

This is not about a romcom although corporate life is not short of comedians – just not the sort that would make you laugh out loud.

As everybody knows, working with other people is complicated. Occasionally, we do hear stories about a cosy “Volksheim” atmosphere in teams or offices (to borrow a term from a Sweden past) but often this turns out to be a civil service office or a holed-up team. In many other cases, cooperation remains trickier.

What defines us as parts of an organisation, as colleagues, managers and reports?

I would argue that criteria of the first order are character and personality, education and experience – all measured by relevance and depth. These criteria are about genuine attributes. Hierarchical standing and compensation are proxies at best and often unreliable indicators. They are transitory by nature and loaned to the individual by the organisation akin to uniform and rank in the military. It always helps to picture people without their hallmarks of power.

“There are two kinds of people, those who do the work and those who take the credit. Try to be in the first group; there is less competition there.”

Advice from Motilal Nehru to his granddaughter Indira Gandhi née Nehru

Some may say that the value of education and even experience fades over time and those factors become less relevant. To me that sounds like saying that an old hammer becomes less useful as a tool just because of time passing. That is what education and subsequent experience are – tools for new thoughts and actions. They do not become dull or obsolete but simply more elaborate. Those are the fertile grounds for an adapting mind. Friedrich Engels once wrote that the human hand was not only the tool for work but also its product. The same goes for the human mind where wrinkles are coveted. Unlike inanimate things, the mind constantly renews and does not really decay before late in life – even if we all seem to know some exceptions in our family or work environments.

If we consider the value added to an organisation as a product of three main factors, these could be (i) formal knowledge; (ii) the ingenuity or creativity to develop and apply such knowledge; and (iii) finally the attitude in doing so along with – importantly – interacting with others in the organisation. These ought to be the building blocks for valuing people and evaluating their contribution.

The hardest to assess is the softest to measure – attitude

There is a plethora of factors:

People are a difficult and precarious asset to manage as they are but misplacing them in an organisation makes it much worse. We remember the Peter principle which describes the phenomenon of managers being promoted up to their individual level of incompetence but then not taken down or downsized in their area of responsibility. There is also the habit of appointing people to positions not because of what they know and can

do but precisely because of what they are not and cannot do. The ulterior motive behind this is often the career interest of the person's boss fearing to be eclipsed and eventually replaced. Only proximity to retirement or an unassailable position as owner or shareholder may get the company's interests – as opposed to the selfish career interest – back into play – beyond the necessary fig leaf that is. Not in every case is the cause genuine fear for one's position. Delusion about own grandeur is never 100%, the occasional Trumpian aside. There is almost always the nagging little self-doubt somewhere but around this, a strong and genuine belief that the personal interest and the interest of the organisation are not only broadly congruent but identical can regularly be observed.

There is no cure but there is therapy

So, how to solve or reconcile this while preserving motivation? First, hire the best people and pay them well. Getting pay off the radar was once a fashionable piece of advice – but that was at a time when the radar screen of compensation was considerably smaller in scale.

With philosophers being few and far between in the corporate ranks, there is no complete cure, but there is therapy. Devolution is one of the key ingredients; people should be given as much responsibility in their work and in their own and their colleagues' contribution, for example in the guise of process revisions and checks for improvements in their daily work and general setup – remember the "Andon cord" first devised in the Toyota Production System – it can also be applied figuratively. Such process is far more effective than anything which an internal – let alone external – auditor could do.

As far as evaluation is concerned, devolution is useful but cannot be left on its own. The gap between the ideal and the real worlds needs to be filled with some checks and balances. These need to be effective without being obtrusive. Forget the often self-serving remuneration committees for boards which have become a byword for being in

cahoots with each other for mutual but not the common benefit.

Along the process design, it can be useful to keep own weaknesses in mind and take the same approach as a team of engineers designing a security system asking themselves what they would do to circumvent or break it. This is not ill-meaning but just reasonable and conducive.

Teamwork makes the dream work – or does it?

When the general theme is to collaborate as it should be in observance of lessons gleaned from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and when in an ever more complex world specialisation is important, teamwork is often given as answer and sermon for the office mass. But whose dream exactly would that be? Also, can AI be my team – complementary or exclusive? To be clear, I do not want to be seen as disparaging teamwork. I am however observant of reality and sometimes the wine gets clearer with water poured in. Start with Adam Smith: his lesson for productivity gains was not about unstructured teamwork as such but about collaboration as in coordinated and clearly defined cooperative work. The aim cannot be to create the largest possible overlap, which clearly be inefficient. If double-checking is needed in certain elements of a workflow for some reason, this should be a defined and well-reasoned exception.

To be both productive and effective as a team, several conditions must be met:

1. Clear definition of the team's task and the required skillset;
2. Adequate composition of the team to represent the identified skillset;
3. Balancing of the team using personalities for an effect – reinforcing the depth of the discussion and avoiding frustration, neither cancelling each other out nor descending into group think.

Diversity is often brandished as the all-important ingredient but if we suppose for a

moment that we are past peak woke, does diversity matter? It matters greatly but only diversity of minds. Other criteria substantially only have relevance in so far as these are proxies for the diversity of minds.

From task and composition, derive the work schedule and substance for any team to be captured in

- a working order;
- a finer breakdown into microtasks and their distribution
- rules of procedure

These are important because working together does not mean duplication, free-riding or group think, which are all common side effects of teamwork as ordained. The French philosopher Julia de Funès has been examining changes in the work environment. She observes a slide into egalitarianism preventing the recognition of different abilities and competencies and believes that this is perilous for organisations and society at large.²

Instead of teamwork, I prefer to describe coordinated co-work and mutual but anchored participation towards a common task as **crew work**. Everybody have their clear function as a starting point, may transgress by discussing thoughts and their interaction with others but never get unhinged from their field of origin – fertilisation is desired, abandonment or leaving topics in orphanage is not.

This can only be a general and incomplete conceptualisation. Do contact me for the discussion of more elaborate analyses and expression.

¹ Friedrich Engels, Der Anteil der Arbeit an der Menschwerdung des Affen, 1896, printed in MEW 20, S.

² See for instance [Wie sich die Bedeutung der Arbeit im Leben der Menschen verändert – Daily Ninja](#)

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