

THE COMMUNITY COMPANY:

A paper presented to the City University Business School, London, 1982 by N.M.J. Moore

The definition which rests at the heart of the community company is that "Work is the means of personal and community fulfilment". The straightforward application of this suggests that unless a person is in some way enhanced or magnified by his association with the company then there is no reason why that association should continue. This contradicts one socially accepted approach which we have found in many areas of industry and which suggests that the pay a person receives is compensation he needs for the work he has to do to earn it.

However since money is one of the major incentives to work in our society, how does personal fulfilment, which can often mean anything but money, fit in?

Over the last ten years we have explored, in a practical, living experiment, this and many other problems, first in a company called Graef Associates Ltd., and then as InterActions (UK) Ltd.. Since our motive has been personal fulfilment and happiness we wondered what would happen if we allowed our business to develop as a natural organisation -

placing great emphasis on the process of communication and little emphasis on doing things because "thats how they have always been done".

There was no starting grant, no input of capital to soften the blows of commercial life during this turbulent decade. The whole thing started with two people, Kevin and Venika Kingsland, who initially wanted to share some educational programmes. They had some ideas on the structure of human personality and the nature of human communication - but, apart from a great deal of enthusiasm had little else. The experiment has touched thousands of people from Devon to Cumbria and involved up to fifty adults working full time, with all the regular problems that people have, whether they be mortgages or children, desires for status or feelings of inadequacy.

Some aspects of this experiment have been reported elsewhere (1-6). There can be little doubt now that the approach of the community company is very successful - it works! As such it presents an opportunity for a creative way out of our current world social and commercial difficulties. If the world is experiencing the dualities of:

Capital v Labour

Boss v Worker

Employed v Unemployed

then the community company is the creative step, the synthesis of thesis and antithesis, which we can use to move forward. My purpose here, then, is to review some of the

operational elements of this organisation. Elements which are the hallmark of its difference (and its success).

It is often difficult to share through the written word something which by its very nature is at right angles to conventional thinking and which really can only be known through personal experience. Rather like flying an aeroplane - you can read all about it, watch films, even practice on a simulator, but nothing is like the actual experience of being aloft by yourself, skipping through the clouds or rolling off the top of a loop into a near vertical spin. Or just the satisfaction of making the perfect landing. However I hope you will forgive the limitations of my writing and maybe get some idea of the sheer fun and joy of working in this kind of environment.

Briefly then InterActions (UK) Ltd., is a community company based in Frome, Somerset, and its primary commercial activity is in trading as The Whole Food Company. As such it imports, manufactures and distributes natural foods throughout an area of approximately 30,000 square miles. It is also licensed as a Road Haulage Operator and increasingly carries goods for other concerns.

ROLE EVOLUTION

The way in which an individual becomes involved is rather unusual. Since the purpose of the company is to satisfy the persons needs rather than the other way round

then the job a person does is a product of that person's interaction with the company. Obviously there are certain practical limitations - we could not provide a mine for a coalminer to work in but it may be that his drive to work could be satisfied in another way which would be acceptable to him. A consequence of this approach is that there is a greater flexibility in the understanding of what a job is and there is the discovery that a person's role can develop with him. So then a role or title is a description of what a person does rather than a position which someone is promoted to fill. In other words a manager is someone who can manage. He who does the job gets the title.

It has been our experience that most people who become involved in the community company do not, initially at least, have a clear idea of what it is that they want to do. For such people there are always jobs that can be done which both help the company operate smoothly and also allow the person to find out by trial and error exactly what they do want to do. As this process evolves you tend to develop a group of people who increasingly know what they want in life and have a lot of fun attaining it. This in turn develops a certain cultural attitude within the company which is highly contagious and could be called positive expectation or simply optimism. Since the way the company works highlights the interdependence of our various activities it soon becomes clear that each person is positively motivated to help the other, since only in that way will his/her own area

of responsibility work for him. These interactions lead to a "rounding-off" of personalities so that the positive qualities of each one tend to be enhanced and shared by the group. So it is that we magnify one another.

EMPLOYMENT

Since a person's involvement in the company is not usually in response to a job advertisement, then we have found that the relationship between an individual and the company varies from person to person. This relationship appears to be defined by the extent to which that person identifies the company as being able to fulfil his/her needs. Although there is an obvious difference between the person who is playing a centrally directing role and the one who comes in once a fortnight to help out, it is still difficult to pinpoint exactly at which point a person could be said to be "working for the company". We call this state which is neither employed nor unemployed **Employment**. This brings into question the idea of remuneration - how do you pay someone who is employed?

REMUNERATION THROUGH PATERNALISM

The conventional wage approach does not work in one significant way; we have frequently found that money is not what normally fulfils people - it may be an apparent means to that end, however it is not very often money itself which is needed. Unless this discrimination is rigorously applied then a great deal of time and personal energy can be used up

pursuing money for extrinsic reasons, which are inherently unsatisfactory. For a year we tried a simple wages system, but it did not work, it became apparent that paying a wage was a substitute for communication - and a poor one at that. Since the communication process is a corner-stone of the community company then anything which limits or glosses over that process reduces our ability to fulfil ourselves and be effective.

We thus practice something which can be described as **Remuneration through Paternalism**. This is simply a process whereby each person receives according to his needs. This prospect seems to provoke more reaction than any other in those who are not familiar with it, however the proof of the pudding is in the eating and results so far suggest that this particular scheme works well. It has actually provided a number of people with an experience of wealth and a more challenging lifestyle than would normally be expected. Don't forget that the object of the company is fulfilment and happiness - that does not go hand in hand with deprivation and financial hardship.

The proposal of this particular modus operandi suggests an apparent contradiction since on the one hand there does not appear to be a direct relationship between a person's working week and their reward (in terms of £'s/hr.) and yet for the enterprise to be commercially successful it must obey certain basic laws of business as regards profitability and the percentages available for personnel. The resolution

of this contradiction is that the appreciation of a person's needs is an interactive on-going dynamic process, involving regular weekly meetings with each person. As a consequence of these meetings it is apparent that the actual relationship between a person's working week and the support they receive from the company is very simple. It is the person's contribution which is important. After all since the whole thing is about personal development and fulfilment then surely it is exquisitely reasonable that someone's own contribution should be the cause of their satisfaction? In fact our experiences suggest that that is the only source of personal growth. However much we try to do things for others or save them from a particular heartache it becomes increasingly apparent that each one of us needs, and in fact wishes to learn our own particular lessons. The end result of all this is that both the individual and the community benefit from an attitude of "what can I put into this?" rather than "what's in it for me?". Since this extends beyond the person then the result is not only challenging and exciting - it is also caring and sympathetic.

DECISION-MAKING BY CONSPIRACY

This extension of each person's ego bubble to include others in the company brings about an approach which might be called "inclusiveness" and turns out to be the key to the decision-making process. Our observation of most organisations is that many of the bad decisions turn out to

be inoperative simply because the people who need to carry them out or who are directly affected by them feel that they have been excluded from the decision. Their experience is one of having been put upon by others and of having no power. However by practising a form of positive conspiracy we find that the reverse is the case. The act of open conspiracy, in a way which includes others, means that decisions are made smoothly and effectively. It also means that the decision reflects a community view and will have community power to make it work. Retrospectively, when asked "how did you decide this or that thing?" (such as which type of computer-system to get for the company) it has often been difficult to pin down a particular decision point. It has seemed that the decision made itself and that it did so as a result of "checking it out" with other people. This may appear slow or vague but the practice of it certainly is not, any more than the internal decisions made by the human body. Our bodies are constantly making countless decisions which involve communication and conspiracy amongst many different organs and cell structures. There is no single "boss" issuing directives (certainly not the brain) and yet this beautiful and awesome community of cells carries us through life with incredible efficiency, not to mention pleasure.

A natural consequence of this way of making decisions is that each person identifies more strongly with what is happening or about to happen in his/her particular area. If he/she has been included in the decision making process then

he/she will almost certainly see an advantage to themselves in it's enactment. This motivates him/her to see it through and to overcome any unforeseen difficulties which may arise.

THE ABILITY TO RESPOND

Thus as a consequence of role evolution, remuneration through paternalism and decision making by conspiracy, we have a new attitude to responsibility being expressed. Responsibility is demonstrated by a person who is able to respond in a particular way, rather than being a quality which is somehow given by a superior. This avoids the problem of a person being told that they are responsible for something of which they may never have been capable and yet at the same time allows each person to experience the consequences of their own actions. When this happens in a positive, forward looking atmosphere it becomes the feedback loop of a dynamic action-learning situation. Over the years it has become apparent to us that this approach allows each of us to develop very rapidly as successful people. And not just successful in business but in life as a whole.

A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Since the commitment of the company is to self-development then it necessarily means that the company as an organism must develop - or die. Inevitably, since it is still early days, this paper is in the nature of a progress report

on some aspects of the community company. The application of many of our approaches to British Industry in general might seem far fetched - based on a response of "well it's okay for you guys, but that would not work in the real world". But each year that goes by makes that response more the cry of a doomed species. If understanding reality can be measured by the ability to learn from the past, act successfully in the present and to create a positive future then the great mass of British Industry is out of touch with the real world. Many of our so called Captains of Industry (and here I include the spectrum from politicians to trade unionists) simply do not know what to do. Fortunately, many of them are beginning to realise that a different approach is needed. Not just some variations on an old theme but something creatively different. The community company is still evolving, but it is certainly different - it offers a breath of fresh air into the sterile atmosphere of traditional working practices. Because it has no limiting political or philosophical affiliations it does not exclude anyone. Since it's purpose is to enhance and reflect personal development then it can work where-ever there are human beings. At the same time it must be recognised as only one approach to the challenges which face man today. If for any reason what we are doing was no longer appropriate or did not work then by definition we would be looking for something which did.

IN CONCLUSION

The community company is dependent upon the voluntary interactions of people positively pursuing their own self-interests. The nature of the company is such that it becomes apparent that a consequence of this is community evolution. We do not think that we have found anything "new", we just feel that we have identified and are using some very natural processes.

Adam Smith says (Wealth of Nations (1)477):

As every individual, therefore endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that it's product may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner that it's produce may be of the greatest value he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectually

than when he really intends to promote it.

The community company is one which enables that "invisible hand" to manifest smoothly and effectively through man's day-to-day affairs.

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