

# Big Brother Says Hello : post-modern management

[This article originally published in: Le Monde diplomatique, May 14, 2004 is translated from the German on the World Wide Web, <http://www.taz.de/pt/2004/05/14.nf/mondeText.artikel,a0074.idx,2>. Stephane Haefliger is a sociologist at the University of Lausanne.]

Once businesses simply expected their employees to be present. Today they demand complete openness. Management seeks to increase 'total efficiency' by operational organization in the form of nets and virtual offices. Team, 'task force', 'incentive' and 'fringe benefit' are the slogans...

Management seeks to increase "total efficiency" by operational organization in the form of nets and virtual offices. "Team", "task force", "incentive" and "fringe benefit" are the new slogans. "Fringe benefits" or additional gratifications" exist in monetary form (for example bonus pay) and in non-monetary form (for example, continuing education possibilities). A co-worker mutant corresponds to this management model, a kind of superman whose personal qualities are just as crucial as his expertise for his advancement. The "human resources" manager of today puts great emphasis on the "personality profile" of the potential co-worker", his or her emotional intelligence, power-handling capacity, communicative ability, capacity for team-work, work-group coordination and conflict resolution.

Thus businesses do what was earlier prohibited in hiring-, evaluation-, acceptance and termination discussions. In a pseudo-scientific way, they investigate the personal values of the co-worker ("Are you dominant or a team-player?" his or her mental disposition ("Are you emotional or rational?"), his or her private life ("Do you need confirmation? Why did you leave?"), his or her personal qualities ("List your strengths"), his or her beliefs ("What values are most important to you?") and his or her social environment (occupation of the father and life companion: membership in Rotary-, Lions- or Kiwanis Club).

Management in the style of "Big Brother" demands total openness in all areas. Costly errors in hiring new co-workers should be avoided. All personnel managers have read the famous "Peter-principle" ("In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence."). This was the basic thesis of Lawrence T. Peter and Raymond Hull in "The Peter Principle or the Hierarchy of the Incompetent" (2001). To sleep tranquilly, there is no better remedy than the expert opinion of an advisor validating the competence profile. The more expensive the expert opinion, the more serious the opinion. Thus "assessment centers" are regularly established, sometimes in the business itself, sometimes outside, sometimes very professionally and committed to ethical norms and sometimes not.

These processes that operate with scientific terms should insure that the candidate corresponds to the job profile, shares the values of the business, acts in a customer-oriented way and shows team spirit. He or she is expected to blend into his business

with body and soul. These methods allow unionists to be silently eliminated and everyone who seems a little refractory excluded from the first. With psychometric tests - the best know is still the Myers-Briggs type indicator -, consulting firms set the personnel decisions of their clients on a "scientific" foundation. Role-playing, structured candidate discussions, confrontation with other candidates and computer simulations are used to explore the personality of the candidates.

The naïve claim to "scholarliness" should be scrutinized even if the right of these practices is not questioned. Purely empirical methods do not change anything in the subjective character of a personnel decision. Observing one or several candidates a half-day to find out their most important behavioral characteristics and examining their reactions to the job demands and the "business culture" is a very complex matter - apart from the fact that the "business culture" from a sociological viewpoint is a strange concept. Distance from immediate realities as necessary for scientific works is lacking. Astonishingly pseudo-sciences like physiognomy (the interpretation of the character of a person from facial features), graphology and numerology still rate highly in this "assessment". This is quite strange for an economy that emphasizes its rationality. The so-called trainings or indoctrinations are another instrument. Continuing technical education is involved like introduction in new computer programs. The conduct and personality of co-workers should be trained. Businesses put their leaders in camouflage suits and send them to survival training in the forest where they must sleep a whole week in a tent disguised as "rangers". A big Swiss bank recently invited its top employees to spend a week in a hospital with Aids patients who may not live long.

Outdoor-adventure rafting in white water rivers, bongi jumping or even walking over burning coals under direction of the motivation guru Anthony Robbins are still very popular. The personality seminars (and spectacles) of the American motivation guru Anthony Robbins regularly attract thousands of interested persons. The courses aim at "transformation" of the individual, not only the banal goal of continuing education and seek to "expand the experiential horizon of co-workers and increase their creativity".

The employees obviously do not come apart at the seams with this perverse strategy. They know very well the underlying intention "to urge people to work, control them, exploit their needs, manipulate them and lead them in the desired direction". Most also know how to tactically dodge this strategy and outwit the demanded transparency and exposure of the self. They intuitively feel that the new management techniques seek to annul the distance between employees and businesses and produce identification with the so-called business culture. They don't want to run over glowing coals, pass a survival training, practice self-management or be psychoanalyzed at their workplace. They know only too well that the business doesn't offer them the necessary protective space where they can say everything, show everything, reveal everything and give the employer access to what is most valuable, their identity as a woman or man.

Copyright 2003 ProLitteris et Stéphane Haefliger, CH 8033 Zürich

**Stéphane Haefliger**  
**Sociologue**  
**Boulevard de Grancy 27**  
**1006 Lausanne**

Tél. perso: 021 617 31 55  
Mobile: 079 742 67 81

E-Mail: [stepcom@bluewin.ch](mailto:stepcom@bluewin.ch)