



Corporate values

Culturism and the manipulation of free will

Robert Terry, CEO of ASK Europe, questions whether the way we engage with our talent is stifling their behaviour and, with it, the scope and opportunity to be creative and productive



Key learning points

1. The purpose of culturism is control
2. Engagement is key to human capital management
3. Control can be corrosive
4. Moral authority flows from legitimate standards

The rash of articles in the academic and trade literature seeking to clarify the definition of employee engagement might be a reflection of the corporate interest in engagement as a solution to the understandable weariness of colleagues living through the longest and deepest recession since the war. It might, on the

other hand, be an indication of a 'coming of age' for an industry now sufficiently confident of its place in organisational life that it feels able to reflect critically on its role and purpose.

Either way, such reflexive contemplation presents a not-to-be-missed opportunity to address a question that is a *sine qua non* of post-modern organisational theory. Is the

effort to secure conformity with managerially defined emotional, intellectual and behavioural norms through a strong and reified corporate culture a morally sustainable attempt to enhance all stakeholder interests, or does it, ultimately, just suppress self-determination? More simply, is it legitimate to want to manipulate the way people think and feel in the workplace?

Turning succession planning on its head

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In 1993, organisational theorist Hugh Willmott criticised 'corporate culturism' as an Orwellian attack on the inalienable right to self-determination. He viewed ostensibly benign strategies such as 'excellence' as attempts to extend management control through "governance of the employees' soul".

Another insight from Tom Peters, business management guru and best known for the publication *In Search of Excellence* which he wrote with Robert Waterman, candidly observed in his later opus *Thriving on Chaos*: "These devices – vision, symbolic action, recognition – are a control system, in the truest sense of the term. The manager's task is to conceive of them as such and to consciously use them."

Whatever the merits of these two very differing viewpoints, one thing is clear; Messrs Peters and Waterman appear to have found a large and receptive audience for their particular prescription for corporate ills, whereas Professor Willmott remains, perhaps unfairly, little known outside the academic community.

These apparently opposed viewpoints are actually in agreement, at least as regards the intentionality behind the practice of 'culturism'. Both agree that the purpose is control. Peters and Waterman would, I suspect, argue that control is an essential precondition for efficiency in organisations, whereas Professor Willmott might hold to the view that power, no matter how benign its

wielders' intentions, privileges those that have it to the detriment of those that don't.

Sadly, the last decade has been ripe with examples that tend to provide support for the latter view. Corporate accounting scandals at Enron and WorldCom, unease regarding the role industry is alleged to have played in climate change, the near collapse and subsequent taxpayer financed bail-out of the global banking industry, widening disparities in income, allegations of child abuse in the Catholic Church and the expenses fiasco in Westminster, to name just a few, have had a corrosive effect on public confidence in the quality of governance in our society.

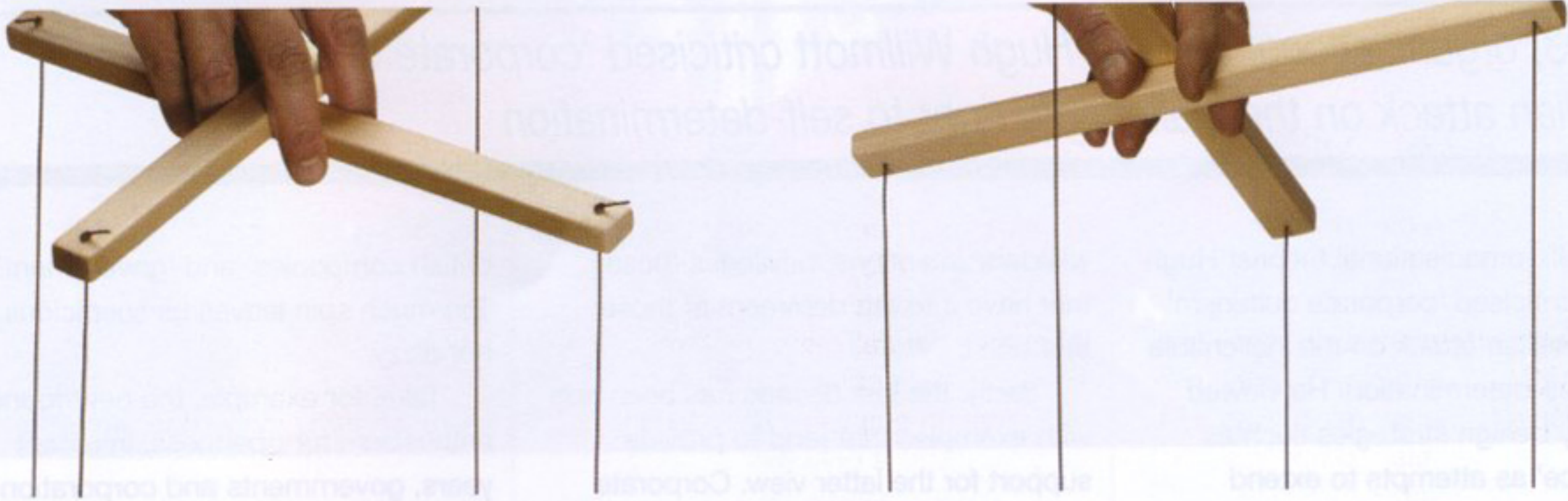
Attempts by the institutions at the heart of these disasters to 'spin' their way out of their self-inflicted woes has merely rendered employees, parishioners, customers and electorates hostile to even the most virtuous appeal to faith. CEOs and bankers have now joined politicians and journalists in that special place of loathing we used to reserve for estate agents and car salesmen – and for the same reasons. It is now the case that virtually any attempt by a large organisation, either state or corporate, to reclaim lost virtue through public pronouncement is viewed with suspicion and mistrust. When the BBC commissioned a survey on Trust from IPSOS-Mori in 2008 it was discovered that, when asked which organisations we trusted most, bottom of the list were 'big

british companies' and 'government'. Too much spin leaves us suspicious, not dizzy.

Take, for example, the new-found enthusiasm for openness. In recent years, governments and corporations have sought to enhance their legitimacy – and thereby reassert their right to exercise control – by embracing freedom of information, what some commentators refer to as the 'cleansing power of sunlight'. Western governments rushed in new legislation to facilitate access to information: Sarbanes-Oxley promised to do for corporate governance in the US what the Freedom of Information Act did for the public sector in the UK. The belief that lay behind this enthusiasm for candour was a belief that disclosure would reveal inner goodness and quell criticism.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your viewpoint, freedom of information can, as the expenses scandal in the Houses of Parliament demonstrated, produce damaging unforeseen consequences. Clearly, openness as part of an HR strategy is doomed to fail if all that is revealed is the raddled body politic within.

Among the welter of definitions offered recently for employee engagement is that provided by Hewitt Associates: "The measure of an employee's emotional and intellectual commitment to their organisation and its success." Others speak of "heightened emotional and intellectual connection" or



“enthusiasm for work”. Though the definitions may vary, evidence of the correlation between engagement and organisational performance is consistent and plentiful. Whichever measures of success are used – customer satisfaction, financial performance, product quality, shareholder returns, service reputation – the message is clear: employee engagement is an important key to human capital management because it focuses on managing employees to produce on behalf of the organisation rather than focusing on what organisations do to employees.

Peters and Waterman’s observed that in ‘excellent’ organisations the precepts of self direction and self control enshrined within ‘Theory Y’ management had been combined and extended to provide employee empowerment, or what they referred to as “practical autonomy”. Yet closer scrutiny reveals that this empowerment was narrowly defined and maintained with strict and stultifying discipline: “Thus a set of shared values and rules about discipline, details and execution can provide the framework within which practical autonomy takes place routinely.” As

Willmott observed, corporate culturism as described by Peters and Waterman seeks to construct an orderly consensus between management and employees by managing the culture through which employee values are acquired. This systematic approach to creating and strengthening core organisational values, in a way that excludes and eliminates all other values, professes to offer ‘self-direction’ but at a price: the surrender of self-determination. ‘Doublespeak’ at its most sinister.

Thankfully we have moved on. The recent report from the Work Foundation, *Exceeding Expectation*, saw signs that some organisations – or more accurately their most outstanding leaders (as judged by those they lead) – have seen the virtue of delegating not on the basis of task, “I’m empowering you to do this: please do it my way”, but to give staff the opportunity to develop scope and voice, “I’m empowering you to do this: I will not be hugely concerned about approach or process as long as you are diligent and successful”, although the report did identify this approach as one that is, as yet, in the minority. Perhaps we will come to view the corporate and political excesses of the first decade of

the 21st century as blessings in disguise, serving as they did to awaken us to the threat of manipulation, the fallibility of power and the meanings that lie beneath the surface of words.

The lesson of the last 10 years is that legitimacy, and with it the right to set and pursue standards not just for the behaviour of others but also for their thoughts and feelings, flows from moral authority and cannot be commanded, no matter how big the PR budget. Legitimacy is a social construction and is conferred or withdrawn by those who would be controlled. It cannot be begged, bought or stolen.

The recently vandalised sign that used to sit atop the entrance to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz proclaimed that “*Arbeit macht frei*” – work sets one free. It is thought the sign was placed there by commandant Rudolf Höss and that it sought to extol the virtues of menial labour. History does not record whether Höss saw his sign as a wicked irony or some pseudo-mystical declaration that self sacrifice can bring spiritual freedom. What is certain is that those who walked under it every day were under no illusion as to their circumstances. ■