

The Hole in the Soul of Business

by Gary Hamel, Professor of Management, London School of Business, Wall Street Journal, December 16th, 2009

I'm a big fan of New Yorker cartoons. There's usually at least one in every issue that provokes a wry smile or a wince of self-recognition. While I've never actually participated in the magazine's weekly caption competition, I occasionally gin up a prospective entry. Last week, the contest featured a drawing of a couple sitting in a living room. The husband (perhaps?) was perusing a newspaper on the sofa while his wife lounged in a nearby armchair. She was a mermaid-naked from the waist up, her large flipper resting demurely on the floor. With her head angled towards her companion and her mouth open in mid-sentence, I imagined her to be saying: "After ten years, I think you could have learned to scuba dive," or "Hiking in the Alps again? I thought we could take a beach holiday this year."

One of my favorite New Yorker cartoons shows an office worker slumped against the wall, clutching his chest. As worried colleagues rush to aid the stricken employee, he mumbles: "Don't worry, it was just a fleeting sense of purpose."

These sardonic portraits of the human condition resonate with us because they capture something deep and true. The mermaid-out-of-water speaks to the challenges of mutual accommodation that confront any couple in a long-term relationship, while the temporarily and implausibly ardent employee reminds us that the typical corporate office is an emotional vacuum chamber. I can't offer you any insights if you're trying to synch up with your partner, but I do have a few observations about the paucity of purpose in the average corporation.

In my last post, I cited a survey that found that only 20% of employees are truly engaged in their work - heart and soul. As a student of management, I'm depressed by the fact that so many people find work depressing.

In the study, respondents laid much of the blame for their lassitude on uncommunicative and egocentric managers, but I wonder if there's not some deeper organizational reality that bleeds the vitality and enthusiasm out of people at work.

Here's an experiment for you. Pull together your company's latest annual report, its mission statement, and your CEOs last few blog posts. Read through these documents and note the key phrases. Make a list of oft-repeated words. Now do a little content analysis. What are the goals and ideas that get a lot of airtime in your company? It's probably notions like superiority, advantage, leadership, differentiation, value, focus, discipline, accountability, and efficiency. Nothing wrong with this, but do these goals quicken your pulse? Do they speak to your heart? Are they "good" in any cosmic sense?

Now think about Michelangelo, Galileo, Jefferson, Gandhi, William Wilberforce. Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa. What were the ideals that inspired these individuals to acts of greatness? Was it anything on your list of commercial values? Probably not. Remarkable contributions are typically spawned by a passionate commitment to transcendent values such as beauty, truth, wisdom, justice, charity, fidelity, joy, courage and honor.

I talk to a lot of CEOs, and every one professes a commitment to building a "high performance" organization-but is this really possible if the core values of the corporation are venal rather than venerable? I think not. And that's why humanizing the language and practice of management is a business imperative (as well as a moral duty).

A noble purpose inspires sacrifice, stimulates innovation and encourages perseverance. In so doing, it transforms great talent into exceptional accomplishment. That's a fact-and it leaves me wondering: Why are words like "love," "devotion" and "honor" so seldom heard within the halls of corporate-dom? Why are the ideals that matter most to human beings the ones that are most notably absent in managerial discourse?

John Mackey, the co-founder of Whole Foods Markets, once remarked that he wanted to build a company based on love instead of fear. Mackey's not a utopian idealist, and his unflinching libertarian views are off-putting to some. Yet few would argue with the goal of creating an organization that embodies the values of trust, generosity and forbearance. Yet a gut-level commitment to building an organization infused with the spirit of charity is far more radical and weird than it might appear.

If you doubt that, here's another experiment. The next time you're stuck in a corporate staff meeting, wait until everyone's eyes have begun to glaze over from PowerPoint fatigue and then get up and announce that what your company really needs is a lot more luuuuuuv. When addressing a large group of managers, I often challenge them to stand up for love (or beauty or justice or truth) in just this way. "When you get back to work, tell your boss your company has a love deficit." This suggestion invariably provokes a wave of nervous laughter, which has always struck me as a bit strange. Why is it that managers are so willing to acknowledge the idea of a company dedicated to timeless human values and yet so unwilling to become practical advocates for those values within their own organizations? I have a hunch. I think corporate life is so manifestly inhuman-so mechanical, mundane and materialistic-that any attempt to inject a spiritual note into the overtly secular proceedings just feels wildly out of place-the workplace equivalent of reading a Bible in a brothel.

Again, there's nothing wrong with utilitarian values like profit, advantage and efficiency, but they lack nobility. Reflect for a moment on the avarice and irresponsibility that produced the recent banking crisis, and wreaked havoc at

Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia and a host of other scandal-plagued companies. If corporate leaders and their acolytes are not slaves to some meritorious social purpose, they run the risk of being enslaved by their own ignoble appetites. An uplifting sense of purpose is more than an impetus for individual accomplishment, it is also a necessary insurance policy against expediency and impropriety.

Every organization is "values-driven." The only question is, what values are in the driver's seat?

There was a time when Disney was in the joy business. Animators, theme park employees and executives were united in their quest to wring gasps of wonderment and delight from children across the globe. Today, Apple is in the beauty business. It uses its prodigious software and design talents to produce products and services that are aesthetic stand-outs. There are many within Google who believe their company is in the wisdom business, who talk about raising the world's IQ, democratizing knowledge and empowering people with information. Sadly, though, this kind of dedication to big-hearted goals and high-minded ideals is all too rare in business. Nevertheless, I believe that long-lasting success, both personal and corporate, stems from an allegiance to the sublime and the majestic.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist, held a similar view, which he expressed forcefully in "Man's Search for Meaning:" "For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended consequence of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself . . ."

Which brings me back to my worry. Given all this, why is the language of business so sterile, so uninspiring and so relentlessly banal? Is it because business is the province of engineers and economists rather than artists and theologians? Is it because the emphasis on rationality and pragmatism squashes idealism? I'm not sure. But I know this—customers, investors, taxpayers and policymakers believe there's a hole in the soul of business. The only way for managers to change this fact, and regain the moral high ground, is to embrace what Socrates called the good, the just and the beautiful.

So, dear reader, a couple of questions for you: Why do you believe the language of beauty, love, justice and service is so notably absent in the corporate realm? And what would you do to remedy that fact?