

Disembodied Managers and their Disembodied Staff:
Or, losing your head in the corporate world.

Being from Perth, I feel that I can say with some authority that there is a strange belief among many people who live on the eastern seaboard of Australia that the distance from Sydney or Melbourne to Perth is considerably greater than the distance from Perth to Sydney or Melbourne! And that there is a comparable level of difficulty in travelling from the East to the West. While I acknowledge that headwinds slow down the flight to the West, the *distance* nevertheless remains the same!

I say this not because I am interested in stirring up old tensions between Western Australia and its Eastern partners - there is enough of that already! But because I suspect that embedded in this geographical myth are some parallels to the relationship between management and staff in organisations, that might be worth exploring! I will come back to this analogy shortly. But I first would like to make a connection with the theme of this seminar series, and that is to do with the state of play for "managing" in this electronic age or what we have termed "e-Management", however you may interpret that phrase. The link I want to make is also to do with a kind of geographical or spatial metaphor - that is about the arena of cyberspace. Electronic communication has undoubtedly changed the nature of the world and certainly the nature of the world of work. There have been changes for the better and there have been changes for the worse. Some of these I would like to look at today. And there have also been *apparent* changes which I suspect are not actually changes at all, only magnifications of what was already there before.

Cyberspace is such an astonishing concept with its apparent lack of boundaries and its spatial multidimensionality. *Where is everything located?* There is a sort of magical or mercurial quality for those of us not steeped in the structures and processes of electronic technology - perhaps even for those who are! But there is also an absence of LOCATION (to connect us back to the geographical or spatial metaphor). And I want to focus some attention on various aspects of the notion of location in the next few minutes. In my perhaps peculiar reference to *disembodied* managers and staff in the theme of this seminar, as well as to the loss of one's head, I was trying to capture something of the concerns that I believe prevail today in organisations.

I have long been interested in understanding the human body and the ways it can be used to represent and symbolise experience, and I have a rapidly developing interest in the "corporeal" nature of the "corporation" (this probably explains my interest in geographical or

spatial metaphors). My reference to *disembodiment* is linked to a few concepts and questions.

The title of this seminar series: "*E-Management? Who is in Charge Today?*" draws our attention to the question of where the locus of authority, management and leadership resides or is located? One might think of this as the "head" (for example, head-office). In whom though is it *embodied*? Now this may seem at first glance to be a dead end or question or one with an obvious answer. But my observation of organisations today, and especially in the way the use of electronic communication is emerging, suggests to me that there is an increasing feeling among staff that they do not know who they work for; who is in charge; who is managing; who is making what decisions, and whether today's manager will be there tomorrow: in other words, where the head is. Especially when decisions affect their lives in a personal way. They feel, often, (in all meanings of the phrase) that they have *lost* their heads

And looking at things from the other side, like looking from Melbourne to Perth, staff are becoming more and more distant from those who are in charge; more and more disembodied. So that the frequently significant and often devastating *consequences for their staff* of many top-level management decisions, are made more and more distant from the heads. So that the "collateral damage" is too far away to be located in specific "bodies" - people - with families, mortgages, loyalties, aspirations etc.

Many Western Australian corporations have their head-offices in Melbourne and Sydney. But it seems that the geographical distance lends dis-enchantment to the view. Probably because I am located in Perth this disenchantment is apparent to me and in my consulting role I cannot and do not avoid *bumping right up against it*. It is exactly this capacity NOT to bump up against "human bodies" or human minds and experience, that contributes to the increasing sense of disembodiment of managers and staff. But we should not be lulled into thinking that it is only geographical distance that we are talking about here. I am aware and convinced - through my own work and the work of colleagues - that it is the "*sense*" of *distance* (i.e. emotional or experienced distance) that is really the issue here.

It is to this *sense of distance* that I will shortly turn when I talk more about the electronic aspects of organisational life and the experience of disembodiment that is intrinsic to electronic communication. But I do want to say too that I am not attributing all the difficulties of contemporary organisational life to electronic communication alone!

Before doing so I want to give a little consideration to some other aspects of disembodiment that I suspect are simultaneously shaping and contributing to organisational life in the e-management age.

I used the word "collateral damage" earlier to refer to the effects on people of some top management decisions. This curious little phrase, popularised I think in the Gulf War, means "of a secondary nature; subordinate: collateral target damage from a bombing run" applied usually to unexpected damage to one's own or other "innocent" people. It is interesting how the "subordinate" damage is thus made less horrifying in our minds. And of course the further away the war, the less real is the damage, the less in touch with the "horrors of war" are the generals at "head-office". The use of language - especially 'in vogue' management language - serves to create distance from the reality or pain of people's experience of "collateral" damage inflicted on them for those issuing the orders. This is, to me, another important distancing vehicle that gets employed in contemporary organisations and contributes to the sense of disembodiment. You will have noticed, I am sure, the number of times I have used the word "distance" or variants of the word.

Buzz words such as "downsizing", "rightsizing" and "outsourcing" (or as one distressed worker put it: "outsorcering") camouflage (to use a military metaphor again) the damage - collateral or otherwise - that is being suffered by large sectors of the work force - *managers and workers alike* and distance senior managers from the damage and pain that results when the work-force is uncertain, anxious and suspicious. The use of language is a valuable clue to deeper unconscious meaning - especially when it serves both to conceal and reveal. As concepts move into colloquial usage they tend to quickly become emptied of their real meaning. Look more closely at the buzz words around currently, like the ones I have just mentioned.

And who *is* in charge? *Where* is the "head"? Invariably (especially in large organisations) in a distant *head-office*, or even more commonly a distant land; or as is increasingly the case nowadays, somewhere out there in cyberspace, a disembodied "e-mail". How distant is *that*?

I believe that there are significant processes of *distanciation* that operate currently - outside of the awareness or intentionality of the individual. They are, I think, both a consequence of current market forces and processes and act cybernetically or systemically to exacerbate the experience of disembodiment that I think increasingly characterises many dimensions of corporate life today.

Before turning to look a little at some contributions of electronic communication, I would like to speculate a bit about this last point.

Whilst I am no expert at macro-economics, I believe that globalisation - or the preoccupation with size (familiar little notion) - and other contemporary political influences, has contributed to a terrible loss of engagement. I think it has contributed to a literal experience of losing contact with people's "corporeal" and corporate connections; to a loss of engagement between senior management and the workers (not that that is especially new - its just far worse and on a bigger scale); and a loss of "self" among managers and workers. By loss of "self", I am speaking in the broadest sense about a number of things that contribute to the sense of self. I mean loss of relationship to the institution; loss of the relationship between perpetrators and sufferers.; loss of the connection to the institution itself. I am the last to romanticise and idealise past eras, but there is little doubt that the present one has so far brought with it a very great extent of alienation.

Indeed the nature of work and of institutional life is so mercurial that many people seem to report the experience of losing their heads. They also report increasingly the sense of management having lost touch with the hearts, minds and bodies of staff.

And what has this specifically to do with the electronic nature of this era? Before offering my thoughts on this, I would remind you that my colleagues will be offering a range of perspectives on this very issue over the rest of this seminar series.

Electronic communication is a prime example of disembodiment. A typed message is carried over short distances (often peculiarly short - like NEXT DOOR) and long distances (from across the globe) in milliseconds and arrives on one's screen with only written forms of identification. And evidence really of the distance it has travelled. It seems to take just as long for an e-mail to reach Perth from Melbourne, as does the reverse journey. And indeed to the "human eye", it seems to take just as long to go to the room next door as it takes to reach New York. What has this done to our sense of distance? I think there was hope that the predicted "global village" had been realised. And in many ways this is true. But I think it is just as true - and perhaps more pernicious - that electronic communication has enabled the head to be split off from the heart; the head-office from the workers; thoughts from feelings. Indeed it would appear to be a powerful vehicle to facilitate splitting, and what psychoanalysts refer to as the paranoid-schizoid position - that experience where the capacity for engagement, reparation and concern to be mobilised and expressed. I am not denying the potential of e-mail for linking people, but I am struck by its potency for splitting.

I would like to sketch some examples where these processes have been evident:

A worker reported to me that he had lived with terrible job insecurity - facing possible redundancy - for close to a year, and that he couldn't ask his manager to clarify where he stood, as the senior manager himself faced possible redundancy. What did they both experience and feel? Chronic anxiety, depression, chronic insomnia, loss of morale, loss of loyalty, loss of interest in their work ..loss..loss..loss. They independently felt that they were losing their heads, losing their own capacity for authorisation, leadership and management within their own job areas. This was an escalation from the downwardly spiralling authority vacuum that they imagined emanated from their head office in Europe which they too felt was lost somewhere in space - cyberspace - since instructions were often issued via disembodied e-mails.

My hunch is that like the riddle of the distance from Melbourne to Perth, head-office management preferred – unconsciously – to keep as great as possible its distance from the anxious staff; while staff wanted and needed proximity and contact with head-office to allay their anxieties. So distancing is a way of avoiding the pain of distressed staff. Yet this false economy in fact induces even greater distress.

A landscape architect working on a project in a fairly remote rural area had daily telephone contacts with his field supervisor. During these calls they planned work, examined problems and made decisions. Once a week he visited the site and extended this process. At the urging of the field worker he went online so that they could have more extensive dialogue. Since going online they had an ongoing series of “ping-pong” e-mail discussions and after three weeks had not been able to make a single decision.

When I asked this man why he thought this was the case, he responded immediately saying that he had temporarily lost the relationship with his field supervisor. I think it is apparent how the change in communication medium affected the nature of the relationship, resulting in disengagement.

A colleague recently presented a paper at the AISA Scientific Conference in which she described a study of email communication between a manager and his staff. She illustrated how the manager would work from home on the weekends and when the staff came to work on Monday they would be faced with a barrage of abusive, critical and distressing emails from the manager. Usually a moderate person, the emails carried a split off rage which he could not mobilise – even in a moderate way – in person.

There is perhaps some evidence here of the way the manager used e-mail communication to distance himself from the effect of his rage. In

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person he was unable to communicate like that because he would have to engage in a responsive relationship with his staff. I emphasize that it is the way the medium is employed – as well as what it offers up – that determines these outcomes.

In the light of the observations I have been making to this point, I invite you to give some thought to how - if my assessment is correct – organisational stake-holders might act to manage this situation differently. It is my assertion that systemic pressures are very strong in furthering this process of distancing or splitting, and courses of action need to be implemented to manage them better.

I would hypothesise that as organisations today are faced with market pressures, globalisation, economic rationalism and disengaging electronic media, they move closer to functioning in a way characterised by what Alastair Bain and colleagues call “Basic Assumption Me-ness”. That is the narcissistically influenced unconscious position increasingly evident in organisations, where members turn inwards to themselves, acting with little concern or engagement with the organisational gestalt of the enterprise.

What I have been describing above demonstrates increasing organisational disengagement, loss of contact, emotional distancing or splitting and loss of relationship.

It is – I believe - to the innovative and renewed development of these relational qualities that organisations will need to creatively turn their attention in the electronic era, in order to re-engage individual and organisational heads and hearts, minds and bodies.

Thank you.