectively

o appreciate and take on the responsibilities of distributed leadership

Significant recent clients include The European Central Bank, The Financial Conduct Authority, A Middle Eastern Department of the Interior, Lloyds Development Capital, Charles Tyrwhitt, The International HIV / AIDS Alliance, Leeds Playhouse and Southeastern Railways.

His major influences include Barry Oshry, a pioneer of systemic leadership, Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University, whose work on the side-effects of leading change informs Jon's coaching approach, and David Gilbert-Smith, winner of the Military Cross, commander of the SAS' training and tactical wing and founder of The Leadership Trust.

For Jon, the art of leadership boils down to enabling individuals and teams to connect emotionally and intellectually to the purpose of their work and having the courage to trust them to work with freedom within constraints and deliver. The hardest task seems to be getting out of the way!

He recently became a grandfather and lives in Brighton with his wife, Claire. He loves reading, ocean sailing, photography and Liverpool FC.

Recent testimonials

"Working with Jon was a very stimulating and rewarding experience which helped me tremendously through a period of significant change. The one to one sessions were always extremely productive and invariably provided solutions to problems or simply raised my thinking and perspective out of the normal day-to-day constraints. Solutions were not proffered by Jon but arrived at myself stimulated by Jon's subtle directing of the discussion. The thoughts and perspective on leadership were far more insightful than a multitude of texts encountered on the topic".
   Finance Director, multi-national pharmaceutical corporation

"The coaching was one of the most valuable tools of management development that I have ever received. Jon has helped me to strive ahead and deal effectively with a variety of conflict issues".
   Head, private school

"The coaching has had a direct benefit to my performance at work and the board has really noticed the difference. It doesn't feel that I have to change my values or way of working generally, I can still approach things as me but am now getting much more out of other people by putting into practice things that I discovered in the coaching sessions. The coaching has been so subtle at times that there are some skills I have gained without even knowing it! This has led to a real, sustainable and practically subconscious change as much of the approach is now an integral part of my professional persona."
   Deputy Director, NHS

"To my surprise people have been starting to notice the difference in me over the past six months and it is incredibly exciting when I actually embrace rather than destroy my talents. On the inside I am a very impatient person but, thanks to Jon's help, I am able now to see more clearly. I also have been able to begin to recognise the progress that I am making personally on this incredible journey I am travelling."
   Chief Technology Officer, IT industry

(A flattering) Afterword

Dr. Edmond Hui (ed@kiai.co.uk)

It is typical of Jon Davidge to ask someone entirely unknown to his audience to write an afterword for him.

Of all the people I've worked with over the years, he is without a doubt the one most able to see past a person's façade and understand their qualities, capabilities and potential and then fit the person to the job, or the job to the person without fear or favour. I had the pleasure of working with Jon in a highly pressured environment for three years, and I cannot imagine a situation where his cheerful, determined presence would not be an immediate asset.   The happy, successful and growing company for which I had worked had come under pressure, and the atmosphere had become unpleasant as managers and staff alike were expected to raise their produtivity without an obvious direction to go in the marketplace. Jon's arrival heralded a sea change in the workplace, transforming the oppressive environment into one where people understood what had to be done, and how they were expected to go about it. The external pressure was unchanged, but internally the feeling went from fear of failure to opportunity for success.

At no point did I feel overwhelmed or unable to see clearly what needed to be done.

Jon has a particular talent which will be immediately apparent when you meet him: he is extraordinarily easy to communicate with. I don't simply mean he is a good listener. Any golden retriever is that. I mean that when you talk to him, he knows exactly how to carry on a conversation with you, so that you can both transfer the maximum amount of information in the most efficient way possible. If you describe a problem to him, you will notice that he understands quickly, but perhaps only later you may realise that he was simultaneously guiding you towards the best way of articulating it.

With the amount of work Jon has done for The Leadership Trust and other executive development and cultural change organisations, it was inevitable that he would look critically at his own qualities and potential, and decide that while he is able to serve admirably on any board across several industries, he is really at his happiest helping others to be the best they can be. I'm delighted that his coaching practice has blossomed so quickly, but not surprised.