

# The More Things Change...

**Dr Brendan Coutts, Hawthorne Academy**

*Once upon a time, there was a business where management's impression of what was happening in their organisation was significantly different to what was actually taking place.*

In this organisation, although management believed that their workers were working to their capacity, the workers were actually deliberately doing less work than they were able. Without management knowing, the workers spent time in a range of illegal activities such as playing games – sometimes leaving the premises to do so, sleeping, socialising, and engaging in physical and verbal violence.

It was a very political environment and factions and rivalry amongst the workers emerged. In the competition between people and cliques, the workers were ingenious. They were able to manipulate their environment to get rivals punished, or sacked. Workers would deliberately withhold valuable information from colleagues. They would deliberately allow or cause others to make mistakes in order to get them in trouble. They would manipulate their work in ways that put rival workers under pressure. They would aid friends and sabotage rivals. They would start fights in ways that made others appear to be the aggressors, so it would be the others that would attract disciplinary attention from management. They were able to get management to act in ways that served the workers own agenda.

While doing all this, the workers continued to be moderately productive, were equipped with a range of plausible reasons for reduced performance, and behaved like model employees whenever management was present. The supervisor, who was the link between management and the workers, aligned himself with the workers in order to retain their friendship and respect. The workers informally controlled all avenues, through which management could have been made aware of what was really happening in the workplace. Management never saw, or heard, anything they did not want to see or hear.

So successful were the workers' schemes for isolating the reality of the workplace from the awareness of management, that management did not question the performance of the workers and believed that any significant increase in productivity could only come from technological advances and lean operations initiatives.

Although the workers were frequently breaking the formal rules of the organisation, their behaviour was highly regulated. Amongst themselves, there were a number of unwritten, informal, rules, which were vigorously enforced through their own techniques of discipline and reward. The most serious crime a worker could commit in this environment was to reveal to management that the 'illegal' behaviour was taking place. When one worker decided to blow the whistle on his colleagues, he was ruthlessly ostracised and targeted. All his suffering amounted to

nothing though, as management were so sure that they knew what was really happening in the workplace, they did not believe him, and took him for a troublemaker.

No doubt, the organisation described above appears highly dysfunctional. It may not surprise readers to know that organisational dynamics like these were found in a factory in the early days of industrialisation. The Hawthorne Experiments were a series of studies conducted in a huge Chicago factory in the 1920's and 1930's, and one of these studies (the Bank Wiring Room) uncovered behaviour much like that described above. Management was shocked when the reality of the situation was revealed, but other research showed that behaviour like this was commonplace at the time. This type of situation was extremely widespread, perhaps even pervasive, but no one believed it was happening in their organisations.

One of the findings of The Hawthorne Experiments was that the sort of behaviour described above did not occur because workers were vindictive, or because they hated management, the organisation, or their work. In fact, the workers had no ill will towards management; they liked their organisation, and did take some pride in their work. The rivalries were not even fundamentally due to personal dislikes between workers.

It was found that all the illegal and counterproductive activities were essentially driven by the worker's need to bring more meaning to their work lives. Because the organisation sought to control and coerce the workers behaviour solely towards productivity, any other needs (emotional, social, etc) were suppressed and the workers were forced to express these needs informally and illegally. In another of the experiments (the Relay Assembly Test Room), an environment where workers were trusted more, experienced greater freedom, had more influence on their environment, and were more appreciated, resulted in spectacular improvement in performance, teamwork, self-direction and morale.

Partly because of the Hawthorne Experiments, organisations began to adjust their approach to relating to their workers. In subsequent decades, great strides have been made in providing workers with a range of benefits - financial and non-financial - in order to attract, retain and motivate staff. No doubt, the workplaces of today are vastly different to those of pre-depression factories, and there is a perception now (as there was then) that the sort of behaviour described above does not happen any longer. The Hawthorne Experiments are granted only historical significance in Organisational Behaviour textbooks today.

This is interesting because in fact, the description of the organisation above does not come from an early industrial setting, but from a recent review of an existing Australian business.

It is virtually certain that it is also to a significant extent a

description of any number of other organisations around Australia and the world. In many years of consulting, we have rarely found an organisation, which does not display at least some of the symptoms of the Bank Wiring Room. This has been the case whether it be blue or white-collar industries – from manufacturing and construction to health and professional services.

Despite the developments in staff benefits that have occurred over the last 70 years, organisational theorists regularly emerge with the same message.

Chris Argyris has found that by far the most common organisational environment is characterised by a particular set of beliefs and values, including - that effectiveness is dependent on a top-down approach, the ability to control unilaterally; and the suppression of feelings. He found that these beliefs are acted out by management, even when they think they do not hold such beliefs.

He also found that in these environments, the following symptoms arise: information is hidden; there is low openness and trust; there is a lack of awareness of what is really happening, and of the consequences of actions; there is a failure to recognise that significantly greater effectiveness is possible; learning is limited; defensive group dynamics arise; counterproductive intergroup dynamics arise; and threatening issues are covered up.

This is a remarkably accurate description of the symptoms present in the organisation described above and in the Bank Wiring Room. Other Organisational Theorists (eg Douglas McGregor, in his 'Theory X') have found similar assumptions and beliefs are pervasive in organisations, with similar results. We find them in most of the organisations we visit and see some of the consequences played out in high profile organisational incidents: the Challenger disaster, Enron, the Bundaberg hospital,... - in all of these cases the reality of the situation was known to people working in the organisation, but management only listened to what they wanted to hear.

While disasters of the magnitude of these cases will not happen to all organisations, the evidence suggests that at the very least,

most organisations are not reaching their potential and do not know this to be the case. The phenomenon is insidious, as even though it is pervasive, its very nature is to mask its existence from management. Whether this type of limiting dysfunction exists in an organisation or not, management will probably believe that it does not.

#### WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US?

We have found that external confidential interviewing can uncover much of what is really happening in an organisation. To a lesser extent, some confidential surveying can also indicate areas of organisational dysfunction. However, it remains that the root of the divide lies in the beliefs prevailing within the organisation, particularly with management. Interviewing or surveying may uncover information which challenges those beliefs, but for this to be of any benefit, there must be a willingness to accept the reality of the situation and acknowledge that there could be other beliefs which might serve the organisation and it's people better.

Both Argyris (Model II) and McGregor (Theory Y) suggested belief systems, which could result in greater effectiveness, and hopefully many organisations are moving towards these systems. Perhaps the growth in business coaching is due to recognition that through a greater understanding of our beliefs we can adopt ones that lead to greater effectiveness.

Nevertheless, our experience is that enormous potential is wasted in most organisations each day, and that there is a widespread ignorance that this is so.

In the case outlined at the start of the article, when the facts were presented to a board member, he was shocked, angry, and felt that the workers were behaving in this way because 'they are saying "F—k You!" to management'. When I asked one of the workers, why the workers behaved in this way, his response was 'because they're bored...or no, it's because they are looking for more...meaning in their work...yes, that's it – they are trying to find more meaning.'

More info: Request **Brendan** to ProgBus@aoq.org.au

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