

Classroom management a shadow of the real thing

Richard Donkin: *Financial Times*, September 20, 2007

Allan Leighton, chairman of the Royal Mail, had some stern words for delegates at the annual conference of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in Harrogate this week. Speaking in *People Management Magazine*, ahead of the conference where he was heading a session on leadership, Mr Leighton said that HR professionals should not regard themselves as responsible for employees in a company. That was the job of managers, he said.

Nor should they be taking the lead on modern working practices such as flexible hours and diversity. They should leave that to line managers. The job of HR, he argued, was to work on employment policies, training and progress monitoring. His comments are striking because they coincide with a vigorous attack on the influential human relations school of management in a recent book, **The Puritan Gift**, by Kenneth and William Hopper.

I came across the Hopper brothers some time ago when I was researching my own book on the history of work, **Blood, Sweat and Tears, The Evolution of Work**. I was impressed at the depth of knowledge accumulated by Ken Hopper on the development of Post-Second World War Japanese working practices. But the book demonstrates a far broader understanding of management history and puts the Japanese developments in to context with those in the US. The Hoppers share my fascination with the origins and influence of the protestant work ethic to such an extent that if their book had been published first, most likely I would have scrapped my project and done something else.

The Puritan ethic, they argue, created the conditions for a “golden age” in American management running before and after the Second World War, between the years 1920 and 1970. The most important feature of this ethic, they suggest, is attitude, the kind of attitude that is willing to pool experience, lend a helping hand and work for the whole.

I suppose this was exemplified in the collaboration achieved by those under the supervision of Thomas Edison at his Menlo Park Laboratory, New Jersey, in the late 19th century. Edison’s workmen called each other “muckers,” reflecting the way they mucked-in or pitched-in together. But what really made the big American companies of the 20th century most effective, say the authors, was the systematic approach of management that evolved to harness and magnify the expertise of the workforce.

Somewhat controversially the Hoppers argue that the US management system has been undermined by what they call the “cult of the expert” pursued by the business schools in their aim of creating professional managers. The late Peter Drucker had voiced such reservations as early as 1954 in his book, *The Practice of Management*, when he warned of the potential economic damage that could result from a professionalisation of management if access to management was limited to people with a special academic degree.

While the MBA has yet to secure an exclusive status among managers, its penetration of managerial ranks is worrying, say the authors. The same criticism might be levelled at the relatively recent moves by both the CIPD and the Chartered Institute of Management, to professionalise their respective management qualifications by adopting chartered status, although each of these organisations include time in the job within their qualifications. Should a need for professional qualifications exclude experienced business managers? I don’t think so. Nor should it be placed at a premium. Nothing can replace what the Hoppers describe as “domain knowledge.”

This is why some business managers such as Allan Leighton and Jack Welch, speaking at another recent seminar, have become cautious about the potential influence of some human resources practices in modern companies. The danger for business arises when the theory cannot match the experience of managers and employees working in their respective roles.

The Hoppers extend their criticism beyond business qualifications such as the MBA in to other academic areas. "The profusion of doctorates existing today offers an extreme example of credentialism, one of the worst intellectual vices of our age," they write. The brothers are particularly heated about the lasting impact of the work study experiments at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant in Chicago that influenced the human relations school of management. As they put it, the academic analysis of the Hawthorne experiments, was responsible for a persistent belief that management had to be "nice" to the workforce.

While I agree that the conclusions drawn from the experiment were flawed, ignoring the influence, for example, of pay in motivation. I do not think that academics were wrong in highlighting the importance of encouragement and recognition in work. Unfortunately the academics overlooked other sources of motivation such as fear of censure, demotion and, ultimately of losing one's job that remains a powerful incentive for many in the workforce. I do not argue, however, with the author's point that the role of the manager is to be "fair" rather than "nice." It's a subtle but important distinction.

The Hoppers blame an emphasis on "niceness" for a decline in shop-floor discipline. While this might have occurred in the US I don't recall witnessing any kid-gloves management during my own career. I have known one or two tyrants in management but most managers I have dealt with I would describe as tough but fair. This impression may be changing in today's workplace where graduates are entering the workforce with new expectations. But collegiate-style working practices do not appear to have done much harm to companies such as Asda, the supermarket chain.

If I have one big criticism of *The Puritan Gift* it is that it suffers from a sense of nostalgia, a niggling belief that things were better in the past. I remember well the distrustful days of "us and them" management when unions and managers were trying continually to get one over each other. Indeed I engaged in such practices as a shop steward, or what unionised journalists quaintly call the "father of the chapel." When I went on strike during the so-called "winter of discontent" in 1978-79, the sole aim was to secure a better pay deal. There was nothing personal. The editor came in to the pub and bought everyone a drink.

It is tempting to hark back to the "good old days" when workers had a little power and there was no going cap-in-hand for a pay rise. But industrial strife didn't seem to do much for the economy. Golden Ages abound in many economies throughout history. They come and they go. In the meantime US productivity rates continue to be the envy of other economies. **The best thing about *The Puritan Gift* is that it is a real book, full of fascinating insights, intellectual rigour and challenging, authoritative arguments that remind us that there is nothing new about the responsibilities of management.** Perhaps its most valuable contribution is to stress those responsibilities and to make the point that there really is no substitute for knowing your job.

The Puritan Gift, Triumph, Collapse and Revival of an American Dream, by Kenneth and William Hopper, is published by I B Tauris, price £24.50