

A Man and His Schtick

by Walt Sutton

On a warm fall night I walked across the University of Southern California campus, approaching the business school. I was on my way to make a presentation to a class that was called something about entrepreneurship. I had been summoned to stand like Socrates, or the old Napoleon, asked to tell the young ones about life out there in the greater world. That's one way of looking at it. But here's how I felt: my assignment was to be the cadaver, a real body for the students to cut up, test their theories on. I was a living example of the trade.

The breeze nuzzled leaves from the trees overhanging the wide stone promenade, showering my triumphant march to the dissecting theatre. You wouldn't think that a man twice the age of most of the students would have anything to be nervous about, but I'd done this sort of thing once before and knew age offered little protection. Students, even graduate students, will ask you anything. They will probe with boundless childlike curiosity, and they will cut and flail with scalpels pushed deeper by unbridled energy in the search for "truth".

As I lie helpless, newly opened there on the dissecting table, they first encounter a monster ego. One student asks, "What good is that?" and chucks it over his shoulder to the jeers of the onlookers, blood-spattered wannabe's.

Once the ego's gone, there's plenty of room for excavation and seven or eight of them get right at it. A woman in the back asks, "Where is the heart? I don't see any heart." She was right, it is smaller than the ego, and you have to know what you are looking for when you go searching for heart.

Hands, knives, hunger, curiosity and cutting lead to the moment that most worries me. A bespectacled woman of twenty-something years pushes a hand into a dark corner of the open cavity and raises up this wooden cylindrical object. "Hey, what the hell is this? This old goat (was I this irreverent as a kid?) has a schtick, everyone, a schtick. Can you believe it, this guy has the nerve to come in here with a schtick!"

But everyone has a schtick, it can't be helped. Stack conscious experiences, the dreams from thousands of sleeps and a train crash or two, and you are left with a schtick - it's inevitable. In fact you're lucky if you only have one.

I decide to come clean to the gathered mob of grad students. I tell them. My main schtick relates to people (surprise) and enterprise (double surprise). I have read or otherwise been exposed to literally hundreds of theories, articles, and diatribes about people conducting enterprise. Maybe thousands! In all of this, I have never once seen real people on a real org chart. I have never seen people distribute themselves equally across the range of a theory. I have never seen people act like the theorists think they should act except on the rarest of rare occasion when a business theorist - and this



includes everyone in business — dares to suggest that people will act just like people. This may sound trite, but it isn't.

We live near Stanley Park in downtown Vancouver British Columbia Canada. The early citizens of this city bequeathed the far tip of the peninsula, which makes up the heart of Vancouver, as a city park. And what a place it is, 2000 acres, old growth timber, trails and a seven-mile seawall walk all the way around the outside. In this park is a huge fresh water lagoon called (cleverly) Lost Lagoon and on this body of water is the most prime, most fun waterfowl environment you could imagine. The water is freshly supplied from the park itself, which acts like a large umbrella, shunting run-off into the lagoon. There are trees and reeds along the sides of the lagoon and several people ignoring the “don't feed the animals” signs at any given time. My wife and I walk the 1 mile circumference of lost lagoon with our two dogs every morning. The seasons come and go and we walk the circuit. The water fowl come and go according to the seasons — we see the whole ecosystem through its yearly clock, from pallet to pallet, orange brown in fall to winter gray brown to spring's yellow green and so on.

The city founders did a good thing when they made this place. Through the shoulder seasons of late summer and spring a great migration of water birds is at rest and in Lost Lagoon. This produces a reliable rag-tag armada of mallards, scaub, golden-eyes, canvasbacks and the occasional merganser. They all settle into life on the lagoon and in the course of a morning's walk can be seen flying or swimming from one feeding location to another, accepting the forbidden food from the lawbreaking lot that give it to them. Even in the absence of lawbreakers a large cloud of waterfowl will swim alongside the walkers, inviting them to realize their criminal potential. Our dogs love this, as it often affords a legitimate reason to jump and bark at the feathery varmints. Were you to attempt a formulation of duck behavior, this domestic begging activity might be part of your description. You might postulate something like, all ducks congregate at the feet of people and wait for food.

I was dwelling (my wife calls it obsessing) on this duck behavior as we approached Lost Lagoon yesterday morning. Surveying the whole area from an adjoining hill, we saw that the waterfowl population was surging. The place was packed. As we descended the grassy incline towards the trail along the water's edge, the dogs were preparing to bark and I was looking for the armada to follow us as we began our grand tour.

We'd approached a large collection of bobbing birds when there was a chaotic and fearful explosion of quacking and squeaking, birds swimming over one another and racing airborne for another part of the lagoon. The dogs were puzzled as they had yet to menace or bark at the little buggers. I knew this was uncharacteristic behavior and considered that perhaps a hidden raccoon or rogue fish had set off the commotion. We walked farther along the path and in about ten minutes approached another mob of birds. We didn't get to within fifty feet of them when the whole place erupted with fright, feathers and flying fowl.

We figured it out. These were the new arrivals, the wild migrating birds that didn't know the routine on Lost Lagoon. These ducks didn't fit on the org chart and their behavior



was completely outside the realm of expected duck behavior—at least that’s how the dogs saw it. A dedicated ornithologist might chuckle at our presumptions and say something like “ducks are ducks.” But in the business world, this perspective is hard to find. Most of the people theories are formulated on some derivative of life in Lost Lagoon as opposed to life in the whole wide world, and we are just as confused as the dogs. This is important, because anyone engaging in enterprise is, in my experience, a business theorist of sorts. “I don’t know what’s the matter with Jane but she could be president of this company if she’d only learn to conform.” Or, “Paul is so smart only he disrupts everything he touches, can’t he see what we are trying to do around here?”

We business theorists are also just people and predictably act like people so we have an opinion on almost everything relating to other people, especially those we wish well or ill or otherwise have strong feelings for or about. This is a powerful brew. People acting like people everywhere, forming and hurling opinions all over the place, acting and reacting to them in various ranges of behavior and generally disappointing or ultimately torturing the theory – but unfortunately not the theorist. My suspicion is that if the theorist suffered a little more for bad outcomes the theories would improve considerably!

Often while interviewing a leader about his or her organization the conversation will hit a surprising soft spot and I’ll hear myself asking, “What are you afraid of?” Inevitably I hear something about people acting like people for example: “I’m afraid that she will quit,” or “You can never tell what that guy is going to do so I don’t want to push the issue.” These leaders aren’t dullards; they aren’t single dimensional technocrats; they are usually caring—and they are always people themselves. The leaders are fearful because we have succeeded in convincing them that they ought to be able to control people’s behavior and any suggestion of “out of bounds activity” or “acting out” is a sign of failure. To such indoctrinated leaders, the notion of “people are people” is not only heresy but dangerous

These leaders need to read Dilbert. In Dilbert the bosses are so stupid that they never get to “people are people” and the outcomes are hilarious – unless you are a leader. What bothers me most about the comic strip is its authenticity and so I squirm. Now we get to the “people are people” part. People have the capacity to do many things, including make us squirm. The range of human behavior is breathtakingly wide and “squirm” is not even near the outer limit of law-abiding human activity.

Since we all know this, why would we believe for a minute that we as leaders somehow control behavior at all? Virtually all spoken and recorded history is defined by people being people. Yet we build organizations on the belief that this doesn’t happen.

Well, not all of us do, just many of us. Clearly when Thomas Watson Sr. hung the now famous sign “Think,” over his desk he wasn’t imploring the reader, “Think what I think,” but to just “Think.” Such out-of-bounds freedom as free thinking could lead to all sorts of heresy, yet to the best of my knowledge he left the sign there until he retired and never regretted its plain and potentially revolutionary message. I do know he and IBM shareholders benefited from the sentiment. I also remember many in business suggesting that he was off his rocker to suggest that people be “allowed” to think for



themselves. But Watson and thousands of other lesser known leaders have approached the truth about people. Simply stated, within all of us there is plenty that is good and plenty that isn't, and the alignment of our desires will often produce a good outcome. In the case of IBM, Watson wanted us to think, and people, being people, did. Some of the outcomes worked well for IBM and the thinkers and off they went.

So I tell the students that if they want to succeed as leaders they must understand that people are people and unless there is some common ground of humanity, some common ground for getting stuff done, for solving problems, there is little likelihood for team success. I tell them that they must find out what people want, see if there is a way to align the larger goals with that of the individual people. If so, go for it, and expect to encounter all of the people emotions and expectations available in the lexicon of psychology (not the lexicon of organizational theory). Expect crying, shouting, laughing, cheering, jeering, greed, avarice and duplicity. Expect, in short, something like Macbeth or an Oliver Stone movie and you'll be better prepared for the adventure. In fact, the great leaders I've known, whether they worked on the shop floor or in the boardroom, encouraged people to be people to the nth degree. From out of that miasma they have conjured a desire to get stuff done in such a way that the adventure and the outcome was challenging, interesting and often fun for all.

The blood is dry and the students are gorged, arms weary from digging, minds worked out. It is almost nine o'clock and they are done with me. I pull myself together, looking at young eyes, brown, blue, hazel, and black. I ask them "What are you afraid of?" From the silence one young woman's voice says, "Nothing. It's just that people can be so complicated, I guess I thought you would tell us an easier way to deal with them." "Sorry." I say, "but maybe you'll discover that this approach is in fact less complicated, you know, after you're out there for awhile. Just file this evening away for the time you find Dilbert taped anonymously to your laptop." I smile at her and the rest of the weary eyes in the room, and put my schtick back in its place, somewhere near my heart.

