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Talking about Respect

Culture Building

Image from: The Guardian 18/10/20

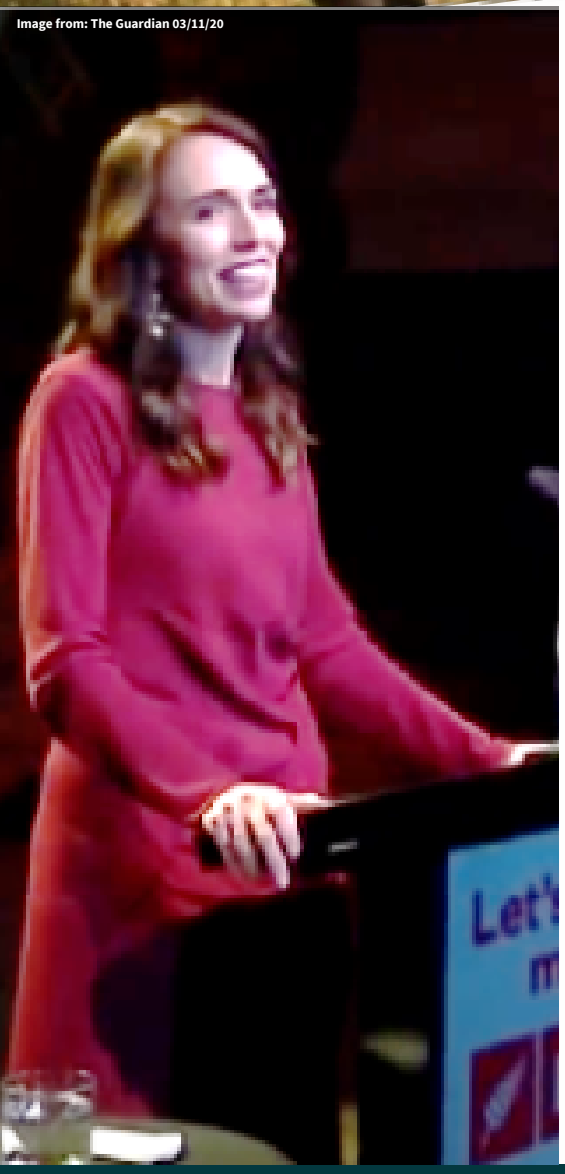
Image from: The Guardian 03/11/20

What is Respect?

The following stories come from the tumultuous year of 2020 and offer simple, concrete examples of what respect looks like in practice[1].

A Trump supporter in Wisconsin, USA, notices that his neighbour's street sign supporting Democrats Biden and Harris has been 'removed' and so sets out to replace it for him (BBC website, reported on the 3rd November 2020).

A female police officer in Detroit chooses to adopt a particular position when listening to women alleging maltreatment at the hands of their partners; she chooses to believe them (BBC Radio 4, September 2020).

Jacinta Ardern wins a landslide election victory for her party in New Zealand and chooses to form a coalition government to reflect the full range of voices across society (various news media, including The Guardian, 18th October 2020).

Participants commend the process of 'Climate Assembly UK' because of the way that they were heard—regardless of whether or not they fully agreed with the outcome.

The thinking underlying each of these stories might be regarded as indicative of a 'post-conventional' mindset, one that formulates the issue in a way that transcends the simple application of rules or norms. Moreover, they are each good examples of the practice of respect.

Being and feeling respected is a deeply held need for all human beings. Being disrespected is possibly one of the most unwelcome and negative experiences an individual could suffer. Respect is tightly bound up in our sense of who we are, of how we identify ourselves and with whom we identify. To be respected is to be affirmed, acknowledged, seen and heard for *who* I am and *how* I am. This is the case in the examples above. Our need is primal. Our ability to reciprocate, variable.

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Why is Respect Important for Organisations?

RESPECT IS SOMEWHAT OF A FOUNDATION STONE FOR RELIABLE AND TRUSTING INTERACTION IN THE WORKPLACE[2]. HIGH PERFORMANCE IS SELDOM POSSIBLE WITHOUT IT.

'The Passion for Politeness', Fougasse, 1923,
Photo: © Tate, London 2021

Who wouldn't want to create a situation in which all people were respected? Who wouldn't understand that achieving it would be beneficial for all relationships (and for all performances)? Yet for many people and many organisations, 'respect' remains unmet, a goal to strive for. Why is this?

It's seldom done on purpose[3]. Most adults try to act towards others in ways that create respect. They recognise that it's mutually beneficial. Yet, we don't have a clear understanding of what respect means—this central facet of human social interaction risks being devalued because respect is easily confused with politeness, another popular and important 'oil' we use to get along with others. Being on time, saying 'good morning' and generally being nice aren't the same as being respectful.

There are some obvious circumstances in which the goal of respect remains unmet, such as when people are severely under pressure. At this point, the subtlety of interaction gets lost in favour of bluntness. At the same time, respect can also be unmet when people encounter too soft a style of interaction—the lack of firmness makes it hard to respect an individual because the individual does not 'command authority'.

So a lack of respect can result from being too hard with people as well as from being too lenient with them. How does this work? Should we all move to the 'soggy centre'? How do you get respect? How do you give it?

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'The Passion for Politeness', Fougasse, 1923,
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How do organisations offer respect?

We said earlier that 'respect is somewhat of a foundation stone for reliable and trusting interaction in the workplace'.

Many organisations use it as part of their statement of values partly because they are concerned about the consequences of its absence.

This question often causes consternation amongst well-intentioned organisational leaders. Yet, the job of leaders is one that goes beyond the task of one individual respecting another. Leaders seek to *institutionalise* respect. They talk about it. They try to model it. They produce documents that define and espouse it. They assess people against it. In some cases, even executive remuneration depends on adequate performance of it. No one questions the seriousness of it. The question is, how is it achieved?

There are two factors:
a) meeting basic human needs
b) self-actualisation.

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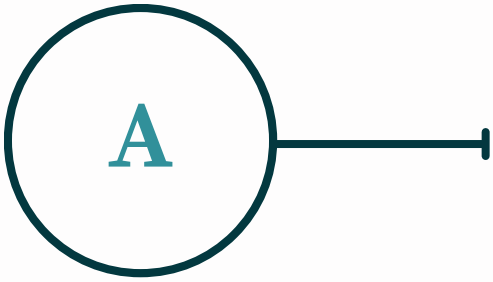

Meeting Basic Human Needs

Organisations demonstrate respect when their actions reinforce the basic human needs that people have spent years self-reliantly incorporating. There are five of these needs[4]:

Place	At the beginning of life this is in the arms of our caregivers; early in life this is in the gaze between parent and child; in adult life, my place is inside of me and so, as the song has it, "… Wherever I lay my hat's, my home". Organisations meet this need directly when there is 'a place of work', somewhere to go to, familiarity with and a degree of control over my hospitable and sanitary working environment. This is respect for the fundamentals.
Nurturance	At the beginning of life this is at 'my mother's breast'; early in life this is the care givers' encouragement that builds self-esteem; in adult life we nurture ourselves with our own efforts. Organisations meet this need directly when they offer adequate compensation for my skills and provide work that offers meaning and a sense of achievement enabling me to balance my own efforts with necessary challenge and support. This is respect for the fundamentals.
Support	At the beginning of life this is being held and carried safely by my caregiver; early in life this is encouragement for my self-supporting efforts; in adult life we support ourselves materially and psychologically. Organisations meet this need directly when they offer material advantages such as holidays, health care benefits and pensions as well as investments such as training in my personal development. This is respect for the fundamentals.
Protection	At the beginning of life this is our caregivers defending us from the hostility of the environment faced by any newborn; early in life, these are the rules we are asked to follow to protect ourselves; in adult life, these are the rules and actions that I create and follow to protect myself. Organisations meet this need by offering a safe and secure working environment with functioning tools, methods and equipment to guarantee our safety. This is respect for the fundamentals.
Limits	At the beginning of life this is the line that tells me where I end and another begins; early in life, these are the boundaries imposed by caregivers to balance exploration with safety for self and others; in adult life, these are the laws and customs of society that I freely observe. Organisations meet this need by offering me a role to play whose boundaries are partly defined and partly fluid, allowing for growth and accountability. This is respect for the fundamentals.

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Meeting these fundamental human needs requires the organisation to invest in processes, practices, policies, infrastructure, people and systems. Respect needs concrete financial investment; it really doesn't come for free.

Indeed, failure to meet these fundamental human needs with the adequate investment can prove disastrous for organisations and their engagement with their people.

Consider the societal level impact of the failures by some governments to provide adequate PPE in the face of the recent Covid pandemic (the need for protection). Consider the stress caused by the sudden and radical change in workplace arrangements as a result of the same and the sometimes-inconsiderate attitudes of organisational leaders to this situation (the need for place). Consider the stress that results when someone who is suitable for the next role is overlooked (the need for nurture). These are not trivial issues. The fundamentals need to be met if 'respect' is to get to first base.

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Meeting the need for self-actualisation

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Beyond this, the second way in which organisations offer respect is when they employ measures that allow people to develop into the best possible versions of themselves, helping them to find meaning, satisfaction, pleasure and connectedness in their (professional) lives. Recognising this life-long human drive towards self-actualisation is to offer respect. It lets people feel seen and heard for who they are and how they are[5].

Two connected factors[6] will allow this (we referenced them earlier when we asked whether we should all move to the 'soggy centre'):

Challenge	Firstly, enabling individuals to create well formulated challenges that stretch their learning and performance. Too much challenge crushes growth whilst too little challenge creates listlessness—there is always a balance to be sought. Only the individual themselves can work out what level of challenge will be optimal for them, but they work it out best when helped by someone else.
Support	Secondly, offering support to individuals to allow them to pursue said challenges. A balance is required here as well; insufficient support exposes individuals and renders them fearful; too much support over-protects them, leaving them risk-averse and unwilling to rise to challenges. Again, only the individual can work out what level of support is optimal for them, but they can best do so when helped by someone else.

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Unlike meeting fundamental needs, meeting the human need of self-actualisation requires skilful, and sometimes sophisticated, face-to-face human interaction. Organisations know this and support it with mechanisms such as performance and development reviews. But these mechanisms are not enough. The interaction that will drive people to feel respected is a continuous conversation which enables the individual to deepen their understanding of the relationship between their performance and their need for a unique combination of challenge and support.

The ingredients of this conversation (which we dub *Talking Respect*) are easily described but difficult to produce in actual practice. The pace of modern working life sometimes prevents (real or imagined) the attentiveness needed for conversations of this sort. And we know also that the verbal preferences of managers and leaders tend towards 'telling' and 'suggesting' rather than the much needed 'asking'[7]. Nonetheless, as we illustrate below, understanding a process and knowing its components is an important first step.

Talking Respect	
The Process	**The Ingredients**
Enable the individual to establish their own relationship with their need for challenge and support.	What does challenge mean to them? What does support mean to them?
Help the individual to continuously reflect on that relationship.	When and in what way has challenge been helpful? When and in what way has support been helpful?
Assist the individual in taking actions that reflect a modification of that relationship so that the level of challenge and support continuously adjusts.	How much more/less challenge could they handle? How much more/less support could they handle?

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In reality, most organisations are on a journey of seeking to embed a culture of respect and recognise that it needs constant attention if it is to endure.

We don't doubt for a minute the positive intentions that today's leaders have in wanting respect to be a continuing feature of their organisations, but we know that the imperfections of us all can lead to its temporary or, in a small number of some cases, near permanent, demise. So, what can we do? With respect to respect, how's it going for your organisation?

In our work, we notice five phases that organisations go through as they learn to incorporate respect into their culture:

The assumption of respect	Generally, people get on; they are civil, work through their differences, try to regard others well and might be said to be in a comfortable mid-table position in Division 2 (sic) - politeness.
The crisis of respect	Something (or a number of things) happens that brings the question of 'respect' to the table. It might be the results of an 'Engagement Survey'; the drive to high standards of excellence or an example of poor behaviour towards one or more people. For the first time, the question of what respect receives attention.
The revitalisation of respect	At this point, leaders turn their attention to the question of values and respect emerges as worthy of promotion—earning a clear advantage and claiming a place at the top of the table. But the leaders know that if it is to survive the first year of its promotion to Division 1 of the Super League of Morality, investment is needed. Not so much in terms of new people, but in better policies, practices, systems and, of course, behaviour. As is the case in so many topflight endeavours, however, there is always the prospect of new management!
The infrastructure of respect	Respect is now promoted, supported and measured. Policies and practices are viewed through the lens of respect - how do we run our performance review process so that it facilitates a sense of respect? Are the fundamentals in place so that the way we reward, recruit, house, induct and so on, are all handled with and signal respect? And of course, is our communication clear in its clarion call that respect is not optional, but expected?
Talking respect	In working synergistically with meeting the five basic human needs, the organisation seeks to grow and realise the potential of its employees. So when a policy or practice is undertaken, it is designed with the ultimate goal of self-actualisation. At a pragmatic level, it's not, for example, the number or frequency of performance and development reviews undertaken in any period—but the quality of conversation that accompanies them. It is in the purposeful intimacy of face-to-face communication that connection and respect grows.

With Respect to Respect, how are *you* getting on?

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Footnotes

1. The mindset that sits behind each of these stories might be regarded as 'post-conventional', a way of formulating the issue that goes beyond the simple application of rules or inherited norms. Such a mindset emerges within individuals as a consequence of reflection on and engagement with life experience. See, Jane Leevinger Technical Foundations for Measuring Ego Development, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998 and Robert Kegan, The Evolving Self Harvard University Press, 1982

2. See, for example, The Shingo Institute's work on Cultural Enablers. www.shingo.org

3. Although we should disqualify sociopathic personality types who according to at least one source occupy a disproportionate quantity of Executive positions. See Ron Jonson The Psychopath Test Pub. Picador 201

4. A richer elaboration of this idea is to be found in the work of Albert and Dian e Pesso, see for example, Moving Psychotherapy,
Brooklyn Books 1991.

5. See Ted Lasso at AppleTV.com for an amusing and yet relevant take on respect and human potential.

6. Two well-known academic sources lend credence to this argument. The first is the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: the psychology of happiness, Harper and Row 1992, who identifies an ideal 'stretch zone' located as existing just above the point where the demands on a person meet the capacity of the person to fulfil them. The second is the well regarded and highly influential work of Carol Dweck, Mindset, The New Psychology of Success, Pub. Ballantine Books 2006, in explaining how it is possible to create a 'growth mindset' (originally, incremental thinking') by encouraging 'trial and error' in learning with feedback that praises effort over performance.

7. See www.soundwave.global for insights into the way leaders talk and the effects that this has.

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