

# **THE HUMANE WORKPLACE: ALIGNING VALUE-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, MEANINGFUL WORK, AND LIFE BALANCE**

*Neal Chalofsky  
The George Washington University*

In pre-industrial society work was performed in the same community setting where people lived. You knew the person who made your shoes, your clothes, your milk & cheese, and your furniture. You socialized with these same people, as well as helped them when in need. The twin forces of the reduction in agricultural work and the rise of mechanical work meant more people becoming wage earners who were working for others (Brisken, 1996). In 1860, half the working population was self-employed; by 1900 two-thirds were wage earners. Work became governed by the clock, by uniform standards, and by supervisors. “Reason demanded that workers subordinate their own experience of natural rhythms to the logic of efficiency” (Brisken, 1996, p. 100).

The industrial era separated work from the community and created the organization, the bureaucracy to house, organize, and control work. There was little or no contact between the organization where employees worked and the community where they lived. Work was no longer an integral part of community life; it was detached, separated, contained within specific buildings and times. One hypothesis is that motivation only became an issue because meaning disappeared when the work became separated from the rest of life and community (Sievers, 1984). “As a consequence motivation theories have become surrogates for the search for meaning” (Sievers, 1984, p.3).

Wall Street further separated the owners from the employees. Employees received pay for the work they performed and owner/investors received dividends based on the profits of the company. And there was little to no contact between owner/investors and employees.

In organizations hierarchies separated executives from workers, and internal competition forced workers against workers as they fought to move up the increasingly narrow upper levels of the organization. And there was little or no contact between executives and workers. Business Week recently reported that in 1990 average CEO pay was 41 times the average workers pay; in 1999 it was 475 times the average workers pay.

We keep moving further and further away from work and the rest of life being entwined. And as work becomes more separated, it loses it’s meaning as an integral aspect of our human existence.

## **The Evolution of the Work-life Movement**

The person who may have been the first humanist of the industrial revolution was actually considered anti-humanist by most accounts. Frederick Taylor was most well known for his time and motion studies, which has been considered de-humanizing because it gave management strict control over worker performance. Peter Drucker asserted, “Taylor, among all his contemporaries, truly deserved the title humanist” (Weisboard, 1985, p. 5). For instance, he believed in matching the person’s abilities to the complexities of the job, He encouraged worker suggestions, he believed in appropriate training for a job, he felt that

management was to blame for worker restriction of output rather than worker inferiority, and he believed in giving people feedback to help them change. “In short, Taylor sought humane and sensible antidotes to the degradation of work which, like smog and pollution, was an early by-product of the industrial revolution” (Weisboard, p. 5).

The group dynamics movement, and t-group/laboratory training in particular, was the first movement to focus on the human in groups and later in organizations. The National Training Laboratories, and its counterpart in the UK, Tavistock, worked for the recognition of individual and group behavior as the critical component of an effective work group and productive organization (French and Bell, 1999). Bion and Trist from Tavistock had regular contact with Likert, Argyris and others in the states, and the journal *Human Relations* was a joint publication of Tavistock and MIT. This movement later transformed into the organization development concept, which has always had the individual at the heart of their value system.

A corollary movement in the US was humanistic psychology, known as the “third force” in the discipline of psychology (AHP, 2001). The first force was considered to be based on Pavlov’s work, and represented by the application of scientific principles to human behavior conducted both in the US and in Great Britain. The second force emerged out of Freudian psychoanalysis and the depth psychologies of Adler, Erickson and Jung, among others. This force focused on the unconscious and felt the conscious, subjective human being was just a manifestation of their unconscious drives. The third force was a reaction to these first two forces by such luminaries as Rogers and Maslow, who contended that the subjective human being was important. And concerns about self-actualization, meaning, race relations, intrinsic motivation, and potential were more important than either controlling or analyzing behavior.

The Quality of Work Life (QWL) movement seemed to have evolved out of these other movements, and was an internal response to the external concepts and approaches of the humanistic OD folks. QWL was about the development of organizational programs that supported the welfare of employees (Passmore, 1985). They covered everything from security and safety to participation and meaningful work, and involved the unions as well as management. QWL coincided with the Corporate Social Responsibility (CRS) movement, which grew out of concerns about businesses’ impact on the environment. Both movements represented quality of life for employees and society in general.

The most recent movement has been referred to as spirituality and meaning at work. The emergence of spirituality in modern business has its roots in multiple sources (Darling and Chalofsky, 2004). One, the slash-and-burn economics of the 1970’s and 1980’s that generated a workforce strongly antagonistic to certain corporate policies which caused prolonged stress leading to employee burnout, increased absenteeism, medical leave and turnover costs. When a more recent prosperous, tight labor market resulted in an effort to retain employees, the subsequent organizational sensitivity to workforce interests revealed a preference among employees to work for socially responsible, ethically driven organizations that allow the “whole self” to be brought to work. That feeling has increased following the most recent ethics scandals. Finally, the “baby boomers” in America (the disproportionately large generation born just after World War II) have been going through mid-life and early retirement questioning the meaning and purpose of work in their lives.

At the same time the Great Place to Work Institute started a project approximately 20 years ago to identify the 100 top companies to work for, based on work-life programs, humanistic values, and social responsibility (Levering, 2000). Levering, one of the two founders and directors of the Great Place to Work Institute, investigated what elements made

the companies that were selected for the 100 Best Companies to Work For list so desirable as workplaces. He visited 125 companies in 30 states and talked with hundreds of employees about their workplaces. Levering then revisited 20 especially good workplaces for further interviews with lower-level employees, top officers and founders. He also reviewed the data from the employee questionnaires that were anonymously submitted as part of the application packet. The same five phrases were heard over and over: “a friendly place;” “there isn’t much politics around here;” “you get a fair shake;” “it’s just like family;” and “it’s more than a job.” From these interviews a definition of a great workplace was created: “a great workplace is one in which you trust the people you work for, have pride in what you do, and enjoy the people you are working with (Levering, p. 26). The elements of a great workplace culture were then identified as: credibility, respect, fairness, pride and camaraderie.

After several years Fortune magazine picked up the project and, in turn, spawned several other similar programs sponsored by magazines catering to different population groups. The ongoing theme of all these movements so far has been the concern for the human in the organization and a reaction against the priority of profits over people. Handy (2002) said that enlightened companies exist to not just make a profit, but to do something better, more useful, or of higher quality than other organizations. A theme echoed by Collins and Porras (1994) in *Built to Last*. According to Pfeffer of Stanford University, “. . . companies that treat people right get enormous dividends: high rates of productivity, low rates of turnover. Companies that treat people poorly experience the opposite-and end up complaining about the death of loyalty and the dearth of talent” (Pfeffer, 1998).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the organizational culture of organizations that are considered to be employee-friendly workplaces. The research question was; in what ways do work-life programs and policies relate to an organization’s culture? Sub-questions were; how do organizations actually achieve being considered a best place to work for? What programs, policies and practices promote a humane workplace? In the US, work-life policies and programs have become synonymous with humane, employee-friendly organizations. Fortune Magazine’s 100 Best Places to Work For, and numerous other sponsored lists of “best places for . . .” are oftentimes the first resource consulted by job seekers. Organizations’ public relations and recruitment materials proudly proclaim inclusion on one or more of the lists. But there has been little research on the relationship between the programs they sponsor and their culture.

## **Research Methodology**

The Maryland Alliance for Work-life (now the National Work-Life Alliance) has been awarding their “seal of excellence” for approximately five years. The list of awardees includes such organizations as Discovery Communications, Marriott International, SAS Institute, Mitre Corporation, Booz Allen Hamilton, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency, and Calvert Mutual Funds, as well as banks, hospitals, technology firms, and municipal governments. This list is noteworthy in that it includes national and local government organizations, non-profits, associations, as well as corporate entities. Of the 57 winners of the award (as of 2005), we identified 17 for participation in our study and 10 agreed to be interviewed. We conducted personal and/or telephone interviews with human

resource management representatives, as well as analyzed their written submissions for this award. Several companies are also on Fortune Magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work For list and the Washingtonian Magazine's 50 Best Places to Work For list, and for triangulation purposes we analyzed those materials as well. In addition, we examined not only their work-life programs and policies, but also their programs and policies on social responsibility, philanthropy, and community service.

## **Findings**

### *Living a value-based culture*

First, we found that there was a strong value-based culture present in each of the organizations. This was evident by the overwhelming alignment between the organization's mission, and their commitment to their employees, customers, suppliers and community. At Marriott the motto is "the spirit to serve". "There is a "Marriott Way. It's about serving the associates, the customer, and the community. Marriott's fundamental beliefs are enduring and the keys to its continued success"<sup>1</sup>. At Sandy Spring Bank, a Maryland-based financial institution, community banking isn't just a slogan. Their commitment is to help communities be better places to live and work, as well as building internal workplace communities.

In addition, we found that the development of employees was one of the values embedded in the culture, not just an add-on. "At Booz Allen, we're very serious about our responsibility for developing our people. We help our people realize their potential and fulfill their ambitions by helping them shape their own individual career paths. From mentoring to off-site courses and from on-the-job learning to mining our award-winning knowledge networks, we provide the tools needed for our people to develop world-class analytical, leadership, management, and relationship-building skills." At Discovery Communications the ". . . goal of enabling consumers to explore their world and satisfy their curiosity depends on maintaining a creative and entrepreneurial environment where individual expression, achievement and recognition go hand-in-hand with our business objectives and performance".

The commitment to diversity is the same as the commitment to learning; it is not a separate program, but an integral part of the culture and the practice of everyday work life. At MITRE Corporation, there is a Corporate Diversity Awareness Committee that is employee run and has the full support of management. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) also has a similar employee-based committee, which has their own website, "*Many Faces... One Vision, Managing Diversity at NOAA, Building a house that works for everyone*".

### *Caring about Employees*

A second theme we found is that the companies possess a strong employee focus. This is illustrated by the way in which the companies treat their employees as assets – as true "associates." At SAS, "If you treat employees as if they make a difference to the company, they will make a difference to the company". SAS has been featured on 60 Minutes as having the most extensive of work-life benefits. Yet employees say that they would still work for the company even without all the benefits. Most of the companies conduct periodic internal work-life audits, and cross-functional teams comprised of employees develop action agendas based on the results. Most of the work-life policies and programs are generated through these action teams, through employee forums, or simply from employee requests.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from the organizations' websites and are not specifically referenced

One story from Calvert Mutual Funds exemplifies the commitment to work-life. Employees asked the company to support the use of public transportation by subsidizing fares. (And many other organizations provide this benefit as well.) But, at Calvert, the employees that commuted by bicycle felt that they were entitled a subsidy. So the company contributed to the cost of their bicycles. Not to be left out, the walkers asked for support. So the company subsidized the cost of their shoes.

An interesting balance to this perspective on employees is that it is matched by an equally serious commitment to holding managers accountable for providing and nurturing a caring and supportive environment towards employees. At Choice Hotels, managers are expected to be out with the employees working side-by-side. Hands-on management means taking care of employees as if they were extended family. All the organizations are led by executives and managers that live the culture. There is an overall feeling that if you want to be a successful manager in any of these organizations you must be a “model” of what the organization values are all about. The president of Discovery has a session over coffee with 15 employees every other week. The CEO of Calvert holds monthly meetings with all the staff to discuss financials. The managers in these organizations totally support the work-life policies and programs; and the involvement and growth of all their employees.

#### *Caring about the Organizational Mission*

NOAA interviewees talked about how many employees they see wearing branded clothing to work and on the streets. There is a tremendous pride in the mission and in the work that is evident in the quality of their services and in their involvement in the community and society at large. MITRE’s management and employees talk about the commitment to the highest quality products and services possible. Discovery Communications values innovation and creativity. Calvert Funds’ mission is about socially responsible investing is taken very seriously and with pride by its employees.

And at all of the organizations that we interviewed, empowerment and integrity went hand-in-hand with pride. At Booz Allen, “you (the employee) create your own destiny and carve out your individual path. You are the driver and the firm is here to help”. At SAS, the emphasis is on intrinsic motivation and trusting people to do a good job. Knowledge workers want to “push the envelope”, which is encouraged at SAS. All these organizations hire talented people, give them a mission they can be proud of, and then get out of their way. This is what is called trust.

#### *Work, Play, and Community Involvement*

Finally, the companies interviewed all describe a culture where everyone works hard and plays hard. Employees find their work to be meaningful, and they believe in the mission of the organization. And they enjoy socializing with their colleagues because of the sense of “we’re all in this together”. At most of the organizations, employee groups organized the social activities, with management support and participation. The diversity-based groups also organized social and educational activities, and organizations used holidays and other occasions to celebrate the organizational community.

The sense of community and social responsibility was overwhelming. Calvert gives up to 12 paid days per year for volunteer work. NOAA employees lend their expertise to helping with the cleanup of the Chesapeake Bay. Sandy Spring Bank has an in-school banking program to help kids learn how to save and manage their money. These organizations spend time and money thinking about and implementing ways to serve their communities. Social responsibility was an integral part of their organizational culture, not just a nice thing to do or just for the public relations value.

## Conclusions

### *It's not about the perks; it's about the culture*

Employees of the organizations we researched are not there just because they have great benefits. The benefits are a result of the work-life culture, because the culture values employees. In turn, employees have an overwhelming commitment to their organizations. It's all intertwined and synergistic.

### *The organization supports the whole person and the whole person is engaged in the organization*

While no organization can be all things to all people, these organizations work hard to recognize and support employees' work, family, leisure, personal and community needs. They know that if work-life balance is provided, then more of the whole employee will be able to focus (and wants to focus) on their work. Again, it's all interconnected.

### *The organization is truly a community*

When you go to work each day knowing what you do makes a difference, that your voice is heard, that your work is meaningful, and that you enjoy the company of your colleagues, then you are truly part of a workplace community. You have ownership of the mission because you are proud to be associated with the organization. When people feel they are putting their efforts and talents towards the purpose of a group they truly feel is their community, then "artificial" motivators are superfluous.

## Discussion

We have come full circle back to connecting work and life in a new way, within the workplace. While there have been a few articles and books about workplace community (Manning, G. et al, 1996, Gozdz, K., 1995, Nirenberg, J., 1995) there is actually very little published research. One doctoral study on workplace community defined it as, "A philosophy of organizational culture that believes if you take care of the people in your organization, they will take care of your organization, your product, and your customers. A community environment is one that is described with terms like family; having a strong sense of belonging and sharing the same values". (Wile, 2001, p. 2) This aptly describes what the organizations in this study have built. Wile found three elements that were critical to workplace community, leadership that is committed to people-centered values; an alignment of the values of respect, trust, and inclusion, among others; and a structure that maximizes communication, seeks collaboration, and promotes employee ownership, All of these elements and sub-elements exist in the organizations that were found to be humane.

The concept of the workplace community represents the essence of work-life balance. Work-life balance is not about having equal time every day for work and personal time, as some critics have suggested. It's about being in an environment that honors both and builds in consideration for meeting work and personal needs as appropriate. They respect their employees as whole persons, not just workers. The western philosophical concept of balance is an either-or proposition; you are either on one side or the other. Rarely are the sides of equal value and in balance. The result of the struggle for balance is usually a win-lose situation. The eastern concept of balance is the yin-yang symbol, representing an acknowledged tension of opposing forces. It's a both-and proposition rather than an either-or one. Both sides can "win" because day-to-day one or the other side will have greater needs. All this is to say that those organizations that are humane know that caring for employees means the employees will care for the organization. One day the situation may call for

everyone pitching in on an important project, another day it may mean covering for a team member whose child is sick, and another day everyone may be going to a company picnic. In the long term, everyone wins.

If what Sievers said about motivation and meaning make sense, then the meaning that was lost when the industrial revolution separated work and community can be found in the “reborn” humane, community-based organization.

## Significance to OD/HRD

One way OD/HRD can have a humanistic impact on organizations is through the influence of the development of or the change in the values imbedded in the organization culture. And a practical approach to impacting the values of the organization is to appeal to the issues of retention and productivity through the implementation of work-life policies and programs. Contrary to popular opinion, some of the organizations did not start out to be employee friendly. Others may have initially envisioned their organization to be humane, but it took time for them to realize that the process of really achieving this kind of culture has to evolve. But all have realized the benefits to all their stakeholders. Business likes to talk about the bottom line, and the most recent research on humane, socially responsible companies is that they are not only financially successful, they also tend to have lower turnover and higher morale.

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