



## Organisational Psychologists – Staying Relevant

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OK, we may be domiciled within an HR department, labelled with varied nomenclature from Personnel Services to Employee Relations, People and Culture to Organisational Capability. Each label will presumably reflect the orientations of that organisation. The titles aside, whether or not the heads of our Business Units, Division or Branch sit on the organisation's senior leadership team will say a lot about how these functions are *viewed* (read, *valued*) in our organisation. Put it this way if I may generalise (and it could be argued that psychologists are paid to do that!) I have not met many fulfilled and efficacious psychologists reporting through the Finance stream.

If one considers some of the hot issues occupying the hearts and minds of Australian executives including operational excellence, corporate governance, values and culture, talent retention, ageing workforce, workplace bullying, intergenerational conflict, accelerating change in increasingly "raplex" (complex and rapidly changing) environments (Lindgren and Bandhold 2003), then, the relevance of organisational psychology is at an all time high. We have expanded our repertoire from the days of screening elite combat soldiers to minimise the likelihood of "choking" or succumbing to PTSD following combat duty (not that there's anything wrong with that!).

However how many hats do we need to *wear* in a day and how much do we need to *know* and *know how to do* to make a difference to the organisations that employ us or in the case of independent consultants like me, invite us to partner their business? The key to our potency, indicated by the trust and reliance placed upon us by organisations, is to *stay relevant*.

### ***What are some of the issues that confront companies and fall within our expertise?***

The profile of workplace bullying is at an unprecedented high. Since the publication of the Guidance Note on eliminating workplace bullying by Worksafe Victoria (2003) and parallel work in NSW, attention has been drawn to OH&S that goes to psychological and emotional health in a way not seen before. The difference is in the focus on workplace stress (eg toxic culture), vs occupational stress (armed services, air traffic controllers etc).

However, not all issues around workplace behaviour have a safety flavour to them. EEO is principally about ensuring the aussie fair go and critical employment decisions that are made on the merit principle. Oft cited statistics like the low percentage of women at board level in this country appear to testify to the fact that women are hardly taking over the country, much less the world and yet some women will cite the sticky floor rather than the glass ceiling as their reason for staying at their current level. Organisational and industrial psychologists involved in Equity and Diversity and dealing with the entire culture piece must push workplace flexibility, help ensure workplace justice, and robust recruitment and selection practices to provide role models and an aura of confidence for any person of minority group status who must believe they will be supported if they take on more responsibility. EEO and



workplace flexibility can no longer be seen as women's issues and selling these types of arguments require real nous in the area of strategic influence. Be that as it may, why are workplace justice issues within our domain? Because they are far less about "how to" and much more about "want to"; often requiring attitudinal shift.

Some of those in our profession are heavily involved in psychometric testing. We defend testing and executive coaching on an almost daily basis (see Berglas, 2002). Only yesterday a sales manager in a manufacturing company told me he thought they were "all a load of cr-p" (he may have received recent feedback on lower than average EI). I found myself gently explaining the importance of selecting tests that were rigorously researched and well chosen for what was being measured, that the administration had to be "flawlessly executed" (Spanyi, 2004) and feedback handled professionally and empathically for them to be effective and well received. Who had actually managed this conversation previously with that very passionate individual? What gave rise to the prickliness and in what way is our profession served when a strenuous pronouncement such as his was delivered by a senior manager in front of 20 others? Rather than point the finger, however, I believe that we should not fall into being apologist or confrontational in pushing our worth. We should continue to add, no create, value for clients such that they find our expertise compelling if not irresistible.

Dr. Tony Grant (2004) in his excellent article in this publication cited the importance of applying theoretical and applied tenets of psychology to this form of positive psychology at work but says as I do that we must actively engage the marketplace, promoting and applying our strengths (whilst being ever conscious of our weaknesses). In the cool light of day I challenge the average senior executive to bother with the fine print on the reliability and validity of any particular instrument or the published findings in a prestigious journal on the efficacy of coaching in the non-clinical population.

They want *results* and will rely on word of mouth and a good reputation ahead of a Masters degree in organisational or clinical psychology (would they even know the difference?!). To continue to argue that we do it better, we have more training and that the others could be life coaches today and financial controllers last week (true story!) can so easily be misinterpreted as elitist, self serving or arrogant when we know that we are arguing persuasively, intelligently and logically. It is appropriate to have those discussions en masse and in print but for the individual psychologist it can sound self serving, and even less sexy than that, sour grapes and desperate.

We hear and read clichés about the ageing population and changing demographics in the Australian workforce. How active are we professionally in trying to hold on to older workers, retrain those who through no fault of their own have become square pegs in round holes due to technologisation and process re engineering? It is not just the humane thing to do. We will need older experienced workers over the next decades and we seem to be heading for an acute shortage (C'wlth Gov't, 2003). Yes, people will live longer with better quality of life, but we are having fewer babies and fewer people are having them. Added to this is the fact that Aussies still seem to want to retire earlier than most other world populations.

Parker (2004) claims that in Australia only 49% of people between the ages of 55-64 are in the workforce compared with 59% in the US and even higher percentages in New Zealand and Scandinavia. In what way is organisational psychology then dealing with the



phenomenon of malcontent older workers who stay because they haven't enough Super but feel undervalued and less relevant? How many poorly executed change programs and restructures have they endured? What are we doing to engage them while younger people around them have written them off? In reverse, how do we instil greater appreciation by the Boomers for the focussed self confident X'ers/Y's many of whom are seen by older workers doing the Shannon Noll (What about me?) but sparking insecurity in older workers nevertheless.

I have not even touched on the myriad of psychosocial and familial issues that are brought to work by employees every day and therefore impact the fabric of working life. Whilst we are more likely in a work context to be talking coaching not counselling, facilitation rather than therapy, relationship breakdowns, the challenge of work/life balance, worries about children, dealing with illness, depression and death has not waned. Employees will expect and have the right to receive empathy understanding and tangible idiosyncratic accommodations to suit their personal situations. Those who choose not to have children and that stands now at just under a third of the female population will still wish to attain work/life balance. Those who find themselves circumstantially single and/or without children may want or need support. In an employees' market which is what we will have for decades, they will leave physically or emotionally if the organisation cannot accede to their demand for flexibility in where, who and how work gets done.

### *What competencies do we need?*

If we want to be in the ear of CEO's we have to talk their language. We have to help them make connections between the people stuff and the bottom line. However if we want respect and potency among shop floor workers too, we must be able to flex our style and delivery, be empathic, non judgmental, even jocular and refuse to take ourselves too seriously. Our ability to help is only as good as their willingness to open up about the needs, challenges, insecurities, weaknesses with which they have to contend. This is absolutely critical if some of our key result areas lie in talent retention, occupational or workplace stress, or even brand management where the perception of the company in the marketplace is one of our most important intangible assets or liabilities.

Above all else, we must practise what we preach in any aspiring learning organisation, identify our mental models, strive for personal mastery - which is not an end point according to Senge (1992) - but an intrinsic hunger for growth. We need to be blindingly self aware, have, in the words of my new favourite tennis commentator Jim Courier "ridiculous" (i.e. great) interpersonal skills, a learning appetite, core competence (i.e. a genuine expertise) and a strategic focus where our work constantly stands up to scrutiny for its alignment with business goals.

Whilst maintaining an ever-present eye on the ball we must continue to scan the horizon i.e. exhibit forward thinking. This is not just critical for our profession (it has been argued we were caught napping on the rise of coaching, as an example) but also to assist our organisations, indeed our communities and countries to thrive. For those of us involved in diagnostic and analytical work about the current state of play, how much of our reporting is about "what was?" and "what is?" and how much of the emphasis is on asking "So What?!"



Is our professional reading all in psychology or do we read The Economist and other business magazines? Is our professional development mostly technical or specialist or do we opt for stretch. For those of us who facilitate in our roles, how often might our organisation source an external facilitator because the perception is that we don't understand the business well enough and/or that we will not be prepared to confront them to enhance the quality and breadth of their thinking?

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### *Conclusion*

I believe our biggest contribution lies in culture and its alignment with strategic imperatives. By implication this requires holistic interventions and solutions. However it is not easy to shift a bullying culture, for example, as some of the worst perpetrators are senior managers, exploiting the power imbalance that exists between them and others. Again using bullying as an example, destructive behaviour that is perpetrated, condoned, reinforced, or worse still rewarded, creates undesirable norms in an organisation. These not only promulgate WorkCover claims, lost time injuries and occupational stress, but threaten “brand”, employer of choice status, breed cynicism and mistrust and serve to alienate valued employees who may simply vote with their feet therefore impacting retention of talent. Dr. Robert Hare, author of *Without Conscience; the disturbing world of the psychopaths among us* (1999) argues that bullies in suits or corporate sociopaths “tend to rise to the top – like sour cream”.

As organisational and industrial psychologists we can be integral to establishing group norms of behaviour that marginalise such antics unless of course the sociopath has sacked us first. Adherence to protocols including spending or trading “limits”, susceptibility to corruption or fraud are all related to the norms that exist around ethics and integrity. If ethical behaviour is part of the fabric of the organisation, lived breathed and practised fervently as a “corporate religion” (Kunde, 2000) , it is very unlikely that widespread corruption or governance violations will get a foothold. Some would-be transgressors will conform to the critical mass and others will be exposed by whistleblowers who feel strong enough and safe enough to transcend our Aussie anti-dobbing culture. Whilst organisational leadership will make the biggest difference to what we stand for, whom more than those in our profession should be the custodians of the collective psyche and enablers of ‘discretionary effort (Evans 2000). But we’re impotent if no one listens which is why I would stress the importance of finely crafted influence skills.

We have every reason to be proud of the little miracles we perform, humbled by those who take us into their confidence and every justification to be self assured about the discipline, professionalism, empirical grounding and the empathy we can bring to organisations we touch, but if a consultant is only as good as their last job then we are only as effective as our workplace culture, our sphere of influence, our credibility and our clients would suggest.

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