

# Me first or after you?

## A top down revolution for organisations

Whenever we join a group, a team or an organisation we are faced with a dilemma; *“are my individual needs primary to the those of the larger group or do I recognise the greater claim of the whole?”* We meet this choice time after time and how we decide to act defines the nature of our membership and of the group itself. We either stay somewhat apart or join completely.

Often the choice is influenced by our ability to be heard. If we believe we will have no effective voice in the larger grouping we look to protect our own interests. Alternatively, if we feel we have the power to be taken notice of, we remain in the fray and argue our case amongst the others, compromising where we need to and standing firm when we must.

The power to be heard is enabled by the system of governance we choose which in turn determines the type of membership and therefore the type of organisation we become. In short, we can choose to co-create our organisations rather than make the best of what we've got. We have a big impact on whether people believe their opinion matters.

If, as policy makers, we assume that people are motivated by self interest, then we must pay attention to their *“What's in it for me?”*, in order to get them to act in the way we want. Whether by carrot or by stick, we end up manipulating their behaviour.

As a result, a transactional culture develops where people may perform well, but only for as long as you keep your half of the bargain. If we are being transactional, the rules of the game must be explicit and unambiguous. Policies and procedures are drafted on the basis of control. Control is exercised from the top of the organisation downward. The pattern is reinforced and gets stronger.

This is the disease we call bureaucracy. We need bureaucracy because we choose not to trust those we employ. The layers that were reduced in many organisations during the 80's and 90's were the symptoms. The imbalance of power, the root cause, remains unaffected.

***“We need bureaucracy because we choose not to trust those we employ”***

If we wish to address the cause, we need to consider how and in what ways power is wielded

within the organisation? How decisions are made and by whom? What are the symbols of power that maintain the pecking order?

Most importantly we need to be honest with ourselves about how we feel about our own power – if I allow others to have a voice will I retain my own? This is where the real work begins (and continues) because this is what you can control and people will respond to what you do, not just what you say. Unlike most revolutions this one starts at the top and works it's way down. Leaders who work on these issues become grounded and confident in their ability to share without loss of power.

Of course this is only half the story. If we create the space for people to have voice and power, how do we know they'll use it wisely? How do we know they'll act in the best interests of all? What if people choose not to exercise their voice?

In all honesty we can't answer these latter questions. Just as a parent can't say what will happen when their child leaves home, we have no way of knowing until we take a chance. But even if we are disappointed, we have a choice of how to respond. We can return to the comfortable route of taking decisions on behalf of others or we can continue involving and trusting. People *will* respond, some faster than others, some with more maturity than others - but they will respond. This is an act of faith; a belief that the people we employ are worth our trust - and will return it.

***“Power is granted to us by those we seek to lead...”***

Eventually, and it may be quicker than you think, the patterns of behaviour will take form and the culture around you will shift. People will begin to take accountability for their actions and decisions because you have stopped doing so. Surprisingly by giving away your power you will find it increases. This is because power is granted to us by those we seek to lead, whether the customer, the core worker, the patient or the client.

In many cases it is our own insecurities that prevent us trusting those we employ. They keep us locked into a belief that sharing is abdication. It is anything but. Putting the organisation first, before ourselves, is tough work but it allows your people to take responsibility for their own participation. But it's not what they do that matters, it's what you do from the top that sets the pattern.

For further reading on this topic see: 'Stewardship' - Peter Block ISBN 1-881052-86-9