[Extract from the book-project *Power and Response-Ability: the human side of systems*.]

Response-ability: a ten-minute overview

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 inefficient, 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 solely '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 a full 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* power*less* - 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 - supposedly 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.