SPIRIT OF THE ORGANIZATION: HUMAN OR NO HUMAN

Perhaps the most productive organizational environment would exist if humans could leave their “spirits” at home and enter the workplace as mere automatons. Without the hang-ups of external emotional turmoil, employees could perform unhindered and independent of supervision. In this organization, the physical environment should be completely bland. Colorful or enlightening artifacts would only be a distraction from the task at hand. The structure of this organization should be purely hierarchical. However, managerial staff would never have to waste time nurturing their staff. Management would be free to design and implement strategic plans to meet the goals of the institution – without interruption. At the end of the day, each individual would leave their work at the workplace and go home to be rejoined by their “spirits”.

Unfortunately, the human spirit is not separable from the being. Everything that a person has endured up until the day they enter the workplace, and then everything endured after is contained within the spirit. The spirit of the human is the core of our humanity; housed within is the intangible maelstrom of affective attributes that defines our individuality. There is no question as to whether or not this spirit exists within each individual – it simply does. However, it is possible for an organization to operate with an apparent disregard for the human and the spirit within.

An excellent example of this type of uncaring organization is the United States Postal Service. The physical environment inside a post office is gray and drab. Absent are visual stimuli that might simply be aesthetically pleasing. Clerks stand at their stations for eight hours without being rewarded by a cushioned seat to sit on between
customers. Carriers sort their mail in skeletal cubicles housed within an area that resembles a warehouse-docking bay.

Each morning the manager prints off a report that shows, in detail, exactly how a carrier should complete their route. This computer program does not account for the weather, type of mail, or obviously, the carrier’s emotional state. If the carrier does not meet the expectations of the computer report, then they are reprimanded and automatically assumed to be lazy or inept. If the carrier delivers their route ahead of schedule then they become responsible for helping the slower carriers complete their routes. This model enables the truly lazy or inept to persist by taking advantage of the diligent. However, why would the slower carriers want to speed up when there is no incentive whatsoever for good performance?

When a postal employee reaches their thirtieth year of service they are presented with a letter and a stickpin. When a postal employee reaches their fifteenth consecutive year with no accidents they are presented with a letter and a stickpin. When that same employee accumulates 2500 hours of sick leave, saving the USPS thousands of dollars, he/she is rewarded with a letter and a stickpin.

The hierarchical structure of the USPS divides the organization into two distinct entities: management and craft. There is a constant battle being waged between the administrative policy makers and the union represented employees. This results in a confrontational organization that shows no trust for the workers while the workers always assume their rights are being challenged by management. Occasionally there are attempts to bridge the gap between the warring sectors with the institution of initiatives that ask for the opinions of employees. However, the employees already feel that nothing
they say will change a thing. And even if they do participate, an upper authority inevitably creates a rule that instantly squelches the entire effort. All attempts at embracing contemporary organizational theories fail within the rigid walls of old-world logic.

As horrible as it may sound, we need to have organizations like the USPS to show the rest of us how things should not be done. There is more to life than the product of our efforts. I believe that a true measurement of an organization’s success is the overall contentedness of the individuals who make up that organization. An organization cannot sustain itself without productivity. However, productivity should be a by-product of a well-nurtured staff. If the organization cannot make profits while taking care of its own employees, then it is the product that is flawed, not the producers of the goods.

Although Google is not a perfect company (no organization can be perfect), they obviously realize the importance of nurturing their employees. Google provides countless amenities to their staff. During a break, employees are encouraged to stop off in a lounge to play some video games or ping-pong. The brown-bag lunch is a thing of the past at Google because they serve their employees three gourmet meals per day, completely free of charge. Stress inhibits productivity. Therefore, Google offers their staff in-house massages, yoga classes, time management seminars, and access to a full size swimming pool and exercise facility. Furthermore, a requirement of working for Google is that employees must spend at least 10% of their workday *not working*, but rather thinking about new ways to improve some aspect of the Google machine.

Granted, Google is a private company that generates billions of dollars in revenues. However, small and large organizations alike could stand to learn a lot from
Google’s example. Google spends large amounts of money on their staff that could otherwise have been realized profits. Yet they know that their extraordinary profit margins are a direct result of the time and money that they re-invest into their staff.

The benefits go far beyond just monetary gains. Google has built a reputation in the global community for being a nurturing organization, and therefore receives over 1500 applications a day from would-be Googlers. The best and brightest are attracted to Google, so Google never needs to spend energy on recruitment. A mathematical model representing Google’s commitment to their employees might look like this: “A happy employee = a more creative employee = a more productive employee = a more loyal employee = better sales” (source: http://www.brandingbuzz.com/).

The USPS and Google stand in stark contrast as an old world behemoth and a new school goliath, respectively. To some, Google may just appear to be an over-ambitious company unscrupulously hoarding the best thinkers in the field to their compound of self-indulgence. That may very well be true. But that is not my concern. What I see is an organization that is well aware of the benefits of nurturing the human spirit. While the USPS gets the job done (most of the time), their disregard for the human spirit has won them the trade mark label of all disgruntled employee killing sprees: “going postal”. Congratulations. But no, I can’t let Google off the hook that easy. Being in the limelight, Google has attracted their fair share of negative publicity. Stop by FuckedGoogle and have a look: http://www.fuckedgoogle.com/. As I have stated previously: there are no perfect organizations.

The physical environment, structure of the organization, and human spirit affect one another in a cyclical pattern. For example, a well structured organization that
nurthes its employees has positive employees who will likely decorate their physical environment with aesthetically pleasing artifacts. Another example: an aesthetically pleasing physical environment is uplifting to the human spirit and positively affects interactions within the structure of the organization. A final example: management who empathize with and care for their colleagues can successfully produce results within a flat or hierarchical structure whereby the layout of the workspace will be a positive reflection of the organization’s success.

A pleasing physical environment should be just that. Employees who work in cubicles should be allowed to decorate to their heart’s desire. Office walls should be decorated with works of art, not just flowcharts and dry-erase boards. A physically comfortable work station is imperative – if an employee is on their feet all day, then they should have supportive padding on the ground rather than cement. The spirit within the human is positively affected by these seemingly simple environmental constructs. In other words, an enjoyable workspace makes a person happy.

The structure of an organization can vary just as much as the goods produced from organization to organization. Whether hierarchical or flat, it is important that the individuals in the organizational chart are all acknowledged for their contribution to the whole. From upper management to janitorial staff, all employees must be provided with the opportunity to develop as human beings, as well as professionally. Rewards should be given (in the form of money, extra leave, special projects, etc.) for a job well done. Employees should be encouraged to have fun and actually enjoy their jobs. If the organizational structure caters to the human spirit for contentedness, then an employee is being well nurtured.
In order for the ultimate organizational structure and environment to exist, all members of the organization must focus on nurturing the human spirit. This concept is really quite simple. All we have to do is be mindful of others and strive to make people happy. There are rotten spirits in the world that have not been nurtured by family, co-workers, or society as a whole. However, there are just as many good natured spirits that exist. Those with healthy, happy spirits must take it upon themselves to share the nurturing that they have received. As a result, an organization will eventually thrive, and perhaps one or two broken spirits will be mended along the way.