

Chapter 9: Action

You may be reading this book with a particular people-management problem in mind. If so, you need to watch that you do not jump to conclusions about what is needed. Organisations are littered with managers who instinctively knew how a problem ought to be resolved, and who are now anxiously trying to clear up the mess before they can be identified as responsible.

Hence it is essential to think through an apparent problem to its real causes before action is taken. This is sometimes easier for someone who is not already involved and has preconceptions which may be misleading; that can be a good reason for getting in outside consultants, or at least a fresh light on the problem from a colleague elsewhere in the organisation.

What sort of new things might you do to reflect what this book shows? You might try using formal management techniques rather more, and relying less on instinct and “common sense”. A key one might be getting your staff to fill in anonymous questionnaires: understanding how your staff really feel about their work, their colleagues and you can be a bit scary, but they will give you credit for your courage in doing it, and it can be very powerful when it comes to working out how to motivate them.

However, be careful. Surveys can have some serious shortcomings. A substantial study in 2010 of how people filled in screen-based surveys found that 6% of respondents made, after they had started on the questionnaire, unconvincing changes to opinions they had given earlier, while 46% clicked through at least some parts of the form at a questionably fast rate, and 3% even changed their reported age. They also found that people with these suspicious behaviours also tended to give answers that did not match

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information got by another route²³⁰. So if surveys are to be relied on they do need to be cannily designed.

Another initiative which might be worthwhile would be a formal quality assessment method, such as the European Foundation for Quality Management business excellence model, or the Investors in People standard. This would provide a structured way of identifying strengths and weaknesses, and hence point to where additional skills development or other effort would best pay off.

Motivation is a key area, and clarity of goals for all individuals and teams will do more than anything else to ensure engagement. Hence getting appraisal and supervision systems right is essential. Planning is a vital part of this; but it is easy to let “strategy” become a self-seeking activity without much grounding in the real world, so it needs to be kept on tap (as they say), not on top²³¹.

With luck, this book will have given the reader a better feel for how much we really know about how to manage people, and what he or she should expect about how reliable management decisions ought to be. One thing which is striking is that the areas where we are pretty confident that our decisions are good ones are rather circumscribed. Another is that, in the other more uncertain areas, views of the best approach have varied quite markedly over time, for no very good reason other than shifts in the background climate of opinion about what happens in the world, and in the personal intuition of the more prominent experts.

If you are a practising manager, you have a very difficult job (as you well know), and I hope that the advice in this

²³⁰ Stieger S, & Reips U, 2010, “What are participants doing while filling in an online questionnaire: A paradata collection tool and an empirical study”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26 (6), 1488-1495.

²³¹ A sound discussion of the proper role of strategy, embedded in a thick discussion of its relationship with many other organisational techniques and qualities, remains in Kay J, 1993, *Foundations of Corporate Success*, OUP, Oxford.

what works at work

book will help, at least a bit. On the other hand, you also have a job which is very exciting, very involving, and (if you are lucky enough for things to go reasonably well) very satisfying too: you ought to be envied for it.

I ask you to keep an eye on the slow progress of the psychologists, as they gradually sort out more about what works at work. And I wish you good luck and a good intuition in handling the stuff that we really don't yet fully understand.