

# Facilitating Professional Engagement

A response to John Scott's discussion paper: *Beyond Compliance*

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## The Context:

The lack of professional engagement identified in John Scott's paper is by no means peculiar to the Power sector – in my experience, it manifests across the complete spectrum of organisational activity from private to public; from plc to charitable. Perhaps this is of less surprise if one considers the contribution that human nature makes, as I will attempt to demonstrate.

## The Horizontal Communication Gap

JS confirms that there is a lack of horizontal working across the sector. This relates to the absence of horizontal communication that I have found and experienced in organisations generally (no communication – no work). There is little doubt that the structures imposed on work impede horizontal communication whilst promoting a vertical, or hierarchical flow. These structures are the legal, regulatory, commercial and standards that JS describes. They are in place to facilitate a predictable and desirable outcome to all activity (the motorway journey).

These structures – the Business Framework – are incapable of dealing with anything other than linear, logical and deterministic behaviour. And when all work activity is made subservient to these strictures, anything non-linear, unpredictable or spontaneous finds it difficult to survive. Regrettably, this includes a large chunk of human behaviour – particularly that associated with creativity and innovation.

And it doesn't just stop there. In extreme circumstances – i.e. when the driver for results is so strong - the structures tend to affect vertical communication as well, filtering and modifying any information that does not fit with the desired outcomes. Shell was a recent victim of this phenomenon when it over-stated its reserves.

## Balancing the Opposites

In assessing human and organisational behaviours, drivers and objectives, we tend to expose a number of apparent polar opposites – factors that appear not to sit well together – e.g. Business Frameworks and Horizontal Communication. They seem mutually exclusive<sup>2</sup> and in opposition to each other:

Hierarchy	Network
Reason	Intuition/Feeling
Structure	Emergence
Profit	Meaning
Authority	Trust
Employment	Engagement
Order	Chaos <sup>1</sup>
Determinism	Creativity/innovation
Predictability	Spontaneity
Machine	Organism

Now to many eyes, the left hand column of organisational attributes looks like the Holy Grail. In practice, in isolation, it becomes a poison chalice, for the simple reason that both the constituents of any organisation, and its environment, have elements of the right-hand column. Put another way, organisations consist of people, and they have to interact with people. So to suppose that an organisation can behave like a machine, and only like a machine, is pure folly.

The need for balance between these opposites is best demonstrated by considering the effect of taking either Order or Chaos to their limits. It is easy to imagine the effects of pure chaos on an organisation. But pure order is equally debilitating - both result in stasis and death.

Both poles are hypothetical – no organisation exists at either extreme. But today's economic environment, driven by the need for short-term ROI, tends to push us towards the left.

The challenge, as I see it, is to find a way of balancing these opposites and allowing them to co-exist.

### **Netting the Hierarchy**

The need for horizontal communication is well stated by John Scott. It corresponds to Network in the right-hand column of the table above. And with its facilitation come the other factors listed with it – creativity, meaning, emergence – even chaos<sup>1</sup>! But all of these counter-balanced by their other polarities.

To introduce or develop networking into an organisation, or across organisations, requires 3 elements:

- Independence from the hierarchy
- Trust
- Quality of communication

To work, the network has to be able to evolve and emerge independently of the hierarchy. Although its objectives are identical (the benefit of the organisation) its process is quite different.

Trust is required by all, since the network is un-predictable and may appear chaotic at times. Its behaviour will not confirm to the same rules that govern hierarchies.

The quality of communication is paramount and coaching is required to enable the kind of conversation to take place that promotes emergence and innovation – without knowing where it may lead.

The simplified process of creating a network or *Netting the Hierarchy* is as follows:

- Explain the approach to all parties – ensure management has 'bought in'
- Identify 'nodes' – individuals acting as 'attractors' for communication
- Provide channels of communication – supported by technology as required
- Coach individuals in 'open conversation'
- Monitor and assess what happens and how it happens

In contrast to the Hierarchy, the Network has few rules, few expectations – it is more process-driven than outcome-driven. The network itself has no hierarchy – it is a network of equals. For that reason, any hierarchical seniority that an individual may carry has no bearing within the network.

It is also important to remove any concept of good and bad here. Hierarchies are crucial to healthy organisations, just as networks are. As Arthur Battram puts it: you want a hierarchy to put out a raging fire, not a network.

### **Extending the Motorway Metaphor**

A fitting analogy to the process of getting the organisation from where it is to where we want it to be, this metaphor can be extended: What if the alternative red path on John Scott's diagram leads not to B but a second destination, C? And what if this destination actually benefits the company more than B – even though it was never envisaged?

An example of this can be seen at [www.1limited.com](http://www.1limited.com) where the Helimorph actuator, initially developed to drive a loudspeaker, has now ended up focussing lenses in mobile phone cameras.

This is emergent behaviour (from the right-hand column of the table) which networks are rather good at promoting, in contrast to hierarchies that tend to suppress it.

### **Professional Engagement**

Let's go back to the table of polarities above.

Notice that the factors in the left hand column can in large part be measured – those in the right-hand column can't be.

Notice also that the factors in the right-hand column can't be constructed – they can't be *done* – rather they tend to emerge when the conditions are right.

So how do we create this Professional Engagement? JS rightly refers to *facilitation* in this respect – literally, making it easy - or in other words creating the conditions for engagement to thrive.

My experience in facilitating engagement suggests that the catalyst enabling this to happen is quality of communication. In practice, this means conversations in which people express their authentic ideas and feelings, in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, free from the fear of repercussion. This is the type of communication that hierarchies tend to impede.

### **Elephants under the Table**

Interestingly, these conversations take place anyway even in the most hierarchical of organisations – but rather than in meeting and board rooms, they occur in the car park or by the photocopier, in cliques. The cliques provide the safe environment for free expression to take place – sometimes referred to as gossip. But no larger forum is available for common issues to be addressed. So the formation of cliques becomes fragmentary and tends to work in opposition to the hierarchy.

Over time, a number of issues build up that are never broached in open forum, even though everyone knows they exist. I call these 'Elephants under the Table'.

### **Professional Engagement in other Industries**

The Digital Broadcast sector provides a good example of horizontal working. The joint development of new technologies has created collaboration between arch-competitors such as Sony and Philips, BBC and Sky. It has buy-in from government and the regulatory bodies. The level of Professional Engagement led one senior industry figure to state that he attends meetings for the joy of them, rather than any actual requirement!

However, it is important to acknowledge in this case that a compelling need for collaboration is evident to all parties. An example is the ongoing move to wide-screen technology.

Compatibility and standards issues have forced competitors to work together for the greater good.

A clear case for horizontal working may not be so palpable in all industries and this is where networking is just as important to identify where the common good lies, beyond the short-term goals of individual companies.

An example of this type – where objectives emerge from the network – is to be found in distribution chains. Very often, distributors acting on behalf of a supplier are not actively encouraged to communicate horizontally by the supplier. There is no obvious need to do so. In fact the supplier may even fear, for example, that discrepancies in discount structures between distributors could lead to conflict if they were common knowledge.

More enlightened suppliers realise that the intelligence and creativity latent in the distribution chain is best released by bringing it all together and allowing ideas and directions to emerge from unstructured, horizontal communication. They therefore hold regular distributor meetings where delegates are encouraged to mix and socialise as well as present and feedback. Invariably, these get-togethers are vibrant and engaging affairs where a lot of creative energy can be translated into productive initiatives.

## Summary

To allow Professional Engagement to take root, we need to restore some balance between Structured and Emergent behaviour, as exemplified by the left and right hand columns of the table.

We do this with horizontal communication, enabled by a network that operates independently of the hierarchy.

If the network is properly seeded, it will evolve and begin to contribute to the workings of the organisation. Tensions will emerge between network and hierarchy that can provide a catalyst for change.

The less structured communication afforded by the network appeals to the creative side that we all have – and without creativity, adaptation is impeded and change becomes impossible.

## Notes

- 1 the word Chaos is emotive. In this context I refer to lack of organisation. Rather than *disorganisation*, *un-organisation* may be the best synonym.
- 2 The best place to see these 'opposites' working together is in a family.