

Lessons beyond Working Life...



"Either Change the System or Polish the Fruit" One of Jock Macneish's landmark work-place change cartoons from Macneish, J and Richardson, T **The Choice A Pictorial Guide to Creating Productive Workplaces**, Don't Press, Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, 1993

Illustration: Jock Macneish

IT IS A MYTH THAT ORDINARY HARD-WORKING men and women win in life. From the classic "It's a beautiful life" to Jimmy Barnes' "Working class man" the rhetoric is honest, ordinary workers have "richer" lives. The rich man may have material wealth, but the ordinary man or woman, has love, family, and the best of life. Stressed-out executives have heart attacks at 40; mobile phones fry yuppies brains; bosses are too busy to see their kids and enjoy anything of life. *Now we may have to revise our thinking, for if you equate good with honest, average, hard working men and women it seems the good and the poor die young.*

The bosses and people who have the largest amounts of money live better and longer than anybody else, they have a higher quality of life, and they enjoy the power and privilege they have. So you say, 'we already knew that': The rich obviously live longer than the poorest of the poor. Yes that's true but did you know that your immediate boss is likely to live longer and have less disease than you do, that you are likely to live longer than the colleagues who are on a lower salary level than you are, that you will likely live longer and have less likelihood of a heart attack than your secretary or your cleaner.

In this edition of *Australian Prospect* we explore the social gradient of ill health discovered by Sir. Michael Marmot in over twenty years of comprehensive epidemiological research and importantly we start to ask: what can be done about it?

Marmot defines the social hierarchy of health as follows: **"You are not poor. You are employed. Your children are well fed. You live in a decent house or apartment. You turn on the tap and drink the water in the secure knowledge that it is clean. The food you buy is not contaminated. Most people you come across in your daily round also meet this description. But, among these people, none of whom is destitute or even poor, you acknowledge that some are higher than you in the social hierarchy: they have more money, bigger houses, a more prestigious job,**

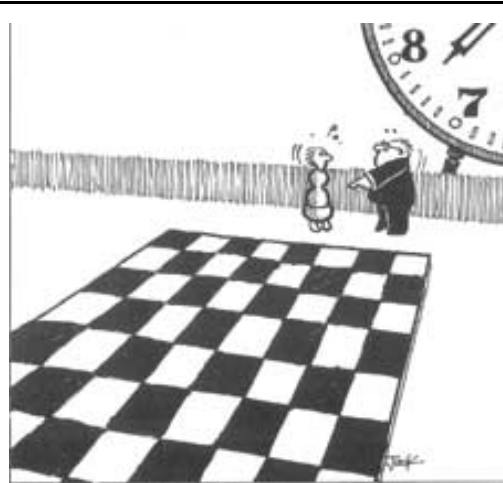
more status in the eyes of others, or simply a higher-class way of speaking. You also note that there are other people lower than you on these criteria, not just the very poor or the homeless, but people whose standing is merely lower than yours, to a varying extent. The remarkable

finding is that among all of these people, the higher the status in the pecking order the healthier they are likely to be. In other words health follows a social gradient." Michael Marmot, *Status Syndrome How your social standing affects your health and life* expectancy, Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 1

But is this social gradient of health everywhere. Marmot's view is that it is everywhere and not one country or organisation in the world is immune to its effects.

So there are many questions to ask about why this social gradient of health occurs. Our focus is *pathological organisation*:

at every tier those above live longer and better than those below. It is difficult to replicate Marmot's empirical research to obtain qualitative findings about whether one workplace is more *pathological* than another or whether one form of social organisation is more harmful than another. But certainly we must revise our thinking that there are bad companies who, for example, neglect blatant health and safety laws, who should be the sole focus of the effort to improve the health in our community. The truth is that based on Marmot's findings even the most benign organisation determines our pathology: the sum of dis-



The organisational pawn: Adults don't thrill to being pawns in someone else's chess game. To stop creating pawns we need to move from thinking 'tasks' to thinking 'relationships'.

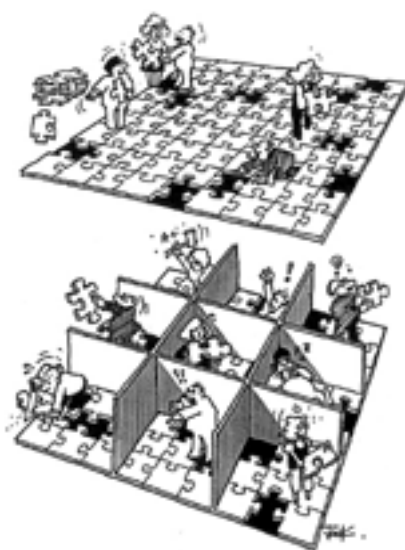
Words and Images from Jock MacNeish and Tony Richardson's **The Choice: Either Change the System or Polish the Fruit A Pictorial Guide to Creating Productive Workplaces**, Don't Press, Sydney 1993

eases or morbid conditions that will affect our lives. Work and the organisation of life gives a sense of psycho-social well being to some and not to others. Some work and occupations are challenging, involve a sense of achievement, well being and good health others do not. Some communities seem to give a sense of achievement to everybody, others do not.

It is interesting to think about how the political and research world will respond to Marmot's important work. Some will investigate a biological determinism associated with evolution and the pecking order of nature and perhaps their conclusion will be that the social gradient of health is natural and inevitable. However the point is to change history not to follow it. Men and women can make their own destinies and certainly knowing that the shape and form of our corporate and social organisations will affect our health and longevity is a spur to a new kind of thinking about organisational reform and change. Can workplaces be improved to ensure greater productivity and better health for workers?

It is remarkable that the social gradient of health was anticipated by a great Australian, Fred Emery, who is probably better known outside his own country than inside it. It is Emery, a founder of socio-technical systems thinking, and the fields of participative workplace design and change, that now seem so pertinent. Genius is often recognised some years after the main corpus of

work has been completed and some years after the death of the author. So it is with Emery. It is remarkable that at the time he was writing his most interesting material, and anticipating the social gradient of health, the first Whitehall studies, on which Marmot would base his ideas, were just starting.



Fragmentation or Wholeness: The old system creates fragmented workplaces. Despite people's best endeavours, multitudes of tedious meetings and forests of internal memoranda, systems, once fragmented will always defy integration.

Words and Images from Jock MacNeish and Tony Richardson's **The Choice: Either Change the System or Polish the Fruit A Pictorial Guide to Creating Productive Workplaces**, Don't Press, Sydney 1993

FOR A LONG TIME now the sphere of participative or democratic workplace change seemed to be of important but peripheral concern. Even its most ardent advocates have tended to stress that democratic workplaces ultimately lead to a more productive enterprise and a better bottom-line. Of course, the fact that, along the pathway to these results, participative change offered other benefits including better worker skills and morale, greater organisational vision, and even, better environmental, community and social outcomes were not insignificant considerations.

But "the bottom line" has been the lure and the focus and understandably so. After all the critical players in changing the workplace are shareholders, owners, managers, trade unions, governments and of course workers themselves - all benefit directly from a better bottom line. In addition workplace change is not for the faint-hearted. It is complex, sensitive and sometimes very difficult to achieve. So there had to be something in taking on such an ambitious set of tasks and the promise of a better bottom line has usually been the key to win-

ning authority to explore significant changes and reforms to organisational structures.

Within this context, of some complexity, industrial players find it easier to get back to the traditional indus-

trial agenda of monitoring wage distribution and occupational health and safety. In this edition Max Ogden shows us how the important issue of creating wealth and better jobs has slipped, or been pushed off the agenda. One of the most important points he makes is that far from being the reason for a decline in union membership, when industrial politics involved these broader issues, in which every worker has an interest, union membership declines were stalled. The other important part of Ogden's paper is that it does not pull any punches about how difficult the process of working on industry development is for managers and unionists alike. There are no easy wins, and it is easy for those who think the marketplace and the organisation should govern themselves, to simply assert that it is all too hard and to simply stand on the sidelines and denigrate those who want to work in these complex arenas.

But with the concept of the pathological organisation, workplace change has to be back on the mainstream agenda. The horizons of what has been a purely workplace focus suddenly seem "boundaryless". Marmot's extraordinary findings that the health and life expectancy of workers, community

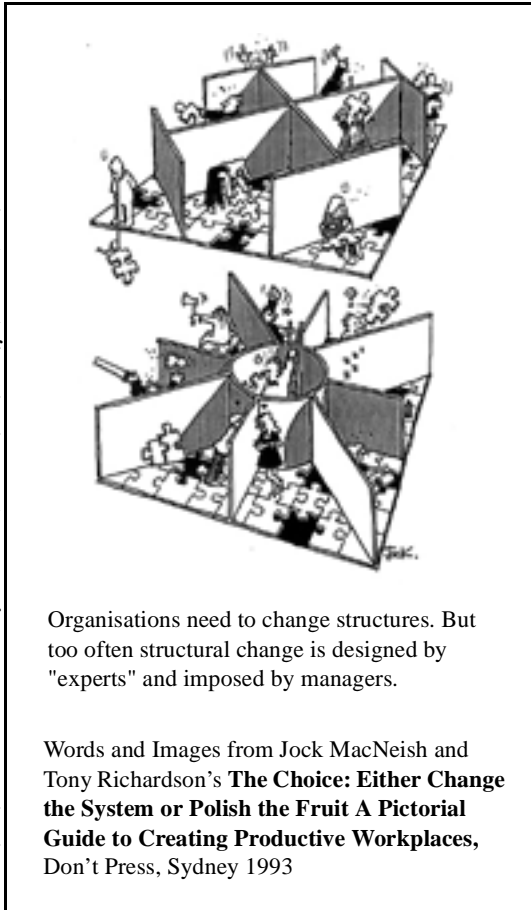
members and even whole populations is determined by where they sit in the pecking order of life and work gives us a whole new dimension.

Security, control and independence in work become literally a matter of life and death. Jock Macneish's famous cartoon, reproduced on the title page of this editorial, and designed to promote the importance of changing the structure of workplaces from an occupational health and safety and productivity point of view, now has an added resonance.

The toxic zone is not just a workplace environment, it is literally the structure and practices of the organisation itself. It is not just a matter of workplace health and safety or productivity. The hierarchical organisation in which each tier of the organisation lives longer and better than those the tier below is itself a site of

toxicity and ill-health. Through Marmot it is now a scientifically established fact that organisations can literally limit the lives of those on the bottom by the way in which work, careers and organisations are managed.

Neil Watson's important article also alerts us to something that is equally important. Now the work of encouraging wholistic, integrated, cooperative work systems must span not just corporations and countries but continents. Watson also reminds us of the importance of Fred Emery - a select list of his writings are included at the end of this editorial. When you consider the wide variety and scope of Emery's thinking it is



hard to believe that he was not reading the Marmot work, twenty five years ago. But Watson reminds us that the success of the socio-technical system has been in bringing about participative change within productive systems. The new challenge is to go beyond work systems to communities and even the relations between divisions of production, communities and the environment across whole continents.

Some within the school of workplace change understandably wonder whether they have ventured too far outside the familiar terrain of their discipline. But it is an exciting thought to think that so-called value chain level relations can penetrate many communities of the earth for the good as well as to the detriment of all. Watson asks does all this ring a bell with anyone else and certainly *Australian Prospect* can hear the bells ringing loudly and clearly. The thought of manufacturing workers in the first and third worlds within a single company understanding each others needs and agendas and developing agreed processes of development is dynamic and welcome opportunity. Some will argue that international unions have been doing this sort of work for decades. The fact is that the arena of work that Watson is pointing to represents a whole new endeavour with a new possibilities and problems that have not, apart from the far-seeing Emery and his colleagues, really hit the mainstream agenda of politics and society. When you put Marmot's findings together with Emery's ideas then suddenly sparks seem to fly out everywhere.

There are some just plain fundamental issues that arise from Fred Chaney and Daniel Donahoo's articles. Politics is not immune from pathological structures. Shutting out voices that do not have same tone, ideological content or rhetoric as the dominant factions, or "group think" is a situation that every person who has worked in a major political party in Australia will be

familiar with. Chaney is correct to point out that many people are simply not electing to be involved because they find the forms and organisational structures and dominant lines of politics too rigid, tiresome and conformist. This is an issue that *Australian Prospect* wants to explore further in coming editions. It may well be that we are increasingly living in a world in which outward thoughts and discourses become more important, easier and more fulfilling than practical deeds. Chaney's thoughts, those of a great liberal, are very welcome. Let us hope that his prognosis, that the people who are really doing things in Aboriginal affairs, immigration and other arenas will lead a path to some more tolerant and open forms of political organisation, will succeed. But there is also a note of pessimism about Chaney's article, and it is that old familiar argument that it is the one per cent who change things, and the ninety-nine per cent who follow. Certainly if this is the case then we do have a recipe for a pathological politics and it is hard not to think that our current system of political representation is precisely such a rigid hierarchical structure with our rigidly elected public representatives at the apex and the mass of followers at the bottom. Something must be done!

Daniel Donahoo's article is a refreshing and innovative piece of writing about the horrors of bureaucratic work. One can imagine why it is precisely easier to "polish the apples" in the public service, it is hard to contemplate where to start changing the system. After all isn't it in the nature of the government sector to be re-arranged and changed, not only when there is a change of government, but also when there is a change of Minister. What is so important about Donahoo's piece is that it reminds us that beneath the outward surface of perpetual change there is a bureaucratic code and pecking order. Donahoo makes marvelously real the issues identified by Marmor in his famous Whitehall study. The fax

memo comes back as a reminder to the young employee that he is a nobody. The leave of absence from work due to a death in the family that no-one knows about. Donahoo's article recalls another one of Jock McNeish's famous workplace cartoons of a jigsaw puzzle that has to be put together without anyone having an overview of the whole puzzle or even the pieces. Perhaps the worry is that public service is designed so that nobody at the bottom can gain a wholistic overview of ideas or actions. Power is knowledge.

Robert Reich's comments to the combined leadership of the Cape York Indigenous community were part of a wonderful exchange of ideas which are only partially recorded here. However Reich noted some of the solutions to our dilemmas here when he said: "...the best management does several things at once. It creates a safe holding environment, I mean, people feel secure. They know that they will not be dropped off the deep end for taking risks, they also know what the organisation is going to do and they have adequate guidance. But within that holding environment, good management gives people as much responsibility as they will take. Now if you want to call that chaos, call it chaos, but its not really chaos, it's managed chaos, very carefully controlled chaos. At the Department of Labor I had 20,000 employees. There was no way that I was going to police the entire workforce and make sure that every labor law in 9 million enterprises was followed. It's impossible. So we tried to get the private sector, consumers and investors to work with us. But I couldn't figure out how to do this myself. So we created systems where employees could implement good ideas and, even if they turned out to be bad ideas, they could figure out that they were bad ideas. In other words, we allowed experimentation, a very important and liberating concept. We created spaces where people could try things out safely. You don't

want people to experiment or throw the dice with regard to the whole future of the organisation but you want a lot of tiny experiments".

Nough said!

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