



CUTTINGS

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Compiled and edited by Geof Cox

DOES YOUR ORGANISATION FLOCK?

A word of explanation to non-English native speaking readers about the title. Birds flock when they fly and group together. The idea of people flocking in organisations comes from author and ex-Shell executive Arie de Geus in his books and articles on *The Living Company*.

He takes his inspiration from biology studies carried out by Nobel Laureate Allan Wilson. Wilson discovered that some song birds were the only species to evolve faster than man, and in proving his case, studied the evolution of the Blue Tit and Robin in Britain. Here is the story:

Britain has a tradition of delivering milk to people's homes, leaving the bottle on the doorstep. In the early years, the milk was left uncovered, and both Blue Tits and Robins soon discovered that the cream on the top of the milk was both tasty and easy to get. In the 1930s, dairies started to put aluminium foil caps on the bottles. Both the Blue Tits and Robins were foiled in their attempts to get at the cream.

However, fairly soon, some isolated Robins and Blue Tits discovered that they could peck through the foil to get at the cream. Whether these indiv-

iduals were more intelligent or just plain lucky is not important. What is important is what happened next.

Within 20 years, the total Blue Tit population (1 million strong) from the North of Scotland to the far South of England had learned how to peck through the bottle caps and drink the cream. For the Robin population, only isolated individual birds could perform the task. What made the difference in the speed of learning?

The answer lay in the social habits of the two species. Robins are fiercely territorial. They protect their own space, and are violent towards other Robins who attempt to invade (whether by intent or accident). On the other hand, Blue tits are very social birds. They group together and welcome members of their species to their flock. When they flock, they are able to pass on the new skills to each other, so that in a short period of time, even the Blue Tit with the severest learning difficulty will have mastered the new survival skill. Robins do not flock. They have no mechanism for passing on learning through the species.

Arie de Geus compares most of our organisation structures and communication (especially those of the board-

room) to the Robin. We have fiefdoms and hierarchies who protect their own territory and attack anyone who is likely to pose a threat from another part of the organisation (like another department). Information is not passed freely, and the organisation does not learn.

All of our attempts at business process reorganisation, knowledge management and cross functional teamworking will come to naught if we continue to behave like Robins. Organisations need to learn to flock.

How can we develop the flocking spirit? Large Group Interventions may provide some of the answers. These highly participative events focus sharing and learning in large groups (flocks), where traditional corporate communication tends to reinforce our Robin behaviour.

Robins may be one of our favourite birds to decorate Christmas cards and cakes, but they are not a good role model for organisations.

Birds that flock together, learn faster. Does your organisation flock? Would you like to be more like the Blue Tit?

The Living Company: A Recipe for Success in the New Economy, *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter, 1998

Have Fun at Work... & The Jester

Fun, growth and innovation must be a part of your workplace culture. The reason: not all of your staff will be judging your attractiveness as an employer based on advancement opportunities.

According to a survey of 1,000 full-time employees conducted over the past year, the vast majority (95%) are 'very' or 'somewhat' confident that they will keep their jobs, but far fewer (73%) are 'very' or 'somewhat' confident they will advance within their current organisation.

"Now that there is less 'up' available, employees must have opportunities to broaden their skills, contribute to cross-department initiatives, and seek a variety of developmental opportunities," says survey editor Paul Wesman of Right Management Consultants. "This helps retain top performers who might leave the organization if they saw no future there."

Bridging the Career Confidence Gap, Right Management Consultants

Paul Birch works as a Corporate Jester. Having first designed the role when working for British Airways, he now works with other organisations. He helps cut through the fear and complacency and unleashing honesty and creativity, by stirring things up, using the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* as his model. "Just because you're the boss doesn't mean that you know better..." *Fast Company, November*

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New Directions Ltd, 26a Downleaze, Stoke Bishop, Bristol BS9 1LZ, UK
Phone +44 (0)117 968 1451, Fax+44 (0)117 968 1625, Email GeofCox@compuserve.com, Website www.newdirections.uk.com

Snippets

A collection of thought provokers and quotations- a full page to celebrate the end of the year and including things heard at this year's IPD Conference.

- ⌘ We all have comfort zones that are several sizes too small.
- ⌘ According to a study of 622 top executives a clear majority say annual vacations are "essential" to keeping their job performance up and maintaining a positive state of mind in both their personal lives (68%) and at work (63%). Vacation time is so important that 70% would keep their vacation if offered a 10% raise for one week of their vacation time. *Spreadsheets to Sunshine: Executives on Vacation, Roper Starch Worldwide*
- ⌘ Men are 40 times more likely to interrupt than women during a conversation between a man and a woman
- ⌘ Although we hate to admit it, we generally have good people and poor leaders. *Aubrey Woodfolk, General Motors*
- ⌘ It's not enough to just cram more knowledge into people's heads. The company itself must learn. We have to do more than merely spend more on training and education. *Arie de Geus*
- ⌘ All our imagery comes from the military or sport where it's about the will to win and avoiding defeat. Instead, I want to use the image of symphonia which means coming together. *Benjamin Zander*
- ⌘ It's often difficult to distinguish a vision from the ego of the CEO. *Gary Hamel*
- ⌘ What do 13 people in Seattle know that we don't? *Ross Perot when offered Microsoft in 1980*
- ⌘ Unless we have a category in our minds we cannot see or hear what is happening. *Benjamin Zander*
- ⌘ PETSMART stores are increasing the employment of over-50s as customers appreciate their maturity and experience. *The Times*
- ⌘ Being a conductor is not about dominating my players, but releasing their ability. *Benjamin Zander*
- ⌘ Our motto is 'screw it, let's do it'. *Virgin Group*
- ⌘ I've never heard the Chairman talk about shareholder returns. He's always talking about the customer. *Charles Schwab*
- ⌘ We do fundamental strategic thinking every two to three years involving hundreds of people over a six month period. *Monsanto*
- ⌘ When I meet my maker and she says 'What have you done with your life?', I want to say something more than 20% ROE. *Monsanto senior executive*
- ⌘ We don't talk about market share because when people talk about market share they are defining their market too narrowly. *GE Capital*
- ⌘ 86% of consumers (94% in the 25-34 age group) expect a better service and 56% complain more than they did 5 years ago; 55% now say service is more important than price in the purchasing decision, and 82% would switch supplier if not satisfied. *NOP*
- ⌘ The manager maintains while the leader develops; where the manager relies on control, the leader inspires trust. *Warren Bennis*
- ⌘ You start with the perception that the world is an unlimited opportunity. Then the question becomes 'How are we going to rebuild the planet?' *Bill Strickland*
- ⌘ I believe—and we've seen ample proof of this—that any group of minds is better than any individual mind. Our job is to harness the brainpower we have *Ronald Davidowski, DPR Construction*
- ⌘ Failure is just part of the culture of innovation. Accept it and become stronger. *Albert Yu, V.P., Intel*
- ⌘ The best leaders spend 20% of their time creating a vision for the future. *Cranfield School of Management study*
- ⌘ Two-thirds of employees in the UK's biggest companies feel undervalued, uninvolved and lack confidence in their leaders. *MORI Research*
- ⌘ Family-friendly workplaces with parents allowed time with their children, flexible working hours and well paid part-time jobs are the way of the future. *Lord Irvine*

... and finally—a topical Snippet:

- ⌘ 24 hours in a day...24 beers in a case...coincidence? *Steven Wright*

SEASON'S GREETINGS

Once again, I will not be sending individual greetings cards this year, but making a charitable donation instead. So through the medium of this edition of *CUTTINGS* I would like to wish all my friends and colleagues, customers and readers every happiness over the forthcoming holiday season, and a fulfilling and peaceful 1999.

MORE INFORMATION

Cuttings is published on the New Directions web-site (address below), where you will find downloadable copies of recent issues and articles, plus connections to source material and reference books. Also on the site you will find information on the international network of consultants and trainers who distribute *Cuttings* and who work together to research, design and provide world-wide consulting and training in management, organisation and individual development across cultures, sectors, subjects, and languages.

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Geof Cox
New Directions Ltd,
26 Downleaze, Bristol BS9 1LZ, UK
phone: +44 (0)117 968 1451
fax: +44 (0)117 968 1625
web: www.newdirections.uk.com
email: GeofCox@compuserve.com