People leaders might baulk at the idea of an ‘emotional’ workplace, but emotion is a positive force if channelled properly.

We tend to think of organisations as rational places. Places where decisions are made on the basis of external, observable data. Of course, they are partly that. But organisations are also emotional, chaotic, political and anxiety-provoking places: they are both emotional and emotion generating.

We rarely return from work extolling the virtues of technical tasks. We are more likely to talk about our feelings in relation to those tasks. Yet, if we are to believe research, emotion is generally identified as inferior to thought and reason in the workplace. This positioning is mirrored in the elevation of some emotions relative to others: the positive emotions signal good; the emotions most of us complain of when we wish to “kick the dog” are bad.

At its most pernicious, this hierarchy is transformed into the utilitarian employment of emotion as a vehicle for advancement, recognition and intelligence. Emotion challenges the restrictions of scientific management with its view of organisations as rational enterprises engaged in productive, efficient tasks facilitated by processes, systems and protocols. Emotion as a disruptor of these ideas is relegated to the ‘irrational’ camp, the dark side. Emotion is the spoiler in the orderly world of management as well as its literature.

An intolerable exhibition
Sigmund Freud described this dilemma in his introduction of psychoanalysis to the English-speaking world at Clark University in 1909. Freud describes a speaker delivering a talk as a noisy heckler in the audience interrupts proceedings. The heckler is evicted from the audience and the guards go so far as to place chairs against the door to ensure that the heckler cannot re-enter. Even though the door is closed, the muffled protest is still audible, “for now he is making an intolerable exhibition of himself outside the room, and his shouting and banging on the door with his fists interfere with my lecture even more than his bad behaviour did before”.

The popular delusion
What Freud (and many other management scholars since his time) tells us is that the more we try to delude ourselves that reason trumps feeling, the more we will find ourselves confronted with unpredictable behaviour in the workplace that seems to appear from nowhere. Absenteeism, illness, procrastination, resistance and bad behaviour are only some of the ways in which we creatively bring emotion back into the room. Similarly, trying to generate particular ‘positive’ emotions (such as happiness and satisfaction) and negate others (such as anger or disappointment) will backfire as it isn’t possible to only occupy one end of the emotion spectrum.

Proponents of ‘positive thinking’ try to persuade us that changing how we think will change how we feel. Unfortunately, telling ourselves that ill-fitting shoes are ‘grand’ will do nothing but create painful blisters and the development of bad feet. The positive workplace ‘industry’ is flourishing right now as we buy into the idea that feeling bad is simply a character flaw, one that is easily remedied by appropriate training, coaching and mentoring. So, is it wrong to feel angry if I am being bullied at work? No. It’s an entirely appropriate response that needs to be heard and addressed. Shutting the door on negative emotion and telling our colleagues to ‘cheer up’ and ‘think positively’ denies the lived experience of organisational members as they negotiate workplace relationships and the pressures of organisational performance.

A creative intervention
Emotion is a sophisticated form of organisational intelligence. Adopting a position of curiosity in relation to the creative ways in which emotion presents itself can offer fascinating insights into how organisations function and what an organisation’s members deem important.

However, reducing the bias towards the ‘rational’ work space, and expanding one’s considerations to the full range of emotions, may be the most creative intervention of all.

Emotion: the spoiler Annette Clancy

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