HRD Forum — Book Review

Towards People-Centred
Organizational Development

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Andy Swann's book *The Human Workplace* offers an engaging twist on the old adage people are an organization's greatest assets. As he notes himself in the final chapter the book should not be looked on as a "how to guide" but a book which is all about "what if …?". The ideas raised are about behaviours at work, recruiting the 'right people'; work environments; connections, conversations, and networks; learning; culture and change; and leadership. What holds this potentially disparate array of themes together is a sense, or aspiration, that workplaces can be energizing and collaborative, where all employees feel positively connected. Perhaps Swann's notion of a workplace community, "where people want to be" is the nub of his aspirations for human centric workplace design. A tall order? Certainly, this is how I began my notes as I starting reading the book. But Swann's enthusiasm and persuasion are infectious. Only occasionally does it fall foul of a rather tired cliché. The book is stacked full of great examples. I was particularly impressed with the achievements claimed by Schneider Electric. Schneider Electric is a large multi-national organization with over 144,000 employees. Well-being is at the heart of Schneider's mission to become a more human-centric organization and which itself is the principal 'strategic' platform for culture change. "Schneider's view is that well-being drives engagement and engagement drives performance."

Let me highlight one other strength before I turn to a couple of concerns. The book is a champion of shared leadership. This may be an unwitting outcome because there is no specific reference, or chapter, devoted to the theme of organizational leadership. But Swann's attention to the themes of trust, connections and conversations about change, workplace relationships, and the problems inherent in traditional structures etc are the stuff of shared leadership. The case study at the heart of the article by Morton and Holden in this issue could well have been one of Swann's examples.

At one and the same time, though, it is also an example of a missed opportunity; an opportunity to draw in more genuinely research-based evidence and insight into the discussion. Swann devotes some space to AI and Analytics — his position is that technology is "proving to be the single most important enabler of the human workplace movement". But the research evidence is worrying and rather undermines Swann's thesis. Current trends suggest that it is unlikely that existing practices of HR Analytics will deliver transformational change. Indeed, it is possible that current trends will seal the exclusion of HR from strategic, board level influence while doing little to benefit organizations and actively damaging the interests of employees. Angrave et al. (2016), for example, argue that if HR is not fully involved in the analytics process, together with the modelling processes involved in predictive and prescriptive level analytics "there is significantly greater scope for models to be constructed in a way which fundamentally misunderstands the

nature of human capital inputs into the processes of production and service delivery". Herein lies the risk that analytics will further embed finance and engineering perspectives on people management at boardroom level in ways that will restrict the strategic influence of the HR profession and do little to further the case for people-centric organizational development.

And so to my major concern … a nagging question that began almost with the book's first case example. It is partly to do with the idea that the human-centric workplace will enable organizations to 'win'. For any one organization to 'win' there surely must be a greater number of losers. Swann draws on the pontifications of Chris Brarez-Brown, Founder of 'Upping Your Elvis'. It is Braez-Brown's belief:

> that for an organization to win these days we need everyone to find their inner Elvis. That means being more of yourself, knowing who you are and what you stand for, coming with more energy and passion and being able to self-express, trying things out and learning from them.

This really started me thinking and indeed took me back some research I was engaged in in the late 90s, exploring the impact of organizational efforts in relation to EDAP-type Employee Development programmes[1]. These were all about providing a small financial resource to enable employees to undertake non-work-related learning of their choice and with anticipated organizational benefits of enhanced engagement, motivation, employee well-being and equipping employees for change. Let me draw on one research encounter. We interviewed Walter, a utility employee who worked with raw sewage. Basically, he shovelled s***t for 8 hours a day. Walter was very reserved and not at all forthcoming until we discovered he was secretary of the local pigeon fancier's association. He had used his monies to take a course on basic accounting to help in this role. He had taken an earlier course in word processing for the same reason. Walter's job required no knowledge of accounts and there was not even a computer at the site where he worked. The limits on this particular OD initiative were all too obviously defined by the nature of work and the division of labour. And so, in the context of *The Human Workplace*, it seems to me that Swann's laudable aspirations and his 'shining' examples are given a dose of reality when we consider that the nature of work for many is routinised, repetitive, lacking in decision making and autonomy and requiring only basic skills. Whilst we might debate exactly how many find themselves in jobs like Walter's there is undoubtedly a challenge to improve the quality of work done by many millions of people worldwide (see, for example, the CIPD's publication *The Road to Good Work*). And let's not delude ourselves as why it is thus. As a small number of labour market analysts, such as Ewart Keep, have argued for many years training and a bundle of other engagement and 'well-being type' initiatives are second or third order issues for many organizations. They operate in a market and with a business model where it is entirely rationale to pursue cost cutting and de-skilling etc because this is the only way they will survive or even, dare I say it, 'win'. There are glimpses in Andy Swann's book that recognize such harsh realities but all too often he seems to side-step the opportunity to engage in this debate. The challenge to HRD, and indeed any champion of the 'human workplace', seems all the tougher in such contexts and thus it is to these workplaces that it would have been appropriate to devote attention and to draw illustration of interesting initiatives … should there be any such examples to find.

All of this said, and to use a well-worn cliché myself, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Swann gives us a well written, accessible text which does genuinely raise a raft of 'what if' questions about the relationship between organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. It is an excellent vehicle to generate debate and discussion on these crucial matters of our time. And this is what the HRD Forum section of the *Journal* is about. So, I applaud Swann's

efforts in writing this book and invite *Journal* readers to do two things. Firstly, read *The Human Workplace* and then secondly, contribute a viewpoint in the context of the challenges highlighted both by Andy Swann and myself through this review. Let's have a conversation about the 'human workplace'.

References

Angrave, D., Charlwood, A., Kirkpatrick, I., Lawrence, M., & Stuart, M. (2016). HR and Analytics: why HR is set to fail the big data challenge, *Human Resource Management Journal, 26*(1), 1-11.
CIPD (2018). *The Road to Good Work: Discussion Paper*.
Swann, A. (2018). *The Human Workplace: people-centred organizational development*, 2018, Kogan Page.

Note

1 Ford's Employee Development Assistance Programme is generally considered a forerunner of a many experiments with non-work-related learning in the late 1990s and 2000's. See, for example, Holden, R., & Hamblett, J. (1998). Learning lessons from non-work-related Learning, *Journal of Workplace Learning, 10*(5), 241-251.