Relationship breakdowns between individuals and organisations
Some crises and some counselling

the Foundation

This Forum was all about tackling an intriguingly circular question. Why do we as individuals have such difficult relationships with us as organisations?

It's all just people, on our own or in a crowd. When we get together something strange goes on. In some situations it's obvious – that weird feeling on the first day of a new job, or first joining a new team, or first going to someone else's book club. Our social antennae come alive as we work out how the new group functions.

It's all unspoken. What gets a pat on the back or a laugh, what gets you airtime, where are the no go areas? Do people swear, do they joke, does being on time matter?

Oversimplifying somewhat, this is about the shared beliefs that a group develops about how things work for that collection of people. These are distinct from beliefs they might hold as individuals, but because we are social animals they are powerful nonetheless and they unintentionally distance the group version of us inside from the individual version of us outside the collective. It sounds innocuous but it leads to people behaving in strangely inhuman ways towards customers, colleagues and all sorts of other people surrounding an organisation.

This Forum set out to explore two particular examples – one with customers and one with colleagues – and then going up a level to analyse what's going on in general. We had a wonderfully eclectic mix of speakers as a result:

We had Joe Macleod, author of Ends, a book about how bad organisations are at ending customer relationships and why it matters

We had Christine Armstrong, author of The Mother of All Jobs, a painfully honest exploration into the nightmare of combining work with being a parent

And we had Gill Ereaut, founder of Linguistic Landscapes, an organisation that helps clients understand the strange ways they behave together and the impact on relationships around them (language turns out to be important).

Where did we get to? Why do we have continual relationship breakdowns between individuals and organisations? The evening's discussion follows in summed up form by Simon Caulkin

When Japanese decluttering guru Marie Kondo enjoined those with overflowing sock drawers to sort out surplus pairs, thank them warmly for their service and commit them to the garment cemetery with a light heart, she had more of a point than the cynics admit.

As author and consultant Joe Macleod pointed out, our inability to dispense with outworn belongings is part of a historically anchored phobia of endings that perversely makes it impossible for us to improve them – with sometimes extreme consequences.

For individuals, the inability to end a love affair with stuff ultimately becomes the pathology of hoarding, threatening physical and mental health – a metaphor, perhaps for the consequences of the ultimate fear of endings, the denial of death itself, which leaves us messily unprepared for the one thing which with absolute certainty will befall us all. For the planet, our common refusal to contemplate the afterlife of extinct products has resulted in oceans full of plastic and stockpiles of deadly nuclear waste that may outlast humanity.

As for companies, their aversion to the idea of loss and less, coupled with ever-increasing production capabilities, said Macleod, makes them as much addicted to overproduction as individuals are to overconsumption. The lack of an ending deprives not only consumers but also companies of the opportunity to reflect on and take responsibility for their behaviour.

'A cliché in the 2008 financial crisis [was that banks had become] "too big to fail" – a graphic characteristic of how we can't grapple with endings in businesses', he pointed out. 'And now we are doing exactly the same thing in digital – we're telling consumers "create content, share content", but we don't put the mechanisms in place to allow them to delete or remove that content forever.' As a result, cyberspace is littered with the same kind of detritus that threatens to make our physical space uninhabitable.

What is climate change but the refusal of humanity to face up to the fact that we live on a finite planet, which is our only home? That growth, like everything else, runs up against physical limits?

Could all this behaviour be in any way described as 'normal'? Well, yes and no.

It's normal – alas – in the way that the attitudes that engender it have become widely ingrained, and it's easy (with hindsight) to see how it came about. One of the things the aptly-named Industrial Revolution swept away, Macleod noted, was the circular economy that had linked the individual intimately with his or her immediate surroundings and with the land. When mass production broke that link, the consequences of individual consumption were suddenly invisible: cause was severed from effect, end from beginning.

The taboo on ending is equally evidently abnormal in the

obvious sense that everything mortal does have an end. We make sense of the world through telling stories which don't make sense without an end – in fact they don't even qualify as stories. But in that case, what does 'normal' actually mean?

That was the question addressed by Gill Ereaut. Ereaut founded a firm called Linguistic Landscapes to explore the tensions she found in companies between what she saw as 'normalities' plural – an organisation-specific cultural one, often constructed around hidden or unspoken assumptions and values, and the rational one that common sense (or commercial logic) suggest ought to prevail.
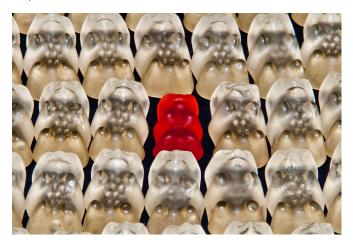
Thus, a pensions company she worked with was being 'taken to the cleaners' by its rivals because of its incomprehensible, user-hostile customer communications. This was an unconscious hangover from the days when customers didn't expect to understand policies. Even when people's expectations changed, the company saw no need to change its tone since it was stuck with the accidental and invisible assumption that customers weren't that clever anyway. That hadn't done it any harm when its competitors thought the same way but became toxic when they started treating customers as adults.

Similarly dysfunctional was the UK Prostate Cancer charity's timid campaign approach, which turned out in part to be the legacy of an influential previous leader. His unwillingness to shock or cause offence still, without anyone realising it, dominated the outfit's culture long after his departure and long after it ceased to be productive for the charity.

Whether in business or politics, culturally constructed normality is both arbitrary and immensely powerful, not least because of the forces of habit, inertia and vested interest, aka power, that hold it in place, and the fact that, like water to fish, it is mostly invisible to those who swim in it.

Ironically it is often glaringly obvious to newcomers – but they have little incentive, not to mention influence, to challenge it, given the strong human drive to fit in with a new group. Normalities, Ereaut summed up, 'have consequences that are both personal and commercial. They shape lives. They affect people's happiness; they certainly affect their productivity'. A normality which is out of sync with its environment but still holds an organisation in thrall can bring progress to a dead stop.

In her company's work she takes off the invisibility cloak around 'normality', concentrating on the language being used by everyone involved. It means suddenly people 'see it, name it, talk about it. Showing the craziness or the oddness, showing the thing it is. We don't judge it, we just say, "This is what it's like. Can you recognize it?" – and if you can recognize it, how far is it helping you now? Evaluating that is the first step to change.'

A poignant illustration of the personal damage dysfunctional normality can do was provided by Christine Armstrong. Now an independent consultant and author, she found her career as an international advertising and comms professional halted when she 'royally screwed up' her attempt to combine full-time work with small children – aka the 'having it all' that ambitious women were supposed to take in their stride.

So she decided to interview women who had apparently made a better fist of it for a book. It didn't turn out quite as she expected. On the record and at face value interviewees valiantly conformed with the approved stereotype: 'you just have to work really, really hard and be fantastically well organised' they all said. So that's what she wrote down.

But later many called her back desperate to talk some more and over off-the-record lunches a very different reality emerged: 'Did I mention that my children are anorexic and I think that's because I'm never at home', 'did I mention that I'm halfway through a divorce, well actually we've been separated for years', 'did I mention that I had a breakdown last year and had to take six months off work', 'did I mention that I work so many hours a week I can't go to bed without three glasses of wine because I'm so bloody wired. And then I wake up at 2:00 am and do my emails. And then I get up at 6:00 am to do it all again...'

What Armstrong came to realise was that there was a conspiracy of silence: on the record no one dared to tell the truth. 'So we have this entire fictitious dialogue on the topic, which is dominated by incredibly senior and successful women

who can afford as many nannies as the world has. But that means we don't have honest conversations about the brutality of our long hours norms, our working culture and the cost that we pay as families, as organizations and as a society. So that's what I write about now' – the fact that the UK at least has never laid to rest a 'breadwinner culture' that despite lip-service to women's ambition, makes no practical concession to them or their families' non-work needs.

She found the dissonance graphically illustrated at an event for working mothers with babies at a Canary Wharf bank where a fire alarm had just taken place. Hundreds of busy-looking besuited business people in suits jostling to get back to their desks mixed incongruously with mothers taking tiny babies up multiple floors of glass and steel to event rooms whose formal setting contrasted with buggies everywhere and tables laid out with brightly coloured children's snacks.

'It makes you realize really viscerally, how very, very far apart modern working life is from families, and how very, very surreal that experience was'.

The reality, she now believes, is that behind the bland corporate normality lies a tangled web of unspoken anxiety and stress. Yes, there is a group of people who believe in the official version. They are genuinely committed to and excited by the prospect of having more women in work and being able to thrive equally with men. Then there is a group of people, particularly younger men, who are aware that the breadwinner model is not working for them and would like to do it differently – but don't yet see how to take the next step.

'And then there's a third group,' Armstrong said, 'which is very, very afraid of this change. And it's really important to remember that it includes quite a lot of women. If we consistently ignore that group and pretend that because they keep quiet they must be supportive of the change, we're kidding ourselves'. What's more, we won't end the now unfit-for-purpose 'breadwinner model' or make the changes to today's inhuman work culture that would massively boost the sum total of human happiness, not to mention the UK's GDP.

As each of the speakers powerfully illustrated, assumptions we share as a group are potent influencers whose impact is felt at every level. Armstrong's interviews showed that trying to live up to a stereotype that is as unrealistic as it is undesirable can cause deep psychological wounds as well as diverting attention from the real problem. That's why, as in Ereaut's exploration of the shared language of a group, the version of normality adopted matters – with the further dimension that it can easily become self-fulfilling.

If enough people believe something to be true and change their behaviour accordingly, they make it come true through their own assumptions.

As Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion have been trying to tell us, denying one necessary ending, getting shot of our carbon dependency, only makes it more likely that we end up (literally) experiencing a much greater one, that of the planet we live on. The threat we're really fighting is our own shared perception of normality.

The Foundation's view

We have a specific interest in this subject area starting most obviously with why organisations of any size find it hard to get on well with their customers. In learning about ways to do better we have also found ourselves venturing into the colleague version of the issue – for example why is it so hard to tell the truth when something goes wrong inside, even though it's causing all manner of problems for those outside? By the end of the conversation we felt we had some very helpful clues as to what's going on, and the most useful headlines that stood out for us at The Foundation were these:

1 Companies have a pathological fear of loss and 'less', so as individuals we accumulate and suffer.

That sounds a bit extreme, but Joe Macleod explained the consequences of our unspoken aversion to endings. Connecting consumerism to Protestantism (no more fasting which helped you appreciate abundance) and the industrial age (an ability to pump out 'stuff' in undreamt of quantities) he showed how we glory in the start of relationships, in sales, in onboarding experiences, but never even discuss an elegant ending. In the short term it's fine – we have access to last year's photos and last month's TV programmes. But over years it becomes a massive burden – the indelible record of a past that's not you, messages on LinkedIn from people who are dead, too many things on the to do list or the bucket list, and then the tortured process of unsubscribing to services that pass you on to a rescue team. He pointed to Snapchat as a rare case of a service whose core appeal was deleting your content, but it is certainly not the norm.

2 Sometimes the veil drops, revealing the madness of incompatible but adjacent belief systems.

Christine started by describing an event she was part of, for mothers with young babies, being held at HSBC's tower of glass and steel in Canary Wharf. There had been a fire drill just before arriving and so several thousand bankers in suits were trying to purposefully re-enter their place of work, intermingled with a smattering of mums in kiddie mode. The room was more incongruous still, with a riot of plastic and primary colours, with animal themed snacks in a formal meeting room setting. Later she talked about the interviews she did researching for her book. Initially on the record she would hear heart-warming stories of success, challenging but rewarding tales of the progress of young ones alongside careers. And then she'd get the second calls, an ask for a proper chat and the truth – misery, depression, anorexia, divorce, all from the complete mis-match of normal work and normal parenting expectations. Of course none of this could go on the record. No one could know because it would just be so painfully awkward. This wasn't the norm and so the group just doesn't want to know.

3 Beliefs around normality are relative not fixed and they are difficult but not impossible to change.

Gill started by tackling normality. Normal isn't neutral – it's a point of view about something among many that are possible, and it tends to be sustained by habit and maybe also by people with vested interests in that version of normality continuing. In the cases above maybe Facebook would like to perpetuate never-ending data storage, and you can certainly see traditional company bosses preferring to avoid any more generosity to parents they employ. Creating a version of normality can be a deliberate act. From a distance you can see the Chinese and Russian governments working hard at it and having a degree of success including in shaping our own expectations over here. What Gill was leading to was a description of a way of changing normality when you aren't an evil political genius, in a business for example. The route she has pioneered is through language and she had a lovely turn of phrase as a way in – that you can't think the unsayable. The language used by people in a business, when analysed well, reveals the hidden beliefs and assumptions being made by all involved. What she has found is that by exposing the analysis to the people involved she gives them the power to change things – to choose to use a different vocabulary that supports a change in the way they collectively think.

4 From our perspective, caring about promoting customer-led success, this is all very important.

Shared beliefs about customers and in particular whether a business looks to serve or exploit them, are, we realise, increasingly important in our work. Look out for more on this in future from us.

About The Foundation

We are a management consultancy working with all kinds of organisations to achieve customer-led success. This means tackling big organic growth challenges; growing faster, growing into new markets or fending off threats to growth by starting with what matters to customers and then making it work for the business as well.

The aim is to influence customer behaviour, but this is inherently tough. Why? Because people in any organisation naturally see the world from the inside-out, with colleagues close and customers distant, and lots of assumptions about how things work that aren't challenged.

We help clients look from the outside-in, re-connecting them with what customers really value (the problem they want to solve, not usually what the client sells), then finding new and better ways to create this value.

This means working both as expert advisors and facilitators. The issue with simply gathering outside-in information is that it lacks impact to get senior teams to tackle inconvenient truths in what customers want, and to believe their own organisation can be different.

By using 'Immersion', personal conversations with customers and leaders of organisations in other sectors who have tackled parts of their challenge, we help teams get around the natural and limiting inside-out beliefs that stand in their way. This helps them develop better answers for customers and new ways of achieving lasting success.

We answer three sizes of question:
• Small – a new proposition or an improved customer experience
• Medium – growing value per customer or improving retention (a sub-set of the former)
• Large – creating customer-led business success, often by uncovering a true outward-looking purpose and the genuine belief needed for it to be acted on.

Our clients include HSBC, the John Lewis Partnership, Sky, Vitality and Ebay, with achievements including helping create Plan A at M&S, adding £100m of value to a Travelex travel money proposition, and giving Morrisons a competitive direction contributing to their return to growth.

Behind our work our most distinctive characteristic is our team and their outlook. Each individual is motivated to and experienced in crossing the border between the worlds of customers and business which often resist mixing well.

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