

## The Soul Within...

### ***Can individual values survive the pincer movement of organisational change and corporate values within nature conservation?***

Organisational behaviour is, perhaps surprisingly, one of the key elements of the context within which the UK nature conservation movement functions. The subject combines elements of sociology, psychology and economics that relate to business studies and is strongly in vogue. Business management schools are offering diverse courses in organisational behaviour and the important related area of organisational change, consultancies brandishing new ideas on behaviour and change are flourishing, academics are producing new theories and models with considerable frequency, and publishing houses are producing voluminous literature. Indeed, the literature canon is vast (there are even papers on the philosophy of bureaucracy and bureaucratisation). Something massive is happening, which affects us all deeply.

This article examines the impact of contemporary thinking about organisational behaviour and organisational change on people working for environmental organisations. It must be noted that the author is not a specialist in this area but has researched the subject in some depth as he has a keen interest in the philosophical and psychological contexts within which conservation functions. This research became an increasingly disturbing psychological journey through a subject area that affronted my psyche and to which I found myself becoming increasingly resistant (at one point I found myself sufficiently irritated to shred and burn a seminal work entitled *Who Moved my Cheese?*<sup>1</sup> - only to encounter an even more effrontery work<sup>2</sup>).

### **We'll all Hang our Washing on the Sigmoid Curve**

One of the theories that has been widely developed holds that when businesses are doing well, experiencing sound economic growth, they need to review their practices and alter their methods of operation - or suffer inevitable economic downturn. Remedies include adopting new methods of working, altering staffing structures, engaging new staff, and even locating to new premises. Handy<sup>3</sup> illustrates this theory by means of what he terms a 'sigmoid curve' - a graph that takes the form of a series

of chain-linked sigmoids on a 45 degree slope. This shows that business grows, organisational change occurs, business dips but then upsurges, organisational change occurs again, with the same results, and so on. Conversely, the theory holds that without periodic reinvigoration a business will rise, stagnate, decline and fade away.

This theory has flourished, together with its variants and derivatives, despite the lack of any real evidence-base and the fact that it is nigh impossible to determine where an organisation may be on the curve at any point in time. The recent sales problems at Marks & Spencer, often cited as an example of a business trying to fly in the face of this principle, now seem to have resulted largely from a sequence of inappropriate designs together with a reluctance to embrace one element of new technology (credit cards)! This theory is still one of the main drivers behind organisational change, though it is questionable as to whether it amounts to anything more than business fashion pertaining to the psychology of control.

### **Organisational Restructuring Disease**

My research was unable to determine why the God of Change rules the world of business, but He certainly does. It is arguable that business organisations in the westernised world are suffering from the corporate equivalent of myxomatosis, which can simply be termed Organisational Restructuring Disease (ORD) or perhaps Organisation Restructuring Fashion (ORF). Theories similar to Handy's are largely responsible. Gleik<sup>4</sup> admits that organisational change is chaotic, with innumerable variables that make it almost impossible to predict, let alone control. Many theories and models state that a period of chaos is essential in order to prepare employees for a new regime. The psychology of change holds that employees are only too eager to embrace a new system - perhaps any new system - after a period of chaos. One established theory, derived from the social psychology pioneer Kurt Lewin, identifies three main stages in organisational change: unfreezing, confusion and refreezing; this has been re-modelled in more recent theories into preparing for change, gaining change skills and achieving change.

Mercifully, some business theorists are concerned about the human impact of ORD: Morgan<sup>5</sup> states that the contemporary workplace is now 'One of continual change initiative', generating rampant 'change fatigue'. He argues for a more evolutionary approach to change. His arguments will appeal to the many UK conservationists who have experienced ORD in

recent years: viz, those who have worked for the Nature Conservancy Council, English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage, The Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, The Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Environment Agency, English Heritage, The National Trust, The National Trust for Scotland, Environment Heritage Service (Northern Ireland), and so on. In other words, a high percentage of all people working in environmental conservation over the last decade have been affected by major organisational change. Moreover, we can almost predict which organisation is next in line.

What this does for partnership-working, which should have much to offer nature conservation, is deeply worrying. How can partnerships function if at any one time a third of the organisations represented is being restructured, another third is re-emerging from ORD-inflicted angst, and the healthy third is looking over its shoulder? Whereas corporate heterogeneity should benefit partnership-working, continuity of participating individuals with established intellectual capacity is essential for longer-term conservation projects, including partnerships, to function adequately. Many of us will have attended partnership meetings where ORD has reduced proceedings to a futile stasis.

My GP friend was wondrously receptive to my plea for the nation's GPs to rise in protest against the damage being done by ORD to human hearts, bodies and minds. He readily agreed that the legacy of ORD ends up in the surgery and beyond, at massive personal and national cost. Sadly, though, he had to remind me that ORD is probably more prevalent within the National Health Service than in any other British work sector.

The International Journal of Organisational Behaviour is bringing out a special edition on counter-productive behaviours in the workplace. Perhaps we should offer a paper. Perhaps it could include a paper on working practices and change management within conservation organisations? Perhaps we need a modern equivalent of the song sung by British troops marching towards Passchendaele, the worst of the Great War battles: '*If you want the old battalion we know where they are - they're hanging on the old barbed wire.*' As a mental sausage machine, ORD is the modern equivalent of the Western Front.

Meanwhile, the spectre of ORD looms over nature conservationists entombed in open-plan offices, bombarding each other with unsolicited emails whilst failing to prepare for the next biodiversity meeting or the

latest stage in the new hyper-convoluted budget bid. TS Elliot sums it all up nicely in *Burnt Norton*:

Only a flicker  
Over the strained time-ridden faces  
Distracted from distraction by distraction  
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning  
Tumid apathy with no concentration  
Men and bits of paper

We are the UK nature conservation movement: ours is vocational work, inspired by deeply held values that reach into the very core of human existence and which cannot be shackled by bureaucratic fashion. We can and must do better than all of this, for the alternative is precipitous extinction resultant from the further severance of the relationship between mankind and nature that is essential for global existence.

### **Corporate Values**

Corporate values are massively in vogue at present, as anyone who Google-searches the two words will readily discover. Businesses now commonly profess to be 'Living our Values.' The basic truth is that all business organisations have corporate values, implicit or explicit, simple or complex. In some situations these values are clearly explained, but often they are not, which suggests that they may vary greatly in depth of meaning or interpretation. Generally, employees tend to be highly aware of the prevailing corporate values, but to varying levels of interpretation. Challenges arise, of course, when new sets of values arrive and, of course, organisational change almost invariably includes new or refreshed corporate values.

Charles Handy<sup>6</sup> explores the concept of the corporate soul, arguing that leaders have to believe and declare that their organisations have something unique to offer the world, and have to make it clear to employees that they are special to that dream of glory. Apparently, the key to this is passion, which conveys conviction. Certainly, and perhaps in consequence, chief executives of environmental organisations now promote their new corporate values with Passion. Environmental organisations, mercifully, have something unique and tangible to offer, and with which many customers can readily identify. The critical issues, though, are the actual meaning of corporate values and the relationships

between them and the values held by individuals within organisations. These two areas are crucial to people working in the environment movement, who are motivated strongly by their own values and are following a calling rather than pursuing financial gain and a comfortable life. Their need to be able to understand, support and implement corporate values that harmonise with their own beliefs could not be stronger. Of course, in theory, and probably to a fair extent in reality, there should be a high degree of compatibility between corporate values and personal values in the nature conservation movement. The problems may lie in semantics and depth, which are both crucial.

Natural England, we are told, is '*here to conserve and enhance the environment for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings*'. At face value this sounds quite sensible and appealing, but it uses several undefined terms, including the rotting chestnuts 'conserve' and 'enhance' which generate ennui. Also, where is the baseline for a good environment, how is 'economic prosperity' determined and, critically, how heavily is it weighted? In short, the balance of the statement is unclear, so that the statement lacks depth and is open to interpretations varied enough to be contradictory. The sentence can scarcely be spoken with Passion. One is reminded of Macbeth's great soliloquy on life that ends, 'Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' The simple truth is that values, individual or corporate, cannot be superficial; they must have or seek to attain depth.

The conservation organisation for which I am privileged to work holds its properties in stewardship *for ever, for everyone*. Although the phrase is now offered as being far more than a mere strap-line, no explanation of its meaning has been offered (none appears on the National Trust's intranet or internet pages), perhaps on the assumption that everyone within the Trust can readily subscribe to it. It is therefore open to varying depth of interpretation. Interestingly, its meaning seems to have evolved and deepened since it first came into being as a strap-line over five years ago, for it is now cited as a modern encapsulation of the purpose of the Trust as enshrined in the National Trust Act of 1907: '*Promoting the permanent preservation, for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest and, as regards lands, for the preservation (so far as is practicable) of their natural aspect, features and animal and plant life*'. I have used *for ever, for everyone* myself, sometimes with Passion, but have been grateful that I have never been asked what it actually means. This begs

the question of how many people in the Trust would be able to articulate its meaning. Having thought about it long and hard I could probably now attempt an explanation. National Trust staff are fortunate: despite the unexplained meaning, the statement undoubtedly has gravitas, and far more obtuse corporate statements exist elsewhere. Indeed, it is an excellent strap-line, almost certainly with hidden and intensifying depth. The fact that the ethos of all-inclusive eternity clashes with the organisation's triple bottom line thinking on sustainability can be got round by stating that it is essentially aspirational - and Trust can fall back on the *so far as practicable* part of the 1907 statement.

Of course, the main difficulty for corporate values is that they easily engender cynicism. Indeed, the wording has to be particularly clever to avoid this trap. Poetic language may well be the best mechanism for avoiding this problem. Were he alive today, William Wordsworth would have been superb at producing meaningful environmental corporate values. Perhaps the greatest plus point of *for ever, for everyone* is that it uses poetic language, and is therefore open to hidden or developing meaning for which poetic language is renowned. Although it arrived somewhat serendipitously, it does appear to be now gaining in meaning.

Another difficulty for nature conservation employees is the lack of engagement with the development of corporate values: they are handed down from on high, having been rubber stamped by Trustees and committees with the assumption that everyone will delight in them. The absence of inclusivity here may be a recipe for non-engagement or cynicism.

### **Personal Values**

It would be wrong to suggest that nature conservationists are necessarily able to articulate their own personal values, though that is not to suggest that such values are superficial or non-cognitive. The truth is that we are clear, as individuals, about what we like and dislike but we are less able to articulate why. Often, we feel inhibited from doing so. If challenged, many people would struggle to justify their values, not merely because it is notoriously difficult to articulate let alone justify value-judgements. Moreover, our attitudes change over time, albeit within parameters. For nature conservationists, the situation is even more complex, for many of us feel obliged to hide behind the objectivity that is the legacy of scientific training (perhaps the language of conservation

biology is more of a hindrance than an asset here). What matters most is that we care about our personal values with considerable passion, for to go against them would amount to spiritual prostitution.

I have been either bold, naive or stupid, or a combination of the three, in that I have placed an encapsulation of my personal views about nature on the Values in Nature and Environment web site ([www.vineproject.org.uk](http://www.vineproject.org.uk)). The statement resides there for everyone, forever; or at least until I decide to change it, or the VINE web site regurgitates it. It is probably due for refreshment soon, which may mean that I need to organisationally review myself. The exercise of producing this statement was hugely worthwhile. I was fortunate in that I was staying at the Sufi Way centre in the nether regions of Hampshire, at the time, where such deliberations are considered quite normal. Sufi Way ([www.sufiway.org](http://www.sufiway.org)) promotes a highly westernised form of Sufism that provides a framework for dealing with spirituality and religion. Incredibly, though, it has recently suffered an outbreak of ORD and is in the process of relocating to California. Perhaps there is no escape after all.

### **There must be some way out of here**

In a recent article in *British Wildlife*<sup>7</sup> I examined the increasing penetration of the nature conservation movement by bureaucracy, in a section perhaps rather obtusely titled *Globuli Societatis Florebunt* (this might translate as 'corporate bollocks shall flourish'). Although the article recognises the benefits of (simple and rational) bureaucracy, I referred to the dangers of employees in the nature conservation movement becoming lost within the comfort zone provided by bureaucratic processes; for in doing so they sell themselves and their organisations short, together with the associated values. I could have added that insecurity and traumatization can force people into that comfort zone. This cannot be allowed to happen within the nature conservation industry, or the movement will lose its dynamism - which is essential to it, given the dynamism of nature. Traumatic organisational change can force people into that zone, particularly those close to retirement and those with young families and little money; in addition, people in such situations can, perhaps unwittingly, suppress others.

The article also emphasised the value of people who are prepared to push at the limits of the system, gently and with reverence: 'To prevent the system's parameters from narrowing down and becoming unnecessarily

restrictive, and to ensure that the system serves people and, crucially, that people nurture rather than meekly serve the system.' Such people may well be the most faithful servants any organisation could have. One is reminded of the famous headmaster who believed that a school could always rely on its rebels in its hour of need. The truth is that bureaucratic processes in the westernised world are proliferating and intensifying to the extent that a high percentage of jobs are effectively in the bureaucracy industry, including a great many posts within the UK environmental movement.

Partnership-working should have a key role to play in the future of the UK nature conservation movement. Its success depends primarily on communication at inter and intra levels, pan-organisational stability and commonly held values that have depth and are clearly understood and articulated. Successful partnership-working necessitates an evolutionary approach to organisational change within our movement. The argument for evolutionary change is further reinforced by the fact that environmental organisations are not ordinary businesses, though the commercial element is unquestionably vital, and that they attract and employ workers with unusually high levels of dedication. Both these strands beg the question of whether environmental organisations need to follow corporate fashion as closely as ordinary businesses; indeed, they could set fashion, by substituting Compassion for Passion, and by producing clear corporate values in poetic language through an inclusive, transparent process.

The process would reduce the communication and language gulf between senior management and employees. This gulf may currently be widening as a result of the incursion into the nature conservation movement of chief executives, senior management and senior specialist staff from mainstream business, who may not share the same vocational motivation as most established conservationists, or notice and understand that motivation adequately. Some have, of course, become converts.

Life, like conservation, is concerned primarily with change. Everything changes, especially nature. One of the main challenges for our movement is to understand change better; another is to engage with it more effectively and cognitively, and, especially, to engage in it with Compassion. Nature conservation is inspired not so much by Passion but by Compassion - compassion to all living things. We must not lose sight of that.

## References -

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