

Investing In People

Treating your staff as you would like to be treated

One of my concerns is to help Christians who consider themselves to be influenced by postmodernity to find a place in mission agencies, and to help mission agencies to change and adapt, so that they can thrive, rather than be stifled. This was the purpose of my book, *Postmission*.

Postmodern organisations are founded on the principle of self-organisation, which itself reflects a scepticism about power. They are based on the observation that in nature and human behaviour, order and patterns emerge spontaneously, not through being imposed by an external agent (such as a manager, for instance), but organically from within. These patterns of order change constantly, responding to a variety of external stimuli, and re-emerge anew in different forms.

Applying the principle of self-organisation to human institutions, Eve Mitleton-Kelly of the London School of Economics notes that:

“complex systems cannot be designed in great detail. They are made up of interacting agents, whose interactions create emergent properties, qualities and patterns of behaviour. Humans in particular do not work to strict rules and their behaviour does not have machine-like predictability Humans are remarkably resourceful. If they are allowed to self-organise they will create the structures and relationships necessary to overcome the constraints constantly presented by the environment”.

An organisation can do this by trusting its staff, thinking of them not as human capital, but as investors. Employees are not, as in Marx's view, assets to be controlled, but are people who actively choose to invest (or withhold) their ideas, inspirations and skills. Such a concept should be particularly true for Christian mission agencies, since many of their staff view their involvement in vocational terms, because of their commitment to mission.

There are profound differences between the notions of asset and investor. They highlight different ideas of ownership, but also the feelings that individuals have about themselves, their self-determination, their self-awareness and their capacity to make choices and decisions based on this self-awareness. An asset has no freedom to act; it is simply a resource to be assigned and reassigned. An investor has the autonomy to choose and the freedom to act. They have the freedom to self-organise, rather than being organised by someone else.

If staff are to be seen as investors, then what exactly is it that they are investing? Their 'capital' can be broken down into four areas : intellectual capital (the knowledge they have and continue to build), emotional capital (self-awareness, resilience, ambition, vision, passion and energy), social capital (networks, relationships and contacts), and spiritual capital (commitment to Christ and his mission).

Intellectual capital

Most of the time, individuals need to take responsibility for the development of their own learning. But the organisation they work for can play a key role in facilitating or blocking this learning. Actions that can be taken by organisations to help staff to build their intellectual capital include:

- Providing access to training courses that are appropriate and timely

- Building tacit knowledge by helping people to establish mentoring and coaching relationships with experienced individuals
- Helping to build specific and transferable knowledge through providing stretching assignments and significant and diverse jobs and projects
- Offering time and space for personal reflection and reading.

Emotional capital

Self-awareness allows individuals to ask tough questions about themselves and also about the organisations they work for. Emotional resilience helps them to face adversity and to make tough decisions. Both of these, combined with the freedom to exercise their will, helps people to make choices and to create organisational energy. The concept of Emotional Intelligence has been widely used and explored in recent years to help to emphasise the importance of this issue. Approaches that can help to build emotional capital include:

- Accessing personal feedback from colleagues within and outside the working team
- Building developmental relationships with mentors and coaches
- Creating energy by making choices about work parameters, including when and where work occurs.

Social capital

Social capital binds together the knowledge of individuals into a greater whole, and includes employee relationships both inside and beyond the organisation. For individuals, their freedom to build close and loose relationships is central to the development of their social capital. It involves making active personal choices about the groups they work with, both with immediate bearing upon their work as well as those with cross-functional and/or geographical diversity. The key elements that build social capital include:

- Access to networking opportunities
- Ability to apply for involvement in projects teams, task forces and functions outside the current role
- Opportunities to meet people from outside the immediate work context, and outside the organisation.

Spiritual capital

A person's spiritual capital might be described as the degree to which they bring their relationship with Jesus Christ, and an understanding of his transforming power, into the operation of their daily life and work. It helps them to place their work into a wider context, i.e. the church's transforming mission in society; it provides resilience for and purpose to the challenges thrown up in the course of their work; and it invites them to offer up that work to God in prayer. Measures that an organisation could take to help staff invest in their spiritual capital include:

- Helping them to develop disciplines for spiritual growth in the course of their daily work
- Encouraging people to explore prayer, and ideas like vocation and pilgrimage, in relation to the work they do and the organisation for which they work.

Treating employees as investors implies a far greater degree of freedom than viewing them as assets. Investors look to create value, and balance their short-term needs with the desire to create longer-term stability for themselves. At its heart, viewing an employee as an investor suggests that they can be trusted to organise themselves, for their own benefit and for the benefit of the organisation in which they choose to invest their human capital. It gives them the dignity of self-organisation.