

BEING ADULT IN ORGANISATIONS

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November 2007

That the author and psychotherapist David Richo writes a book called *How to Be An Adult*, (and follows it up some years later with one called *How to Be An Adult in Relationships*) challenges me to consider that whilst I have many of the social, legal and material trappings of what is commonly known as Adulthood – a mortgage, a licence to drive, possessions, a marriage, permission to vote, *responsibilities* – nevertheless emotionally, psychologically and spiritually I may have some growing up to do.

We are born, he writes, with inalienable emotional needs for love, safety, acceptance, freedom, validation of our feelings, and physical holding... We may feel, as adults, that our very survival is based on finding someone to fulfil our basic needs... Our fantasy of 'the perfect partner', or our disappointments in a relationship we do not change or leave, or the dramas that keep arising in our relationships, reveal our unique unmet primal wounds or needs. We try so hard to get from others what once we missed...

Because organisations are only ever an outward manifestation of the habits, dreams, emotions, conversations and behaviours of individual human beings working together, we might see our workplaces as exhibiting an ongoing and perhaps unresolved tension between our attempts to be adult and the recurrent rising up of our child-like unmet primal needs. It is not so much that we get the organisations we deserve, perhaps, as that we get the organisations that reflect – and legitimise – our current stage of maturity as human beings.

I believe our long-established emphasis on patriarchal, top-down understandings and models of leadership – and then our rush to balance that in more recent years with 'bottom-up', democratic and 'softer' staff involvement or engagement strategies - have only provided safe outlets for what can be referred to as the Parent and Child modes. The Adult mode struggles to come through and assert itself, because, inadvertently, we are too busy being encouraged to play Parent and/or Child.

What do we mean by these terms? Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis describes both the Parent mode of human relating as either controlling or over-caring (spoiling), structuring or critical, and the Child, with its tiring-because-unpredictable variations of impulsive, creative, playful, mischievous, resistant or needy behaviours. The Adult, he says, is our ability to think and determine action for ourselves, based on received data – but able, significantly, to make the choice to draw on the best of the Parent and Child modes where that will be valuable and helpful.

Many of my current clients are now asking for what they call 'Adult-to-Adult' communication and behaviours in their staff. This seems to be a response to an inkling they have that something is wrong – or at least that something is not quite right – in their organisations. And at the same time these are companies which have spent, collectively, enormous reserves of energy and money in learning and teaching

'leadership' and in developing practices that 'engage' their people in ways which seem perfectly rational and sound, and always sound attractive. My assertion is that our traditional approaches to leading and engaging are themselves the root of the problem. We may convince ourselves and each other that these approaches are a sign of progress, an improvement on our old "command and control, soul-less" companies, but I still think we need to keep thinking again.

Indeed, it seems to me that standard and popular approaches to leadership and engagement push us to either of the extremes of Parent and Child. 'Leaders' are asked to develop and then exhibit the miraculous powers of vision, inspiration, ruthless decision-making, passionate action, transformational communication and the like. And as employees we are provided every opportunity to have our say, give – and be given – our feedback and generally 'be involved'. What could be the problem? And yet we are now asking for 'Adult-Adult' as if there is something still not quite right with this status quo. And I believe we are correct to suspect that.

There has never in the history of work been a better time to be an employee. Protected, looked after, coached, working in teams, cocooned by a raft of Health, Safety, Legal and maybe just Rights Rights, given nice chairs and lots of information, we are asked regularly, through organisational surveys and so on, if we like our company and the people who lead it and how we'd like it all to be different. So why is everyone so tired?

There has never in the history of work been a better time to be a leader. For the 'heroes' who 'succeed', the rewards are enormous, both for the ego and for the bank balance. So why is everyone so stressed?

Our parent leaders make us feel good when we are down or bored, reprove us when we wander off from the path, protect us from the horrors of the world and the dangers of the future. And of course there's a pay-off to this strategy. As parent leaders ourselves, we look down the organisation to get a sense of how we might control the world. We want to 'align our people', get them energised, have them 'singing from the same hymn sheet'. We want our 'children' to be good, talented, secure and confident. We want them to do well on their own, but we want them also to show gratitude and appreciation for our efforts. (As one 'leader' said to me recently "Whatever we do never seems to be enough").

Child followers like things when they get their way, don't like it when they don't. As Child followers we look up for reassurance, understanding and teaching. We want a clear picture of the future and how we are going to get there. We want to see models of integrity to that ideal. We want our Parent leaders to leave us alone but also to be there when we most need them. And we want them also to show gratitude and approval for our efforts. (As one 'team member' said to me recently, when asked what would make the most difference to her work: "I'd like to be appreciated more").

And both sides get to be disappointed in each other.

As human beings, healthy development is not about getting our primal needs met in adulthood. They can't be: primal needs are related to survival, and survival is no longer

an issue in adulthood. Healthy development is about letting go of any unresolved issues from our personal past and about stopping making unrealistic and unfair demands on others. We learn to be the source of the very things – praise, thanks, love, reassurance, optimism, nurturance – that we mistakenly thought only come about as a result of others' words and actions. This, truly, is personal growth work, and maybe our organisations have yet to come close to providing the space for that, no matter how much we currently espouse 'personal development at work'. But until they do, or until individuals develop a different expectation of what is healthy or possible in the workplace, I believe our organisations will always have a sense that authentic 'Adult-Adult' is some way off, and be characterised by varying degrees of frustration, comparison, competition and resentment – and by various strategies for manipulation and acquiescence (though of course we would never use those terms).

But what would it look like if we had authentic 'Adult-Adult'? Firstly we need to be mindful of what currently keeps showing up.

Some signs of adults believing themselves to be Adult, but acting within the the prevailing construct of Parent-Child relationships:

- fear of not being good enough or doing enough, or of being found out
- judgement
- defensiveness
- constant requests for approval from others or acting largely on the belief that it will bring that about
- operating with suspicion eg believing we know others' thoughts or intentions, without ever having those things expressed out loud to us by the person or persons concerned
- resentment of others' actions
- a need to be right.

And here, nineteen signs of Being Adult in an organisation:

A BASIC RELATIONSHIP TO LIFE

1. Assuming life and living (and therefore work and working) to be complex and complicated
2. Affirming difficulty as a natural part of organising
3. Being tolerant of ambiguity
4. Owning any misunderstanding we might have as being personal and not the fault of insufficient communication
5. Being able to take a stand in the midst of doubt

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

6. Not needing our anxiety to be fixed before we can operate
7. Owning up to being afraid or unsure, if that is the truth (and then see 6 above)
8. Generating and maintaining courage from our own resources
9. Expressing patience and equanimity

GIVING UP OLD AND TIRED TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

10. Knowing that being smart is hardly rare and rarely useful on its own
11. Expecting control to be limited, temporary or fleeting

MAKING THE FUTURE

12. Not needing to be reminded – or have it marketed to us - that responsibility and accountability come with the territory of Being Adult
13. Accepting that our freedom comes with boundaries, and some of those boundaries can look like *not getting our own way* and *being told what to do*
14. Not needing to be motivated, inspired or valued by others to be empowered
15. Putting what matters most over and above personal needs or issues
16. Being able to make a clear request, stand by a clear promise, express authentic refusal and not operate by the myriad and subtle forms of trade, barter or threat

RELATING HEALTHILY TO OTHERS

17. Embracing personal freedom, and the growth that comes with that, and giving space for others to embrace their own
18. Embracing diversity and difference as inevitable and unavoidable and not see those things as threats
19. Not needing situations or people to be other than as they are

This is a work in progress. Your comments are much appreciated. Part Two is about how to make the shift, so if you have questions or ideas, please let me know.

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