Tough Decisions

Tackling difficult, awkward decisions and getting them right

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1   INTRODUCTION: A REAL OPPORTUNITY

> *I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which looked at in the right way, did not become still more complicated.*
>
> **– Poul Anderson**

Management was perhaps never easy; in the modern workplace it can be a downright struggle. Saying so does not, of itself, make it any easier for the hard-pressed manager to succeed. Managing people, and ensuring planned results are achieved, is a complex process. But certain approaches are key to it being made a success. There is plenty of advice around which sets out to make the process easier.

Despite this, you may be forgiven for saying that it is a tough job. Two things are prime in conspiring to make this true. First, management is a complex process. This is true both in the sense that many things that must be done are themselves complex, and in the sense that there are normally many different things to be done, often in parallel. Secondly, the work environment in which things must be done is hectic. Many people might say that it is increasingly hectic and that hectic understates the situation.

Certainly many managers work under pressure and, though some of this is good and stimulates performance, too much can compound the difficulty of any job and have a negative effect. Lack of time, limited resources, impossible deadlines, overwhelming administrative detail – all this and more add to the pressure on those working in the modern workplace, and the stress that can accompany it.

You are doubtless competent (or you would not be reading this book). You utilise your experience (however brief to date), and certainly you achieve things (or you would be out on your ear). You work to make this possible too, keeping up to date, extending and refining your skills, and thinking before you act (though you may feel pressure of time curtails this to some extent).

But do you achieve – or even get done – as much as you want? Even the best of us probably admits to some shortfall as they consider such a question.

As has been said, there may be all sorts of reasons for this. Lack of time, resources, support and the increased pressure and beaurocracy of the modern workplace are high amongst them. Enough. I will resist the temptation to indulge in a long list. Let us leave it that it is doubtless a complex picture, and of course one that varies over time and for every individual.

Facing reality

Realistically no job, certainly no worthwhile job, one that must appeal and provide job satisfaction, is strictly nine to five, enabling its occupant to go home each night with a clear in-tray and everything up to date.

In addition, in many jobs a significant amount of time will have to be spent dealing with, let us say, less than ideal circumstances. In other words, despite lack of resources or whatever, a way must be found and things made to happen so that targeted results are achieved. As my Mother used to say – *given oranges the job is to make marmalade.* Again you probably do this and do it well.

So be it. But, leaving that aside for a moment, there is another reason why productivity and effectiveness is sometimes not maximised. The manager or executive – you – *allows* it to happen. Opportunities to get things done are missed and, worse, people often do not realise they are doing so. What is more, for reasons we have seen, today's job environment seems to be making this opportunity missing more likely. There is a process at work that, at worst, can produce a crisis in management effectiveness.

But it need not be so: this book highlights an opportunity. It reviews a way of positively transforming and enhancing your performance virtually at a stroke. It focuses on approaches to those key things that should be done, and which are of a nature that will make overall success more likely. Here we examine some reasons why opportunities can be missed and highlight one approach that can change your practice in a way that affects many different situations positively. The aim is to allow you to recognise when performance can be improved, then be able to take action to free up potential and get more done and done well.

As the American philosopher William James said: *The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude of mind.*

2   FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE

If you want to do something you find a way.
If you don't want to do anything, you find an excuse.

– Arab proverb

To be successful you need to work efficiently, productively, effectively and often creatively. Some things you do are, or have become, routine. While they must be done right, they can be done and done well without elaborate thought. You have other tasks, which may be one-off or regular, that are a challenge. They demand thought, and may demand struggle, but you are happy to view them this way. They all go on your work to do list and – sooner or later – they get done.

Between being accepted or listed to be done and actually being done may lie something of a muddle. Expertise aside, the first foundation for success in terms of productivity – actually getting things done – is effective time management. So much here conspires to make this difficult: other peoples' meetings, your lack of planning, interruptions – we could make a long list. The point is that you need to work at being organised, develop good habits and not let confusion and chaos allow you to put off concentrating on priorities and making the decisions they demand.

Space prohibits going further (besides I have done so in *Successful Time Management* [Kogan Page]), but the rationale of time management underlies much of what follows here.

Suffice to say that an honest appraisal of what is on your "to do list" will highlight a key category of delayed decision; one where the key reason for delay is solely down to you. Why does this happen? One reason reoccurs.

Consider this fact: Sensible, and logically necessary, action can be delayed or left untaken for no reason **other than that it seems difficult**.

We will define "difficult" further later, meantime I know the response that saying such a thing instinctively prompts, so let us include it and allow a typical hardworking individual manager to comment.

HARDWORKING MANAGER: *Wait a minute. Are you suggesting that I don't do things just because I find them difficult? I deal with difficult things all day; nothing about my job is easy I'll have you know, but I do it and I do it pretty well.*

No one is suggesting management is easy, or that you are not striving to succeed. Quite the reverse, but the fact remains that there is often action that could be taken, that could make things better, and achieve results more certainly, and yet which is not done, or not done in good time. Are you saying, for example, that there is nothing on your current "to do" list that you are a tad uncertain about or which you are putting off making decisions about? Or that there are not things where, while the action is clear, you know that taking it will make you, well, *uncomfortable?* For example, is none of your team under-performing in any way? Is nobody not following a rule or procedure, in a way that dilutes performance just a little?

HM: *Well, yes, I suppose there are some things that do get put off, but life's more than a little hectic you know – surely that will always be the case? It doesn't mean I'm incompetent.*

No, indeed it does not. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. I take your point; but let us consider first the situation in which you must work, after all anything you do must make sense and work in the real world.

And here the intention is to reflect the realities of the work place and identify key action, to an extent simple action, that can help you focus on the right things, and take action about them promptly in a way that will increase the likelihood of achieving the overall results you want.

HM: *Okay, go on then. Certainly anything that helps is welcome.*

A particular challenge

You manage your job, and achieve what you do for numbers of reasons. Three areas are key here, all relate to your experience:

- *Knowledge:* what you know helps you act. For example, you make a good presentation in part because you know something of the tricks of the trade of so doing. You get your way at a meeting because of your knowledge about the way meetings work and what makes a message persuasive. You no doubt know a great deal, indeed it is easy to underestimate what you do know, but specific knowledge underpins particular areas of your work. Hire someone and you need to know something about employment legislation or you may arrange things in an inappropriate way that lumbers you with a dud forever.
- *Skills:* More than knowledge is involved. You need practice to do some things well; doing the job will make you better at it provided you approach it in the right spirit.
- *Attitude:* the attitude you take to things helps dictate effectiveness too. Some things need you to be persistent, self-motivated or thick skinned.

All these aspects of your competence combine, and are influenced by, the way you work. But that is not entirely an objective process. Human nature dictates otherwise. Who never allows positive personal feelings to influence how they work? Be honest. So in deciding to attend a conference in Singapore, to spend extra time on something they like, or to work most closely with those people they get on with best, it is possible that someone is, in part at least, allowing what is best for them to be an element of the decision making. Sometimes this does no harm; it may even do good. Certainly it happens. So it is not so surprising that sometimes the reverse is true and decisions are made, not for positive personal reasons, but to avoid some negative effect.

> **Example – the discomfort of wasting time**
>
> If something threatens to waste our time, we are more inclined to get impatient than truly uncomfortable. While this may be less dramatic than some other situations, it is, however, something that occurs all too often in a busy life – so, if change is desirable, the opportunity it presents may be considerable.

HM: *I may not be perfect, but if there is one thing I am it's productive – no one gets through more in a day than I do.*

And that may itself be a problem. Consider this. There is a scene that is played out in offices all over the world and which must waste untold hours every single day. Imagine a manager is busy in his office when a head comes round the door and one of their staff comes in. '*What is it*?' they ask. And the reply is something like: '*I am not sure how to handle so and so and wondered if you would just check through it with me*'. The manager thinks for a second. They are busy – in the middle of a job and not wanting to lose concentration – but they have already been interrupted. So their first thought is to minimise the interruption so that they can get back to work fast. It seems the easiest thing to do. So, if the matter allows, they spend a minute or two explaining what to do and then tell the other person to let them get on, and the brief impromptu meeting ends. This may be done kindly or abruptly, the effect is much the same, and the same manager may enact the scene many times in a day.

The rationale for this approach is personal: it is uncomfortable to have concentration disrupted and the action seeks primarily to minimise that discomfort.

But suppose the same manager is away from the office for a couple of days and people face similar situations. If their manager were in, they would go and ask. In their absence, they must simply get on with the job. When the manager returns what do they find? A chain of disasters? A plethora of wrong decisions and misjudged actions? Very rarely. Rather things that would have been checked if they had been around have been actioned, and not only is no harm done, everything has probably gone perfectly well.

Think about it. I suspect this picture will ring bells with many, if not most, managers. Why does it happen? It is a classic case of thinking that it is quicker to do things *for* people: most often in this case providing an answer or making a decision, they then take action, and life goes on.

What this describes is essentially the taking of a short-term *personal* view. It seems easiest for you. You have to take a longer-term view, *but doing so takes you instantly into what we might call positive discomfort.*

HM: *Okay, I certainly get this sort of interruption and I guess that is how I think. But what else is there to do?*

There is certainly another approach. It is one that looks beyond the short term and addresses longer-term and more important issues. It still saves time, though in the longer term, and achieves far more beyond this too.

Seven magic words

Next time you are interrupted in the way I have described, respond by saying something like: '*What do you think you should do*?'

The person who is interrupting may not know, but you can press the point, prompt them to make some suggestions, and when they do, then ask which solution they think is best. This takes a few minutes, certainly longer than a "leave me alone" response, but if they are coping when you are not there to ask, then you will find that when you prompt them they most often come up with a good answer (in business there is rarely any one right way). Then you can say something like: '*That's fine*', and away they go to carry on, leaving you to get back to your own work.

Now this is not just a better way of dealing with this situation. It brings additional results of very real value. It will:

- *Teach people not to interrupt*, but rather to have the confidence to think matters through for themselves. You have to be insistent about this. It will not work if you only make them think it through when you have more time, and still provide a quick answer when you are busy. Every time – every single time – someone comes through the door with a question about something with which you believe they should be able to deal unaided, you say: '*What do you think you should do*?' It must become a catch phrase. And as this practice continues the message will get home to them, so that if they even start to think of asking you they can imagine your likely response in advance. If you do this you will find such questions coming less and less often. You will find that if people do ask, they move straight to the second stage, and come in with two or three thought out options just wanting you to say which is best. Resist; ask them. The message will stick and, surprise, surprise, you will find you are saving what may be significant time over the long term as the incidence of such interruptions declines.
- *Teach them to analyse a situation and make decisions*. It will make them more efficient and more self-sufficient, and this is good for overall productivity and the achievement of results.
- *Highlight any development areas that need addressing*. Thus if there is a real inability to take action because of some skill that is lacking, or inadequately developed, this can be addressed. This might be with a few words there and then, or need a longer session that can be scheduled soon. Alternatively the highlighting of any skills gap may lead to more fundamental action: for instance you need to organise for someone to undergo formal training.

- *Have an ultimately positive motivational effect too,* because your people will almost certainly get to like taking more responsibility (and feeling able to do so), especially if you comment favourably on how well they are doing on the decisions that they are making unaided.

This latter approach only needs some persistence and determination. But starting to work like this *is unlikely to be comfortable.*

Early on, if you begin to embrace such an approach, you may think it is taking too much time, but the investment formula will surely pay off. There are considerable benefits to be had here, the number of people who report to you multiplies them. Do not be faint hearted about this, it is very easy to break your resolve in a busy moment and send someone on their way with an instant, dictated solution. Exceptions to your consistency will just make the lesson take longer to get over. But this idea really does work in the longer term; not to operate this way may seem to succeed in keeping you comfortable, but it does your people – and the results you can achieve together – a disservice. And all it takes is a resolve to become a little uncomfortable for sufficiently long to allow you to become comfortable about something new for the future.

Here, avoiding a moment's discomfort and taking a longer-term view can boost staff performance and morale (and save you time on an ongoing basis).

With one bound…

What is being said here is straight forward. If things, especially things that are significant or key to results generation, are not done performance will suffer. Perhaps major opportunities will be missed. A regular cause of things being not done (or at least not done when they should be done) is because we avoid them for fear that addressing them will be in some way uncomfortable.

Easy, you may say, let us just be sure this does not happen.

In a hectic work life it is not that easy; or there would be no examples like the one above. To create improved performance by addressing this issue you need to understand:

- *Why this avoidance happens so easily*
- *What kinds of personal discomfort are most likely to be avoided*
- *How discomfort situations can be recognised*
- *What action to take to break the mould and ensure that action – the right action – is taken as and when it will do the most good*
- *How to identify and utilise opportunities and make them work for you.*

Next we address these elements and provide a route to greater effectiveness.
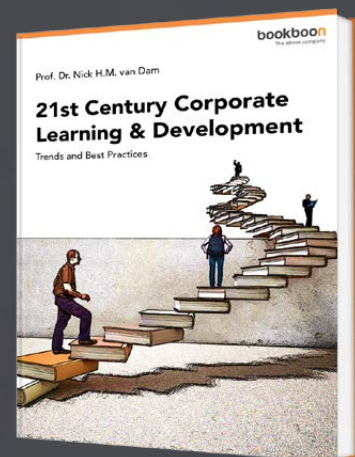
3   IT'S ONLY HUMAN

The first step to managing any feeling of discomfort – taking decisive and appropriate action despite the feeling that doing so somehow puts us in an awkward, difficult or uncomfortable position – is to understand something of why this feeling occurs. This involves recognising that there is an inherent and, to a large extent, unconscious, process going on here. For the most part inaction or delay does not happen as part of an objective review: *let's leave that for the moment, I can't face it.* It happens for what is regarded at the time as "a good reason"; often no more is required than to decide that *something else is more important.* Maybe you will get to the thing eventually, but even slight delay may cause some problems and it is generally agreed that most difficult things do not get easier if left – they tend to become more problematic.

It is said you should: *Never confuse activity with achievement.*

One danger here is that being busy, and always being able to find other things to do if something is sidelined, actually compounds the problem. It allows a rationalisation that says that any avoidance action is in fact "necessary".

If you are tempted to identify with this, even a little, do not despair – you are not alone. Indeed I would suggest that the fact that everyone does this is one of the reasons it remains a problem, or, let us be positive, that it remains an opportunity for potential improvement. Organisations are, in part, mutual support systems. Two heads are often better than one, not everyone has the same experience, and consultation and collaboration act like yeast in a loaf to get things working. But, while you may go to your manager and say *can I have your opinion about this*, or even *can you help with this*, you are much less likely to go and say *I'm finding this really uncomfortable, will you get me out of it?* We are reviewing an area that remains largely unaddressed by one of the most powerful and regular mechanisms that exists within organisations. Hence the necessity for everyone individually to address it in their own situation – and see what gains they can make, and what action is necessary to make them.

To make your task easier, consider what happens in your mind when you are faced with a typical avoidance situation.

Balancing needs

If sometimes we do not proceed logically, it is not because we are incapable of logic, rather because other factors submerge our logical thoughts, overpowering or cutting them off stillborn. This is a powerful – and natural – effect. It is one well recognised by psychologists and it should not be dismissed lightly. Recognising that it happens and that it needs dealing with in an active way is the first step to combating it, and thus to ensuring that a more considered path is followed.

What are the main triggers that prompt something to be put on one side? There are several:

- The overriding feeling is one of avoidance, the need to get away from the uncomfortable; see box. Not surprising really, who actually wants to be embarrassed, upset or otherwise put out? No one. We do not want to feel it and, even more, we do not want to be seen to feel it. So we see such situations coming and juggle with our lives to avoid them; albeit (if you like) subconsciously. It works too. Certainly in the short term, we do avoid the upset – but we avoid taking positive action about something too and that can cause a variety of problems.

"Uncomfortable"

The range of feelings we fear or avoid includes, in no particular order:

Embarrassment, confusion, criticism, confrontation (with someone aggressive, difficult or even simply that we are unsure of or do not know well), difficulty, distress, humiliation, uncertainty, frustration, ridicule, stress, doubt, perplexity, alarm – and being wrong, making a mistake, and all the consequences of that being seen and addressed by others. Add to taste.

All such feelings come in a variety of guises and a range of severities. Each of us may have worst fears, things we dislike disproportionately; and perhaps also some others we get over with little or no problem.

- Another strong feeling is that of urgency. Modern life has created a short attention span. We live in a world of sound bites and instant hits and have come to reject the fact that some things cannot be instantly resolved. The result is that if something is not only likely to make us uncomfortable, but to take a moment to deal with too, then we are all the more likely to side track it, possibly in favour of something that can be sorted promptly; or several such somethings, which will give us a greater illusion of getting a lot done.

- The easy or straightforward tends to be allowed to displace the more difficult. This is true without what needs to be done being inherently uncomfortable. It occurs to me, writing this, that writing is a classic example of such displacement. Writers are notorious for putting off getting down to work; so I am really not going to sharpen my pencils or make another cup of tea until I have completed this chapter. If something is not really difficult, but truly likely to cause discomfort along the way, then the chances of likely avoidance is compounded.

- The other main cause of delaying or skimping tasks is lack of knowledge or skill – not knowing quite how to proceed. This sparks fear, fear felt internally and externally – *I might get this wrong and what will people think?* Most people, in most jobs, have to tackle new things. Doing so can be difficult, but the rewards are likely to be good. Once you can do something then being able to do so, and do so well, may open up possibilities that are both job and career enhancing. Nevertheless the initial worry is very real and is certainly instrumental in seeing things put off to their detriment. Incidentally, it is not a question of black and white. You may have some skill but it is inadequate to doing a comfortable, fear free, job. For example, I conduct many training courses on presentation skills. Most participants know something about it, but they want greater skill to allow it to be done quickly and easily – and allow them to excel. Equally, the additional knowledge or skill improvement required to allow positive action may be minimal and easily acquired, but the fact that that stage exists means that the chances of delay increase.

A further thing to watch out for, one of surprising power, is using things that you like to keep you away from others. Many people have the tendency to spend more time than is strictly necessary on tasks that they enjoy (and also to resist delegating things that could be passed on for the same reason) – if you doubt this ask yourself might you just regard attending a conference that involves a long grisly motorway journey differently from one that takes you somewhere exotic: London or New York, say? Sometimes people go further and use this to camouflage and sideline jobs that are more demanding of attention, but which are less appealing or a positively uncomfortable prospect.

Even one task dealt with positively and promptly rather than not, can improve performance significantly. The antidote is awareness of the problem and a logical approach. This raises, in turn, the question of how to ensure you take a logical view.

A considered approach

Without a doubt those who are most successful, and by that I mean work most effectively, take a logical view of the task. Of course emotions are involved, of course creativity is necessary, and is a difficult concept to tie down (though there are logical approaches to ensuring ideas are generated), but many things need to be well considered, well balanced and well related to the reality of the situation.

There is room for the hunch, certainly for the hunch to play a part, though even a hunch may spring, in part, at least, from the instinctive logic of proven habit. But a systematic and realistic approach is at the heart of many management processes. The checklist encapsulating good decision-making shown in the box makes a good example, and is also chosen as a topic worth a moment's thought in context of our main theme.

Decision-making

Decision-making is important. The right decisions can affect results and also your career. So, it is worth being clear how, once you have decided to address one, you should go about it.

To a degree there are no "right" answers in business, but there are certainly wrong ones. Experience is a vital factor in guiding us to pick the right alternative, though too much reliance on it can give a false sense of security and may stifle creativity. A procedure that is logical and systematic and that ensures due consideration of the alternatives, whilst not being infallible, will certainly help make more of your decisions turn out right. This leads to what is a neatly ten-step approach:

Step 1: Setting objectives
Before any action can be considered, the objectives of the exercise must be set. Unless you know where you are going, you cannot plan how to get there or how to measure your progress. For the objective to be valuable, it must be as specific and as quantitative as possible. Goals such as "increasing sales", "improving customer service" and "reducing costs" are useless, as they provide no basis for measurement. If the aim is to increase sales, it should be specified by how much and within what time period.

Step 2: Evaluating the objective against other company objectives
When a clear, precise goal has been established, it should be compared with other corporate aims to ensure compatibility. Failure to do this is common, particularly in large organisations. This results in different sections of the organisation working towards objectives, which in themselves are reasonable, but which when put together become mutually exclusive: for example, the sales office manager may be trying to maintain business with small accounts, whereas marketing or sales management are planning to service them exclusively via wholesalers.

Step 3: Collecting information

Information can now be collected from which plans can be developed. It is unwise to start this data collection stage until clear, compatible objectives have been defined, otherwise vast quantities of useless figures will be assembled "for information" or "in case we need them". The hunger for information has been stimulated by various factors, including the advance of research techniques and the progressive development of the computer. It is a great temptation to call for information simply because we know it is available. Mountains of figures may give a sense of security, but information is costly to process and is only useful (and economic) when it contains answers to precise questions, which have direct bearing on the decisions it is possible to take.

Step 4: Analysing the information

It is the objective that will guide us towards the questions to be answered and thus the information needed. The lines of analysis to be followed will in turn be indicated by such questions. For example, declining sales in one area of the country, perhaps owing to the larger customers buying from competitors, should not prompt us to ask for "everything we know about the market". What we really need is sales in that region broken down by customer type, possibly compared with similar figures for another area. From this analysis, we can proceed progressively through the relevant information, very much more precisely (and probably more quickly and economically) than starting with a dozen different breakdowns that attempt to show "all about everything".

Step 5: Developing alternatives

The whole basis of this method of approach is to encourage us to think more broadly and creatively about possible solutions to problems. Sometimes, of course, the solution will become obvious from systematic processing of the data. In the majority of instances, however, no clear-cut answers will be found, a number of alternative actions suggest themselves, or the answer lies in a combination of a number of factors.

Step 6: Choosing the "best" alternative

This is the heart of the decision-making process. It is unlikely that all possible solutions can be implemented; one must be chosen. To help in this choice, consideration should be made of four criteria: Cost, time, risk and resources. The costs of each alternative can be calculated and compared against the objective. Assuming that several approaches appear to be capable of achieving the objective, this might only narrow the choice. So the other yardsticks should also be used. Time taken might be a critical factor, or the element of risk (particularly of failure) or lack of certain resources might rule out other options: e.g. a critical staff situation may preclude certain courses of action.

The choice of the "best" alternative then is based on a consideration of all the advantages and disadvantages of all the possible alternatives. It is at this stage that experience can be particularly valuable. Its possible limiting effect will already have been overcome by the systematic search for alternatives.

Having made the choice, at least we will be well aware of what we have done in terms of the possible drawbacks of our decision and the discarded alternatives. It will also be easier at some time in the future to look back and assess why such a decision was, in fact, made.

Step 7: Communicating the decision
This is a step too often omitted. And yet unless all concerned know what is being done, impact will be lost. For example, it is commonplace to find inside sales staff whose first knowledge of an advertising campaign is gained from customers; other such situations abound around organisations. The communication must be systematically planned. Information may well have to be passed by different methods and in different forms to different people, in writing, by telephone, meetings, etc. By communicating only necessary information by the most appropriate methods, far better results will be gained than by a blanket email with copies to everybody.

Step 8: Setting up the control system
Remember that this stage occurs before implementation. This is because in many cases the process of implementing a plan destroys the ability to evaluate it. For example, in a situation where it is believed that inside sales staff lack product knowledge, the decision might be taken to run a training programme. At the end of the course a test is given in which the average score is 90 per cent. It might be concluded, therefore, that the programme was successful. But, as there has been no measurement of what the test score would have been at the beginning of the programme, it can at this stage never then be known whether it was successful or not.

Step 9: Implementing the decision
Putting the decision into action should now be easy. It will have been clearly stated what is to be done towards what objective and why that particular action has been chosen, all concerned will have been informed, and the system of evaluation will have been set. Research has shown that if change is to be implemented, then specific tasks should be allocated to particular people and deadlines laid down for the tasks to be completed. Vague requests for action "sometime", will inevitably result in failure.

Step 10: Evaluating the decision
Again assuming quantitative objectives, clear decisions and predefined control systems, evaluation is simple. The problems of control and evaluation are caused by lack of clear yardsticks against which to compare. If we simply set broad qualitative goals of increasing sales "as much as possible" or improving customer service, we will have the utmost difficulty in evaluating the results. There will usually be no common definition of what constitutes an increase or an improvement.

You need to make the "right" decision more often than not, and you may also benefit from a reputation for being decisive. So, never say *Leave it with me* and then fail to revert back. Rather, give things due consideration and make your consideration systematic, thorough – and logical.

Note: It is worth noting that sometimes an element of risk exists; it is simply not possible for careful decision making to remove it. Accept it and act despite it.

Logical thought is useful and may need either to be cultivated or to be focused upon in a way that screens out some of the distractions already mentioned.

What prompts the ability to think logically? Certainly the following are key:

- *A high tolerance to the realities of life*: frustration is likely the order of the day in most jobs. Things never go the way you expect and, to quote Murphy's law – *if something can go wrong, it will.* That said – what are you going to do about it? Constantly resenting reality and hoping it will not be as it is fruitless. It really helps to develop a streak of realism. Recognise the facts of the matter as a starting point and it becomes much easier to take a logical view. Incidentally, watch out if you have perfectionist tendencies. These can be irreplaceable in attending to detail, but can compound frustration when, realistically, nothing will ever be quite as you want. Constitutional perfectionists need to work hard to define perfection as something specific. Setting a measurable and considered level of quality say, the achievement of which allows satisfaction, rather than aiming for an ever receding goal that is never achieved but which can consume endless time as it is pursued.

- *Self belief:* confidence in your abilities is a great facilitator of the ability to stand back, see the broad picture and address the situation logically. Confidence may need to be cultivated, but nothing succeeds like success; if you are doing well and achieving your goals, then it is easier to have confidence to continue and do more. Confidence can be instilled as a habit, though realistically it may need action to maintain and enhance it from time to time. Incidentally, nothing boosts confidence more than practical measures: acquiring the right knowledge, knowing you have an appropriate skill or that you are well prepared, for instance.

- *Acceptance of uncertainty:* to a degree this is closely linked to the first point. We live in a dynamic world, and certainly in the workplace the vagaries of everything, from markets and competition to a clash of internal objectives between different departments in the same organisation, means dealing with the unexpected just goes with the territory. Again acceptance and realism in the face of this fact helps you focus on logical responses. Thrashing about and retaliating, kicking against what may seem like "unfair" happenings hardly makes considered action likely.

- *Willingness to take risks:* just as the unexpected should be expected, so nothing you initiate is guaranteed to succeed. If you wait on many issues for guarantees, you wait forever. Sometimes – regularly? – you have to take a chance. But the chances of success are much greater when in doing so you base action on sound experience and considered judgement. Again logical thinking provides an antidote to the mess of reality.

- *Acceptance of change:* everyone is in favour of change, you are surely no Luddite and want to work in an environment that changes and develops rather than one that is static and boring. Change is good. But go into someone else's office and say: *We are going to have to make some changes* **here** and see what reaction you get! Ten to one it is defensive. Fighting against change instead of working with it is never going to help you take a logical view, especially if the fight is irrational or essentially emotional – *I don't like it!*
- *Identifying and dealing with distractions:* a good example here is office politics. The personal aspirations and striving of individuals can create a fog though which it is difficult to see the realities. It needs dealing with, though I will not digress here (it's easily checked out: another short book in this series is *Office Politics: surviving and thriving in the corporate jungle* (Patrick Forsyth).
- *Balancing the long and short term:* many things seem to evoke a response in people that is primarily short term. Yet not only does a logical view surely demand assessing the two alongside each other, it is likely that a solely short-term view (which can be the instinctive response) may be inappropriate or damaging.

The net effect of coming to terms with all these factors, is that you will be much more on top of the way you have to work; and conversely less stressed. Consider how often the stress of a particular situation is compounded by the fact that you are resentful and wishing something could be otherwise, aiming perhaps at an impossible ideal.

So far so good: view things in the right light and there is far less tendency to put off key tasks, avoid problems or generally neglect anything important.

The way forward

Overall you have to find a way of working that enables you to compensate for matters of human nature where instinct tends to promote inappropriate thinking or action. You need to operate effectively across all the things you have to do, and avoid anything that encourages you to isolate and file some things away in a "for action when things are better" place. The right frame of mind is essential. Given the instinctive tendencies to go in the other direction, some positive thoughts about the way ahead may be appropriate to end this chapter. So:

- *Focus on the good results:* note what works and what you make go well, link the past with the future – *this is like so and so, that worked out okay, so let's make this do the same.* This habit of comparison can become an important and useful element of your logical approach.

- *Set clear priorities:* it is a fact that, while several (many?) projects can be edged along in parallel, at any one moment you can only do one thing. Choosing which must be done in light of the relative priorities of everything you have on the go is vital. Such decisions must, in turn, reflect clear overall job objectives. If you are unclear about any aspect of those, then you must – repeat must – seek to clarify your brief. The alternative is for anything you try to do to be either considered in isolation and suffer from it, or at loggerheads with the doubtless long total list of things to be done. That way lies confusion and failure. The principle of having clear objectives and a clear brief apply equally to individual projects. As a useful aside see the boxed note about what makes for clear objectives below.

Objective setting

The oldest management maxim of all says that if you do not know where you are going any road will do. Setting clear and appropriate objectives is a key part of planning almost anything; something that literally creates a foundation for success. A much-quoted acronym can provide a good guide here: SMART. This stands for:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Realistic, and
Timed.

As an example you might regard objectives linked to your reading of this book as:

*To enable you to spot danger areas where potential discomfort may delay action and deal with such situations positively (*specific)*

*To ensure (*measurable)* action takes place afterwards (here you might link to any appropriate measure: from agreements or actions that follow dealing with something to the actual results, perhaps described by figures or finances that accrue)

*To be right for you: sufficient, understandable, information in manageable form that really allows you to change and improve what you do later (an *achievable* result)

*To also be *realistic*, that is desirable – hence a short book of short sections, (if it took you several days to read the effort might prove greater than any benefit coming from doing so)

*And *timed;* always a good factor to include in any objective – by when are you going to finish reading this book? When can you address something differently as a result? How far ahead of doing so should you prepare?

So, ask yourself whether you are clear in this respect before you even begin work on a task. If you know *why* something must be done, and *what* you intend to *achieve* then you are well on the way to success. Time spent sorting this, and making sure you have a clear vision of what the objectives are, is time well spent. It may only take a few moments. Or it may need more thought and take more time. So be it. It is still worth doing and in any case may well save time at a later stage. Certainly setting inadequate objectives, and then discovering half way through that you are unsure quite where you are going and then having to take time to rethink is unlikely to be a productive way of working.

- *Manage your key resource – time – effectively:* as has been mentioned, the approaches and systems of time management are key to success for us all.
- *Give yourself some rewards:* the principle of self-motivation is a valid one. The reward can be great or small. For example, I have promised myself a nice cup of tea and a biscuit when I have completed the draft of this chapter and it is surprising how even something as simple as that concentrates the mind (provided it is a chocolate biscuit!). This can be used actively as you first identify areas of avoidance, and then focus on making sure that you grasp the discomfort nettle, as it were, and take appropriate action.

- *Organise to maximise job satisfaction:* the more you enjoy your job, the more you will tend to be on top of it. Things are less likely to slip between the cracks if you are well-organised and up to date on things. There is an old saying that *it is difficult to see the writing on the wall, when your back's to it.* The antithesis of this is that if you are on top of things, you are better placed to take things forward together, prevent anything being misplaced along the way, and ensure that things are well done; indeed that everything is well done. The same applies, of course, to the effectiveness of any team of people you may manage: your making their jobs' satisfying – motivating them well – is an important part of your job and one well worth the time it takes.

I have not meant to harp exclusively on the difficulties in this chapter. It is surely part of a logical approach to your work to be realistic: realistic about the workplace and realistic about yourself. There are tendencies, which – for us all – make sidelining difficult issues, sometimes even those that are essentially simple tasks, the natural thing to do. It is human nature to avoid the discomfort trap. And, let us be honest, some of what makes for discomfort makes for considerable discomfort. Positively, if we recognise this and work at overcoming these tendencies, then we are well on the way to ensuring that everything we do gets due attention – and works – not just those things that are routine, straightforward or fun.

Now, on to how opportunity for improved performance exists if initial discomfort is addressed.

4   ISSUES TO ADDRESS

Where can you put the philosophy of managing whilst uncomfortable to work? Where in fact can you aim to get uncomfortable and benefit from it? You are searching for areas within your work that are, for one reason or another, likely to be sidelined or neglected just because *they might make you uncomfortable*. Such areas need not be significant for it be worthwhile you taking a new view of them (after all we are not talking about a great expenditure of time, cost or effort), though the results will be most dramatic with matters that are important. Better still if, in turn, they are things that link directly to your ability to create the results that you want.

Some such areas will be particular to your own job, but here I will comment on ten generic and intentionally disparate examples, chosen as likely to be of importance to many readers, and all of which lend themselves very much to the principles described here. Indeed they are chosen, in part, to demonstrate a range of different degrees and types of discomfort. Let us start with something important to many people: networking (all of us are assisted by a good network of contacts and this needs originating and sustaining).

Ten kinds of issue to address

1. Networking

There is an old saying that "it is not what you know, but who you know that counts". In the world of work this certainly contains an element of truth. The term networking encompasses the whole process of getting in touch with people and maintaining and developing that contact to the mutual benefit of both parties. Let us take one element of that: an external one. Consider the following example.

Imagine that you are scheduled to attend a conference of some sort. It may focus on a topic that is important to you and which interests you. You look forward to hearing what is said and have in mind uses for the information you will gather.

Additionally, like so many people in such a position, you hope you may meet people there who are themselves of interest to you or valuable in some way (maybe they are potential customers, maybe you hope to meet your next employer). You do not just hope to meet such people – you intend to do so. So, off you go, ready to do just that.

What happens? The next day you sit down back at your desk surrounded by all the bumph from the conference, and one solitary business card. This is from the person who happened to sit next to you, with whom you exchanged a few words at the mid-morning coffee break, and who was of no possible future interest whatsoever.

Why was this? Was it just the luck of the draw, with two hundred people there was it just unlucky that you did not sit next to someone more useful? Or does the reason lie elsewhere? Almost certainly it is the latter. Why did you not return with ten business cards, or twenty?

The personal discomfort factor here is a common one: embarrassment. If you are at all typical you looked round you and rationalised the opportunity away: *they don't look as if they would be helpful – I'm sure they would snub me – That person looks rather unapproachable – I'm not sure what to say – I can't interrupt the conversation those two are having.*
Yet is making what happens different really so difficult? All it needs is a little resolve. So:

- Resolve to network actively
- Be clear about the kind of person with whom you want to establish contact
- Set yourself a target (ten new contacts from today's conference or whatever)
- Plan some introductory remarks (questions may be best – from where they are from to what they thought of a particular session – but make them open questions, that cannot be answered by "yes" or "no" and are thus more likely to prompt a dialogue)
- Consider what can make your contact memorable and always follow up later and keep in touch over time if you do not want contacts to wither and die
- Monitor results so that you have past successes in mind when you approach someone new.

This is a very typical discomfort area and improvement can be useful to many people; even one more contact could prove useful.

Embarrassment can also prevent action in other areas, similar in nature, such as cold calling and making follow up contacts designed to prompt action or commitment from contacts already made (though such may demand more specific persuasive or sales skills as well as simply a positive commitment to take action).

Think of how valuable one current contact is and how easily you might never have got the train of events it involves started.

2. Managing your time

We all have to work within the constraints of the resources at our disposal. We are used to having only a finite budget, a particular level of staffing or other resources. Consider another resource: time. Somehow this is viewed differently. People who are instinctively careful about budgets and finances, squander time as if it was not a resource at all. Yet, unless there are executives in the worlds near Alpha Centuri bending their tentacles to the problem for longer, we all have to work within a 24-hour day.

This topic was mentioned early on; – suffice to say here that attitudes to it can be so classic that it must appear in this list. People feel – and say – that there is nothing that can be done to relieve their workload or get better organised, and do so with real conviction. But so often what they mean is – *changing my habits here needs some effort, it is difficult, so actually I will not do anything about it.* The status quo, however undesirable, can so easily continue.

This can literally affect every working hour.

3. Saying "no"

This may seem an odd example, but it very much links to time management (above). If you have too much to do then it is a fair bet that you have some things on your to do list that could have been avoided: all you had to do was to say "no" when they came up.

Now I am not suggesting that you incur the wrath of your boss by refusing their next request (though there may be occasions when a firm "no" should be addressed to the boss). I am, however, very much suggesting that you should consider saying no more often and perhaps see doing so in a different light.

Very often this is a discomfort situation where the level of discomfort is minor, though perhaps our view of it is compounded by time considerations. We do not say no, even to things which manifestly we should not be agreeing to, because:

- It will cause an argument
- The argument will take time and cause ripples
- It will need an explanation to resolve the argument; taking more time
- It will leave you looking unhelpful, or worse, even when you are right and that can be made clear
- It may be reciprocated later when you want someone else to say "yes".

Often none of these things is insurmountable. Of course, you cannot go around saying an unthinking and abrupt no to all and sundry and expect that there will be no repercussions. You may well feel discomfort if you do so, and collect more tangible disadvantages too. But surely some of these can be softened. A little tact, some explanation – and a reduction in the category of negative responses you always regret not giving can be achieved. Your reputation and profile will not take a dive, you will not be thought universally unreasonable – but you will be able to focus better on your key tasks unencumbered by some of the digressions you otherwise let yourself in for with a different approach.

This is a clear example of the sorts of thing that become habits. You have people and things about which your fear of discomfort when asked to do, or become involved in, something is instinctive – you find that, even after mild protest (which people learn means nothing), you are quickly moving into an ill considered, *I suppose so.* Better to say an enthusiastic "yes" or to say, and mean, "no" where appropriate.

This approach is also something that you can quickly tag as "firm change". Every time you feel yourself wanting to say "no" and wavering, pause, count to ten if it helps, and then resolve to not only say it, but of make it stick.

This is one clear instance when being negative can be positive; you may well end up feeling that the occasional moment's twinge of discomfort is well worthwhile.

4. Making a presentation

This example points up a rather different problem. Faced with having to make a presentation on a particular date, most people will give it some thought and be ready to stand up at the appointed time. They do, after all, recognise the pain of standing up and not being able to string one word sensibly after another. Certainly not all presentations go well (and often there are no marks out of ten, it either works – winning business or getting agreement of some other sort – or it is wasted).

In my training and consultancy work with presenters, everything from basic training to fine-tuning and rehearsal, one thing occurs repeatedly: people failing to make as good an impression as they intended admit – *I guess I did not spend sufficient time preparing.* They do not really need me to tell them this. They know preparation is key. They may well even be able to identify particular elements that preparation would have sorted; yet still they did not do enough.

This is, I believe, another aspect of the discomfort dilemma. What happens? A presentation is scheduled but time to prepare is not, or not enough. The immediate discomfort – having to rearrange activities to allow suitable preparation time, having to delay or turn down other things, perhaps having to allow other people to see how much preparation is necessary – such thoughts all end up making delaying or skimping preparation seem like *the best thing to do at the moment.*

Another factor here is a failure to accurately judge your own skills. Someone may really convince themselves they only need an hour to prepare, when the real situation is that, while they know preparation is necessary, they are uncertain how to go about it. Taking too short a time and muddling through takes longer and may still fail to do the necessary job. Or sometimes peoples' uncertainty relates to what it is – the right sort of presentation to meet the brief – which they are trying to prepare.

Such attitudes can be sustained for long periods (perhaps until a course is organised!). Yet the logic is clear. In order to make a good presentation, you need to know something about what makes a presentation good – the tricks of the trade that will allow you to plan, prepare and deliver a good one. It is unrealistic to think you can wing it, and the truth of the matter is that few people can do so, however much some good presenters may give this impression. Though experience can reduce the time preparation takes, it is usually some degree of preparation that makes a presenter seem to be "a natural", and allows them to appear to be acting effortlessly.

To quote a phrase from a training film *I wasn't prepared for that* (Video Arts): *"A presentation is the business equivalent of an open goal".* Well executed, it represents too significant an opportunity to allow discomfort to dilute it by default.

Being unrealistic about: taking the necessary time for something or the skills you need to do something well can apply to numbers of tasks and areas. For example, I encounter similar attitudes amongst delegates on business writing courses.

Do not let a shortfall in skill (which can be rectified) lead you into inappropriate decisions dictated by the thought of discomfort.

5. Idea suggestion

If there is one area where progress is often stillborn it is in the adoption of ideas. It is less that there are insufficient ideas; rather that they are snuffed out unconsidered – *I'm sure it wouldn't work* – or, because of the discomfort felt to be inherent in suggesting them, they never see the light of day in the first place.

Yet how often have you decided to bite your tongue and not to say something for fear of rejection? I wonder what significant differences there might be now in your organisation if you had tackled the discomfort and spoken out. Ideas do not care who has them, and managers should not care either. A manager is not paid to have all the ideas that are necessary to keep their operation up to date and forging ahead, but they are paid to somehow ensure that there *are* sufficient ideas to keep things moving ahead. The wise manager will encourage ideas from wherever they can, especially from around their team.

But…there is always a but. Realistically not all ideas will be welcomed with open arms in even the best-organised organisation. It is the nature of things that some will prove less than ideal; though one thing can lead to another and discussion prompted by an unacceptable idea may well lead to a better and more appropriate one being adopted. So:

Ideas may not automatically be greeted with open arms, but they should always be greeted with open minds.

So, what do you do if you have a "good idea"? You should:

- Think about it yourself before you mention it to anyone (this may be extensive or simply a moment's thought before you speak out in a meeting)
- Test it if possible (a trial run, a word with a colleague acting as a sounding board, perhaps)
- Consider it in the round: long and short term and the implications far and wide (it is possible for an idea to improve one immediate area and yet not fit more broadly)
- Then, if it seems worth real consideration, do make the suggestion, and do so with conviction
- Recognise in so doing that the best you can hope for is a good strike rate. Not all your ideas will be worth taking up, but some will and you may well gain a good reputation as an ideas person without having a one hundred percent strike rate.

It is easy to say, "suggest it", but doing so might take several forms. It might only necessitate a few words at a meeting; though they should be well chosen ones. It might mean a well-reasoned and well-documented case being made – persuasively – in a written report. Whatever is done it must be well executed, it must not fail the idea merely by making an inadequate case for it. Worth thinking about – creativity is an essential part of many jobs.

Creativity is never easy, so never let a creative input become impossible because making it may be uncomfortable.

Incidentally, creativity is necessary in every environment. The pressures of corporate life can stifle it – *there's no time just to think!* But many people are very creative given the chance (and chance can become habit). In conducting public training courses I notice that in syndicate work for example, people can be very creative; yet here, as elsewhere in the world, they sometimes comment on the difficulty of doing the same within their own company.

6. Dealing with poor performance

For those who manage others this is a classic. I am sure you do not surround yourself with incompetents, but over time and with a number of people reporting to you this does crop up. Indeed it may do so simply as a result of change: jobs move on, demand new things and suddenly someone is not doing what is really required of them any more.

This is also something that engenders classic people orientated discomfort. Only the sadists enjoy saying to someone that they are not pulling their weight. Only the chronically insecure will not respond defensively – that is a reflex – so challenging poor performance seems a sure way to argument or resentment. So, what happens? We convince ourselves that the short fall in performance is temporary – a blip. It will get better soon. Leave well alone, wait for next month's figures (or till year end, after the holiday – when the cows come home). The most common delay – coupled of course with a firm decision to tackle it head on – is to decide to wait for something specific (anything) coupled with an, often irrational, belief that *it will get better.* Maybe it will. More often it needs addressing in a positive way.

Consider the situation objectively:

- The results orientation of most jobs and organisations demand that such a situation is not left
- There are other reasons, the motivation of the rest of a team who see a passenger in their midst amongst others, that demand action
- The outcome is, by definition positive: an improvement (one the poor performer will regard positively if it is well handled)
- The analysis and action are not complicated.

That being so, why does poor performance tend to be allowed to continue too long? In a word because dealing with it is felt to engender – discomfort. This may not be true. It surely should be the case that any employee knows what performance is required of them and that they are thus aware when their performance is slipping. If so, the problem being addressed will not come as a surprise to them; they will expect it to need dealing with. In many circumstances the outcome will be positive all round – better performance and someone ultimately reassured that they are back on track. Only if such things are not regularly and constructively addressed will people respond badly to the one occasion when something is done.

The options for action are, in any case, few. When faced with poor performance there are only three things you can do:

1. Put up with it; which is not to be recommended
2. Correct it, taking action to ensure satisfactory performance occurs in future
3. Remove the person from the job and replace them with someone who can perform to standard (this might mean rearranging work allocation and moving a task, moving the poor performer to different work or terminating their employment).

Addressing the correction of performance is again conceptually straightforward. Either the person is:

- Able to perform as you want, but is not doing so
- Not able to do what is required of them.

In the first case, you may need to apply discipline and/or motivation, and initially it is sensible to ascertain why the lapse is occurring: have they taken their eye off the ball, do they have a problem at home – or what? In the second case you need to develop them so that they can do better, and this, as has been said, may be necessary only because of some change. Such a change may be unexpected, external and mean there is no reflection on the staff member for not having the ideal current level of skill.

The time to take further action, to remove the person, is when action has been taken to correct matters (and sufficient time allowed) and no improvement is forthcoming. The timing is important, it may take a while for someone to become adept at something new, for instance, and there may be other delays even when the cause has been identified; for example a slot may need to be found for someone to attend a training course.

Note: if, as occasionally happens, the problem can only be reconciled with a drastic solution then this too must be addressed promptly. The most difficult option is firing people. Such action needs the mandatory preliminary of a careful checking of procedure and of employment legislation (the latter, it should be noted, is becoming ever more complex). Beyond that the action needs taking and taking promptly. The decision may have in a sense to be ruthless, but it is always the best policy (and good public relations) to sever employment on as fair, amicable and generous a basis as possible.

There may be many forms of remedial action possible, but the sequence and principle of action described here is clear. So too are the penalties of taking no action and leaving poor performance to continue: just imagine it in terms of any job for which you are responsible.

A little action soon – a stitch in time, if you like – is always going to be better than a delay and then real drama and difficulty.

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7. Confrontational situations

Some problems combine factors in a way that enhances their potential difficulty. Such may be exceptional, but involve conflict between people, which may be potential or actual. One example is the breaking of rules. Sometimes this may be straightforward, as with poor timekeeping, which is simple to the extent that someone is either in late or not (though the validity of the reasons for it may be difficult to judge). On other occasions it may be less clear, as with a less than well-described office dress code that needs some subjective interpretation.

In all such cases there is the threat of argument and a defensive response if you broach it with the perpetrator. Discomfort rears its head again; confrontation is not high on most peoples' list of favourite things. So there are plenty of reasons to let things ride. You:

- Hope something is an isolated incident and will not reoccur
- Hope that something will prompt change without your intervention (others muttering about bad timekeeping, say)
- Think there is a chance of action making things worse.

There is also the skills problem. If the matter is exceptional – as something like bullying or discrimination hopefully is, for example – then you may have no prior experience of what to do. Putting yourself in a position to know what to do is going to take time and effort, and busyness provides a seemingly "good" reason to put that off.

Other factors can compound these difficulties. Maybe the person you need to address about such behaviour is older or more experienced than you are, maybe a difference in gender makes things more stressful (despite the politically correct and fair society we are now supposed to inhabit). For these reasons and more some things really do suggest major discomfort to come. So, what to do?

First it should be said that dealing with such things is made immeasurably easier by clear, well spelt out guidelines and consistency of practice. If you let things go half the time, especially if the rules have an element of ambiguousness about them, then you can confidently expect a greater level of confrontation when you do pick on someone (and they will certainly see it as picking on them if you make them the exception). Secondly, it is such things of which the following maxim could not be truer:

If you leave a difficult problem then it becomes, not easier, but more difficult; and rarely, if ever, does it go away.

Delay can have further negative results. For instance, if you do not deal with a case of bullying, then the person bullied may raise it at a higher level. You will then not only have to sort it out with someone else watching to see how well you handle it, but have to explain why it was not dealt with promptly in the first place.

Yes, there is unavoidable discomfort in some things that must be dealt with, but it must be done.

When you see this sort of trouble on the horizon always remind yourself not of the pain of dealing with it now, but of the greater pain all round of dealing with it later.

8. Job appraisal interviews

Many mangers take appraising their staff very seriously. It is, after all, a significant opportunity to ensure good performance in the coming period and to set up any matters, for example development, that will enhance its likelihood. But, there are sadly also many managers who find the whole process very awkward. The result is people who find that what should be an important event in the year is awkward for them too and, worse, offers no practical benefit or satisfaction.

So, here is an example of pending discomfort that affects activity throughout the year. Appraisals, well-conducted appraisals, do not just happen. They are the culmination of planning and activities that must take place on a considered, ongoing basis through the year. The awkwardness is often, in my experience, due to uncertainty about how to conduct such a meeting well. The trouble is that if the matter is down graded from the beginning because of this overall feeling of discomfort, then the necessary preliminary processes are omitted or skimped. As a result, come the day it is almost impossible to do justice to the meeting and failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The moral?

Do not end up trading avoiding some discomfort early on in a process for a double ration at a later date.

The correct handling of job appraisal meetings is too broad a topic to review in detail here, however two overriding principles are paramount. It is in the nature of a successful appraisal that:

- The appraisee does most of the talking (though the appraiser may need to chair the meeting)
- The focus, and weight of time and discussion, is on the *future* more than the past (the two go together, of course, but the end results are action for the future, albeit stemming, in part, from the experience of the period just gone).

Approached in the right way this is one of management's greatest opportunities to enhance good future performance.

Enough said. *Note:* If you are being appraised rather than appraising others, see: *"Career boost: Job performance appraisal: surviving and thriving from it"* in this series.

9. Positive use of rules

All managers these days are surely well aware that management is not simply about telling people what to do. Consultation in all its forms is the order of the day. The problem (again) is time. What do you consult about and what do you not? Consultation is more than a mechanism to solicit agreement to action. It can also be an essentially creative process and should prompt ideas – everything from new ways of doing things to new things to do.

That being so action is necessary to make sufficient time available to consult whenever it is advantageous to do so. You cannot discuss everything, and one way to avoid issues being inappropriately time consuming is to have, and stick to, some good operational rules. In other words there should be some things people simply take as givens, accept and do not argue about – with the compensating benefit that it is seen as clearing the way for other, more useful, consultation and feedback.

Making and sticking to rules is another classic discomfort area. It has to be well considered and appropriate; and ensuring this is so takes time. There is the worry that rules will be thought draconian, cause resentment and that sorting that out will waste more time. The trick is to make good rules and explain them; and to do so not only individually in terms of their sense or necessity, but in terms of saving time.

People actually like to know the ground rules. They like to "know where they are". But if things are not clear, then anarchy can rule – and the time taken up with pleadings of special circumstances, exceptions and precedents runs riot.

One example, which I like and which well illustrates the principle here, concerns a field sales team (though the principle could apply in other ways). Renown for hating admin, external sales people tend to be dilatory about filling in reports, forms and the like. In one company the rule was established that unless every form (there were only half a dozen or so) was in on time at the end of each month, and was complete and legible – then response to the form designed to record expenses and trigger repayment (something that was never late!) was delayed until the following month.

The effect was revolutionary. Suddenly administration was completed properly. The monthly time-consuming chore of chasing those who were late (in a situation where information had to be consolidated and was useless until everyone had submitted it), returning things that were incomplete and waiting again for their return – all ceased. The time saved was significant. To make the rule acceptable, time was given to other issues the team wanted addressed, and that time was labelled as available because of their more disciplined behaviour. I know of a number of organisations that operate this policy successfully.

The point here is that this was quickly accepted and worked well – as can be many other similarly sensible rules. The creation of such may seem difficult, but an uncomfortable moment can lead you to a situation where actually future difficulty that would otherwise be ongoing is reduced or removed.

Seeming uncertainty and difficulty can be turned into something positive, changing both how things are seen and done.

10. Powerful people

Finally, an example designed to show that discomfort may well come, and be as tangible, not from what you have to do, but from the circumstances in which you have to do it. Dealing with someone senior – and daunting – is a good example of exactly that.

Maybe it is the boss. Maybe it is someone else from the higher reaches of the organisation. Either may be made more daunting by reputation – though this may compare less than accurately with reality – or imagination.

The discomfort of having to deal with an unknown quantity is, nevertheless, real. Above all rejection is probably the commonest fear. This may just be a fear of their irritation – *they don't have time for me* – or of an idea being rejected and the encounter tarring you with a brush that ensures future encounters are worse – *they'll never take me seriously again.*

Because of all such feelings, the now well described fear of discomfort and thus inaction follows. Things are put off, ideas are left pending and then forgotten and instead of working actively to create and maintain good relations with such people, a significantly important area of work activity is in danger of being ignored as part of what could make you effective and help achieve objectives.

It is perhaps worth noting in passing that bosses can contribute to or create this feeling in others. It is a sure sign of a poor manager if their team assume any summons, especially an urgent one, means something is wrong. If the majority of contacts are positive and constructive, then this feeling will not be engendered – something for everyone who manages others to think on.

So, how does one avoid an uncomfortable feeling when dealing with the senior and powerful? Two things are key:

- *The person:* be sure that your dealings are based on a factual view of the person. Ignore the rumours and beware of false impressions and untypical precedents; just because someone was short with you once does not mean that they will never make time for you in the future. So find out about them and let the facts dictate the way you deal with things.
- *Their methods:* similarly try to understand something of how they work. They are busy; and they may have many people reporting to and in touch with them. What does this mean? That they appreciate good use of time, getting to the point promptly, a clear brief and matters being handled the way they want. For example, in a meeting they may give you a specific time – *Okay, let's hear it, you've got ten minutes.* The response to this must not be to struggle and fail to keep to it, doing no justice to what you have to say. You have to respect it. By all means negotiate it, by all means limit what you try to do in it – *Right, in that time let me just describe this and this* – but make sure they know they are getting a considered and appropriate response and not a panic-stricken one.

Note: if in doubt ask, or do some checking.

As an effective person, if you act on the basis of some thought and logic, then there is no reason why you cannot deal with a few seemingly scary people as well as you deal with any others.

Do not let the smokescreen of false information or assumption create discomfort where none should exist.

More opportunities

With these specific examples in mind, once the reflex of truly considering something with a view to action, and in the knowledge that this is truly preferable to allowing it to be sidelined by default, is established, then you can usefully comb innumerable incoming tasks, both immediate and occasional (e.g. staff recruitment), and situations for this opportunity.

Think positive, watch for opportunities and develop the habit of tackling the uncomfortable as a priority.

5   PLANNING TO CHANGE

If you spot something in limbo (actually or about to be) – be honest, and use it as an example:

Pick something with clear discomfort elements to it, and think about it in a way that enables you to list both the good effects of dealing with it promptly and well, and the negative results of leaving it unresolved.

The wide range of results

For example, if you were to select the poor performance of a member of your team, touched on earlier, you could list what the results of addressing and changing it would include:

- An improvement in performance (be specific and list all the ways in which this might be measured: speed, accuracy, revenue generated – whatever)
- An avoidance of the worse problems to which continuing poor performance might lead
- An opportunity for personal development (for instance extending a skill the standard of which might have been diluting performance)
- The possibility of extending the range of responsibilities in light of the improved skill
- A opportunity for positive personal motivation (because development, constructively done, is always motivational)
- An opportunity for positive team motivation (no one in a group likes passengers, and if development is available that is seen as good for everyone)
- The clearing of any unpleasant atmosphere engendered around the team by the problem not being addressed as a positive motivational effect kicks in
- A positive improvement in image (either of your department within the organisation or outside too, certainly if performance affects customers)
- An increase in positive ongoing management communication and counselling useful to the individual and appreciated by the whole team
- A boost to your own performance (you are doubtless judged not only on what you do, but also how any team operates).

Perhaps you can extend such a list: certainly you might add longer-term factors such as a contribution to staff retention, or add the ability to focus on and get done some key job itself delayed by the problem. You might also want to add the reward of a certain personal satisfaction that comes from seeing a problem well resolved. Similarly you could list the penalties of inaction: from ongoing and deteriorating performance and motivation to sanctions from above.

It is certainly worth noting that such lists may be long. The ramifications of an uncomfortable problem may extend far and wide – perhaps worrying far and wide. It would be wrong to get hung up on the word "problem". Other examples might be much more positive. Someone might sideline making presentations, worrying that their skill in making them is inadequate, but might be well aware of the many advantages of being able to do them with sufficient clarity and clout. As an old proverb has it: *Behind every problem there is an opportunity – all you have to do is recognise the fact.*

Analyse the chosen situation

Having selected an example, then take stock. Ask:

- What are the reasons for not addressing it (or why you do so with circumspection or unease)?
- Are the reasons practical (like the lack of being sure what to do or how to do it) or emotional (just seeming unpleasant or difficult)?
- If practical, then what steps are indicated to get over the hurdle (as in training in presentational skills)?

If the pressure is psychological, maybe it needs no more than identifying – *I know I am being silly about this,* then all that may be necessary is an act of will. Just do it. More likely the check will throw up some necessary preliminary action. This could take real time and effort, as if you schedule attendance on a presentations skills course. But it may be comparatively simple. You need only check a reference, have a word with a colleague or access some guidelines as to how to proceed. It could only need a moment's careful consideration. Additionally, maybe you need to consider method, or maybe you only need to think about manner – you know how to address the poor performance question, say, but want to do so in a way that comes across as motivational rather than negative.

In any event you should take the necessary preliminary action first before proceeding with the test. If you pitch into something, determined to address it head on, but still unsure how to make it work, the danger is that it will not only be distinctly uncomfortable, but that the situation will not be resolved either. Discomfort will increase, probably attended by your kicking yourself because you knew the likely outcome. In the poor performance example, fear of causing resentment and denial and of making matters worse are probably prime amongst the reasons for taking it slow.

Forearmed and appropriately equipped in terms of knowledge and skill as to how best to tackle it there is every reason to believe that all will go well. At best you will find yourself wondering why you ever saw it as a major discomfort trap in the first place.

With such an exercise gone through very consciously your ability to be momentarily uncomfortable and yet emerge not only unscathed, but also victorious, will be well demonstrated. Good, so far; what next?

Creating a positive habit

The next step is to do more and to create circumstances that allow you to see this and similar situations differently in future. You need to:

- Keep the problem in mind; keep your discomfort zone spotting antenna tuned in
- Stop looking for the "easy way", especially stop pretending that an easy way will appear in time if you wait
- Stop feeling inadequate about your situation. You are normal. Everyone is subject to the discomfort trap – though not everyone breaks out of it
- Not rate yourself in negative terms – be confident and believe you can do what you want (or do what will enable you to do what you want)
- Actively reject past negative influences that may have led you into the discomfort trap; that was then, this is now.

Two things together can ensure you tackle things like this and win:

- *The right attitude*: it really does help to think in the way described above, rather than allowing an unfounded rationalisation to lead you into simply acting to avoid any looming discomfort.
- This is very much an area where *experience* boosts morale and a commitment to do more. After all we all know in our heart of hearts that our approach to some things is less than positive – seeing such areas resolved satisfactorily is almost bound to be a catalyst to more, similar, action.

An experiment was suggested above, one task approached in full awareness of its potential discomfort and with every intention of working through it. If you are successful, then promptly go on and try something else in the same way. If it is not successful, pause, ask why and go on to the next experiment in light of what it has taught you. Repeated attempts to break out of the trap are likely to succeed

Some things fall into a pattern. Find a way through one and you can deal with them all. Others are essentially one-off. So be it, they need individual thought, planning and execution – but the successful approach evolved in this way can be applied elsewhere. Of course, some discomfort traps may be caused by a significant gap of some sort in you or your competencies; a skill that needs enhancing is a good example. Once addressed, however, the same principle applies – the more future tasks you will be in a position to address in a straightforward and positive way.

The action lies with you. As much as anything, this book is addressed to successful people. It shows that, however experienced and effective you are, there are ways of enhancing your achievements. As John Wooden said: *It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.*

The approach described here is one that not only can potentially enhance results and do so fast, it can substantially improve your job satisfaction along the way. Only not taking advantage of this is really an uncomfortable thought; ask what that attitude will do to your future success.

Go for it and remember:

Change is only another word for growth, another synonym for learning.
We can all do it if we want to.

– Professor Charles Handy

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