

Kings or cousins?

In the first of a regular series of articles taking a sideways look at the practical aspects of modern management, Dr Leandro Herrero discusses the trade-off between tyrannical hierarchies and the benign dictatorship of 'teamocracies'.

Hierarchical business structures are a thing of the past. Their tyranny has long been declared managerially unacceptable and incorrect. Command and control may be good for the army, but not for the boardroom.

The oppression of the structural, top-down, boss-at-the-top pyramid has been replaced by a flat, horizontal organisation. The pyramid has been transformed into a pancake in which de-layered flatness has been designated the correct organisation for the 21st century. People are told that moves will be lateral and ladders to climb scarce. The new structure has established itself with additional qualifications: good for business, good for empowerment, good for flexibility, good for people (particularly the ones who don't like generals), lean and mean and, above all, aesthetically clean and politically correct.

But grouping of people has not disappeared with the death of the top-down hierarchy. On the contrary, flatness is fertile ground for breeding teams. In the pancake, teams find a natural, more relaxed culture in which to grow. Multidisciplinary teams (and the inevitable 'matrix') formed from people from all corners, are now standard.

The 'team' label has its magic. It easily leads to the legitimisation of the activities of its members. 'Team spirit', 'team culture', 'team atmosphere' and 'teamwork' have been declared organisational benchmarks. Their simple existence in the organisation validates the enterprise.

Most of the teamwork philosophy is largely based on organisational and behavioural premises of the type, 'people perform better when they are not told what to do in an authoritarian way, when they work together with others, when they are empowered.' Teams are supposed to bring out the best in people, and solve problems that cannot be solved individually. (And this is true, although only half of the truth. There are proven areas where the team's



ability to solve problems is worse than that of individuals.)

I am taking a historical liberty here. Progressively, although admittedly not universally, teamwork has grown closer and closer to consensus work ('one team', 'one voice', 'allowed to disagree, but once we have agreed on something, everybody must rally'). Teamwork also plays some sort of convergent game with democratic values, which we all embrace. Teams, democracy, consensus, togetherness, rejection of despotism, 'one voice', collaboration, participation and so on, are all different things, but they also get on happily together in the same organisational playground. Progressively the conceptual borders disappear and suddenly one finds oneself talking about democratic forms of management as an inevitable marriage.

As with the hierarchical organisation and its limitations, there is plenty of literature on how teams are limited. But compared with the organisational pyramids, far less attention has been paid by management to the shortcomings of the pancake and its teams. There is plenty of research on 'groupthink', for example, a group phe-

nomenon characterised by 'progressive convergence towards an average resolution...'. In groupthink, 'pressure on individual members to conform and reach consensus means that minority or unpopular ideas may be suppressed; members who oppose the group are stereotyped as evil, weak or stupid; the search for group consensus can result in rationalisation by members to discount warnings and to create an illusion of unanimity¹.' Groupthink, as an example of group dysfunctionality, has little room in any Master of Business Administration curriculum.

Today, the team-model is simply taken for granted. But we have all seen how team consensus often leads to the adoption of lowest common denominator decisions and policies, in which mediocrity is legitimised. Entire corporate cultures have espoused consensus as their core value, giving them the feel and smell of democracies. The question is whether the democratic model, the best one we have to ensure representation and fairness in the pursuit of public life, has anything at all to do with business management. (Political correctness has never been my forte.)

A more serious set of questions might be: Are professionals more free in the team-pancake? Have all the tyrants disappeared together with their ugly pyramids and hierarchies? Are the new structures a better platform for drawing the best out of people? Once liberated from the authoritarian command, are people now performing with fewer barriers, no dictators and the borrowed (from political society) bonus of democracy?

Perhaps one can answer these questions by learning from history and cultural anthropology. In his magnificent book, *Conditions of Liberty*², published a year before his death, Ernest Gellner, former Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, described something which in my opinion is of great value to management. 'Traditional man can sometimes escape the tyranny of kings, but only at the cost of falling under the tyranny of cousins, and of ritual... Roughly, the general sociological law of agrarian society states that man must be subject to either kings or cousins, though quite often, of course, he is subject to both.' The king is dead, God save the king! But this does not mean freedom – other forms of dependence take over. For example, the submission to the control of kinship, of social sub-groups, networks of power, Mafia-like organisations, etc.

We in business management are far removed from an agrarian environment, but it is intriguing how the idea may still hold. The kings have long gone from our business structures. Power is devolved down to the teams (we have empowered them). But there are plenty of cousins around: project leaders, influential team members, functional prima donnas, refugees from the old regime now embracing empowerment beliefs. Glory to the team and to the trade-off between dictatorship from above and dictatorship from the sides. Sure, the benign dictatorship of our teamocracies may be more acceptable but, at the end of the day, is it just a choice between kings or cousins?

It is fascinating that we should still have a romantic view of teams and that we give them so much power. Teams are, to me, a sort of 'Cité Antique' of modern management. Let me explain. Gellner quotes a French author, Fustel de Coulanges, who in 1864 wrote *La Cité Antique*³ (The Old City) in which he challenged the romantic view that the Greek or Roman cities were the quintessence of freedom for the individual.

De Coulanges wrote: 'The (old) City had been founded on a religion, constituted as a Church. Hence the omnipotence and absolute power exercised over its members. Within a society based upon such principles, individual freedom could not exist. The citizen was subjugated in every aspect and without reservation to the City... Private life could not escape the omnipotence of the State (the City) that exercised its tyranny even in the smallest of things.'

It has happened before. Renaissance man admired the classics, their literature, philosophy and art. Greek culture became the new cult. It is still there today in some form, among us, as a 'package': great ideas, great philosophers, great institutions, great origins of our beloved democracy, great beauty, and great time. But it is important to put things in perspective, as Harvey Yunis, an author and professor of Classics, does in a recent *Wall Street Journal* review of a new book, *The Greek Achievement*⁴.

The main problem with management (perpetuated by management education) is the widespread lack of interest in the social sciences

He says: 'Contemporary methods of history, in fact, have cast ancient Greek society in a new light. We have learned about such mundane things as Greek farming and trade, but we have also learned about slavery among the Greeks, their social elitism and economic inequities, the roles to which they rigidly confined the sexes, the brutality and frequency of their wars, the irrational, primitive, superstitious features of their religion, and the cultural debts to the ancient Near East.'

In years to come, when somebody writes about the social anthropology of our team-structures in the pre- and peri-silicon-dotcom era, a similar truth may come to light. Just as people have glorified the 'Old City' before, we may also have glorified teamocracies. Flat structures and teams are our 'Management Cité Antique'. We could be trapped into thinking that, perhaps, almost everything was wrong before, and almost everything is good now.

The main problem with management (perpetuated by management education) is the widespread lack of interest in the social sciences. Our literature on teams is largely a 'how to' one: what to do, how to structure, things that work, things that don't work. 'Why?' is an unwelcome word. However, it is impossible to understand what's going on in team-organisations without some knowledge and interpretation

of the dynamics between individuals: no apologies for calling this social psychology. Don't look for it in modern management guru literature. This again is a 'how to' approach, in most cases purely journalistic, a description of facts and anecdotes, a report on modern heroes (please, not another reference to Branson), a compromising promenade without depth.

Teamocracy is here to stay. The trouble with teamocracies is that they contain new forms of authoritarianism, intellectual bullying, lack of trust, hidden command and control and team terrorism. These forms emerge and are accepted under the legitimacy of 'we-as-a-team', but they may be as freedom-empty as the old bureaucracies.

I confess: given a trade-off, I would choose cousins. The benign dictatorship of a newly appointed international project leader may be an acceptable alternative to the old autocratic divisional prima donna. The team-citizen is probably better off than the trooper accustomed to marching orders.

But the acknowledgment of the trade-off may just be the beginning of understanding the mechanisms that govern our nine-to-five world. This world is not about vision and missions, and detailed, top-down percolated strategic plans. It is about exercise of power and control, about dynamics of authority and boundaries, about motivation and gratification. It is about employees' self-realisation and satisfaction. This is real life in business organisations, as any employee will tell you. That does not mean that the collective sense of purpose has no place. On the contrary, that is the glue of the enterprise and should come from the leaders. But to be effective as a leader one has to understand the plain and simple ground mechanisms in meeting rooms, the ones impossible to see from 35,000 feet. Bad news: the answer is not in Tom Peters, but in Plato. And you should consider hiring an anthropologist. 

References

1. L.J. Mullins, *Management and organisation behaviour*, 1996. See also, J. L. Janis, *Groupthink*, 1982.
2. E. Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty; Civil society and its rivals*, 1994.
3. F. de Coulanges, *La Cité Antique*, Paris, 1864. Reprinted 1967. Quoted by Ernest Gellner. My own liberal translation.
4. C. Freeman, *The Greek Achievement*, 1999.

•Dr Herrero, who has wide experience of management in the international pharmaceutical industry, will be contributing a regular column to Scrip Magazine.