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HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY IN A CONSULTATIVE ROLE

When I was asked to write about how I use humanistic psychology in my job, my first problem was to discover what that could mean! I was given the following definition:

'It stands for the respect for the worth of persons, respect for differences of approach, open-mindedness as to acceptable methods, and interest in exploration of new aspects of human behaviour.' (1)

What follows is an attempt to look at my job from this standpoint.

I am employed, full time, as an elected staff representative on the Staff Council of the Central Offices of a major multinational company. There are about 3000 staff of all levels in the Central Offices. Along with 13 part-time colleagues, we consult with Management on all aspects of the terms and conditions of employment, pensions, salaries, office accommodation, restaurant facilities, and not forgetting the inevitable bicycle shed Our job is to identify and to represent staff views on existing situations and on the unceasing series of changes proposed, intended to keep the conditions under which we work amongst the very best in the country.

One of our major difficulties is finding out what is of concern to Staff and what are their views on particular propositions. My door is always open and I get valuable input from people 'dropping in'. The boundary line between input to me in my official role and an approach for what might be better described as counselling is sometimes difficult to discern. I see it as part of my job, not simply to take note of what is put to me but to try to separate the wider issues from the individual problem. In the latter case, my role can quickly become more that of a counsellor than employee representative.

There is little ambiguity as to how we are perceived - quite clearly as the voice of Staff. However, in that role, we are valued to very different degrees! Senior management is sincerely concerned to

(1) 'Articles of Association', American Association of Humanistic Psychology, 1962.

know what we think; Staff find us sometimes useful, sometimes apparently impotent but are generally supportive; middle management, when not behaving as Staff, have very mixed views the classic problem.

We are a very big company. We have a very complicated but remarkably effective organisation. Particularly in the Central Offices, Staff at all levels are accustomed to using the organisation and its committee-style methods to achieve results. Organisational considerations often weigh heavily and one of the important aspects of my job is to underline that it is people that we are dealing with, as individuals, and not simply organisational cyphers.

Historically, we have enjoyed generally excellent, caring but heavily paternalistic management. Paternalism is no longer officially approved and employee involvement in decisions that directly affect them is encouraged. However, in the past, Management generally did know best and the very able personnel advisors of today frequently still do! As a result, their proposals are usually good ones and consultation sometimes seems superfluous.

Consultation, in our terms, is the discussion between Management and Staff of issues that affect the latter before decisions are taken. Decisions are, very properly, to be taken by Management but it is still very difficult for personnel technocrats to accept that they should share their understanding of the problems not only with Management but also with Staff. Consultation does not necessarily lead to optimum outcomes - if only because of the very long time it takes to do it. I hope that eventually we will be able to show that the decisions taken are better ones when the Staff feel involved in their preparation. One of the less agreeable aspects of my job is to identify and express to Management how unhappy staff are on those occasions when they have not been involved in the build up to a particular decision!

However much I may want to 'personise' the issues that face us, I and my colleagues have to recognise, and frequently to accept, economic reality and organisational imperatives. Keeping up with the Joneses is one thing, moving noticeably ahead of them something else again. Equally, while it may suit our particular group of staff - 3000 strong - what we propose may have unexpected or unacceptable effects on other parts of the organisation in the U.K. (22,000). We are frequently faced with that insoluble dilemma of either being fair to everyone or actually getting anything done. I am a firm believer in meritocracy but the egalitarian concept of the greatest good for the greatest number must also somehow find a place in my outlook.

Large and successful companies like ours can and do tolerate widely different approaches to problems and can make use of very differing individual styles. Particularly in the Central Offices it is this individualism which is likely to make us a poor hunting ground for conventional Trade Unions. I find that my colleagues sometimes expect rather too much of me and our consultative system - particularly when we have apparently failed! They insist on their right to be treated as individuals and frequently on the rightness of their individual viewpoint. Nonetheless, they expect that I negotiate for them from a power base which they have never mandated to me - and which I do not want. Fortunately, these same people are generally quick to acknowledge that the methods of peaceful persuasion and influence which our consultative process uses should lead to more generally satisfactory outcomes than the head-on confrontation which they so frequently read of as being part of normal negotiating tactics. This of course puts an enormous premium on consultation being seen to be honest and open and its outcomes being seen to be reasonable. I have as my prime objective to increase the openness of the very detailed consultation which does indeed take place here.

Looking back at my original definition I see I have concentrated particularly on treating persons as individuals. I believe that we do have a respect for differences of approach if only because total conformity leads inevitably to the stifling of the individual and the death of the organisation. However I live, and enjoy living, in a very achievement oriented society. Changes in approach or method may sometimes be essential simply to avoid stagnation but in general must be seen to be directed towards achieving the common goals. There are also limits which I feel are imposed on the methods that I use. For example, I have not dared to offer my skills as a therapeutic masseur as a means of relieving the all too obvious strain under which some of my colleagues operate!

It is not merely lip service when our Chairman records his appreciation of the resourcefulness, sense of involvement and participation of our employees. We are a very people-oriented organisation. However, every big organisation is sometimes blind - and that gives my job some of its varied interest!