



OE Cam

# Who's Got the Power?



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## OE Cam LLP

3 Wellington Court,  
Cambridge  
CB1 1HZ  
UK

[info@oecam.com](mailto:info@oecam.com)

[www.oecam.com](http://www.oecam.com)

+44 (0)1223 269 009

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Editor: Helen Pybus  
Editorial Consultant: Mike Thackray

Design: Logorunner Design  
Illustrations: Rob Hill

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# Who's Got the Power?

Welcome to this edition of *The OE*.

The drive towards greater personal autonomy and individual rights has grown remarkably over the last few years. Fuelled by Diversity & Inclusion initiatives it's perhaps been accelerated by the Pandemic, but in the workplace is there a *limit* to the expression of individual wants and needs? And does today's pressure to make the organisation recession-proof mean we're approaching that limit?

This edition of our journal explores the shift in power between an individual and the organisation and the leadership challenge in achieving an optimal balance between the two. A key thread that connects our five articles is authenticity; the promise for employees to 'be who you really are' at work presents a number of challenges for managers who need to respect that individuality whilst also championing the needs of the team and the business.

So who has the power? What rights should the organisation retain, and to what extent can ways of working be left to the individual to decide?

As always, we welcome your feedback and look forward to hearing what you think.

**Martyn Sakol**



**MARTYN SAKOL, *Managing Partner***

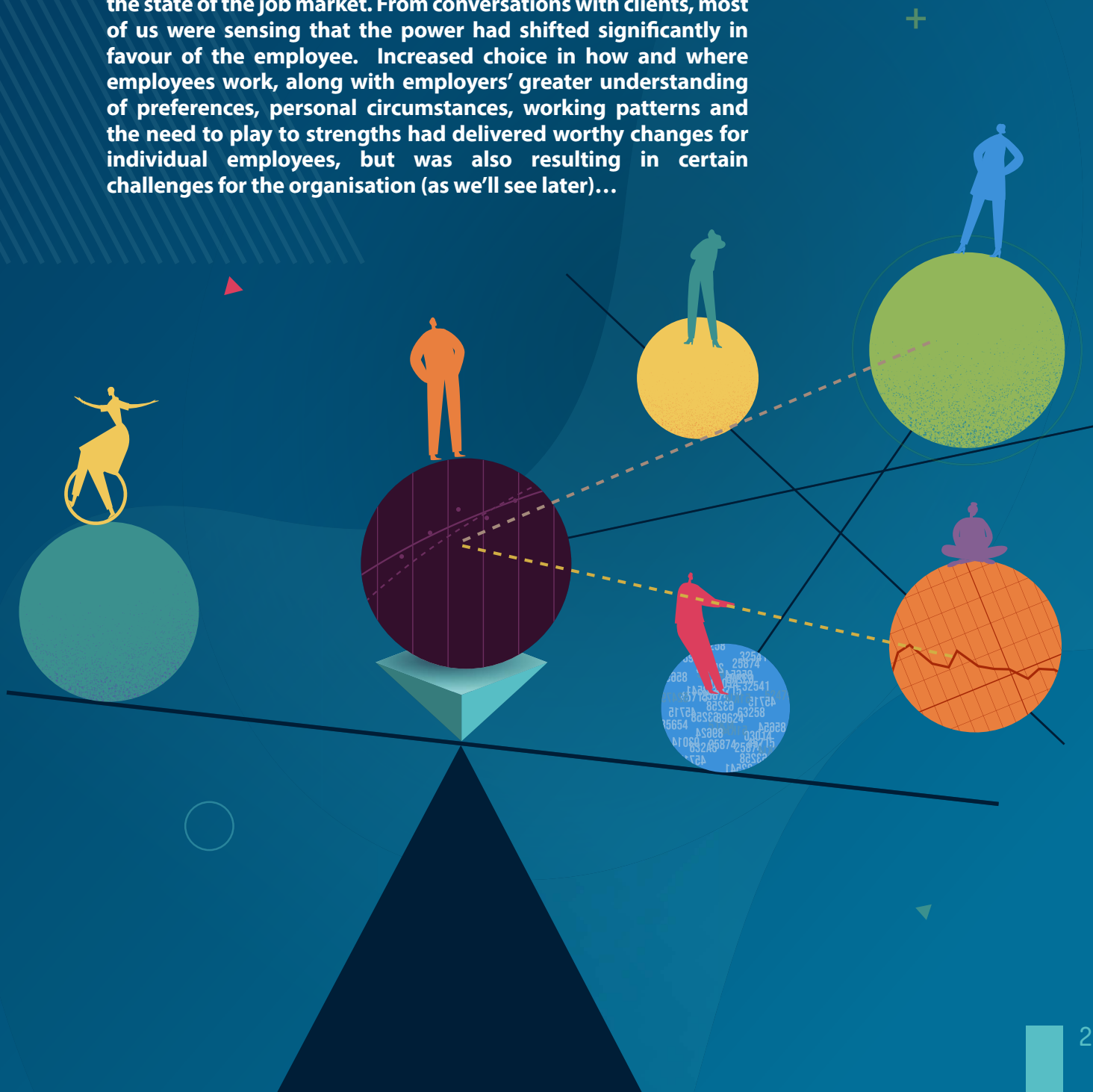
Martyn is a Chartered Psychologist and MBA, with over 20 years experience in leadership and management assessment and development across all sectors, both in the UK and internationally. The focus of his work is to maximise the effectiveness of individuals, teams and organisations.

[martyn.sakol@oecam.com](mailto:martyn.sakol@oecam.com)

by Mike Thackray

# Balancing Individual and Organisational Power

A recent internal meeting included an interesting debate about the state of the job market. From conversations with clients, most of us were sensing that the power had shifted significantly in favour of the employee. Increased choice in how and where employees work, along with employers' greater understanding of preferences, personal circumstances, working patterns and the need to play to strengths had delivered worthy changes for individual employees, but was also resulting in certain challenges for the organisation (as we'll see later)...





## Who's Got the Power?

A more individual-centric approach to how, when and where employees work is something to which most forward-thinking organisations aspire. Indeed, a failure to adapt to these employee ideals may have had a hand in the rise of what has previously been described 'The Great Resignation', and more recently the 'anti-work' and 'quiet quitting' movements, whose subscribers are wondering whether they have been striking the right balance between work and other worthwhile activities (see a recent Guardian article 'A bigger paycheck? I'd rather watch the sunset!: is this the end of ambition?').

We have certainly seen much progress in the number of employers making real headway in the journey towards respecting people as whole human beings – with complex lives and unique needs. In some organisations, the opportunity to 'be who you really are' is actually promised as an employee offering. So, are we living in a time when the Individual has the power?



*..in this scenario, will the employee, fearful of job-loss, acquiesce power to the organisation?*

Returning to our internal meeting, it is also clear that this is by no means a unified picture that permeates all sectors and organisations. A colleague who had been listening intently from the beginning spoke up at one point and stated that she didn't recognise the world we had described at all. For some of her clients, work was still very much 9-5, managers still acted in ways that allowed their staff little autonomy, and everyone was expected to be present in the workplace unless there was an 'exceptional' justification for working from home. The more individual-centric working practices were still a total anathema to some of her clients, and further discussion amongst the wider team seemed to confirm this division.

As we move into a time of recession and a cost-of-living crisis, we may see more leaders and managers revert to even tighter 'command and control' as they seek to cut costs. And in this scenario, will the employee, fearful of job-loss, acquiesce power to the organisation?

There is clearly a varied picture in where the power lies at present.

## Learning to Flex

Part of the challenge in this age of polarised debate, is perhaps the reluctance to acknowledge that there can be equal merit in two apparently competing arguments.

It is perfectly possible to value a power shift towards the individual, in understanding the importance of work-life balance, and all the positive outcomes that come with it, whilst at the same time acknowledging that in some situations it has become counter-productive for the organisation as a whole.

The debate runs the risk of becoming polarised to a point where accusations of 'snow-flakery' or 'wokeness' get thrown about to anyone speaking up for individual needs, and similar insults to anyone who dares to admit that rules help create the foundations on which an organisation can legitimately operate, and need following.

It is not the intention for this journal to add to the above debate, but rather to understand the optimal balance required for your organisation and develop the leadership capability to flex along that point.

No one who works for an organisation of any size works in isolation. So how do we reap the benefits of an individualistic approach whilst balancing the needs of the organisation so it can function effectively? And what ensues when this alignment is less than perfect?

To explore this idea we have created a number of articles, each looking at the theme of 'individual vs. organisation' from a different perspective:

- Firstly, Felicity takes us through the do's and don'ts of recruitment if your goal is greater authenticity. If we want individuals to be truly authentic, then at the outset we need a more honest recruitment process that ensures that the brand of authenticity is one that will work for the employee and the organisation.
- Next, I discuss the focus on the challenges of authenticity as a concept, on performance in organisations and recognising where shortfalls occur, and ultimately how to manage it.
- Paolo then shares his experience about what counts as a legitimate explanation for a shortfall in performance and what is simply an excuse that needs addressing...
- In a fifth article, Lucy looks at why being 'kind' isn't necessarily good for business performance and building effective feedback mechanisms. A culture that enables employees to feel comfortable to share their opinions and be included is still critical, but there's a complex balance between nice, kind, constructive and brutal.
- And finally, Jodie discusses the way individuals need to adapt and thrive as part of a team, and how organisations can utilise the unique skills, preferences and views of individuals.

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*... the key leadership challenge is navigating a balance between focusing on individual autonomy and preference versus organisational rules and expectations ”*

## Finding an Optimal Balance

It's a fascinating time in the world of work.

At the time of writing we're seeing the UK Government under pressure to find stability amidst ongoing market volatility and economic uncertainty. Organisations that will weather the next series of storms will have leaders who can balance organisational and individual needs; cutting costs to drive efficiency and simultaneously continuing to invest in the individual employee.

In summary, perhaps the key leadership challenge is navigating a balance between focusing on individual autonomy and preference, versus organisational rules and expectations. What rights should the organisation retain, and what can realistically be left to the individual to decide?

Aside from those extremely rare cases where the unregulated raw behaviour of thousands of individuals is precisely what an organisation needs to survive and thrive – organisations will constantly be striving to find that happy point between control and autonomy that hits the sweet spot. It is those that successfully do so, that will have the true power.



### MIKE THACKRAY

Mike Thackray is an experienced and engaging Occupational Psychologist and organisation consultant, having delivered bespoke people solutions for clients in both the private and public sectors, on enabling greater personal and collective effectiveness.

[mike.thackray@oecam.com](mailto:mike.thackray@oecam.com)

by Felicity Wolfenden

# Honest Recruitment

Unless we were born into extreme good fortune, most of us will need (want?) to hold down a job at some point in our lives. If we are lucky, we will work for organisations that we feel reflect our beliefs and the role itself suits our skills and preferences which means that we a) enjoy what we do, and b) undertake tasks that come more naturally to us. Individuals who are *not* suited to a particular role are likely to be a burden and drain on the organisation. In contrast, there are numerous research studies documenting the positive psychological and performance related effects if someone is well suited to the role and the organisation.

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*So how do we REALLY know if a candidate and organisation will suit one another? And what does all this tell us about the drive for greater authenticity in the workplace?*”

Too often however, this ideal situation is hampered by the fact that the recruitment process can so often feel like an act, with both parties in extreme selling mode. We know that just as a candidate might say whatever is necessary to **get** a job, the Hiring Manager may also overlook things that aren't 'quite right' in order to **fill** one.



VSJNF2

Indeed, we are taught through school that to succeed we need to study the test and ensure that we are making it as easy as possible for those marking our work to give us points (e.g. by putting work in a specific order, and clearly written). We have this all the way through our qualifications, and then there is often no one to teach us that this is not the same way we should be going about an interview for a job. The goal is not to adapt ourselves to fit the organisation, yes the goal is to sell ourselves, but not at the expense of being our authentic selves.

So how do we REALLY know if a candidate and organisation will suit one another? And what does all this tell us about the drive for greater authenticity in the workplace?

## Looking in the Mirror

From an individual's perspective, being 'well-suited' to the role and organisation can be determined by four main criteria;

1. The role fulfils our basic needs (sufficient salary, satisfactory hours and working location)
2. The role utilises our strengths while allowing some development opportunities
3. The role satisfies our interests, likes and dislikes
4. The organisation aligns with our values.

We will often know what we need from a role to fulfil the first criteria, but how do we know what will satisfy the other three?

For some people, this will involve taking an honest look in the mirror. Carefully considering what our strengths and development areas are. One option is to ask colleagues or those around us for feedback, thinking about previous projects / work that we have done and evaluating the outcome and / or our feelings about the work. For this method to be effective we have to be prepared to be extremely honest with ourselves - a process that may involve many iterations, and involve the discovery of strengths or weaknesses that surprise us as we experience new things. Looking in the mirror can therefore be a little bit painful!

An even better option is to utilise one of the many self-report psychometric assessments designed to highlight strengths and development areas, and in some cases likes and dislikes and even what motivates us – all of which can help individuals to identify their personal values. These tools remove the guess work from simple introspection, and help put words to feelings that might seem more abstract.

It is only by looking in the mirror that we can begin to understand what we're looking for, and also what to seek out in any potential employment. Being honest with ourselves in the long term will mean that we are more suited the roles we fulfil, with all the benefits that brings to ourselves and our employers.

## A Job, or *The Job*? It's About Alignment of Values

Being aware of what we are looking for, or personal values, strengths, interest areas, likes and dislikes will help us to choose the role that aligns with as many of these as possible.

Aside from actors, no one (should) want a role where they have to pretend to be someone else the entire time as that would be exhausting. Just as we want a role that plays to our strengths, we also need an organisation that is aligned with our values. There will of course always be a degree of compromise needed. Finding a role that suits the unedited version of ourselves is highly unlikely, but we are looking to keep this compromise to a minimum. This is the ability to be 'Constructively Authentic' in the role, and my colleague, Mike Thackray explores this in more detail.

Many organisations now publish their values along with company vision on their website. For the candidate, this is a good place to start in understanding whether there is good alignment with personal values. We're so busy trying to sell ourselves to the Hiring Manager that we can often forget that a recruitment process is a two-way street. The organisation also needs to sell the role and company to us, so the espoused values are likely to be somewhat 'polished'.

# VALUES

If we are consciously trying to sell ourselves or think about the sort of person we need to project, then what does this tell us about our inherent suitability for the role? When you take into consideration the amount of time each of us spends at work, we really need to ask how comfortable it will be to 'adapt' to a way of working, or a set of values over a long period of time. Pressing realities often dictate the need to accept sub-optimal roles at times in our lives, but where possible we should look to avoid this, and a good analysis of our core values can go a long way towards ensuring a lasting fit.

## The Downside of Hope

From the organisation's perspective, the pressure to fill can push us to accept, and forgive, and perhaps worst of all – believe that things will change. Too often do we see recruiting managers accept that whilst the candidate in front of them isn't *completely* suited to us, they buy into the fact that they can adapt and change. Unfortunately, if the differences are too far apart, they likely won't. An individual's underlying preferences and personality is surprisingly stable. Hoping that someone can adapt is appropriate when it's a minor tweak, but expecting someone who has come from, and thrived in, a fluid, flat structure to suddenly fit in with a hierarchical one? We'd be setting ourselves up for failure if we based our recruitment decisions on such hope.

## Suppressing our Natural Instincts to Sell

Whilst it goes against all our instincts, the more honest an organisation is about its culture and working practices (whilst obviously seeking to improve and develop that culture) the more they attract the sort of people who are seeking, and are likely to fit in with that culture. Honest conversations about what to expect, and some insights in how to handle it may well be seen as a selling point by some. Most seasoned applicants are wise to the over-selling card, and therefore a degree of honesty can also go a long way in building trust with future colleagues.

As much as it is the individuals' responsibility to consider whether they can be their authentic self if they were to be successful, the organisation also has a key role to play in ensuring the right person-organisation fit. For an organisation of any size, recruiting against the values rather than the job spec may be beneficial here, as there is much greater scope for individuals to 'craft' the role to suit them.

There are a number of methods which we can use in recruitment to determine whether someone is the right fit for the organisation, from psychometric assessments to interviews, individual assessments to group assessments. The organisation can use any combination of these methods to determine whether the candidate's values are aligned with the organisational values, and whether it is a good person-organisation fit.



*For an organisation of any size, recruiting against the values rather than the job spec may be beneficial here, as there is much greater scope for individuals to 'craft' the role to suit them* ”



## Summary

Recruiting individuals who are able to be their authentic self, rather than having to pretend to be someone else in an organisation comes down to the success of the recruitment process, and whether methods utilised reveal similarities in values between the organisation and the candidate. Both sides should be honest with what they are actually looking for, and how they expect to work to manage expectations ahead of time. Specifically, below are some top tips for organisations and individuals:

## Top Tips for Organisations

- 1 Don't fill just to fill. Look for the right candidate who will be able to fit in with the organisational values
- 2 Don't over sell, but don't under sell either... find the right balance
- 3 Don't utilise a recruitment process just because it's always been done that way. Examine whether there are any better selection methods available and use a range of methods that demonstrate different things.

## Top Tips for Individuals

- 1 Seek to understand your own personal values, strengths, interest areas, likes and dislikes before applying for roles
  - Consider utilising a coach, or personality assessment to get more insight into yourself if you are able to
- 2 Remember who you are during the recruitment process – would you have to change to fit into the role?
- 3 Be curious and seek to understand what it is really like to work there, and in that role. Balance finding the right job, with just finding any job.

We'd love to hear your thoughts on the topic of an honest recruitment process! To discuss these topics in more detail, or to find out how OE Cam can help, please do get in touch.



### FELICITY WOLFENDEN

Felicity is a Business Psychologist with expertise in applying psychological principles and psychometric tools to improve organisational and team effectiveness. She is passionate about empowering individuals and teams to utilise their unique and collective strengths while accepting and working on their development areas. Felicity has a particular interest in personality interactions and decision-making processes for both individuals and teams.

[felicity.wolfenden@oecam.com](mailto:felicity.wolfenden@oecam.com)

by Mike Thackray

# Your Right to be You



The concept of 'authenticity' is one we are hearing a lot about at present. The idea that if we can be our authentic selves at work, then good things will follow. This Holy Grail is not just sought-after, in some organisations it is actually promised as an employee offering. 'Come and work here, and we will allow you to be who you really are'. Sounds great! But what happens when 'who you are' doesn't align perfectly with 'who you might need to be'?

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*If we have a perfect alignment between who someone is, what they are competent at, and what the organisation needs, then Hallelujah! we've solved 'Work'...*

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Let's state at the outset that aspiring to create the optimum organisational conditions under which your people can apply their skills and attributes in a truly authentic manner, and have it work for the organisation at the same time is a worthy goal. If we achieve perfect alignment between who someone is, what they are competent at, and what the organisation needs, then Hallelujah! we've solved 'Work'.

Unfortunately, I know from experience that if I acted in an unthinkingly authentic way in my organisation, I would likely be seeking alternate employment within weeks. That's not to say that there isn't plenty of alignment between who I am, what I do, and what is needed by OE Cam, it's just that there's a whole other set of characteristics inherent to me that I would be wise not to demonstrate on a daily basis. I therefore need to act 'constructively authentic', in a way that works for me, *and* OE Cam.

The potential misalignment between organisational vs. individual needs has perhaps become more obvious (or acute?) post Pandemic with a widespread shift in working locations. If your authentic self wishes to join important stakeholder meetings via Zoom from a beach in the north-west Highlands wearing a Leeds United shirt and drinking a can of Tennent's Super, then at what point, and how, should the organisation articulate its right to reject that version of authenticity? In short, if part of my authentic self is being a compulsive flame thrower, what do we do when this this clashes with the needs of the paper factory?



*If part of my authentic self is being a compulsive flame thrower, what do we do when this clashes with the needs of the paper factory? „*

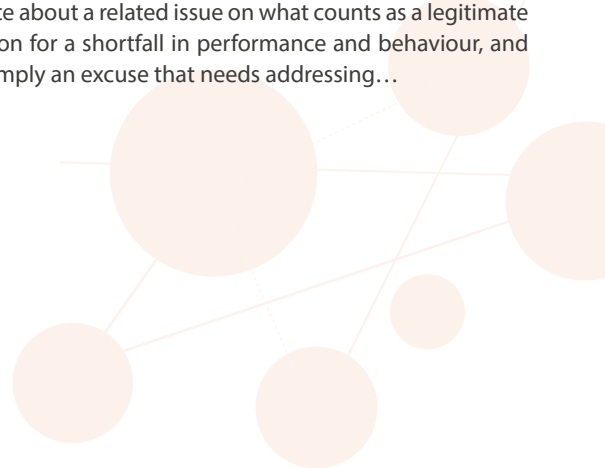
The goal of authenticity leads to some major challenges that organisations need to address:

- 1 Recruiting the right people** – This comes back to the analogy that if we do happen to run a paper factory, we shouldn't be recruiting flame throwers. Sounds obvious, but how much thought do we actually give to ensuring we are recruiting people whose authentic selves are likely to be a good for the role, and the organisation? When offset against the challenges that ensue when recruitment goes wrong, are we putting enough time and effort into finding people that really fit in with our organisational culture?
- 2 Articulating the acceptable and unacceptable** – Part of the challenge in an organisation of any size is the felt pressure to place hard and fast rules on what is and isn't considered acceptable.

In our experience, leaders need to be better at articulating the boundaries between self and organisation through stories and principles rather than rules or absolutes. This ambiguity and comfort with tackling situations as they arise is not a natural state for a lot of organisations.

We've seen this time and again in respect of hybrid working – where even though the leadership agrees in principle with the concept of people coming into the office when they are needed, they find it hard to resist putting boundaries around this requirement along the lines of '...but we expect you in at least 2/5 days'. Rules will never be able to define that need in the way that rich stories can, and as far as possible, perhaps we should resist pressure to interpret 'fairness' as being 'the same'.

In the article on page 12, my colleague Paolo shares his experience about a related issue on what counts as a legitimate explanation for a shortfall in performance and behaviour, and what is simply an excuse that needs addressing...





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*Whilst leaders need to be more emotionally intelligent and tuned into individual needs, they also need to be more willing and able to have adult conversations about balancing the needs of the individual, team and organisation...*”

**3 Holding difficult conversations** – Linked to the previous point, and a logical next step is the ability to engage in a conversation that addresses these shortfalls. If the goal is authenticity at work, then leaders do need to be more emotionally intelligent and tuned into individual needs, but also more willing and able to have adult conversations and balance them with the needs of the team and organisation, as and when the need arises.

This is the cornerstone of most managerial roles, but also the one we struggle with the most. Building awareness of *when*, and the skills of *how*, to deal with these types of conversation is becoming increasingly critical when blanket rules &/or a ‘one size fits all’ approach no longer apply.

**4 Practicing ‘Constructive Authenticity’** Finally, we come to the idea I’d like to promote that builds on the idea of authenticity in the workplace. The addition of the word ‘constructive’ is a useful addition that makes it clear that there is a limit to the expression of individual wants, needs and preferences.

We want people to behave in a consciously authentic way. Finding enough congruence with who they are, and who they need to be to make it work, but keeping certain aspects in check for the good of the whole. This sounds blindingly obvious, but we have heard several anecdotes that really test this idea that anyone should be anything other than ‘who they are’.

Four big challenges then. In order to begin to be more constructively authentic, we suggest you start with three small steps:

- 1** To what extent are you allowing your people to be who they truly are? Do you have the right balance between meeting individual and organisational needs?
- 2** To what degree do people understand the boundaries they need to operate within, and how are you articulating these?
- 3** How equipped are your leaders to interpret, explain and ultimately enforce these standards?

Or just email me and I’d be happy to talk through how it might work in your organisation!



**MIKE THACKRAY**

Mike Thackray is an experienced and engaging Occupational Psychologist and organisation consultant, having delivered bespoke people solutions for clients in both the private and public sectors, on enabling greater personal and collective effectiveness.

[mike.thackray@oecam.com](mailto:mike.thackray@oecam.com)

# Excuse Me

Many organisations are placing a much greater emphasis on diversity, inclusion, wellbeing and belonging than they were three years ago. This increased focus started pre-pandemic but Covid and remote working really accelerated it. At a practical level, policies, communication, decision making and everyday language have changed, and in some cases, at a rapid pace.

Reflections from a number of our own clients suggest that the increased focus on the individual has delivered numerous benefits. In some cases, they are simply better places to work. However, we are also beginning to hear about the unintended consequences of these changes. You may recognise the sentiment of the following statement (one that I have heard at least six times in recent months):

*"My company has made a big thing about valuing people and respecting personal circumstances but despite telling my manager about my difficult situation, she won't reduce my targets and has marked me as not meeting expectations!"*

Now, there are lots of variables to be considered for reduced performance, but I think it can be simplified to three important dimensions:

- 1.Explanation vs excuse**
- 2.Timed well vs timed badly**
- 3.Effective discussion vs ineffective discussion**

## 1 Explanation vs Excuse

Different organisational policies and country norms, laws and points in time will be relevant to what constitutes an 'explanation' rather than an 'excuse'. For example, employee stress caused by an increase in manager expectations being a legitimate explanation for a reduction in performance in one scenario:

*"Although you have achieved less than we set out, given the circumstances, I don't think the target was reasonable. The rigour of your work has been excellent"*

However, in the same organisation, but different site, it was seen as an unacceptable reason (excuse) for reduced performance.

*"You were in a position to decide what you got done and the level of rigour you put in. You repeatedly chose things you could have delegated and in some cases I think you should have pushed back and not done them. However, what you have done repeatedly is shown an inability to flex from excessive levels of perfectionism that were unnecessary and massively time consuming"*

There has to be shared understanding of what is an explanation vs an excuse, and it requires some judgement, ideally based on principles.

## 2 Timed Well vs Timed Badly

When there is an issue (explanation) for why performance may be affected, timing is very important. The same issue flagged early on with a discussion and plan around it is very different from raising the issue on the back of a poor performance review. The cause of the issue may be sensitive, difficult to talk about and the individual may find it difficult.

An example I came across was an individual (Bob) agreeing to work that he didn't think he could do in the way requested as a result of his neurodiversity. Bob didn't mention that there was an issue to his manager until things went badly wrong. Bob's manager was annoyed with Bob for not raising the issue before making a commitment and Bob was furious with his manager for not respecting his neurodiversity. The timing was wrong and the consequence was unhealthy tension for months afterwards.

### 3 Effective Discussion vs Ineffective Discussion

Some discussions that relate to diversity and inclusion are difficult and I have worked with many individuals in coaching sessions on planning and practising options.

I strongly believe that some people need more support for these conversations and how to balance respect for the individual with performance required for the role. In some cases when organisations quickly launch very positive inclusion initiatives, one of the unintended consequences is leaders and managers not knowing how to handle those conversations.

As my colleague Mike points out, leaders and managers need to develop capability in articulating the boundaries between the individual employee and the organisation, through stories and principles rather than rules or absolutes. It is a mistake to assume leaders and managers have innate abilities to have those conversations in an effective and consistent way. At OE Cam we provide advice, support and challenge to leaders and managers in having effective difficult conversations. This can take the form of executive team development in order to agree the principles in line with the desired culture and values, collective leadership and management development to develop the mindset and skills or individual or buddy coaching for more specific preparation for live issues.



#### **PAOLO MOSCUZZA, PARTNER**

Paolo Moscuza is a Chartered Psychologist, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a registered coaching Psychologist. He has nearly 20 years experience of assessing and developing the capability of leaders and he heads up OE Cam's Leadership Development Practice. Paolo is a former winner of 'HR Management Consultant of the Year' as featured in the Sunday Times and his approach has been described as "fresh, energetic and innovative".

[paolo.moscuza@oecam.com](mailto:paolo.moscuza@oecam.com)

by **Lucy Cox**

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# Build a Kind Culture (Not a Nice One)

We all want to work somewhere where we feel valued, accepted and respected.

Indeed, over the past few decades we've seen an increasing focus on creating positive, inclusive work environments in which everyone can flourish and wellbeing is high on the agenda. This has been accompanied by a shift in how we think about performance. We've moved from a pure focus on *what* people deliver, towards *how* and *why* they deliver it. An employee might be achieving great results, but are they living their organisation's values? How do they behave towards the people they work with?

nice

KIND

At the core of organisational culture is the way people treat each other. If you hear somewhere described as a 'nice place to work', what image does that conjure up for you? You might picture a place full of warm, friendly people who care about each other and are quick to help others out – all good things. But while it might sound great to work in a nice culture, could this be at the expense of something else? For example, what if a culture of being nice acts as a barrier to saying and doing the things that are genuinely best for people, performance and innovation?

### **Don't be Nice - Be Kind**

Striving to build a culture where people are nice to one another seems like a worthy goal. However, does a nice culture signal true kindness and respect – and genuinely drive wellbeing and success?

Let's start by breaking down what is meant by 'nice' and how it differs to being 'kind'. The word nice comes from the Latin word *nescius*, meaning ignorant (1). Today, nice is defined more along the lines of "*pleasing, agreeable, delightful and amiably pleasant*" (2).

Kind, on the other hand, which comes from the Old English *(ge)cnynde* (3) - essentially, treating others as family - is now defined as having a "*good or benevolent nature or disposition*" (4).

There is a clear difference here. On the one hand, there's pleasing others, and on the other, there's benevolence (or doing good to others). Would you rather work with colleagues who are trying to please you, or trying to do good?



*Would you rather work with colleagues who are trying to please you, or trying to do good?*



*While it might sound great to work in a 'nice' culture, could this be at the expense of something else? ... what if a culture of being nice acts as a barrier to saying and doing the things that are genuinely best for people, performance and innovation?*



## A CULTURE OF KINDNESS

## A CULTURE OF NICENESS

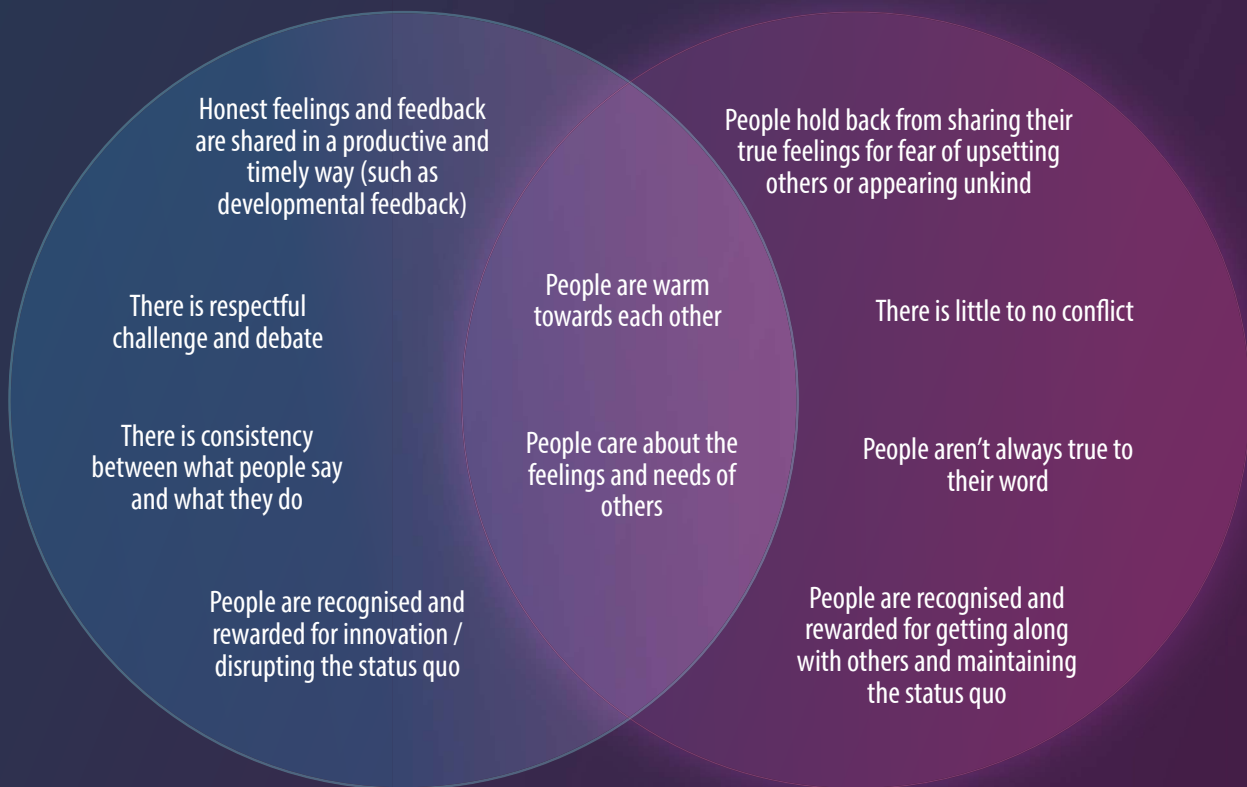


Figure 1: A culture of 'kindness' vs. a culture of 'niceness'

Nice and kind cultures have some similarities. As Figure 1 illustrates, the key area of overlap is that the people in both types of culture care about each other. Employees are mindful of individual needs and feelings, and they treat each other with warmth.

From here, this might go one of two ways. Towards a culture of kindness, where people are encouraged to express this care through openness and respectful challenge; or instead towards a culture of niceness, where people hold back from sharing their true thoughts and feelings for fear of upsetting others or appearing unkind. In a culture of niceness you might find that people avoid disagreeing with their colleagues, don't challenge how things are done, or shy away from holding people to account.

So, what might cause this divergence between nice and kind cultures? Why in one organisation might you feel supported and encouraged to challenge and say what you really think, while in another you hesitate? And what can you do to build a kind culture in your organisation?

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*In a culture of niceness you might find that people avoid disagreeing with their colleagues, don't challenge how things are done, or shy away from holding people to account*

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## How to Avoid the Pitfalls of a Nice Culture

### 1 Be (respectfully) honest

Imagine that you're discussing the solution to a problem with a colleague but you disagree on how to approach it. By being nice and aiming to please them, you might just say you agree with their idea. However, by aiming to do good (being kind), you would take the time to hear them out, share your honest thoughts and respectfully debate the pros and cons. By speaking authentically, not only are you then more likely to get to a better, more innovative solution between you, you're also demonstrating your care for the situation you're discussing, and showing that you trust the other person enough to speak truthfully. Also, when you do agree on an idea in future, they'll know you're being genuine.

A healthy level of conflict is key for driving innovation. Without a psychologically safe environment, employees won't speak their minds or truly challenge the way things are done. Key to building a kind culture (instead of a nice one) is making it OK to respectfully challenge a colleague's idea or opinion, without criticising them as a person. Authentic actions with kind intentions will lead to more innovation and stronger relationships.

Creating space for authenticity also contributes to wellbeing. In a 2022 review, researchers found that being honest is linked with stronger self-acceptance, more positive relationships with others, and could even have a protective effect on our long-term physical health (5). The mesolimbic reward system reinforces stimuli by releasing feel-good hormones such as oxytocin (6), a sensation that has been described as "*the helper's high*" (7) which could help explain why kindness and wellbeing are so intertwined.

There are, of course, times when unfiltered honesty might not be wise. Before speaking your mind, you might want to ask yourself: What is my relationship like with the other person? Have I built sufficient rapport? Is this the right time and place? How will I convey what I want to say? Most importantly, how can I combine honesty with kindness?

### 2 Be inclusive (but not to a fault)

Inclusivity is critical in fostering wellbeing, ensuring everyone's voice is heard and getting the most out of your people. But you can be too inclusive...

In a nice culture people might want to include everyone in the conversation. Whereas it's kinder (and more efficient) to carefully consider why someone should be included. Not only does this ensure timely decisions are made at the right level, but only including people when there is a genuine opportunity for them to add value means demonstrating that you respect their time, energy and input.

### 3 Recognise and reward the 'what' AND the 'how'

Caring about people and business is not an either/or. Kindness means being nice *and* holding people to account. A classic management dilemma is prioritising the needs and wellbeing of the individual whilst at the *same time* thinking about organisational targets and potentially navigating difficult conversations around individual performance.

It could be said that in recent years, *how* people get their work done has become more important than *what* they get done. This is certainly a risk for nice cultures. You get the behaviour you measure, so be sure to reward and recognise both the *what and* the *how*, in a way that makes it clear that they're not competing concepts.

Managers and leaders play a particularly important role here. Questions for HR could be: What behaviours do managers recognise within their teams? Is it when people step up to help colleagues or when they achieve great results, or a mix of both? What signals are sent about how welcome challenge and feedback are?





## An Authentically Great Place to Work

We started out by asking whether a culture of being nice acts as a barrier to saying and doing the things that are genuinely best for people, performance and innovation.

The recent focus on the individual and their wellbeing could be at risk of producing workplace cultures that value niceness above all else. But by building a kind culture that encourages and rewards respectful honesty, mindful inclusivity, and a balanced focus on performance as well as people, you'll not only set the stage for innovation and success, but create an authentically great place to work.

The most important thing you can do to play a part in building this sort of culture in your organisation is to mentally reframe seemingly 'tougher' behaviours through a different lens. By being respectfully honest, you could be driving innovation, improving your relationships and helping people grow in their careers. By being mindful about who you're including in meetings and discussions (and why), you're respecting others' time and energy. And finally, by focussing on performance and results as well as on people, you're avoiding the traps of a 'nice' culture and creating a place where people can truly make a difference.



### LUCY COX

Lucy is a Business Psychologist in OE Cam's Talent Management practice with expertise in designing and facilitating development experiences. With more than five years' experience in leadership development and employee engagement, she works with leaders and teams to uncover key strengths and opportunities for maximising their effectiveness. She does this using psychological tools and frameworks to design creative and progressive learning & development programmes that drive self-awareness, mindset and behaviour change.

lucy.cox@oecam.com

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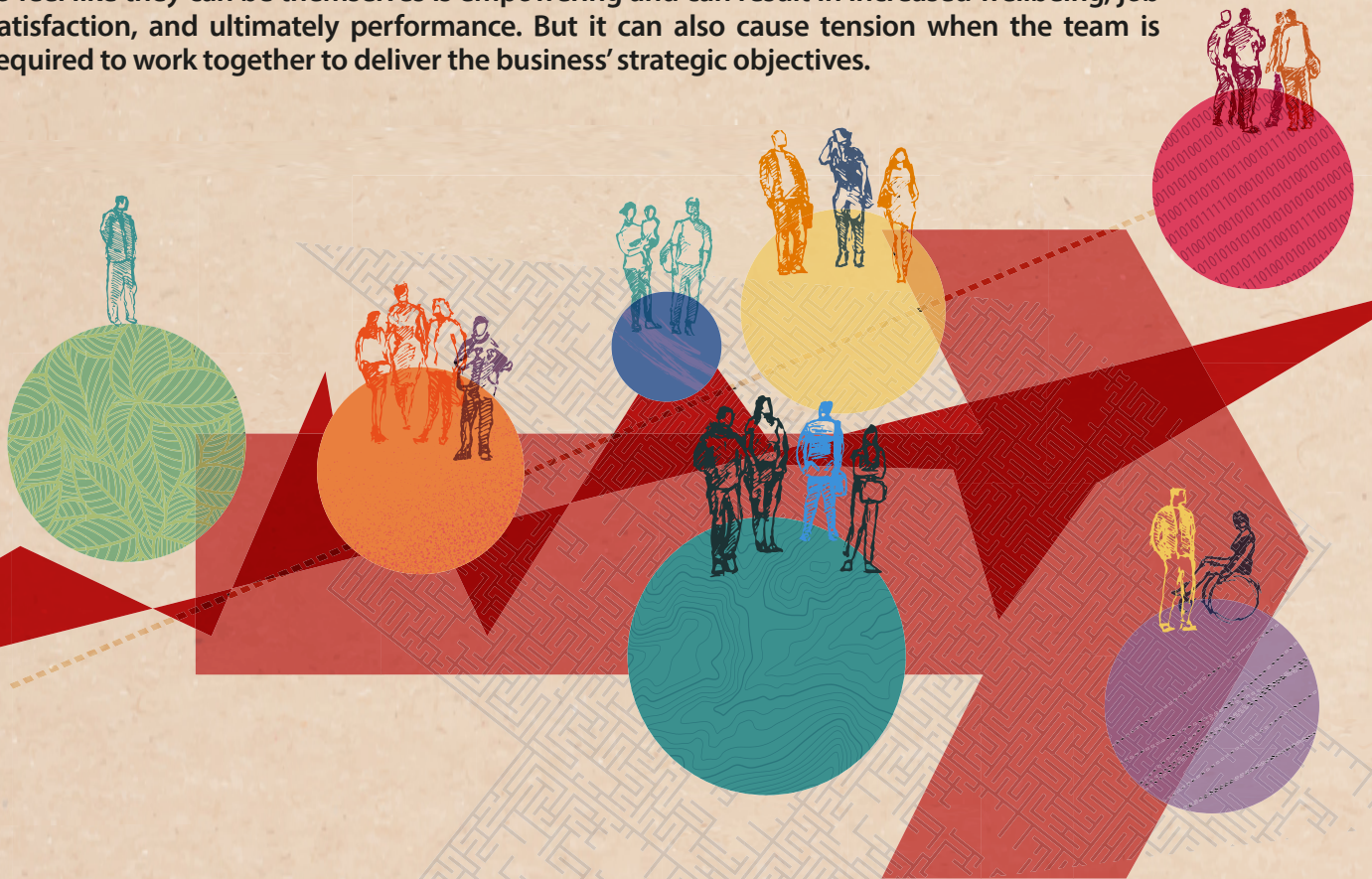


by Jodie Hughes

## Giving Up to Fit In:

### The Tension Between Individual and Team Needs

The last few years have seen a shift from an organisation-driven environment towards championing the needs of individual employees; not only because of recent discourse around the war for talent, but also due to the rise of flexible working and a push towards authenticity in the workplace. This greater focus on 'Self' certainly has many benefits: allowing employees to feel like they can be themselves is empowering and can result in increased wellbeing, job satisfaction, and ultimately performance. But it can also cause tension when the team is required to work together to deliver the business' strategic objectives.



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*As new hybrid ways of working bed down, how will team members balance their individual needs with those of the team? And should leaders be thinking about teams in a different way?*”

For many teams, remote (and then hybrid) working disrupted the team dynamic, with people reporting their interactions have become more transactional as the social cohesion has eroded over the last two years. As new hybrid ways of working bed down, how will team members balance their individual needs with those of the team? And should leaders be thinking about teams in a different way?

The team is traditionally the unit in which most work takes place; typically co-located, with a shared understanding, and close working relationships. But the notion of a team has perhaps changed, and in some ways, got lost in recent times. It is increasingly 'normal' for teams to be formed of people who have never met one another in person – indeed there are many articles about team working in a hybrid world and the degree to which physically meeting one another is important. However, this article focuses on the tension between 'individual' and 'team' work, and the concessions that must be made on the part of the individual in order to fit in with the team. What do we give up? What do we gain? And how do we manage this tension?

## Playing to Individual Strengths

Let's start with a look at what individuals bring to the team setting. It's long been understood that a team benefits from a variety of strengths and preferences in order to be truly balanced and effective, and one way to identify where an individual's preferences will fit within a team is to use a psychometric tool.

Psychometrics are designed to help individuals develop awareness of their own strengths and learn how to utilise them in the workplace. Insights from these tools help individuals understand that other members of their team have different preferences, and with this knowledge, find more effective ways to interact with colleagues.

There are many psychometrics available, but our go-to tool of choice when it comes to understanding teams is the Team Management Profile (TMP): see diagram 1 below.

The TMP proposes that there are eight types of work necessary to create a high-performing team. From a 'Creator-Innovator' who comes up with ideas to a 'Thruster-Organiser' who prefers to plan and organise and a 'Concluder-Producer' who enjoys seeing tasks through to completion. Each of the roles bring their own strengths to a team, helping it to be balanced and more effective, and increasing teamwork by knowing where your and others' roles lie.

Understanding and utilising these strengths is likely to lead to better results – for instance, you would probably see a better outcome if you delegated a proof-reading task to a detail-orientated person, rather than someone who sees the big picture. It also has numerous benefits to the individual. Capitalising on the 'parts' of a team, i.e. focusing on individual strengths and what people do well, can help team members to feel more empowered and energised.



*...the tension between 'individual' and 'team' work, and the concessions that must be made on the part of the individual in order to fit in with the team. What do we give up? What do we gain?,,*



Diagram 1: Margerison-McCann Team Management Wheel © Team Management Systems

## Preferences are not Excuses!

However, in undertaking this team analysis, we need to be mindful of a trap that is heavily linked to the debate about authenticity at work. And that is that preferences are just that: preferences. This does not mean that an individual lacks the ability to do a task outside of their strength, and equally, or perhaps more importantly, neither does it mean that our preferences are ready-made 'excuses' for not doing so.

To illustrate this point (with a slightly over the top example), it would clearly be wrong for an Air Traffic Controller to attempt to argue away role incompetence along the lines of "of course I didn't see that plane, I don't do detail". Neither does having a preference for flexibility excuse reports being handed in late, nor does having a preference for structure excuse resistance to change. These preferences help explain behaviour, but it is not meant to excuse it.

In fact, weaknesses can be a great opportunity to step out of one's comfort zone and expand knowledge and skills. For example, if an individual prefers to brainstorm ideas in a Creator-Innovator role, this doesn't mean they're free from organising schedules and plans when the team &/or situation requires. Viewing a shortfall in one area as needing to be filled by another individual is actually a dangerous mindset, and plays to the notion of placing all the emphasis on individual responsibility rather than the team. If your team lacks a creative spark, it is vital to make this part of the collective responsibility, rather than simply look to the 'Creator-Innovator' to shoulder the burden alone.

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*Viewing a shortfall in one area as needing to be filled by another individual is actually a dangerous mindset, and plays to the notion of placing all the emphasis on individual responsibility rather than the team*

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This is an important, and often overlooked, pitfall of focusing on individual roles within a team. Whilst we want to aim for a great person-role fit, there will be times when we need to undertake work in a way that is not perfectly aligned with our preferences. The question then becomes "do I have *enough* fit between my preferences and what is expected of me?"

## Is Team Work Always Better?

*"An effective team is always worth more than the sum of its parts" (1).*

Undertaking a team analysis like this can have huge benefits, but there remains another pitfall so often overlooked, and one that helps explain why a team made up of diverse skills, backgrounds and preferences does not always result in improved performance. Along with a diverse team and the understanding of individual preferences, it is also essential for the group to have a solid understanding of the mechanics of how a team operates, and the skills to link people and unleash the full potential of this diversity.







*Along with a diverse team and the understanding of individual preferences, it is also essential for the group to have a solid understanding of the mechanics of how a team operates, and the skills to link people and unleash the full potential of this diversity ”*

Simply putting a wide range of people of very different personalities, backgrounds and skills in a room and setting them on the task is actually unlikely to improve performance, if not accompanied by a good understanding of the ways in which the group can utilise that variety (2).

One of the ways in which we often see this play out, is through dilution of an individual's expertise. We occasionally run an exercise based on a NASA scenario, where we ask people to give their individual answers to a problem of which most people have limited experience. They are then asked to form groups and discuss the issues in order to arrive at a group answer. Teams usually do better than individuals for all sorts of reasons: greater access to knowledge, wide range of experience, effective challenge and questioning.

But sometimes an individual outperforms the group, and this is almost always down to a failure of the team to utilise that diversity effectively.

The best example of this issue involved a more junior female employee with strong introverted preferences and an over-deference to seniority being placed in a group with more experienced and confident managers. Her individual responses outperformed the group by some distance, and it was only after the group discussion that she admitted she had studied Aerospace Engineering at University, and 'knew a little bit about the subject'. Peer pressure, lack of confidence and turn-taking, failure to state credentials and over-confidence (bordering on arrogance) on the part of the senior managers were all culprits here, but make our point well: diversity is not enough.

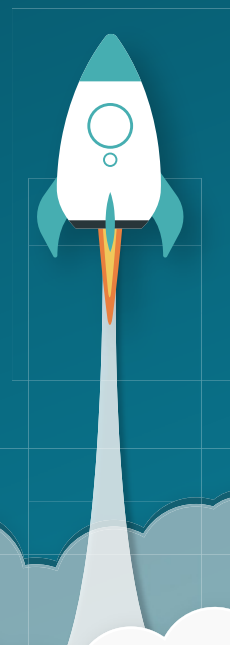
In fact, in such instances where this interference with knowledge and expertise is easy to predict, it can actually be more beneficial for true experts to work alone, albeit with a level of challenge and checks built into the process somewhere along the line.

## Linking and the Process of Teamwork

So, while it is beneficial to have diversity within teams, integrating mechanisms must be in place for the benefits to be realised (3); whether through process, or effective softer skills, teams need development in ways in which this diversity can be allowed to flourish. Put another way – our authenticity needs some nurturing. One way of doing this is to improve communication between the individuals.

Part of the Team Management Profile is focused on 'linking' – helping employees understand the most effective ways to interact with each other. For example, a more flexible manager understanding that a structured team member could benefit from having an agenda for the meeting to get the best out of them. This is an essential but often missed step in setting up effective teams with varied skills and preferences.

Another good example of where linking skills play an important role might be in considering the importance of active listening. This is a key component of linking the preferences, and something clearly missing in the NASA example above – not because the leaders didn't listen, but because people felt unable to speak out. Active listening is much more than just paying attention when someone speaks, it's about creating the conditions in which they are likely to offer their thoughts without fear of reprisal, or judgement.



## What Leaders Can Do

While the rise in sense of self and personal autonomy should be celebrated, there may be a knock-on effect to the sense of shared team identity and performance, which has likely been exacerbated by hybrid working. Therefore, it is important for leaders to understand what they can do to help individuals forge this shared identity, keeping in mind the individuals' autonomous preferences.

- 1 Use a preference development tool to understand the strengths and opportunities of their team.** One of our clients, a financial planning organisation, has been using the Team Management Profile to onboard their various investment subsidiaries and help their teams become more familiar with each other and work effectively together more quickly.
- 2 Manage team expectations around strengths and preferences.** Create the expectation that whilst working outside preferences will be minimised, there will be occasions where work will be outside someone's immediate comfort zone. Remember that preference explains, but doesn't excuse, actions when those actions are a key part of someone's role.
- 3 Address team weakness through process.** If there is a weakness in the team, first and foremost seek to compensate for it through process rather than actively seek a new individual to fulfil the role. We should always look to the best overall person to recruit, rather than prioritise preference simply to fill a gap.
- 4 Unleash the full potential of diversity.** Focus on developing the tools and skills to really make use of the diversity present within your team.

## Authenticity in a Team Needs Nurturing

For organisations to deliver their strategy, they need individuals and teams to be working effectively, and helping people to understand their likely preferences within that team can have a huge impact.

Creating the conditions where people can express their preference and authenticity in a way that works for the team, is a worthy goal, and being mindful of the potential pitfalls and solutions can go a long way towards balancing the needs of the individual *and* the team.



### JODIE HUGHES

Jodie is a Business Psychologist in OE Cam's Talent Management practice. She has a keen interest in understanding the role individual differences play in the workplace; specifically how strengths, weaknesses and preferences impact the way people work individually and as part of a team. She applies a broad variety of psychometrics with her clients and is experienced in designing and facilitating leadership development to enable individuals to work more effectively.

[jodie.hughes@oecam.com](mailto:jodie.hughes@oecam.com)

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# OE Cam

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# Contributors



## **MIKE THACKRAY**

Mike Thackray is an experienced and engaging Occupational Psychologist and organisation consultant, having delivered bespoke people solutions for clients in both the private and public sectors on enabling greater personal and collective effectiveness.

[mike.thackray@oecam.com](mailto:mike.thackray@oecam.com)



## **FELICITY WOLFENDEN**

Felicity is a Business Psychologist with expertise in applying psychological principles and psychometric tools to improve organisational and team effectiveness. She is passionate about empowering individuals and teams to utilise their unique and collective strengths while accepting and working on their development areas. Felicity has a particular interest in personality interactions and decision-making processes for both individuals and teams.

[felicity.wolfenden@oecam.com](mailto:felicity.wolfenden@oecam.com)



## **PAOLO MOSCUZZA - PARTNER**

Paolo Moscuza is a Chartered Psychologist, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a registered coaching Psychologist. He has nearly 20 years experience of assessing and developing the capability of leaders and he heads up OE Cam's Leadership Development Practice. Paolo is a former winner of 'HR Management Consultant of the Year' as featured in the Sunday Times and his approach has been described as "fresh, energetic and innovative".

[paolo.moscuza@oecam.com](mailto:paolo.moscuza@oecam.com)



## **LUCY COX**

Lucy is a Business Psychologist in OE Cam's Talent Management practice with expertise in designing and facilitating development experiences. With more than five years' experience in leadership development and employee engagement, she works with leaders and teams to uncover key strengths and opportunities for maximising their effectiveness. She does this using psychological tools and frameworks to design creative and progressive learning & development programmes that drive self-awareness, mindset and behaviour change.

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