

PAMPHLET 29

CONNECTIONS

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@1999

IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?
Pink Floyd

A story in the Boston Globe:

It can never be said that Adele Gaboury's neighbors were less than responsible. When her front lawn grew hip-high, they had a local boy mow it down. When her pipes froze and burst, they had the water turned off. When the mail spilled out the front door, they called the police. The only thing they didn't do was check to see if she was alive.

She wasn't.

On Monday, police climbed her crumbling brick stoop, broke in the side door of her little blue house, and found what they believe to be the seventy-three-year-old woman's skeletal remains sunk in a five-foot-high pile of trash where they had apparently lain, perhaps for as long as four years.

Eileen Dugan, seventy, once a close friend of Gaboury's, whose house sits less than twenty feet from the dead woman's home:

It's not really a very friendly neighborhood, I'm as much to blame as anyone. She was alone and needed someone to talk to, but I was working two jobs and I was sick of her coming over at all hours. Eventually I stopped

answering the door.

Nobody was out there for Adele Gaboury. Our disconnect from others is a fractal pattern in our world and in our organizations.

In exasperation, I said to the senior management group: Listen carefully, here is the million dollar advice. If you want this organization to change, you must learn to talk to one another.

The attentive executives looked at me with befuddled eyes. These managers worked in a fragmented, mechanistic organization with rigid boundaries (visible and invisible) between people and departments. Most communications were via memos, e-mails, and voice mails. No discussions were ever held on the topics that mattered most. They did not know how to talk to one another in any but the most superficial way.

I facilitated an interest-based bargaining process between a union local and a department management team. The tension and anger were palpable. A red-faced employee trembled as he raged at the shaken department manager, "I hate you. If you were on fire no one in this department would pi-- on you to put you out." The employee's peers congratulated him.

The director of a fourteen-person department was a 6 foot 5 inch tall man. The people who reported to him were all women. He rarely left his large locked office. He didn't hold staff meetings, and people lacked the information they needed to do their work. He said he was too busy to talk to his subordinates. His staff complained about his lack of interaction with them. After a lengthy conversation, and many excuses for not talking to the people who worked for him, the man said, "I can't do it. I'm afraid."

The mechanistic worldview teaches us that we are separate and distinct from nature and from others. This philosophy of life even teaches us that we can disconnect from our spirit and emotions and rely on our rational minds only. This worldview instructs us that we can control and dominate nature and others. We then believe we are responsible only for ourselves and others must fend for themselves.

In our organizational lives we learn that success and promotions often go to the strongest and most ruthless--not the most caring, creative, or competent. Isolated employees identify with and defend their fragmented jobs and/or departments. Interactions with others are often dishonest, conforming, competitive, paternalistic, and politically correct. Often we

create enemies who we demonize and scapegoat to justify our own bad behavior. We act like living machines, each in conformity with one another.

Rigid and impermeable boundaries maintain and protect our disconnect from others. Such beliefs alienate us from others and ourselves and allow us to harm people with no sense of personal responsibility. With our fear, ignorance, alienation, mindlessness, indifference, and fragmentation we do not realize that such beliefs are not natural. When we deny relationships, we deny much of life's potential.

We go it alone, feel that we do not belong, and wonder what is wrong with us (few in organizations socialize anymore). We lack reactions from others that affirms our worth and contribution. We conform to the expectations of others. We handle our stress alone, disconnected from others. We lose our authenticity and our creativity. We pretend things are fine. Distanced from emotional connections our humanity becomes fainter and fainter, and we wonder what it means to be human.

We know the impact the mechanistic worldview has on people in organizations. In a world where corporations are machines, where management is equated with control, where employees are children, where people are motivated by fear, where change is synonymous with pain, and where emotions are forbidden, many people are bored, afraid, confused, alienated, and angry. We know this loneliness but we don't talk about it in our organizations. Those of us who are aware of this insanity struggle to maintain our integrity and authenticity. Those of us who are not mindful of this lunacy join the legions of the walking dead. We lose our souls. This is not the natural way.

Quantum physics teach us that relationships are primary in the universe. Elements in the sub-atomic world are life-like, exchange information constantly, and co-create based on these dynamics. The relationship is primary; the message is secondary. These unseen connections are the essence of creativity. Particles are not separate, distinct, or atomistic as many of us believe and as so many of us live. This separation is not real; it is only in our minds. Unless we change this thinking our problems will grow. Relationships are the natural way.

The same dynamics occur at the human level. Like sub-atomic particles, people are meant to be in relationship with one another. We have a basic human drive to form relationships with others and to talk to other people.

When we talk authentically to people different than us we develop trust, feel safe, exchange and process information, and we change. We do not create or transform in isolation. In a healthy workplace connections are made around the shared identity (vision, values, and purpose) of the enterprise and shared information that allows employees to self-organize continually around the vision for the future. Relationships enhance creativity.

Many of us need to form new beliefs about the importance of relationships in our lives and to the success and sustainability of the organizations we work in and lead. Who we are is determined by how we relate with those around us. When we understand that we are interdependent, we internalize the truth that what we do to others we do to ourselves. If we damage the spirit of another, we damage our spirit.

When we look back honestly through the lens of new beliefs we see the destructive patterns and dynamics of our relationships with others. We see how our behavior often brings out the worst in others. We reflect on how we harmed others mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially, and in their careers. We accept responsibility for our actions, and we hold ourselves accountable for our impact on others.

We learn to apologize, to change our leadership practices, our business practices, and our personal behavior as we see how living from a new worldview can evolve us as human beings. We learn how to form, cultivate, and sustain relationships with people and our isolation from others begins to end. We begin to pay attention to connections. The walking dead come alive. We do things differently, and we are different.

When we understand the importance of relationships, the positional boundaries that separate us are removed. We let go of our preconceived notions about the potential of others. We accept and support others as fellow human beings worthy of equal respect because of our shared humanity. We learn to cooperate and seek win-win solutions. We see new, vast possibilities around us. We discover how relationships impact innovation and understand the power of ownership, participation, and engagement with others. Trust and concern for others grow. We realize that we can lead only in symbiotic relationship with our followers. We learn to imagine the futures we want to bring forth.

I met with a self-managed team. Relationships and performance were suffering because of unspoken conflict. The team was stuck in

equilibrium. Fearing they would be criticized, they felt apprehensive and distrustful. We talked for two hours: we discussed feelings, shared information, confronted inauthentic behavior, and supported one another. Ideas came forth, and plans were made and responsibilities assigned. Pent-up energy was released. Everyone felt connected, energized, and enthused; the team was ready to move forward.

Some time ago I interviewed an employee in a manufacturing plant. Afterwards I felt sad and depressed: this man was pathetic in his attitude, demeanor, and view of himself. He slumped in his chair, focused his eyes downward, spoke softly with no emotion, and described how he let others abuse him. This self-described powerless victim was one of the walking dead.

I spoke recently with the employee's new supervisor. He described how this employee had posted for a job in another part of the organization. The plant manager had to delay his move because the man was needed in his old job for a while longer. The supervisor was new and understood the importance of relationships. He told me how he gave this man added responsibilities, treated him with respect, and acknowledged his contributions. The man came alive, did a great job, and made contributions no one expected he could make. The plant manager wanted him to stay. This sad man came alive with a little acknowledgement from another human being. I see this happen often.

Organizations will not transform in sustainable ways without authentic relationships between the people in the organization. I sympathize with those in leadership positions who don't like people problems or matters of the heart. I know relationships scare many because we are not skilled in them and believe the task is more important than the relationships. I understand that when we talk tough and belittle the human skills we are trying to hide our fear and sense of inadequacy. I also know that we will not achieve the results we want without learning relationship skills.

Change is personal, and the job of leaders today is to guide others through transitions. If we want to lead effectively, or be on a high-performance team, or work in a great organization, we must learn how to reconnect with ourselves and others. We will then be a healthier, more creative, and more vibrant man or woman than ever before.

Our voices fade in a world of instant but isolated communications that lack the human connection. The potential for mistrust, confusion, and

miscommunication is as great as it has ever been. We are not helpless. Our isolation does not have to grow. Our responsibility is to create our own communities of human contacts and to create conditions that allow people in the organizations we lead to do the same. Otherwise our humanity will ebb rather than emerge.

We need to be out there for one another.