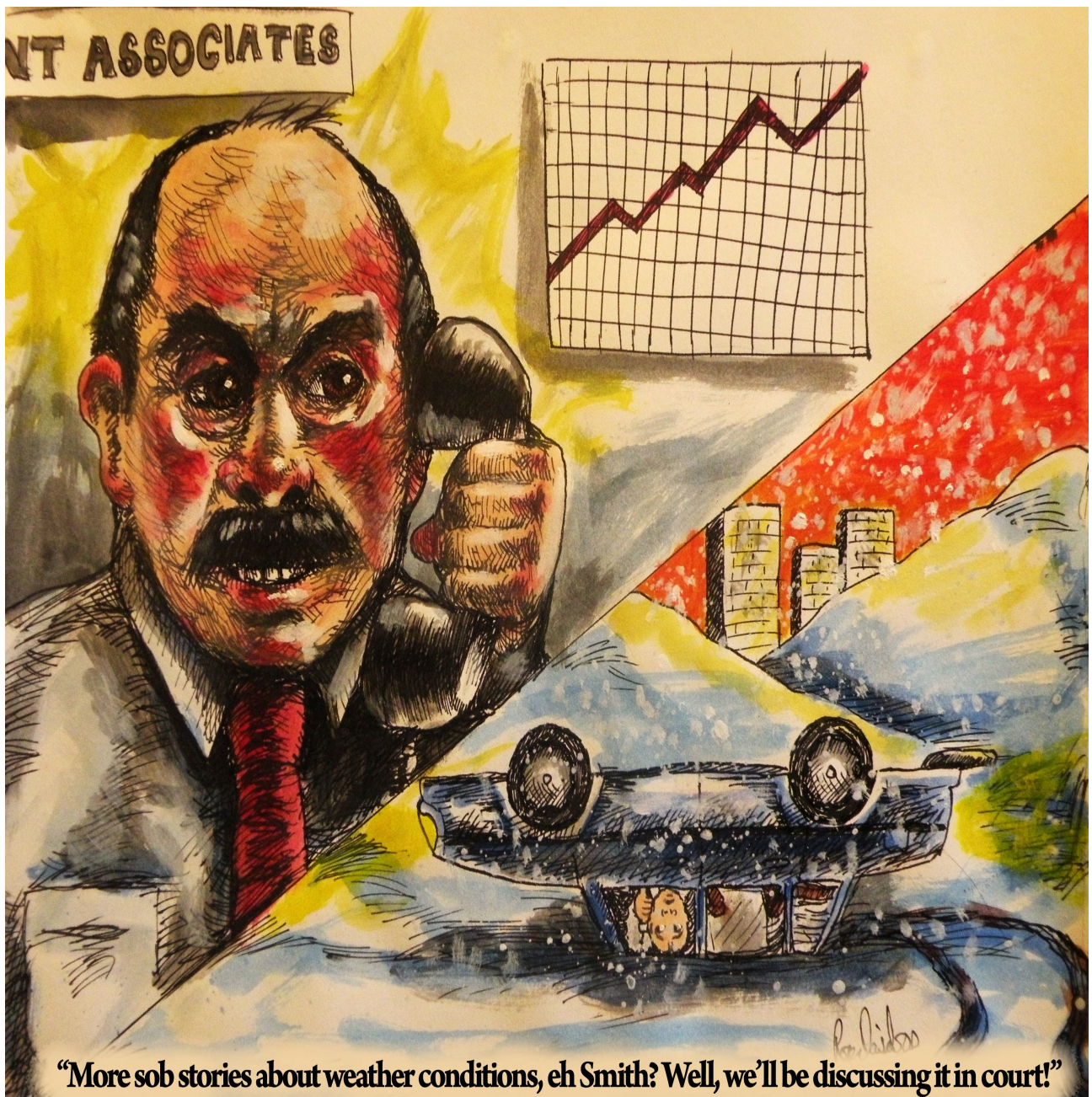




HUMAN RESOURCES AND THE WEATHER: A FROSTY RELATIONSHIP



Hello everyone! Hope you are all well! Our new collection of essays kicks off with a short, but punchy, response to some knee-jerk, and short-sighted, reactions from HR and legal professionals to staff allegedly 'skiving' from work due to the bad weather experienced here in the UK, late 2009. No doubt many employees took advantage of the snow to stay indoors – however, organisations may have missed an opportunity to reflect on why many employees couldn't be bothered turning up for work; indeed, should organisations be so surprised that employees would rather stay in bed, or go shopping?

The zeitgeist appears to be the encouragement and development of Next Generation HR, which would result in a more robust role for HR in strategic and Executive decision-making; more pro-active organisational consultation, collaboration, and involvement with employees under the populist banner of Employee Engagement; and an urgent need to improve Performance Management initiatives. However, will this result in a genuine, positive impact on reducing levels of workplace Bullying and Harassment, a phenomenon costing the UK economy upwards of £14 billion annually? We'll be discussing and analysing, in some depth, this question over three essays.

Our final essay will focus on the implementation of a Forum Theatre intervention, commissioned by a large insurance company, to cultivate improved levels of trust between employees and customers. We'll be discussing the advantages of this exercise and also offering suggestions on how it can be improved upon.

My thanks, once again, to Roger Davidson for contributing the front-page illustration, and also to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) for their excellent research.

If you wish to discuss any issues included in the essays, please don't hesitate to call me on 0845 025 1066, e-mail me on paul @theatreofchange.co.uk, or write to me at:

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'SNOW SKIVERS': DON'T BE SURPRISED IF YOUR EMPLOYEES WOULD RATHER STAY AT HOME!

Jonathan Whittaker, a senior employment lawyer at SAS Daniels, recently pointed out that his firm had experienced a 40% increase in employer enquiries on how to deal with 'dubious employee absences' during the spell of wintry weather in late 2009.¹ Whittaker labelled many of these absentee employees as “snow skivers” and “utter clots” characterising a “work-shy mindset among a minority, which looks set to prevail given the likely pressures on workers in 2010.” One could argue, his comments are rather ignorant and misjudged, considering much of the country's transport infrastructure, especially in the densely populated South East of England, froze to a standstill - the comments also reveal a rather shallow, myopic and churlish attitude that fails to address some of the deeper, underlying issues that motivate some employees to stay at home, or go shopping, rather than go to work. Indeed, the wintry weather should have been used as an opportunity for organisations to investigate, assess, explore, and reflect on, the reasons for alleged employee idleness in a constructive, positive and sensitive manner. Running to a lawyer for advice betrays a lack of confidence, knowledge, imagination, authority and planning.

Whittaker's statement also reveals a naivety that, in my opinion, lies at the heart of HR and Employee Engagement schemes. Organisations have to be more realistic about employee attitudes to work and reflect on the fact that, if there is a sudden flurry of snow, many employees would rather stay at home with their families, enjoy themselves in the local shops, or have a lie-in rather than sit in a traffic jam for hours, or stand huddled next to someone blowing their nose on an overcrowded train! Organisations need to be less narcissistic about their own existence and purpose: many employees work for you primarily to feed their families, keep a roof over their head, pay their bills, satisfy their own ambitions – not out of undying loyalty or an urge to improve organisational productivity and the bottom line. Organisations who are more realistic and approach Employee Relations with the view that employees, given a choice, would choose to do other things rather than trudge to work everyday, will, arguably:

- develop more effective, pragmatic and robust Employee Engagement programmes
- work harder to develop relationships, trust and rapport with employees

¹ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 'Lawyer blasts 'snow skivers'', *People Management*, 28 January 2010, p13

- do more to understand, respect and explore solutions to employees' desires to be with their loved ones, rather than being stuck in an environment with colleagues they often don't like
- develop a more informal, enjoyable and less intimidating work environment – one in which overly-assertive and overbearing leadership styles are frowned upon; after all, if employees don't really want to be there, and they perceive an oppressive management style akin to Bullying and Harassment, the organisation will only succeed in widening the gap between themselves and their people.

Whittaker's earlier statement seeks to remove employers' obligations to their employees, assuming that work is central to most people's lives. Taking the philosophical approach that employees are lazy and work-shy, and that work is a deeply unattractive concept in contrast to other human activities, could actually be perceived as being positive, placing the onus of responsibility on the organisation to work much harder to increase employee motivation and happiness. Organisations should be actively encouraging dispirited employees, apathetic to the organisation's success, to come forward and discuss the reasons why they don't want to be there, providing a wealth of information on issues that management can actively work on to resolve. Organisations who listen to their disenchanting employees and explore and challenge the dark side of their organisation, perhaps will discover that many people may eventually prefer their workplace to being at home. That, in itself, will present other difficulties beyond the scope of this article!

What I have proposed should not be taken as a means to cover up for employees who are deeply selfish, irresponsible, inveterate liars, who, despite employers' best intentions, contribute little. Yes, employers must understand that many employees would prefer not to be there – after all, millions of people participate in lotteries to retire from working life – but employees must understand that they have signed an employment contract and are responsible for their own actions. If an employee decides to absent themselves from work, fraudulently citing ill health or logistical problems, they do so at their own risk, understanding that based upon their contract of employment, their actions can be construed as misconduct, and disciplinary proceedings may be initiated. If an employee is unhappy at work, one could argue that they should take the necessary steps to tackle and resolve the situation by approaching their employer to discuss solutions, or simply look for another job or a change of career.

Nevertheless, attitudes such as Whittaker's are very unhelpful and regressive, echoing early 20th century industrial tycoon 'theory x' beliefs that employees are not to be trusted. This is the 21st Century, and it's important to develop a cultural framework underwritten by employees' own personal experiences, ambitions, hobbies, domestic

and family life, worries, attitudes, beliefs, and desires that may not be aligned with the aims, goals and ambitions of the organisation. Organisations should, indeed, trust their employees, understanding that many do wish to avoid the workplace for very good reasons and will use real events as an excuse not to turn up. Encouraging them to come forward and discuss issues affecting attendance and motivation, without the threat of disciplinary action, will help organisations tackle hitherto unknown, and potentially serious, issues, helping to create a more attractive and enduring workplace environment, reducing absenteeism and improving productivity.

'NEXT GENERATION HR': WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR TACKLING WORKPLACE BULLYING AND HARASSMENT?

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have embarked on an ambitious research project that contemplates the future of HR practice and thinking. Analysing, exploring and discussing 'cutting-edge' HR best practice evident at several large UK organisations, the CIPD seek to develop a new HR framework – 'next generation HR' – positioning HR as a primarily insight-driven, cross-functional, applied business discipline, predicated on a concept of 'organisation equity', led by talented, highly influential, authoritative and courageous HR professionals contributing directly to organisational strategy and senior executive decision making.² Bearing in mind that rising incidents of workplace Bullying and Harassment are costing the UK economy upwards of £14 billion a year in lost productivity, how will 'next generation HR' shape up in tackling the problem?

Before we begin addressing this question, one must provide a brief summary of 'next generation HR'. Its constituent parts can be broken down as follows:

- Organisational Equity

Rather than simply acquiescing, tolerating, supporting and reinforcing an organisation's existing business strategy and senior management's decision-making, HR, in future, must be seen to be more influential at senior level, taking the lead in driving sustainable, long-term performance. Levels of HR influence, power and effectiveness can be conceptualised by 'organisational equity': an organisational currency measuring HR's standing within an organisation, the strength of which is governed by levels of senior management's commitment to HR involvement with,

² CIPD (2010), *Next Generation HR: Time for change – Towards a Next generation for HR*, Interim Research Report, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

and HR's levels of investment in, strategic and critical organisational decision-making. HR's involvement must look to lead the way in developing the following areas:

- Future Proof Cultures: HR must work hard to foster an honest, transparent, open culture, challenging established values, encouraging open, cross-functional debate and discussion, and shaping fertile, imaginative and positive employee behaviours, to develop a flexible, high-performance, agile, proactive culture capable of absorbing future shocks and creating and taking advantage of opportunities.
- Future fit leaders: HR must develop leaders who have the talent, the insight, the skills and the experience to succeed in a future world. HR must therefore have a strong grasp of issues that will impact on future organisational and management decision-making: technology improvements, changing demographics and societal attitudes, climate change, ethnic tensions, increased legislation, greater financial instability, geopolitical shifts in power, and so on.
- Organisation guardians and commentators: HR must have a robust understanding of what is really going on in the organisation, and be capable of challenging and tackling behavioural issues and foolhardy and inappropriate decisions that could potentially subvert the long-term welfare of the organisation – a case in point considering the reckless behaviour of bankers that would seem to have went unchallenged by HR in the run-up to the financial crisis. HR must also develop and balance what the CIPD refers to as 'process-light, business-relevant mechanisms informed by real insight into the needs of...[the] business...[that can] make a big difference to...sustainability', with the need to be 'chief integrity officers', providing informed, moral commentary and guidance on organisational behaviour and direction.
- 'Omega Personalities': cryptically defined by the CIPD as 'Alpha personalities who have arrived at ego maturity', HR professionals must become masters of organisational insight, recognising, reporting and exploring solutions to hitherto unknown, unfamiliar and unacknowledged business issues.

'Next generation HR' professionals must be capable of:

- effectively and courageously stimulating debate that can influence senior management
- demonstrating dynamic, professional, patient, supportive and strong moral personality traits
- exhibiting a natural authority and a strong personal presence

I should point out that this is a very brief and rather crude summary of the salient

points included in the CIPD's interim research report - I would strongly recommend one reads the report in its entirety. It can be accessed via the CIPD's website.

So, how can 'next generation HR's' potential impact on workplace Bullying and Harassment be assessed? One could argue that the research throws up a number of points that one can be cautiously optimistic about. An HR department, led by 'omega personalities', that:

- actively sets the cultural agenda,
- has the constant ear of the CEO and senior management,
- has a powerful, pro-active voice overseeing, influencing, and calibrating the organisation's moral compass,
- harnesses cross-functional, inter-departmental co-operation, idea fermentation, information sharing, debate and discussion;

we hope would be much more effective at raising awareness of, and tackling issues correlated with, workplace Bullying and Harassment. As always, there are caveats:

- Will next gen HR prioritise problems, such as Bullying and Harassment, on a contingent, flexible basis – as is suggested in the research – and will they genuinely have the power, authority, autonomy and independence, free from management interference, to robustly tackle these problems? Will they prioritise problems according to a long-term strategic plan, co-authored with senior management, that may subtly discourage HR from addressing workplace Bullying and Harassment in the open for political reasons of corporate reputation and employer brand image? Old habits die hard, after all.
- Will Bullying and Harassment be a top priority, addressed directly, rather than euphemised by 'respect' and 'equality and diversity' initiatives and policies?
- In the event of a senior management change of heart concerning levels of HR involvement and influence, can HR survive and thrive as 'chief integrity officers', challenging problem issues, and ensuring the organisation's moral stability? Much of HR's strength will rely on senior management's endorsement, which can never be guaranteed over the long-term.
- Attitudes within and towards HR may change, but will attitudes towards workplace Bullying and Harassment change for the better? This is a very important issue, bearing in mind that recent reports from the trade union UNITE and other institutions, quoted by the CIPD themselves in other reports, point out that Bullying is being 'quietly ignored' and 'complaints not followed up properly'. Will a 'next gen HR' revolution herald a new era of high-profile, courageous, genuine and vigorous Bullying and Harassment interventions? This is a very difficult question to answer as no reference to tackling workplace Bullying and Harassment was made in the CIPD's interim research report.

- Next Gen HR visualises a much more powerful and influential organisational role for the discipline. How will other departments perceive and react to this? Real Politik is a fact of organisational life, and other departments may not be willing to tolerate a more powerful HR department at the expense of their own existing levels of power, authority and political capital. This is, arguably, an especially salient point in an economic recession; departments are required to co-operate, but, in reality, often have to compete for scarce organisational resources – can we expect a fair fight? The strength, objectivity and fortitude of an organisation's senior management will be the defining feature in pre-empting, and tackling, possible conflict and departmental resistance to HR's new role.
- Next Generation HR will mean different things to different organisations. Each of the organisations analysed in the CIPD's interim report have contrasting management styles, culture, people (obviously), industrial context, economic and political pressures, strategies, operations, and performance levels. One could argue, much of HR's existing success within these organisations can be correlated with unique, contextual and intangible organisational variables interacting with each other that would be very difficult to replicate within other organisations. Formulating an over-arching and generalisable 'next generation HR' theory, distilling the 'essence' of disparate organisations' successful and unique 'cutting-edge' HR practice, will prove to be very difficult, in my opinion, and could dilute the future impact of research in this area. It is important that the CIPD conceptualises its research findings with detail, clarity and with caution, highlighting that organisations must shoulder the responsibility of developing their own, individual 'next generation HR' strategies. Next generation HR should not become a stand-alone theory that can be easily inserted within a management textbook.
- Conceptualising 'next generation HR' as a progressive movement for change could cause problems. Currently, evidence of effective next gen HR exists, in practice, in individual organisations and appears to be working well. However, translating individual practice into collective thought under a new banner of 'next generation HR' could prove to be anathema for many senior Executives, already complacent, or antagonistic, towards HR. Communicating the benefits and the advantages of a more inclusive, participative, effective, and robust 'business-focused' model of HR will require will, determination and perseverance to overcome skepticism, cynicism and resistance – indeed, one will need a long-term strategy for 'next generation HR' to be included in many organisations' *overall* long-term strategy.

A cynic may complain that the CIPD's vision is idealistic – a yearning for an organisational 'el-dorado', led from the top by a high-performing team of 'omega' HR super-humans. However, what I like about this research is that it at least *has* a vision,

imagination, and the courage to tackle the status quo, coupled with solid, robust empirical research and analysis. In the CIPD's view, 'next generation HR' is, in practice, a reality in some organisations; what we need now is for 'next generation' practice to be crystallised in clear, pragmatic and realistic 'next generation' thought, supported by the majority of major players within British industry. Roll on the next report.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT MOVING UP COMPANIES' AGENDA: WHY IS BULLYING AND HARASSMENT INCREASING?

The HR zeitgeist has to be Employee Engagement (EE). One can't open an HR journal or textbook these days without this phrase striking you between the eyes. The concept of it is good and I'm glad more organisations, gurus and businesspeople are recognising the need to empower, co-operate, empathise, listen and consult with employees more pro-actively and constructively. *The British Captains of Industry* report indicates that Employee Engagement will increase within their organisations in the next 12 months³ - happy days. Well, not exactly. What puzzles me is a lack of correlation between ostensible increases and improvements in Employee Engagement and an increase in workplace Bullying and Harassment (when I say lack of correlation, I mean I was expecting an inverse relationship: Employee Engagement goes up, Bullying and Harassment goes down). This is rather strange. If Employee Engagement's *raison d'etre* is to harness employee strength, energy, ideas, knowledge, endeavour and expertise by means of empowerment, collective participation and improved communication between employees and management to make the workplace a happier, more cohesive and more positive place to be, why are more people than ever complaining of being bullied?

From my own research with organisations, the majority of HR people, in the first instance, tend to deny there is any problem with Bullying and Harassment - "we have our own robust policies, training & development and employee engagement practices in place" is the distilled, generic phrase that's thrown at me. Fine. So, why does research commissioned by numerous organisations indicate that Bullying is being ignored and is increasing? "Doesn't happen here...we don't have a problem." Really? Emmm...sorry, but if the majority of organisations are saying this, one doesn't have to be a Professor of Statistics to realise that it's an improbable situation. One's initial reaction to this 'denial' is often rational - respectable organisations will never admit, in the first instance, to a problem afflicting their staff; after all, this will damage their

³ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 'Staff engagement moves up the agenda of top firms', *People Management*, page 7, 28 January 2010

reputation and their employer brand. But what if the organisation genuinely believes there *is* no problem – that their 'policies' and 'employee engagement' strategies and methods are robust? Then one has a very serious problem. When one digs deeper into modern organisations, one tends to find the following problems with Employee Engagement (EE) schemes:

- Can accentuate differences between high, average and low performing individuals. This may be advantageous from a Performance Management perspective – separating the 'wheat from the chaff' – but may exacerbate existing low morale amongst poorer performers by tangibly categorising and earmarking them in negative terms. 'Outing' poor performers may render them as prey for over-zealous line managers, eager to improve productivity at the sharp end, away from the 'soft zone' of the Employee Engagement activities.
- Whatever the content, the aim or the success of an Employee Engagement exercise, they tend not to address fundamental personality issues – immaturity, psychological insecurities, poor self-esteem, perceived personal injustices, personality disorders, a grandiose sense of self-entitlement, hypersensitivity, obsession, perceived inadequacy, impatience - that often drive individuals to indulge in Bullying behaviours.
- Employee Engagement schemes can, in their most impotent forms, be ineffective, clumsy and irrelevant. This is symptomatic of a complacent one-size-fits-all, off the shelf approach that ticks all the right boxes in advance, but fails to take into account the informal organisational culture – the attitudes and beliefs of the staff on the frontline – demonstrating management ignorance, laziness and lack of knowledge of their own organisation; no surprise that employees will privately ridicule the whole project - this is Employee Engagement as window dressing. Nevertheless, there are those who will argue that it is for precisely those reasons of lack of knowledge of employee attitudes, and so on, that Employee Engagement is vital. Despite the obvious question being what on earth the HR function has been doing with itself heretofore, it raises the issue of **when and why** an Employee Engagement exercise should be commissioned. Should an Engagement exercise be implemented by management to gain knowledge, understanding and trust of their employees, or, assuming the success criteria of these variables have been met, should the Engagement programme have more ambitious aims?
- Meretricious is an adjective that could be applied to a number of EE projects: deceptive, pretentious, flashy, tawdry, insincere. Some organisations spend considerable sums of money commissioning EE projects, often facilitated by expensive professional HR consultants on the hunt for repeat business. This is EE as exploitation and propaganda, manipulating employees' hopes, fears and ambitions by means of silly games and competitions; derivative, conventional, traditional and unimaginative HR consultancy approaches and processes; entertainment trumping serious organisational inquiry, consideration and

analysis of employees' genuine concerns; and PR exercises concerned more with boosting the employer brand and 'improving' the public image.

- EE can simply gloss over institutional issues that can be correlated with workplace Bullying and Harassment: a sales and target driven culture; generational bullying (a big problem in the British National Health Service - NHS); management corruption, nepotism and favouritism; and highly entrenched and experienced management cliques dismissive of new and/or younger recruits.
- Management who are aware of instances of Bullying and Harassment, but have no wish to endanger their position and their power base, will probably want to limit EE's aims and ambitions, control the content, directly supervise implementation and carefully distill and censor the results.

On a more positive note, I should qualify the above by pointing out that many employees enjoy EE exercises and projects. Nevertheless, the problem remains that there is an inverse relationship between the increasing number of organisations commissioning EE and the increasing reports of workplace Bullying and Harassment. One could argue that the increase in the reporting of Bullying incidents is due, in part, to:

- greater organisational transparency
- better HR infrastructure encouraging employees to report incidents
- improved employee confidence to come forward
- increasing media coverage of workplace Bullying.

However, one of the biggest employee complaints is the lack of action taken by HR in response to allegations made. Yes, there is improved HR infrastructure but there must be an organisational will and determination to tackle and resolve individual reports effectively and take a more robust, pro-active approach in raising awareness. With Bullying and Harassment eating up more of the UK's productivity, organisations implementing EE schemes must consider incorporating methods and techniques that can make inroads into tackling the problem. Failing which, Bullying and Harassment strategies may have to be decoupled from EE projects, encouraging more thought, imagination, innovation and the development of more effective methods of long-term intervention.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AT THE EXPENSE OF ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN AND CHANGE: A RECIPE FOR DISASTER?

A recent report by consulting specialists 'sourceforconsulting.com' indicates that, despite the economic difficulties, organisations' HR consultancy spend was still relatively robust; a closer examination revealing Performance Management (PM) consultancy growing at the expense of organisational design and change management consultancy.⁴ I must confess, on first reading this, I was rather concerned: is HR regressing, rather than moving forward with more innovative and sophisticated methods of employee empowerment, engagement and organisational development interventions? Are we going all retro, returning to grey conference rooms, baroque-sized VCRs, John Cleese 'how to manage' videos, Personnel departments, and other dreaded cultural symbols of the 1980s, an era that heralded Gordon Gecko, Amstrad, Friedmanite economic policies and organisations' obsessive focus on figures and, of course, *performance*? Or, perhaps I'm being cynical and short-sighted, not realising that organisations, in 2010, are facing the most challenging business environment for almost 100 years, galvanising Captains of Industry to urge parsimony in one large and rather unpleasant knee-jerk carrion call - "we must be lean and agile to survive" . We all understand that organisations have to survive the current conditions, and no-one should condone lavish and wasteful spending. Nevertheless, one has to consider how organisations will navigate a post-recession/depression world – are staff sufficiently trained and resourced? Is the organisation structured effectively to accommodate future change and flexibility? Cutting spending on experts who can address these issues in favour of PM consultants is, arguably, not a prescient but an expedient decision. A definition of today's zeitgeist could therefore be: 'better to fund outside help that can develop PM programmes delivering efficient and cogent data on employee productivity, against an oppressive backdrop of potential job losses and pay freezes, ensuring a clear and tangible return on investment on our consultancy spend, rather than waste money on focusing and preparing for the future'. And what about the toxic relationship between PM and workplace Bullying and Harassment? Too much for the first paragraph!! - more on that later.

Performance Management is nothing new; it's been around since the 1980s and, despite necessary evolutionary streamlining and updating, the processes have remained very similar. As a concept it's very simple: all employees' performance - senior and junior - are measured against a set of criteria, commonly referred to as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), to determine individual employee performance,

⁴ Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD), 'Why performance management has survived HR consultancy cull', *People Management*, 28 January 2010, page 12

productivity and contribution to the organisation's strategic aims, objectives and the bottom line. In a nutshell, an effective Performance Management programme should successfully:

- align individual employee performance with the organisation's aims and objectives,
- ensure employees know what they need to do and achieve to contribute successfully and effectively to the business,
- provide relevant, constructive, clear and objective feedback,
- recognise and reward specific incidences of exceptional performance,
- discuss and explore constructive and realistic ideas and solutions to address weaker areas of employee performance,
- inform the employer on individual employee productivity,
- allow the employer to calculate return on investment on individual employees using a cost-benefit analysis - costs can include training & development, for example; benefits are employees' productivity levels,
- improve relationships between employees and line-managers. However, as we shall discuss later, this is a loaded issue.

A number of HR professionals have advocated a more sophisticated and holistic PM programme, linked to the following processes discussed in a recent PM report released by the CIPD⁵:

- Learning and development
- Career development
- Coaching/mentoring
- Succession planning
- Competency frameworks
- Talent Management
- Behaviour management strategies
- Job/work design
- Well-being
- Flexible working
- Occupational Health

The report was lacking on practical guidance on how these processes could realistically be incorporated into an existing PM programme, and the difficulties in correlating with traditional activities such as performance appraisals, target setting, regular review meetings, and 360 degree feedback.

⁵ CIPD (2009) *Performance Management in Action: Current Trends and Practices*. Survey report. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

A rise in Performance Management may lead to problems however. For example:

- Incompetent, insensitive and inconsistent line-management application of PM processes can lead to an increase in allegations of workplace Bullying. Important that line-managers remain objective and professional; expunge latent negative emotions and feelings towards particular employees; avoid gut instinct and focus on evidence; communicate results clearly and constructively; and have a plan of action ready to discuss and explore ideas to improve areas of weak performance.
- Employees may react defensively, denying criticisms levelled at them, believing they are being 'singled out', fuelling further potential allegations of Bullying. Vital that an organisation communicates KPIs clearly and effectively, ensuring employees: fully understand KPI measurement criteria; how and what they need to do to successfully align individual performance with strategic objectives; demonstrate to you, in writing, their full comprehension of the PM process, its scope, and their willingness to co-operate in a constructive, professional and positive manner.
- In the absence of previous PM initiatives, employees may question why their productivity is now being forensically analysed. This could threaten existing bonds of trust and rapport between employees and management, with some employees responding with bewilderment and hostility - this, in turn, could lead to unrest, frustration, anger, collective attempts at sabotaging the PM process, increased employee turnover, deteriorating levels of motivation, and poorer levels of productivity - somewhat ironic considering PM's ostensible *raison d'être* is to rationalise and improve performance levels.
- PM may be used as a tool to dismiss underperformers, with little effort to rectify the situation with extra training and coaching.
- PM is perceived by HR and management as a set of hoops to jump through; in other words, an employer can produce 'evidence' that employees earmarked for redundancy have had their performance objectively assessed, analysed and compared to previously agreed contractual KPIs, pre-empting potential claims for unfair/constructive dismissal. During a downsizing exercise, this can be a thorny issue for staff members over the age of 50, who may feel that PM is a covert exercise in age discrimination.

Nevertheless, programmes and methods of measuring employee performance are essential tools, ensuring a fair, objective, proportionate, and pragmatic approach to calculating reward, extolling recognition, flagging up black-spots of poor performance, and communicating to employees how they are contributing towards their own success and career, and to the success of the business. This is a principal reason, one could argue, for the proliferation of PM consultancy – organisations want to develop successful and effective schemes, addressing the issues listed above.

My main point of concern is that PM consulting should not be promoted at the expense of other areas of HR consultancy. Personally, I don't see how PM, in isolation, can do anything other than *measure* performance; one would have to consider other methods to *drive* performance that can exist alongside, and in conjunction with, an effective PM programme. Organisations must also be mindful of the need to develop and structure the business to not only survive current economic conditions, but thrive when market conditions improve – fertile ground for consultants currently feeling the pinch.

In a somewhat ironic twist, a number of notable HR practitioners, in response to a PM survey conducted by the CIPD, believed that individual employees reap the highest benefits from PM, at the expense of line managers, HR departments and senior managers. However, only 20% of those surveyed believed PM has a positive impact on individual performance; 21% disagreeing; and 59% remaining neutral. Of the same group, 21% believed PM has a positive impact on organisational performance, yet 23% disagreed, and 56% remained neutral – hardly a ringing endorsement from a profession who seem to be favouring a greater uptake of PM consultancy. One could argue, this is related partially to PM's rather pernicious correlation with workplace Bullying and Harassment; Employment Law experts, Pinsent Masons solicitors, have reported an increasing number of Bullying allegations linked to PM.⁶ Again, this may partly explain the rise in PM consultancy: HR want a thorough, robust, objective and fair PM programme designed to pre-empt accusations and allegations of discrimination. This raises a number of issues however:

- One must consider the level of knowledge, expertise and experience the PM consultants have of workplace Bullying and Harassment – are they capable of factoring in the salient issues correlated with previous examples of Bullying and Harassment to create an effective, bespoke PM programme?
- Can PM consultants design a PM programme effectively taking into consideration the unique folds and faultlines of an organisation's culture?
- Do they have sufficient knowledge and experience of interpreting latent, informal cultural signals and symbols potentially impacting on PM effectiveness, incorporating these issues into their design, and pre-empting their emergence during PM discussions and negotiations?
- Can they develop robust, lucid and realistic guidelines for line managers to pro-actively tackle these informal cultural issues?
- On a more general note, is PM, in isolation, *capable* of including a whole range of complex issues correlated with workplace Bullying and Harassment? I doubt it.

⁶ Pinsent Masons. Seminar and Presentation. “Workplace Bullying...”, February 10th 2010, Edinburgh

Considering workplace Bullying and Harassment is costing the UK economy upwards of £14 billion a year, organisations must seriously consider the long-term cost of not exploiting knowledge and expertise of HR professionals who can make a difference in tackling this phenomenon. PM consultants, while important, cannot possibly do it all on their own.

FORUM THEATRE TO THE RESCUE!

I was taken aback recently when confronted by an article that asked the most fundamental of questions: 'Does trust matter?'⁷ One would think that Business Management and HRM thinking has not advanced much in 30 years, if a top journal is asking its readership such a basic question without irony. Of course, the answer must be 'yes'...surely? The article in question was rather vacuous, offering some tepid platitudes such as, 'if your employees don't have faith in your organisation, then why should your customers'; unimaginative, staid and derivative. However, this may speak volumes about the state of HR, if professionals need to be reminded that trust is important; although, something tells me this is not the case. Nevertheless, despite my apprehension of the article's quality, a little case study tacked on at the end saved me from boredom, describing the fascinating application of Forum Theatre by AXA Insurance, a large insurance company, to develop trust between colleagues and customers.⁸

The insurance industry has been mistrusted and castigated by the general public for many years. Indeed, my first job was as a motor and household claims handler, assessing levels of cover, debating liability with policyholders, and negotiating settlements. It was a tough job – many customers were suspicious of insurers, believing their purpose was to collect premiums but not pay out when presented with 'genuine' claims. Many claimants were also of the opinion that insurers lacked understanding and failed to properly empathise with their predicament, polarising opinion further. Discussions with policyholders felt, at times, more like arbitration, rather than negotiation, thus hindering agreement and unnecessarily prolonging final settlement. Trust was a core issue that needed to be addressed, but never really was in a pro-active, imaginative and effective way. How refreshing to see, some 10 years since I left the industry, AXA Insurance using Forum Theatre as a training method to

7 Chartered Institute of Personnel and development (CIPD), 'In whom we trust', *People Management*, 28 January 2010, pp 24-26

8 Chartered Institute of Personnel and development (CIPD), 'How AXA UK created a culture of assurance', *People Management*, 28 January 2010, p 26

cultivate customer empathy. Over a three hour period, mixed teams, including employees who don't normally communicate directly with the public, took calls from actors playing the role of distressed customers affected by a gas explosion. The actors, in character, would then debrief the employees on their levels of empathy, assistance and helpfulness. In this situation, Forum Theatre can:

- provide detailed and objective feedback on employee performance at the sharp-end of the business that can be used in future Theatre sessions, building on what's been learned, and improving customer engagement over the long-term
- be used to impact directly on a customer-facing organisation's core business processes: engaging directly with customers in distress; empathising and understanding their situation; communicating clearly and effectively with them; offering practical step-by-step advice; and making tough decisions
- demonstrate in tangible and visceral terms to staff, who don't normally face the public, the complexities, the difficulties, the stress and the tension that their customers and their customer-facing colleagues have to face each day. This helps in two ways by: 1) developing empathy, understanding, collaboration and trust between a cross-functional group of employees, challenging silo mentalities, and fostering improved, long-term co-operation, communication and productivity; 2) opening a window on customer experience as they deal with the aftermath of a distressing incident, allowing the organisation to witness, at first hand, the realities faced by their customer-base, cultivating closer, more emotional ties, with customers, and encouraging a more empathic and customer-focused employee behavioural strategy that can be cascaded throughout the entire organisation.

What surprised me, however, was a lack of customer involvement in the initiative. Customers could have provided first-hand accounts of their experiences dealing with AXA, contributing their own, perhaps more realistic and accurate, feedback, suggestions and ideas for improvement during the Forum Theatre sessions. Direct customer involvement would have allowed direct, face to face engagement with employees in a creative, positive and constructive environment, further engendering trust.