

Contents and sample chapters for

Power and response-ability

The human side of systems



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Please note that, to preserve commercial and personal confidentiality, the stories and examples have been adapted, combined and in part fictionalised from experiences in a variety of contexts, and do not and are not intended to represent any specific individual or organisation.

PREFACE

[[see published book for details]]

RESPONSE-ABILITY:A MANIFESTO

Systems

1. People are powerful. People make things happen, people make things work.
2. For convenience, we tend to partition work into 'systems' – collections of related work-processes.
3. Every system is part of a larger system, all the way up to 'the everything'. Working on just one system at a time, it's easy to lose sight of the other parts that make up the larger system – or even of the system we're working with.
4. Within every system, every problem – no matter how complex, no matter how technical – can be resolved if there is commitment, drive, motivation. This power arises only from people: the human side of systems – 'response-ability' – is what makes everything work.
5. Many, if not most, of the methods used to 'control' people, in order to control a system, actively reduce the availability of this human power. The result is systems – and hence work-practices – that are often ineffective, unreliable, inelegant and inappropriate.
6. By understanding, and respecting, the human side of systems, far more of that human power is released in support of the system and the shared purpose.
7. In many contexts, the human side of systems is the only one which really matters.

Economy and the 'bottom line'

8. The ways in which we work, and share the proceeds of that work with others, combine into what is loosely called 'the economy'.
9. The word 'economy' literally means 'the management of the household'. Hence the *real* economy encompasses far more than mere money: its concerns include the management of every aspect of the ways in which we interact with others, whether they involve money or not.

10. The economy exists on every scale, from individual one-on-one transactions, to the mass-markets of multi-national corporations.
11. Because money-management is so easy to quantify – whereas people-management isn't – it's all too easy to mistake the money-side of the economy for the whole economy, and that everything else can be ignored. It isn't, and we can't.
12. Balancing the budget for a huge corporation, or even a household, may not be easy, but it's the easiest part of the overall economy to manage. Managing people is *hard*.
13. One of the reasons why managing people is hard is that people don't respond well to being treated as objects, or as subjects of someone else's whims. Rule-books that forget to treat people as people deserve to be ignored.
14. The real 'bottom line' isn't just the bit where the finance-figures supposedly balance out, but where the *whole* of the economy balances out: all of our relations with *all* of our stakeholders.

Stakeholders and corporate culture

15. Stakeholders are people who have a stake in our work: our colleagues, customers, suppliers, shareholders, banks, unions, regulatory bodies, government and the wider community.
16. Ultimately, *everyone* is a stakeholder in our work, because what we do may, or does, affect everyone. For practical reasons, it may be easiest to regard as stakeholders only those people that are immediately associated with our work: but we need to remember that, at times, they may indeed include everyone.
17. Every organisation is a compound entity, a literal 'corporation' created from the interactions of its stakeholders. 'I' interweaves with 'We', with 'Us', and with 'Them' too.
18. At each level, the organisation – this compound entity – has its own persona, its own voice, made up of the choices of each stakeholder, and each cluster of stakeholders, in relationship with each other.
19. Another name for this persona or voice is 'corporate culture'.

20. Despite being made up of individual choices – or evasions of choices – this compound persona can be surprisingly stable. If we're not aware of it, it can swamp our own personality – changing us into yet another frustrated robot within the mechanisms of the machine.
21. Despite the desires of corporate management, corporate culture cannot be controlled – certainly not through something as crass as a company rule-book, at any rate.
22. The culture can, however, be provided with a direction, a sense of purpose.

Purpose and quality

23. Purpose provides the basis for an organisation's existence: the motivation and meaning for 'Us', as an organized association of individuals. Without that sense of purpose, nothing that the organisation does is done on purpose.
24. An explicit statement of purpose is the key foundation-stone for a functional quality-management process, such as TQM and ISO 9000:2000.
25. Without a meaningful purpose-statement to anchor them, quality-initiatives will invariably fail and fade away.
26. A purpose-statement must be something which provides a reason and focus for work, and which is credible and meaningful for all stakeholders.
27. To be meaningful, a purpose-statement isn't something to be knocked up by corporate management over a weekend retreat: it needs to be discussed with every stakeholder, to ensure that the stated purpose matches well with their own.
28. Once understood and committed to by all, the purpose-statement acts as the reference-point for all of the organisation's economic activity. Purchases, sales, policies, procedures, choices for hiring and firing – anything which purports to fulfil the organisation's purpose should be checked for alignment with the purpose-statement.

Knowledge

29. All individuals and organisations create and acquire knowledge, unique to their industry, their market and their purpose.

30. Knowledge is more than mere information. It is built up from the content and context of information, and the *connections* created between items of information.
31. Knowledge is dependent on people. All knowledge is created by people, either directly, or indirectly with the assistance of some kind of information-technology.
32. For the most part, knowledge resides in people, and often only in people.
33. On its own, information is meaningless. The 'information-technology revolution' of the past few decades has vastly increased the amount of information available to us, but most of it is unusable – and will remain so without a systematic knowledge-technology to create meaningful connections.
34. Most automated 'knowledge-management' tools do little more than provide repositories for unlinked and often unlinkable information.
35. Knowledge technology depends as much, if not more, on an understanding of people as it does of machines.
36. Information with a potential or actual application is often termed 'intellectual property'.
37. The intellectual-property system has become so misused that it is now little more than a legal fiction held together by lawyers' bluff. Mistaken attitudes about ownership now place everyone's work at risk.
38. The real intellectual property – the *use* of information – resides primarily in people's memory. Remembering is often hard, but forgetting is even harder: what is remembered cannot simply be forgotten on a lawyer's demand.
39. Important connections may be made via the accumulation of small, often unidentifiable and unrepeatable, items of information. The process is known as 'intuition'. "Discoveries are beyond the reach of reason: the role of reason is to follow afterwards and build a general theoretical scheme."
40. Intuition is literally 'teaching from within'. It is the basis of all skill and creativity.
41. Organisations are ultimately dependent upon individual skill and creativity.

42. Few organisations do anything to foster that skill and creativity. Many claim to do so – “our people are our greatest asset!” – but most actually crush it through clumsy handling of the human side of systems.

Work-relationships

43. People are not assets: they cannot be ‘owned’.
44. Describing people as assets, or as ‘human resources’, is an insult. ‘People Strategies’ isn’t much better. Either way, organisations usually get what they ask for. Surly, disaffected robots tend not to be very productive. Organisations which *do* bother to respect the human side of systems tend to be very productive indeed.
45. An organisation’s ‘greatest asset’ is not ‘our people’, but its *relationships* with those people. If not treated with respect, ‘our’ knowledge, skill, inventiveness and creativity will just walk out the door and go work someplace else.
46. Relationship-management is nothing new: for example, most large corporations use automated ‘customer relationship management’ tools.
47. Functional relationship-management only happens when *all* stakeholders are treated as co-creators in the organisation’s purpose, and are treated with the same respect currently accorded only to customers, shareholders and senior management.

Power and response-ability

48. An organisation’s productive activity arises from individual, *personal* power.
49. Misunderstandings abound regarding the nature of that power, and how it can be created, fostered and maintained in support of an organisation’s purpose.
50. In physics, the definition of power (or, more accurately, potential) is ‘the ability to do work’.
51. In physics, work is defined as ‘the rate at which energy is expended’.

52. These definitions are implied when organisations treat people as work-objects or ‘human resources’. In effect, slavery is equated with power: productivity is invariably poor, as most energy is expended on work without focus or purpose.
53. Objects don’t have choice; humans do. Any definition of ‘power’ in human terms needs to acknowledge that fact of choice.
54. People express their power of choice through response-ability – the ability to choose and act upon appropriate responses to varying contexts.
55. Objects can never do more than react to circumstances: “to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction”.
56. If treated as objects, people can never be more than reactive. When power and response-ability are fully acknowledged, people can also be *proactive* – planning for and acting upon future circumstances and future choices.
57. Organisations can prevent ‘their’ people from being proactive and productive, simply by treating people as objects. Most still do – with unfortunate results for all concerned. This can be avoided by working *with* – rather than against – the human side of systems.

Human forms of power

58. Any definition of power in human terms must include and express human choices and human needs.
59. In human terms, power is ‘the ability to do work, as an expression of personal choice, personal response-ability and personal purpose’.
60. In human terms, work remains ‘the rate at which energy is expended’, as in physics. However, ‘work’ is anything – any process or purpose – upon which human energy is expended. To calm a fractious client, to reclaim composure from failure, or to hold true to a purpose, are ‘work’ just as much as are to dig a ditch or to solve a technical problem.
61. In human terms, there can be no clear distinction between ‘work’, ‘play’ or ‘learn’. Each depends upon the other: they are different and necessary facets of the same human power.

62. In human terms, power is thus more accurately 'the ability to work / play / learn...' rather than 'the ability to do work...'.
63. The interwovenness of work / play / learn is demonstrated every day in every schoolyard – yet poorly understood in most organisations.
64. At any given time there will be a bias towards either 'working', 'playing' or 'learning', but over time all three must be in balance for any of them to occur consistently and productively.

Power in the work-environment

65. In organisations, 'work', 'play' and 'learn' map closely to purpose fulfilment, relationship management and knowledge technology. In any given aspect of the organisation's activity there will be a bias towards one or other of these areas, but all three must be in balance for activity to take place consistently and productively.
66. Attempts to exclude any part of the work/play/learn triad from any domain – "people come here to work, not play!" – will reduce the available power and purpose within that domain, and within other domains.
67. The common attitude that "work is what I do to pay for my play" leads to poor success and poor satisfaction in *all* domains.
68. A transitory balance of the work/play/learn triad may occur spontaneously, in individuals, groups and whole organisations, creating a brief burst of enthusiasm, creativity and productivity. Well-known examples exist in every industry: most, however, return to the 'normal' torpor after mere few months, weeks or days.
69. Individuals and organisations that intentionally manage their balance of work/play/learn in each domain, and that work with rather than against the human side of systems, can sustain such 'phenomenal' activity indefinitely. Examples exist everywhere: however, most are, by intention, 'quiet achievers', and few are known outside their industry.
70. There are no 'hidden secrets' to such success. All that is required for success is acknowledgement and respect of the human side of systems: respect of the fact that people are people.

Sources of power

71. People are powerful – if we allow them to be powerful.
72. *We* are powerful – if we allow ourselves to be powerful.
73. The *only* source of human power and response-ability is from within ourselves ('power-from-within'). This power cannot be given to us: we alone empower ourselves. This power cannot be taken from us: yet it can easily be stifled and suppressed, by others or by ourselves.
74. All work – work/play/learn – requires us to face the personal challenge and personal effort of that work. By assisting each other ('power-with') to face that challenge, we can help each other to create and release personal power and response-ability for the chosen work.

Mistakes about power

75. People, being human, make mistakes about power. Organisations and the wider society, being made up of people, tend collectively to make the same mistakes – though often on a larger scale.
76. The idea that 'power is the ability to *avoid* work' is a common misunderstanding: this is almost exactly what power is not. Without work/play/learn to be done, there is no need for power. Many who claim that they want to 'be powerful' do not in fact want to do work: instead, they want to not *feel* powerless – which is not the same thing at all.
77. Fear of powerlessness, or fear of challenge and effort, leads to a desire to attempt to 'export' those fears to others – trying to force those others to face such fears on our behalf.
78. An attempt at such export may take the form of trying to prop oneself up by putting others down ('power-over'). Common examples include intimidation, bullying, denigration and domination.
79. An attempt at such export may take the form of offloading response-ability to others without their involvement or consent ('power-under'). Common examples include rumour-mongering, misinformation, 'playing victim' and, especially, the artificial manufacture of fear and blame.
80. All forms of power-over and power-under reduce the *overall* available power. Most energy is absorbed either in promoting or responding to the abuse – leaving very little for actual work.

Power-addictions, 'winners' and 'losers'

81. Despite the overall loss of power, both power-over and power-under tend to create the illusion that power has been co-opted from others. As a result, power-over and power-under can be highly addictive.
82. So common is this addiction that, for many people, exported power-over and power-under *is* 'power' – the only 'power' they know or understand.
83. The resultant 'knock-on' effect of this one mistake can cripple individuals, work-teams, divisions, organisations, industries and entire societies. In such situations, there are no 'winners': *everyone* loses.
84. In each transaction, there are only two choices: create power with each other, in a 'win/win'; or attempt to export fears about power to others, in a 'lose/lose'. The simplistic concept of 'win/lose' ('zero-sum') is actually an illusory form of lose/lose: this year's 'winner' is next year's loser.
85. Competition, for example, may be either win/win or lose/lose. Competition *with* others ('playing to learn') is win/win; competition *against* others ('playing to win') requires there to be losers in each transaction, and hence is invariably lose/lose in the long run.

Scope of power-issues

86. The same issues, and the same mistakes, repeat at every level, within each 'I', between 'I' and 'Thou', between 'I' and 'We', 'We' and 'Us', 'Us' and 'Them'.
87. As a result of mistaken notions about power and response-ability, in individuals, organisations and the wider society, power-over and power-under are more common – sometimes far more common – than power-with and power-from-within.
88. In organisations, the result of such confusions is invariably detrimental to the 'bottom line' – whatever the 'bottom line' of the organisation may be. Hence none of this is 'soft psychology': it impacts directly upon all business practice.

Conclusions and actions

89. Anything which supports personal power-from-within and personal response-ability within a organisation's members will improve that organisation's 'bottom line'.
90. Anything which supports power-with and purpose within an organisation's transactions will improve that organisation's 'bottom line'.
91. Anything which reduces power-over and power-under within an organisation's transactions will improve that organisation's 'bottom line'.
92. Anything which supports the balance between purpose-fulfilment, relationship-management and knowledge-technology - 'work', 'play' and 'learn' - within an organisation, and within the members of that organisation, will improve that organisation's 'bottom line'.
93. Tools and techniques exist to assess, audit and address these issues - the human side of systems. Some are described in detail here. Others may be found elsewhere. They work: if applied consistently and with care within an organisation, they *do* create significant improvements in that organisation's 'bottom line'.
94. Doing nothing about these issues also has significant - but destructive - effects on an organisation's 'bottom line'.
95. As always, the response-ability, and the choice, is yours.

INTRODUCTION

People are powerful. People make things happen; people make things work.

When people are powerful, work really *does* happen. The productivity soars, the inspiration flows, the care and the commitment are omnipresent. Whenever that kind of enthusiasm occurs within an enterprise, everyone *wants* to work there, and work as hard as they can, because work at last feels worthwhile. And that's true regardless of the organisation's type – commercial, government, NGO, non-profit, whatever – and of the organisation's size, from a giant multinational corporation or government department, all the way down to the local Rotary Club.

All too often, though, things *don't* happen that way – or at least, don't happen in the way we want. Without apparent warning, the excitement and enthusiasm fade away to nothing; the 'Monday blues' become prevalent again; and it's back to the usual bitching and backbiting, the joys of office politics...

All of this chaos arises because of confusions about power and purpose: a failure to understand what power is, how to gain it, how to use it, how to share it, how not to lose it. In fact, many of the common concepts of power – especially within business – are so close to perfectly wrong in a functional sense that it's amazing any work happens at all. The results can be seen in almost every organisation: frustration, inefficiency and ineffectiveness, loss of motivation and morale, lost opportunities and, for commercial organisations, lost profits. It hurts. It hurts *everyone*.

Yet it needn't be that way. Those seemingly 'random' bursts of creativity and productivity at work aren't random at all: and the circumstances under which they occur can be easily understood. So it *is* possible to create, *and maintain*, the kind of enthusiasm and commitment to work that makes everyone's eyes open wide. It *is* possible to create, *and maintain*, a commitment to quality that has little to do with paper and procedures, but arises directly from people themselves. It really *is* possible to create, *and maintain*, conditions in which everyone involved can find a true sense of satisfaction, even joy, in work and elsewhere – with impressive impacts on every aspect of the organisation's 'bottom line'. Not just 'business as usual': a lot *more* than 'business as usual'!

And yes, there is a catch, of course. You won't get these results from some quick-fix fad, some kind of 'fit and forget' system. You'll get them only by paying systematic and consistent attention to the *human side of systems*: human power, and its expression as 'response-ability'.

Response-ability is all about personal power and productivity in the workplace: what it is, what it isn't, why it's worth developing, how to develop it, and how to prevent it from being destroyed.

So it depends not only on a different understanding of power, and relationships between people and organisations, but also on a different understanding of the nature of business itself, as a dynamic balance between three distinct themes: knowledge technology, relationship management and purpose fulfilment. And it requires continuous attention to quality – not just of products or services, but every aspect of the *human* quality of business, upon which the quality of products and services will ultimately depend.

Although this human side of systems deals with so-called 'soft' issues, its effects, and the results of measures taken, can be assessed, audited, addressed in the kind of 'hard' numbers that managers and other analysts need. And though its processes can at times be challenging, for everyone, the end-results *are* worthwhile, for everyone: I can promise you that.

So who should read this? It's aimed mainly at managers, consultants, union organisers and others who work with people in the workplace. Don't let that put you off, though, because it'll be relevant to anyone who wants to know more about their own power and response-ability, so as to get more of a sense of satisfaction and achievement from any aspect of their life. That'd be just about everyone, I'd guess? Let's see, anyway.

UNDERSTANDING EMPOWERMENT

Defining power

For our organisations to be effective, we need everyone involved to be as productive as they can. And that productivity, in turn, depends on the availability of power, in a human sense. So a clear understanding of power – what it is, and (often more important) what it isn't – is essential, to provide the foundation for functional responsibility at work.

But what *is* power, anyway? In some management texts, we'll see that power is linked with 'soft' concepts such as empowerment, commitment, motivation, quality – words which somehow seem to have about as much meaning as a wet fish, and about as easy to grasp. In other texts, power seems to be equated with control – whatever that might be, because it's evident no-one actually has it, no matter what they might try to pretend. And in common usage, too, 'power' is hopelessly ambiguous: power over self, power over others, a powerful leader, a powerful car, a powerful telescope, a powerful strike, a powerful blow – almost anything might be powerful. Or not. So power is, um... er... *power*, right?

In short, the usual concepts of power are a muddled mess. To get anywhere, we need to start again, with definitions that actually *mean* something. The simplest and safest place to start looking for concrete, objective meanings is in the sciences: and in physics, 'power' has a clear, straightforward, unambiguous definition:

Power is the rate at which work is done.

The physics definition for 'potential' is perhaps more relevant for the human context:

Potential is the ability to do work.

And 'work' too has a straightforward definition in physics:

Work is the rate at which energy is expended.

More accurately, it's the rate at which energy is changed from one form to another – a point that will become more relevant later. But that's about as far as physics will take us: 'energy' is essentially defined as energy, which isn't very helpful. And in most sciences there's intentionally no concept of *purpose*, which does, however, have meaning in the human domain: the kinds of work on which energy is expended, and why that work is done, usually matter a great deal in business!

So where do we go next with this? To understand power at work, it's obvious we need to include the human dimension. So the first shift is that 'power' in human terms is essentially a description of *potential*, rather than the strict physics sense of power as the expression of that potential. Hence, in human terms, we could start with the definition:

Power is the ability to do work.

But if we try to use that definition without any other rider, we run into trouble straight away, because in effect we define slavery *as* power – not a good idea! And whilst objects and machines don't have choice, humans do: it's one of the things that makes us human. So at the least, we need to add the human dimension of choice, and the human need for a sense of meaning and purpose:

Power is the ability to do work, as an expression of personal choice, personal responsibility and personal purpose.

Here the definition of 'work' remains the same, as "the rate at which energy is expended". But it changes radically in sense, because 'energy' has many different meanings in a human context. So 'work' includes anything on which human energy is expended: digging a ditch is work, and likewise solving a technical problem – but so is managing a household or a corporation, or calming an angry client, or planning a future strategy. All of these, and many others, are 'work' – and in many cases we can *measure* the energy expended on that work, if only in nutritional terms.

So far, so good: in human terms – as in business – 'work' can be anything on which people choose to expend energy in a purposeful way, and 'power' is the ability to do that work.

But there's another essential human characteristic that needs to be added to that definition, though it's the source of many difficulties in business and elsewhere: it's that in human terms, there's no real distinction between 'work', 'play' and 'learn'. They're three different yet inextricably interdependent aspects of the same human energy: we learn, to extend our knowledge and ability; we practice those abilities through play, either on our own or with others; we apply the results of that practice through work, on our own, and with others; which leads, in turn, and in time, to new learning, for ourselves, or shared with others.

This interwovenness of work, play and learn can be seen every day, in every schoolyard. Each depends on the other, and unless all of them are present – as in that dynamic balance of work, play and learn that can be seen in the schoolyard – *none* of them can happen. Trying to separate them, or partition them into separate domains, leads to endless problems and pointless inefficiencies.

And yet that kind of separation is exactly what most businesses, and even most people, would try to enforce. "You come here to work, not play!" is a common cry in business; employees learn to accept that "work is what I do to pay for my play", and settle down to doing the minimum work they can get away with: few people seem to realise there might be an important connection here... Those few organisations that *do* recognise the connection, and do intentionally integrate 'play' and 'learn' in the work of the organisation, tend to be very successful indeed.

So in human terms, we end up with a definition of 'power' that goes as follows:

Power is the ability to work/play/learn, as an expression of personal choice, personal responsibility and personal purpose.

It's a definition that works: it can be applied directly in business and elsewhere, with concrete, measurable results.

But what about all those other colloquial meanings of 'power'? This doesn't say anything about getting power, or keeping power: how do we gain power, for example, or take it back from those who try to take it from us? What about power as control? What about – heaven forfend! – "power comes out of the barrel of a gun"? Where do those things fit within that definition?

They don't. That's the whole point: they don't.

Those other apparent meanings of 'power' arise from a series of delusions that have nothing to do with power itself. And until we recognise that they *are* delusions, we're going to get nowhere – which is what so often happens at present. So before we can go any further, we need to look at these delusory forms of 'power' – and start to face them within others, and within ourselves.

Power and delusion

We have a workable definition of power in human terms: but where does that power come from? The short answer is: from within each one of us – and *only* from within us. It doesn't drift around for us to grab out of thin air: it's part *of* us, an expression of us as human beings.

For example, imagine you want to cook a meal. You've invited some friends round, you want everything to be the best for them. (In a commercial context, just scale this up a bit: imagine you're doing the catering and presentation for a public event.) There's work to do, of many different kinds: plan the meal, get the ingredients, make a schedule so everything comes together at the right moments, tidy the room, lay out the table... the list goes on and on. Each of these tasks needs different kinds of energy, which tend to be given different names: to get started at all, for example, needs a specific kind of power that's usually called 'motivation'. But for each of those tasks, the power, and the energy, comes from you. Nowhere else. That's why power in this human sense is referred to as 'power-from-within'.

Power-from-within is the ability to source and access human power from within the self.

Doing everything ourselves can be hugely satisfying. But sometimes it's not as much fun as doing it with others; and there are many things which we can't do only on our own. Perhaps the task is too big (as it certainly would be if you were catering for a public event); perhaps you don't know what to do; perhaps you're simply too tired. Either way, we can ask others for help. So you might ask a friend to show you how to do Thai cooking, perhaps; you might just need a bit of 'moral support' – and a suitable glass of red wine – to help you find that all-important motivation with which to get started. The only source of power, in human terms, is from within; but we can *share* that power with others, or help each other find that required power. This sharing of common purpose – particularly when its aim is to help us find our own power-from-within – is sometimes described as 'power-with'.

Power-with is the ability to assist each other to generate and access power-from-within, and to share that power with others.

Yet in this sharing of power, a crucial delusion can easily creep in. Our only source of energy to do work – any kind of work – is from within ourselves. Everything needs energy, effort: it takes effort even to learn something new. But to *find* that energy within ourselves is often challenging – physically, emotionally, mentally or whatever. Facing the challenge, we don't feel powerful at all: often exactly the opposite, though we may not be conscious of the fact – indeed, in many cases we may be careful to *not* be conscious of it. That feeling of powerlessness is not pleasant: *no-one* likes facing it. And for whatever reason – and there are many, many reasons – up comes the delusion: the idea that we can banish that feeling of powerlessness by 'exporting' it – and, usually, the problem too – to someone else.

It *seems* to be so easy: pass the buck, find a scapegoat, trap someone else into doing the job for us. "Power is the ability to *avoid* work", says the delusion. And it *looks* as though it works – which is why it's such a common delusion. But it actually doesn't work: it *never* does, though it sometimes needs a lot of careful thought and observation in order to be able to recognise that fact. All that the delusion does is reduce the overall amount of available power. For one individual, or one group, for a short while, it may perhaps seem to increase their own power; but overall, over time, over the entire system or entire group of people, the total amount of power is *always* less – which means that less work gets done.

The delusion always takes one of two forms, whose usual names are perhaps a bit too pejorative for use in this context. We could call these forms 'Type A' and 'Type B', of course; but for consistency with 'power-with' and 'power-from-within', they'd best be described as 'power-over' and 'power-under'.

Power-over is any attempt, in any form whatsoever, to create the illusion of empowering the self by disempowering any other.

The 'Godfather' slogan "true power cannot be given: it must be *taken*" is an obvious example of power-over; likewise the old Maoist assertion that "power comes out of the barrel of a gun". If a manager uses her supposed 'superiority' to bully a subordinate, that's power-over; deliberately setting out to humiliate someone is power-over; excluding others from involvement in decisions that affect them is power-over; spreading rumours about others, or intentionally misleading others, is power-over; so is kicking at the cat because you're feeling down. The details vary enormously, and impacts may vary enormously, but it's all the same delusion: the idea that we can prop ourselves up by putting others down.

The aim of power-over is to create the illusion that all the power has been 'taken' from others. By contrast, power-under *does* need others to be powerful - but only so that that power can then be co-opted by manipulation, by 'exporting' responsibility in some way:

Power-under is any attempt to offload responsibility onto another without their express involvement and consent.

(For that matter, attempting to *take* responsibility *from* another without their involvement and consent can also be power-under: the crucial issue is the lack of consent rather than the direction in which the responsibility is transferred.) Blame; scapegoating; 'playing victim'; dumping responsibility for work onto others: they're all forms of power-under, all variants of the same delusion that "power is the ability to avoid work". Power-under can sometimes be a lot more subtle and a lot more difficult to identify than power-over: but the damage can sometimes be much more serious, precisely because it's so difficult to detect.

Power-over and power-under are extremely common - so much so that for many people, that's what power *is*. Some people make these delusions into a way of life; but *everyone* falls into them from time to time. To a large extent our entire society is held together - or supposedly held together - by power-over and power-under, through threats, punishments, edicts, demands, cajoling, bullying in many different forms. The Machiavellian office-politics promoted and popularised in books such as "*The 48 Laws of Power*" essentially consists of nothing but power-over and power-under. And so on, and so on - there's an awful lot of it about...

The usual name for power-over is violence; the usual name for power-under is abuse; as you'll now perhaps recognise from those definitions above, both are *extremely* common. If you don't believe me in this, think about those definitions for a while, then take a look around you: take a good look at most advertising and marketing; take a good look at other people's behaviour, at work and elsewhere; for that matter, take a good look at some of your *own* behaviour, at work and elsewhere.

Ouch...

And none of it works – that's what's so sad, so pathetic. Yet so very, very common.

It's all a delusion. We can't 'take' power from others: whether we want it or not it just doesn't work that way. We can't offload every responsibility onto others: it just doesn't work that way. Scapegoats have an uncanny ability to return just when they're least expected. None of it works: it simply doesn't work.

Ouch...

Yet because it doesn't work, but at first does *look* as if it works, it's also highly addictive. Therein lie a lot of problems, for everyone...

The addiction is perhaps more obvious with power-over. For example, imagine I'm your manager, but I don't feel in control of anything, including you or your work. So, feeling somewhat powerless, I try to 'export' that feeling to you: I try to prop myself up by putting you down, telling you you're no good at your job. What happens?

Either you ignore me, and get on with your work anyway; or you believe me, and become unable to do your work. If you ignored me, have I actually propped myself up? If you took on my 'put-down', am I actually in any more control – is any more work actually done – than before? In both cases, the answer's 'No': I might perhaps gain a brief delusion that I'm more 'powerful', but the overall power, in a functional sense, is less, because you now either can't, or won't want to, share your power with me. But because there's less work being done, I'm still not feeling powerful: so I do it again... and again... and again...

Indulging in power-under is just as futile, and just as addictive. To go back to the meal example, let's say you want a Thai theme, but you don't know how to cook that way: so you might try to trap a friend into doing it for you – rather than *with* you. You might trap that friend in any number of ways: nagging to create guilt, perhaps – “you promised you'd do it for me last week, *and* the week before” – or ‘playing victim’ – “I can't do it, you've got to do it for me” – or flattery – “you're so much better at this than I am”. It's now their responsibility, too: if the meal doesn't taste right, it's all *their* fault, not yours. “Power is the ability to avoid work”, supposedly: if they're doing everything for you, you're obviously more ‘powerful’ there.

But what happens? Are you *actually* more powerful at all, from doing this? In reality, “power is the ability to work/play/learn”: but here you've done nothing; learnt nothing. The smug feeling of having ‘got away with’ doing nothing is soon replaced by a flat feeling of emptiness and impotence. And what about next time you want a Thai meal? Having intentionally and deliberately learnt nothing, you're now dependent on increasingly unwilling friends: so to trap them into doing it for you again, you have to find another power-under trick... and another... and another...

The *only* source of power, in human terms, is from within ourselves. We can choose to share that power with others. *Anything else that calls itself ‘power’ is a delusion*: and an addictive delusion at that. It's a delusion that invariably reduces the overall amount of power available to do the work that we choose. It's also a delusion that's extremely common everywhere – including inside every organisation.

So in case you're thinking that this discussion of power still seems a bit abstract or academic, try a small costing exercise. Take a look at the usual office politics; take a look at all those put-downs and blame-games that run rife through almost every organisation. Take a good look at the place you work, the people you work with, the interactions you have with others. And note this one fact: *every occurrence of power-over and power-under will invariably and inevitably reduce the overall ability to do work.*

Take just a handful of examples, and ask yourself: what is the cost of each of those examples, in lost productivity, lost efficiency, lost morale? (A hint: whatever cost you come up with at first will be a wild *underestimate*, because of the knock-on effect of attempted export and counter-export.) Work out a typical cost for each type of incident. Then multiply that average by the total number of incidents (and yes, there'll be a lot of them...) within each area of work. And then let that hidden cost work its way through the balance-sheet, all the way down to the corporate 'bottom line' - whatever that 'bottom line' might be. That's the *real* cost of failing to minimise power-over and power-under at work. That's the *real* cost of failing to understand the real nature of power.

Ouch...

Not quite so abstract now?

Failing to face these issues effectively hurts organisations *real* bad. Hurts *you* real bad, too.

Ouch...

Export and import

Yes, it really *is* that bad. But if the problem's that bad, what can we do about it? More to the point, is there anything we *can* do about it? It's at this stage that a sense of futility tends to creep in...

And that feeling of powerlessness is exactly what I'm on about. Notice how *you* respond to that feeling, because that'll show you, first-hand, exactly how the delusion works - and also what you can do about it. But first you have to notice what your response actually is: because most of the time, most of us go to quite a bit of effort to *not* notice it.

It usually goes through several stages - which happen to illustrate exactly the different forms of the delusion.

The first response – especially in business environments – is often some variant on the ever-popular theme of ‘shoot the messenger’: an active form of power-over to express what’s technically known as ‘denial’. You try to export your discomfort to me, as the ‘messenger’ who appears to be the cause of that discomfort. You don’t like what I say: so you throw away this book, rage at me, say I’m a liar, demand to have me fired, whatever... And yes, I might well run away in fear and terror at your anger, so yes, you might think that you *have* exported the discomfort to me. But none of this changes the fact that what I’ve described really *is* fact: so where’s the power to work with those facts? The facts are still sitting there, “large as life and twice as natural”: but now no-one has any power to cope with them. Oops... Delusion #1...

Some people, as we know all too well, never manage to get past that stage. But the next stage, as the feeling of impotence drifts back once it’s clear that nothing has really changed, is often to slump down into the passive form of power-under. You want to blame me, or everyone else; if you can get past that, you may want to blame the world at large for not being *fair*. You might blame *yourself*, exporting responsibility to yourself in the past; or procrastinate, exporting responsibility to yourself in the future. More likely, you’ll want to pass the buck to someone else – *anyone* else – to make it their responsibility, their fault. You might well put a lot of effort into that last part – effort which, if you think about it, you could otherwise have used in finding a more useful solution. And although you might find someone else who’s able to take on the responsibility, the chances are fairly low, because, as we’ve seen, *everyone’s* likely to be stuck in this particular delusion. And again, none of this activity – or, more often, passivity – changes the fact that the facts are still sitting there, completely unchanged. Oops... Delusion #2...

Many people never get past that stage either, and remain perpetually stuck in trying to export ‘the problem’ to someone else. But in business especially, where people pride themselves in their ability to take charge, there’s often a third stage: the active form of power-under. Once we recognise that passing the buck doesn’t work – because there’s no-one to pass the buck *to* – we eventually come back to the old phrase “the buck stops here”: and instead of trying to export the problem to everyone else, we try to *import* it from everyone else. We try to take control. Of everything. For everyone (since clearly they’re not going to do it themselves). And of everyone (since clearly they’re not going to do it themselves). Oops... Delusion #3...

Big delusion... perhaps the biggest delusion of all...

Like all forms of the delusion, it looks good at first – it *looks*, and usually *feels*, like ‘the right thing to do’. But... no. Or rather, it depends on what our motives are – not the motives we’d probably like to *think* we have, but the real ones that we’re likely to be very careful not to notice. Go back to the definition of power-under: notice that “the crucial issue is the lack of consent rather than the direction in which the responsibility is transferred”. Did everyone *ask* us for our help, our ‘protection’? Did everyone *ask* us take control of every aspect of their behaviour and their lives? For that matter, could we do it? Would we actually succeed? It’s fairly obvious that the answer’s going to be ‘No’...

So what’s *really* going on here? In almost every case, what’s really going on is that we’re using the apparent import as a cover-up for our own export – in other words trying to use ‘being responsible about everyone else’ in order to *avoid* being responsible for our *own* behaviour. Which is why it doesn’t work: because ultimately the only person we can be responsible for is ourselves.

Others can be responsible about us, and to us – that’s power-with, in fact – and we to them; but not *for* us, not *for* them. The difference is subtle, yet utterly crucial. *The only actions and behaviours we can be responsible for are our own*: everything else is either attempted export or attempted import, in order to avoid that responsibility. When two people try to take responsibility from each other so as to avoid facing their own, the result is called ‘co-dependency’; when more than two people try to do this, the result is called, simply, a mess. We can’t live others’ lives for them: it’s exactly as possible, and exactly as sensible, as trying to go to the toilet for them. Others can’t live our lives for us: it’s our responsibility, and no-one else’s. We can’t ‘take’ responsibility from others, any more than we can ‘take’ power from others: it just doesn’t work.

So what *can* we do? Answer: go back to those original definitions about power. We *do* have the power-from-within to address every kind of problem – including this one. And with awareness of others, we *do* have the possibility of power-with, helping each other to face these delusions. In principle, and in practice, all that we need to do is watch our responses, watch for our reflex tendency to fall into one or other of the ‘power’ delusions – and then choose a different response.

That’s all there is to it, in principle. But not so easy in practice, especially in the everyday chaos of work and other people: it’s a mess out there – a *big* mess. If we’re honest, it’s probably a big mess ‘in here’ within ourselves too... But there is one bit of good news: if it’s as bad as all that, even quite a small amount of effort can create a large improvement – so the effort *is* worthwhile!

Winners and losers

There are a few other issues we still need to face, though, before we can start to turn this round. One of them – perhaps the most important – is the concept of ‘winners’ versus ‘losers’.

“Winners are gridders”: *everyone* wants to be a winner – feeling powerful, feeling on top of the world. Conversely, *no-one* wants to be a loser – feeling down, feeling lost, feeling powerless... no-one wants to face that feeling of powerlessness. But wait a minute: we’ve seen this before, haven’t we? Something about being so uncomfortable with the feeling of powerlessness that we ‘have to’ export it to others? Just how much is that going to affect the ‘need’ to be a winner? Oops...

Dead right: there’s another delusion at work here – or rather, another way in which the same delusions about power get played out. And as usual, the delusion starts with a simple mistake, leading in turn to *big* problems we see all around us, every day.

The mistake is about the availability of power: where it comes from, where it goes, who has it, who doesn’t have it, how to gain it, how to lose it. The common-sense view of human power is that it’s a fixed quantity, much like many other resources. It’s ‘out there’, somewhere – though no-one seems to know quite where. And it’s apparently divided up like a pie, with each person somehow – again, no-one quite knows how – assigned their own share of power. Since the size of this pie is fixed, all power-transactions between people must re-divide the pie, with gains and losses always adding up to a ‘zero-sum’. As one Marxist theorist put it, “it is in the nature of power that it is impossible for one to have more without others having less”. No other choice, apparently.

This ‘win/lose’ view of power tells us that we can *only* be a winner – *the* winner – by making someone else lose. And we win *by* making others lose: we *need* them to lose, and know that they have lost, in order for us to be able to win. Worse, in this perspective, there’s also no link between personal effort and personal power: instead, if we want to be powerful – *feel* powerful – all we have to do is make someone else lose. So we don’t need to make any effort to win: all we have to do is make sure that others lose. And when we make someone lose, we take their power – and export *powerlessness* to them in its place. That’s the idea, anyway...

We've already seen what goes wrong when there's any attempt at export. Yet here, in win/lose, we have a structure which actually *requires* it. It doesn't take much to guess the result: power-over and power-under run rampant, and thought before action is conspicuous mostly by its absence. *Not wise...*

This 'pie-slice' view of power also tells us that if we're feeling powerless – feel we've somehow been 'oppressed', made a loser – that must surely mean someone else has purloined some of our share of power. Hence, not surprisingly, we want it back. But what if everyone else is feeling powerless and oppressed, too? Who's stolen all our power? There must be a hidden oppressor here – we need to find them and strike back! No-one seems to know what power really is, but we know when we *haven't* got it: and we'll fight *anyone* for it – to the death, if necessary!

This zero-sum view of power is so simple, so clear, so easy to understand – and seductively, dangerously, lethally wrong. It's the source of countless battles for 'market share' and 'mindshare', the source of countless wars, countless revolutions and, yes, countless oppressions – and ultimately it's completely wrong. Sure, there's *some* truth in it: but often only because others have fallen for the same mistake, too, and think that *they're* fighting for or protecting their own so-fragile share of power. Total chaos, anyone? Free gift of chaos with every simple mistake? Oops...

Business – and much else besides – can be a lot less troublesome, and a lot more profitable, once we can bring ourselves to understand and accept that this simplistic pie-slice view of power isn't just an unnecessary assumption, it's just plain wrong. Yet to many people in business, my Darwinian description above isn't wrong at all – that's the way that it really *is*. It's a tough world out there: it's 'survival of the fittest', dog-eat-dog, y'know?

Ever stopped to wonder why, though?

Ever stopped to consider the possibility that all this pain and struggle and chaos might just be the result of one simple mistake?

The mistake is that power isn't 'out there' at all, as some kind of fixed resource that we have to fight others for. It's 'in here', arising from within us, as part of us – and the only ones we might need to fight, to gain it, is ourselves.

It's not even a fixed resource: it's always there, from within us, in any amount. Power is our *own* ability to do work, or play, or learn, as an expression of our own choice, our own purpose. And it's not others, but *we*, who apply limits to its availability from within us, for all manner of different reasons – some of which we've already seen, in the previous discussion on power.

It's true that it can be hard to find that power from within ourselves – mainly because it's so easy to shut it down. That's actually the reason why power-over and power-under don't work: not only is energy wasted on setting up the attempted export, but most people shut down when they detect – even unconsciously – an attempted export, so the power is no longer there to 'take' anyway.

If this isn't obvious already, look at the productivity of slaves. Not very high at the best of times, is it? What happens when a workforce gets pushed too far by management? Answer: they shut down – they work-to-rule, or go on strike – so that there's *less* 'ability to do work' as a result of the bullying, not more. What happens if you push a prospective customer too far? Answer: they shut down – and you don't make the sale. What happens if you use power-under tricks with a prospective customer? Answer: yes, you might make the sale this time, but they'll shut down automatically in future – they won't be a repeat-customer – and they'll probably warn off all their friends and colleagues, too.

In each interaction, we have only two choices, two possibilities of shared power: win/win, or lose/lose. Either everyone wins; or no-one wins. *Win/lose is actually an illusory form of lose/lose.*

For that matter, so is 'lose/win' – a mistaken notion of power-with in which I assume that I can only help you win by making myself lose. Putting myself down to prop you up is merely the other side of the power-over delusion; whilst pretending to do so – a common sales ploy – is just another kind of power-under, and just as ineffectual in the long run.

The pie-slice view of power – zero-sum, win/lose, lose/win, with all the power being somewhere 'out there' – seems like common-sense: but like so much apparent 'common-sense', it's completely wrong. Every time you, or I, or anyone, plays power-over or power-under, *everyone* loses. There are no winners in win/lose: only losers. It may not look like it at first, but that really *is* what actually happens.

So that's our choice: win/win, or lose/lose. We can play power-over games and power-under games as much as we like: whenever we do so but everyone loses – including ourselves. Or we can explore the possibilities for power-with, to help each other find the appropriate power-from-within, to do the work / play / learn that arises from our shared purpose – and with care, and awareness, *everyone* wins, every time.

If we want to win, we have to make sure that everyone else wins with us.

And it's our choice, and our responsibility, every time.

Rights and responsibilities

Responsibility is where and how we express our choice. But even here problems can arise, which we need to note before moving on to exploring power within the business arena. The delusion that “power is the ability to *avoid* work” means that accepting responsibility is often equated with powerlessness, a ‘successful’ export of responsibility to someone else. And the habits of power-under lead, all too often, to a situation in which responsibility is equated with blame – “*who* is responsible for this mess?” yells an irate administrator, for example – and in which anyone who's willing to take on the responsibility for tidying up some kind of chaos immediately gets blamed for everything else as well. This doesn't help in getting the work done... but both are very common, in all kinds of work-environments.

More subtle yet are the confusions that arise over rights and responsibilities – especially when people think in terms of ‘rights *or* responsibilities’. The problem is that statements like the US Bill of Rights or the UN's ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ give the impression that rights are automatic, inherent and so on: but in fact every ‘right’ is an assertion that responsibilities are to be placed *on others* to uphold that right on our behalf. And some of those assertions of ‘right’ can be very arbitrary indeed, such as the supposed ‘jus primae noctis’ – ‘right of first night’ – claimed by some mediaeval warlords over any newly-married couple under their so-called ‘protection’. The concept of rights can lead straight to the dishonesties of power-under, the offloading of responsibility onto others without their consent – as is particularly evident wherever an argument is phrased in terms of “*I* have rights, *you* have responsibilities!”

Interestingly, and perhaps most disturbingly for business, even the concept of ownership falls far too easily into this trap, because it's usually defined in terms of property-rights, rights of *possession*, without any definitions of matching responsibilities. "If I own it, it's my right to do what I like with it": in effect, ownership is defined as 'the right to exploit without reference to others, either in the present or elsewhere'.

There's also an associated 'anti-ownership', an asserted 'right' to *avoid* the 'anti-property' that no-one wants, such as pollution, poor food, poor living conditions, poor health and poor life-expectancy. Poverty brings unwanted 'riches' of the unwanted, it seems.

This all seems at first to be straightforward common-sense: but as with the pie-slice view of power, it doesn't work. Possession is deemed to confer rights without responsibilities: so the matching responsibilities have to be imposed separately through another route, through the cumbersome chaos called 'the Law' - and even then some people spend their entire working lives trying to find loopholes that would give them the 'right' to evade those responsibilities. In other words, power-under again, just like the pie-slice view of power - but institutionalised on a society-wide scale.

As we'll see later, there are some specific problems about ownership 'rights' in relation to business. And there are also many arguments about 'workplace rights' and the like. But in practice, in trying to create a more functional approach to power in the workplace, the concept of 'rights' itself often tends to be more of a hindrance than a help. More to the point, it actually isn't necessary: assertions of rights often result in evasions of responsibility, but defined responsibilities automatically lead to, and implicitly define, concomitant rights.

In Britain at least, the simplest illustration of this is traffic law. Despite the common-sense concept of 'right of way', there's in fact no such right: technically, a 'right of way' is actually a *responsibility*, on a land-holder, to permit passage of people and (usually) vehicles along a defined route across the land-holder's property. The law then specifies a series of rules and responsibilities, indicating who must give way to whom, and under what conditions. Each rule is accompanied by explicit reasons for the respective responsibilities. Finally, there's a 'none of the above' kind of rule which says that road users are responsible at all times to drive safely, regardless of what anyone else is doing, and regardless of what any of the other rules might say.

So no-one is assigned arbitrary 'rights' over others: *no-one* has an automatic, inalienable 'right of way' over everyone else. There's no such right as a 'right of way': yet as a result of a complete, clearly-defined set of interlocking responsibilities, in effect *everyone* has 'right of way' appropriate to their needs, and in relation to everyone else's needs.

Given the prevalence of power-over and power-under, the concept of rights all too easily leads to power-problems: but we can get exactly the same result as was intended by the concept of rights, by starting instead from responsibilities. And in doing so, we bypass most of the power-over and power-under: when we *know* that there's no such right as a 'right of way', there's not much point in fighting others for it...

The possessive rights-based concept of ownership all too easily creates a tangled mess of assertion and counter-assertion, blame and counter-blame; but we can start instead from responsibilities, and replace it with a concept of *stewardship* - an acknowledgement of responsibility rather than assertion of right. In functional terms, it comes out much the same, it even *looks* much the same: the difference is that it works, where 'rights' and 'possession' don't.

I'd perhaps better add - especially in a business context! - that there's nothing wrong with ownership as such. Stewardship works better as a concept because it enforces an awareness of power as 'the ability to do work', where possession invites a lapse back to an attitude that power is the ability to avoid work.

In the same way, the common habit of equating responsibility with acceptance of blame suggests that 'responsibility' itself needs a different name, too. In the functional form of responsibility, in this context, what we need to emphasise is its relationship to functional power, as opposed to the delusions of power-over and power-under. And we need to emphasise responsibility as the *expression* of that power and choice, both in a personal sense as power-from-within, and shared with others as power-with. We can do this by describing responsibility as 'response-ability':

Response-ability is the ability to choose and act upon appropriate responses to events, in relation to personal purpose and shared purpose.

Response-ability is the expression of power as the personal and shared 'ability to do work': so there's no point in trying to 'be powerful' unless there's work to do. Response-ability is the expression of personal response to changing circumstances: it's an ability varies from person to person, from moment to moment. And response-ability is also the expression of personal choice and personal purpose - which reminds us that the human need for *meaning* must be included within our concept of human power.

Motivation and meaning

Another key area of confusion is around what's often described as the spiritual dimension of work. The usual problem-area is the word 'spiritual' itself: many people seem to think it's somehow connected only with religion, and hence has no real role in business - other than perhaps keeping industrial chaplains on call, to help staff with problems at home. But in fact it's the other way round: religion, in whatever form, is simply a tool to assist spirituality - but so too is work itself, if the circumstances are right. The confusion is so severe and so prevalent that the term 'spiritual' needs an explicit definition for the work-context:

The spiritual dimension of work is the personal experience of meaning, purpose and belonging - a sense of self and of relationship with that which is greater than self, within and through the process of work itself.

Once again, I mean 'work' here in that wider sense earlier: a dynamic balance of the three facets of 'work', 'play' and 'learn'.

Spirituality is sometimes described as 'inner power' or 'inner strength' - which tells us that it's essentially the same as what we've earlier seen as 'power-from-within'. More accurately, it's the *source* for that inner power. Without it, the availability of power slowly fades down to a kind of maintenance level, where nothing much happens at all - and stays that way until there's a good reason to find the energy to rekindle the inner fires again. We don't have to look far for examples: think of the well-known effects of 'de-skilling' an area of work, or the devastation of workforce morale after repeated 'restructuring' and 'downsizing'.

The process of reclaiming and maintaining that inner power, and using it in productive work, is generally described as 'motivation'. But herein lies another common mistake: the idea that people are only motivated by external inducements or external forces, and that, as leaders and managers, we're responsible for providing that motivation for 'our' people. In reality, we don't 'motivate' others at all: people motivate *themselves* – and they're the only ones who can do it.

It's true that 'motivational' speakers and the like can certainly help at times: but if we push people too hard that way, it'll just feel like an attempt at power-over or power-under – which means that they'll shut down, and we're then worse off than where we started. Bringing in motivational speakers to 'rally the troops' also tends to reassert the illusion that the power is 'out there' rather than 'in here': hence although productivity may rise for a while, it soon slumps back – often leading to an addictive dependence on 'motivational' support just to keep going.

The key to successful motivation lies in understanding its relationship with the spiritual dimension. Personal power arises from a personal sense of meaning within work, or associated with that work; it arises from a sense of purpose, that the work fulfils some personal need, some personal thread or theme of life; it arises from a sense of self – especially a sense of self identified in and with work; and it arises from a sense of belonging to some purpose or process greater than the immediate limitations of self, a sense of belonging to and jointly expressing some shared common purpose. All of these things matter: ultimately, they're the source of our power, and the power we share with others.

As with the 'work/play/learn' triad, all of those facets of the spiritual dimension need to be in balance for that power to be fully available. This is as true for organisations as for individuals. So yes, people *can* do work that has no meaning to them; people *can* get by on clockwatching, on an attitude that "work is what I do to pay for my play"; people *can* function, after a fashion, with Machiavellian self-centredness and an obsession with "what's in it for *me*?". But productivity and creativity will invariably be poor – and such people usually bring others down with them as well.

If we look at what *does* get people going, it always has those same four elements: the work feels meaningful; there's a feeling that it aligns with a personal sense of purpose; there's a sense of personal identification with the work, and the quality of that work; and there's a sense of membership and commitment not just to the group or organisation, but to the wider community as well.

It's a bit unfortunate that for most people the best-known context that fulfils all these conditions is war. It's one reason why so many organisations end up being run – even in peace-time – as if they were on a war-footing, stumbling from one crisis to another in order to create a sense of urgency and excitement. So it's important to remember that support for all the facets *can* be created and maintained in ordinary, everyday work – and with a lot less stress on all concerned. We'll be looking at this in detail later.

Part of our power, though, is that we can *create* meaning in order to do work that we otherwise wouldn't want or be able to do. Even the most interesting work has periods of drudgery and boredom; all of us have aspects of our work that we dislike, or that we'd rather not face. To do that work, we have to create power from somewhere: we motivate ourselves to do it. And we usually do so by linking the work with something else that *does* have meaning, that *does* connect with our own sense of purpose.

Many people go to work day after day, year after year, in mind-numbing, dangerous, dirty jobs, and keep going by connecting it with the idea that by doing so they're supporting the family they love. And they can fall apart completely on divorce or separation, or when the family leaves home – because the supposed 'reason' to work goes with them. These are described as spiritual issues: yet they have very real impact on people's ability to do their day-to-day work – in other words, their power, in a human sense.

The spiritual dimension also indicates that people need a sense of self – a clear sense of who they are, and of their own *personal* purpose in life – in order to be able to identify with and be committed to their work. This is another reason why the delusions of power-over and power-under cause so many problems in organisations: the aim of both delusions – especially power-over – is to crush the sense of self of the Other, to create the illusion that power has been 'taken'. For example, think of a typical 'shoot the messenger' scenario: after a full-on yelling-at, or worse, for the sin of being the bearer of bad news, the 'messenger' is likely to feel crushed, worthless – and possibly unable to work for quite a while... Many organisations still operate on the inane principle of "the beatings will continue until morale improves", thinking that this style of power-over is somehow 'motivating' – and then wonder why their workforce laugh at them, and come back with the old retort that "the morale will continue until the beatings improve!"

All too often, the common concept of motivation regards people as little more than mindless robots that need to be rewound from time to time. Instead, it's far more sensible to realise – and respect – that people *are* intelligent, and motivate themselves when we don't stop them from doing so. People do know when extra effort is needed – and often know this better than their so-called 'leaders'. "We knew times were hard", they said, "so we'd put our shoulders to the wheel, ready to push, ready to take the strain – and then the idiots took the wheel away!"

Time and again, the same old pie-slice mistake about power rears its head: but the reality is that we don't 'give' people power through motivation, any more than we can 'take' it through power-over or power-under. If we want to 'motivate' people to do work, we need to understand it not as 'giving' power to others, but as power-with, as a work-oriented support for their own spiritual process: and where they can find a sense of meaning and purpose in work, and both a sense of self and that which is greater than self within that work, *people motivate themselves* to find their own power-from-within.

Expressing empowerment

The same mistakes that we saw with motivation also often occur with the concept of empowerment. The errors all arise from the usual source, namely the pie-slice view of power. In that view, the manager or great leader 'empowers' her staff by magnanimously giving to them some of her own power, or power that she, in turn, has been given by others 'above' her. In return for this gift of empowerment, her staff must use that power in carrying out the work that she ordains. As a model of the empowerment process, it's clear, it's simple, it's easy to understand, it's just plain common-sense – and it's completely the wrong way round. Which is why things get into such a mess...

It's best to admit, right from the start, that much of that common notion of empowerment is – to use somewhat outdated slang – little more than an ego-trip for the supposed 'empowerers'. We all like the illusion that we're the ones who 'give' power to others. The reality, though, is that *we* don't empower others at all: *people empower themselves* – and may then choose to share *their* power with *us*. So our real task, if we want others to be empowered to work, or play, or learn, is simply to be aware enough to not *stop* them from being so. Most of the time, the main problem is not lack of power from 'above', or 'out there', but people meddling so much that the power *can't* arise from within as it otherwise would. Hence, most of the time, all we have to do to 'empower' people is to remind them that they are powerful already – and then get out of their way, to let them get on with the work as required.

That process of 'reminding others that they are powerful' is part of what I earlier described as power-with. How we do it, what we need to do – or not do – and what type of power we need to encourage them to find within themselves depends on the context and the requirements. It's often also highly individual, because something that excites one person may be entirely unappealing to another: one reason why an understanding of the *personal* nature of 'life-purpose' is so important to empowerment. It also depends on an understanding of the real nature of power, as something that arises *from* the individual rather than something that is 'given' *to* them. And it depends on an awareness of the expression of power as response-ability – the ability of individuals to choose and act upon *appropriate* responses to current conditions.

We'll be seeing many examples of this as we go along. In practice, the process of functional empowerment always includes the same elements as motivation: exploring ways in which the work – whatever it is – can be perceived by the individual as worthwhile and meaningful to them and to those they see as associated with them; as being aligned with their own desires, needs and aspirations; as being something with which they can identify, and express themselves; and in which they can gain a sense of belonging, and a sense of contributing to a greater whole.

Given the prevalence in society in general of delusions about power, one of the complications is to find a way of empowering that doesn't simply replicate the problems of power-over and power-under at a larger scale. For example, it's quite easy to create a sense of urgency – and thus motivation of a kind – by inventing a sense of risk or threat: for business, as I mentioned earlier, the obvious example is war.

It's also why many 'motivation' models emphasise an image of 'Us against Them'. For example, one luxury-car company has, as a key part of its 'mission', the statement "beat Benz!". The catch, as we'll see more later, is that it doesn't work, in the long run, or in the wider scale: if we *do* 'beat Benz', or whatever, the only group left to 'beat' is ourselves... leading to an implosion of infighting of a kind that's destroyed many an otherwise seemingly successful organisation. 'Us against Them' is just another form of the power-over delusion: the *only* way that individuals, or groups, or whole corporations, can 'win' is by creating forms of empowerment that ensure that *everyone* wins.

That's empowerment; that's power. And we now need to move this discussion out of the abstract, and into the practical world of business - starting with a review of the ways in which these power-issues repeat within and between every scale of endeavour, from 'I' to 'We' to 'Us' to 'Them'.

I AND WE AND US AND THEM

Spheres of influence

Each of us has our own power; each of us has our own persona, the 'mask' with which we face the world; and each of us has our own sphere of influence, our own direct area of response-ability. Often we want to extend that sphere, for a while at least – perhaps to do work that we cannot do alone, or to gain access to resources that we cannot reach on our own. To do this, we have to share: share power, and response-ability, with others. Expanding the scope at each stage, one person becomes a member of a team, a department, a company, a corporation; 'I' becomes 'We', becomes 'Us', in relation to 'Them'. And that triad of 'work / play / learn' becomes a tetrahedron, with 'relate' as the new dimension taking us beyond the purely personal realm.

[[see published book for details]]

Hidden voices

A key part of this negotiation depends on a recognition not only that each level – 'I', 'We', 'Us', and 'Them' as well – has its own sphere of influence, but also has its own persona, its own voice. 'Persona' is the Latin word for 'mask', but also translates literally as 'that through which I sound': as we'll see, both meanings are relevant here, in a business context.

[[see published book for details]]

Systems within systems

For convenience, and for other practical reasons, it's a common practice to partition work into 'systems' - collections of related work processes with defined inputs and outputs and, usually, defined activities. Having partitioned work in this way, it's then easy to fall into the trap of thinking that these systems, and the boundaries between them, are natural and inherent in 'the way things are' - rather than recognise the reality that, ultimately, all boundaries are entirely arbitrary.

[[see published book for details]]

Conditions and context

If we want people to work well, we need to provide conditions in which they *can* work well. The needs to manage physical conditions are well-documented: they're usually handled under the heading of 'health and safety at work', and covered by a vast mass of legislation - though sometimes not much thought, in practice, beyond vaguely satisfying the legal requirements. By comparison, managing *non*-physical conditions rarely even makes the agenda: there's some inconsistent and erratic legislation about harassment and discrimination, which many companies perhaps try to ignore, but that's about it. Yet it's there that so many of the real productivity losses arise, because power-over and power-under can run rampant, crushing the real 'ability to do work'.

[[see published book for details]]

Competition and cooperation

Power isn't only about our own ability to do work: it's also about how we *share* that power with others. We start off as 'I', with all the power that we have within us. But to get further than that, we meet with others – and immediately, created by us and between us, there is 'We', a compound entity with its own persona and choices. There's a wider scope of 'Us': groupings to which we belong in a less direct way – company, church, neighbourhood, or state. And finally, there are 'Them': groupings to which we believe we *don't* belong, but with which in some way we must relate.

[[see published book for details]]

BEYOND CONTROL

Control and direction

The purpose of management, we're told, is to control the operation of the respective aspect of the business. Directives, instructions, orders, procedures: these are all tools for controlling business processes. Precise control of all processes supposedly provides certainty, and freedom from surprises of any kind.

Control is an operational approach in which processes are rendered predictable through the application of defined rules to the relevant factors of the process.

This all seems fairly obvious, no doubt: what's perhaps not so obvious is that none of these 'broadcast' tools ever actually succeed in controlling anything. *None* of them: not one. Control is a myth: it does not and cannot exist.

[[see published book for details]]

Creativity and chaos

Organisations *need* ideas: organisations live or die by their ideas, and the ways in which those ideas are expressed in practice. As discussed above, organisations also tend to want control of everything: but too much control kills the creativity from which the ideas arise, and can easily kill the organisation too.

[[see published book for details]]

Accepting uncertainty

Nothing is certain in business. If we attempt to apply rigid controls to our business, what we get is chaos; but if we turn round and accept uncertainty, and learn to work *with* it, what we get is a weird kind of order. Again, this is the same as in science: as James Gleick commented, on the new mathematics of chaos, “it turns out that behind apparent order lies an eerie kind of chaos; and behind that chaos lies an even eerier kind of order”.

[[see published book for details]]

Beyond systems

For sanity’s sake, we’ll often partition work into systems: but it’s essential to remember that every system is part of a larger system, and that boundaries between systems can always be redrawn another way. There’s no absolute reason, for example, why an organisation’s work should be split along function-boundaries, such as production, sales, marketing, administration and so on. It may seem to be easier to manage that way, but the result is often vertical ‘empires’ with poor communication between them – and low *overall* corporate effectiveness.

[[see published book for details]]

ECONOMIC ACTION

The meaning of economy

The business of business – of every enterprise, whether commercial or otherwise – is economic activity. The ways in which we work, interact with each other in the process of that work, and share the proceeds of the work, combine together into what is loosely called ‘the economy’.

Whenever politicians and business analysts refer to the economy, they generally use the word as a synonym for ‘management of finances on a national or international scale’; yet historically the word has a much broader meaning:

Economy is the management of the household, in a manner which is efficient, reliable, elegant and appropriate to the respective context and scale.

In this sense, ‘the household’ exists on every scale: an individual, family, company, corporation, industry, nation, the world as a whole.

[[see published book for details]]

The end of ownership

As a concept, ownership seems obvious enough: but there’s a surprising range of problems concealed within the concept – mostly to do with implicit power-over and power-under, much as we saw earlier with rights and responsibilities. To tackle those problems, we need to draw a distinction between two different attitudes to ownership: ‘possession’, and ‘stewardship’.

[[see published book for details]]

Purpose, relationship, knowledge

A corporation's economic activity arises from individual, *personal* power. The only source of that power, as 'the ability to do work', is from within us as individuals. It cannot be 'taken' from others - and any attempt to do so, via power-over or power-under, reduces the availability of that power. For the reasons we've seen, the power is greatest when it can be expressed as responsibility in a purposeful way, in a context which is based on stewardship rather than possession, and one which addresses the full scope and meaning of 'economy'.

[[see published book for details]]

FULFILLING PURPOSE

Proactive purpose

Clarity of purpose is central to success in everything that we do. In a business sense, purpose provides the basis for an organisation's existence: the motivation and meaning for 'Us', as an organised association of individuals. That'll be true regardless of whether the enterprise is commercial, political, social, non-profit, service, government or whatever. With a purpose, we can be *proactive*, watching for trends which point the way towards our purpose; but without a purpose, we can never do more than react to events. And without an explicit business-purpose, all we'll be left with is *implicit* purpose - primarily the infamous "what's in it for me?" - which is *not* a good basis for business...

But what exactly is 'purpose', in a business context? What does purpose look like? And what's the relationship between purpose and the pointless platitudes in purpose-statements, mission-statements, vision-statements, value-statements and the like?

[[see published book for details]]

Involving everyone

Although it's short - or perhaps *because* it needs to be short - a meaningful purpose-statement can be a lot of work. It's not something that can be knocked up by corporate management over a weekend retreat, broadcast once through the organisation's intranet, and then forgotten - because that'll guarantee that it *will* be forgotten! The weekend workshop or whatever is only the start: to be of practical use, the purpose-statement needs to be discussed not just with a few key managers and shareholders, but with *every* stakeholder, to ensure that the stated purpose matches well with their own. And that really *is* a lot of work... But it's work that's well worthwhile, because a meaningful purpose is probably *the* key protection against power-over and power-under - both within the enterprise, and between it and the 'outside' world.

[[see published book for details]]

Accounts and accountability

Identifying the vision, values, principles and purpose can be hard work. Framing them in the form of clear, concise statements is hardly simple, either. Even so, in many ways that *is* the easy part: the real work comes in translating those commitments into profitable business practice – or whatever the organisation’s equivalent of profit might be. Yet despite the effort – much of it challenging, much of it embarrassingly visible to the outside world – it’s still far less than the hidden costs of ‘business as usual’.

[[see published book for details]]

The quest for quality

In effect, the same accountability to purpose is also the core of *quality* within all of the economic activity. Quality *depends* on purpose: it’s as simple as that. An explicit statement of purpose is a foundation-stone for formal quality-management processes such as TQM and ISO 9000:2000. And without a meaningful purpose-statement to anchor them, quality-initiatives will inevitably fail and fade away – regardless of the amount of effort put into them.

[[see published book for details]]

MANAGING RELATIONS

The schoolyard and the marketplace

In describing business interactions between people, the usual metaphor is a mediaeval market: bustling, busy, merchants shouting their wares, people stopping to buy – and a few dubious deals being done in the background! Few of the producers can be seen: most are hidden away out of sight, at the back of the stall, back at home, or in some foreign country. Other ‘non-producers’ are rather more visible: the merchants, and even their customers, at times seem to be outnumbered by the ‘between-takers’ – the literal translation of ‘entrepreneur’ – all jostling to interpose themselves in every transaction, demanding either the official excise or, more likely, their own personal cut from each deal.

We’d perhaps have to admit, too, that in that market the most common means of ‘making money’ – as distinct from ‘making a living’ – consists of misleading others about the true value of what’s on offer. A cynic could easily argue that much of what goes on there is little better than ‘maximising theft within the law’ – with the law being fierce on small offenders, but strangely lax and lenient with regard to the richer merchants...

The metaphor still works quite well at the larger scale of the modern ‘mass market’. The merchants may be multinationals, though customers may be viewed as mere ‘consumers’. Somehow the producers remain as invisible as ever: to be seen to *do* anything, expressing personal power and response-ability in productive work, still seems to be assigned the lowest status – though no-one knows why. And there are plenty of dubious deals going on in the background – though some of them have new names, such as ‘price-fixing’ and ‘insider trading’. And the between-takers, the ‘middle-men’, are even more plentiful and persistent: and some of them have new titles, such as ‘charge-card service’ or ‘commodity-futures broker’ – or ‘inspector for Inland Revenue’...

But to understand what's really going on in the marketplace and in those forgotten 'manufactories', in terms of interpersonal transactions, there's an even better metaphor: the primary-school playground – the schoolyard. After all, it's there that we each learn most of our habits for adulthood: all that's happened over the years is that those children have grown larger – and better at concealing, from others and even from themselves, those habits that are far from helpful in the real world.

So go back there to the schoolyard; take a look around in your memories. We may have thought that the marketplace was busy, but the schoolyard is even busier – so much so that even trained athletes can't keep up. Yet the hard part is that you'll see there every one of the power-problems that we looked at earlier: power-over and power-under; cooperation-against and competition-against; and object-based and subject-based attitudes to others. Much of it makes office-politics seem almost tame by comparison: “nature red in tooth and claw” indeed!

[[see published book for details]]

Shareholders and stakeholders

For commercial organisations, the first place where we need to do this reframing is with the shareholders, that small group of stakeholders who so often – and so mistakenly – believe that they alone are the owners of the enterprise. We've seen this issue already in a slightly different form, but we now need to make it more explicit. An enterprise consists of its purpose, its ability to fulfil that purpose, its relationships, its knowledge, and its assets. The shareholders may own – possess – the physical assets of the organisation: but *they do not own the enterprise itself*, because the physical assets are only one part – sometimes a very small that – of the overall enterprise.

[[see published book for details]]

Open and closed

If markets are conversations, the best way to create a market is to create a conversation. In business terms, that means creating open, two-way conversations with all manner of stakeholders – clients, customers and prospects, suppliers, shareholders, employees, government and everyone else. Involving stakeholders *directly* in the enterprise in this way demands a lot more openness than most businesses are used to, yet it also creates many proven advantages for the organisation:

- improved reputation
- improved product-development cycle
- improved time-to-market
- improved saleability of product
- improved self-marketing
- improved tolerance by clients about faults or problems
- improved service-delivery for service agencies

In most cases, all that stands in the way of those improvements is fear of uncertainty, of loss of control.

[[see published book for details]]

Personas and power-dynamics

Power-relationships are at the core of every company, every enterprise. At this stage, it's worth reiterating the definition of power we identified earlier: 'the ability to work / play / learn / relate, as an expression of personal choice, personal response-ability and personal purpose'. This may not be what people usually mean when they talk about power, in office-politics and the like: but it's the functional form of power, whereas the supposed 'power' in office-politics is often little more than a dysfunctional mess of power-over and power-under, which can only be reduced through a clear focus on power-from-within and power-with.

[[see published book for details]]

CREATING KNOWLEDGE

The nature of knowledge

All individuals and organisations create and acquire knowledge, unique to their industry, market and purpose. For organisations, their knowledge to some extent defines what they *are*. Information is also supposed to be *the* key asset of the 'new economy' – which is why most large corporations spend a fortune on information-technology, data warehousing and 'knowledge-management'.

Yet knowledge is more than mere information. It's built up from the content and context of information, and connections created between items of information. On its own, without context and connections to anchor into Reality Department, information has no meaning and no use – and hence no value, either. And whilst the information-technology revolution of the past few decades has vastly increased the amount of information available to us, most is unusable – and will remain so without a systematic knowledge-technology to create meaningful connections.

[[see published book for details]]

Mobile memory

Usable information is often termed 'intellectual property'. The ownership of ideas and their expression – as copyrights, patents, trademarks, brands and the like – is central to the 'new economy': ideas are often purported to be the primary assets of every enterprise. So the concept of intellectual property is supported by a huge and complex area of law: what's worrying, though, is that if we look closely, we'll find there's nothing concrete behind it. It's all imaginary: that entire system of law is 'smoke and mirrors', a series of legal fictions held together by power-over and power-under, and very little else.

[[see published book for details]]

Analysis and intuition

Knowledge is built up from content, context and connections. Content may be any kind:of data facts, figures, names, numbers, dates, places, images, all manner of other kinds of data-structures. A predefined set of connections provides metadata for some basic context: for example, a figure may be linked to its source and a date. But the use of that information is more often derived from wider connections that are *not* predefined: as part of an aggregate figure for the year, perhaps, or for the town or industry, or as a link to a newspaper article on the person's life. Knowledge and experience are more than mere information: and for real knowledge, *anything goes* as far as connections are concerned. But that's also what makes it so hard to separate out meaningful knowledge from amidst the morass of everyday information.

[[see published book for details]]

The learning organisation

The term 'learning organisation' was coined by Peter Sengé to describe a constant process of self-education and self-development, as the foundation for an entire enterprise. It goes far deeper than the usual 'fast-fix' fads, or the shortlived 'human resource' training courses. Instead, it promotes a quiet, careful re-think and re-work of every aspect of the organisation's business - carried out by the organisation itself - to create a fundamental shift in orientation and focus, towards empowerment, in every way and at every level within the enterprise.

[[see published book for details]]

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

...or, “What do we do on Monday morning?”

First things first: slow down! It's usual, after reading something like this, to want to rush in and make changes straight away: but in this case, as in so many others, doing so would be likely only to make things worse. The power-problems in business and elsewhere usually arise from very deep roots: trying to 'fix' them at the surface level may create short-term surface changes, but unless the issues *are* tackled right down at the roots, the problems just reappear elsewhere, or in a different form. And the only way to reach those roots is to slow down: as the old joke puts it, “don't just do something: stand there!”

[[see published book for details]]

APPENDIX: DEFINITIONS AND DIAGNOSTICS

Definitions

[[see published book for details]]

Property

[[see published book for details]]

A power/property-diagnostic

The diagnostic consists of a suite of questions which invite interpretation of a given context, by assessment of the conditions of the context in the light of these definitions.

Use the questions here as a checklist to explore power-issues and property-issues in any context. In particular, note any split-off of anti-property, and the dysfunctional forms of power (power-over or power-under) used to create and maintain the split: basing any part of a business-model on split-off of anti-property (such as waste, pollution, creation of social stress and suchlike) will render the entire business-model fragile and unsustainable in the longer term.

[[see published book for details]]