



## 50 SHADES OF TEAL

*As the UK Parliament struggles to resolve the Brexit situation the Government has precipitated, those looking on might wonder whether parliamentary democracy has passed its sell-by date. For a few centuries, the system appeared to work well enough, but seems to be incapable of functioning properly in the digital age. It is just one example of “the way we have always done things” no longer being fit for purpose.*



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As with the parliamentary system, the way business organisations operate is open to question. Invented long ago and developed extensively in the industrial age, are they really fit for purpose in the age of the Internet and widespread robotics? Of course, they continue to “do business”, but have increasingly seemed to produce wealth for a few, at a high cost - in social and environmental terms - to the many. We are so accustomed to this feature of organisations that we rarely question it. It is written into company law, as if it were entirely natural, rather than a human construct and historical anomaly. As a result, that which most people call “work” is, for many, becoming little more than meaningless toil, to be endured until someone invents a way to have a machine to do the job. Does organisational development address these existential issues, or is it merely prolonging the agony? Technology itself is neutral, yet it puts power into the hands of those who have it. An extreme example is nuclear weapons, the awesome power of which shocked humanity into eschewing their use and trying to keep them out of the hands of villains. In contrast, we are all enthralled with social media, where lack of regulation seems to be stocking up future problems. Similarly, robotics threatens to displace many jobs and, without international regulation, may well destroy many lives too.

Because we are used to finding technological solutions to problems, we imagine that those created by technology will be solved by yet more technology. As said, technology may well be neutral, but it can be used to leverage power and control. It is urgent, therefore, that in the way we organise, we think of the greater good of all the people, not just those currently wielding power. In his popular book, *Reinventing Organisations*, Frederic Laloux reminds us that 21st century organisations are somewhere on an evolutionary trajectory that started some millennia ago and has centuries of development ahead. New forms of organisation are emerging and people break new ground in their experimentation to improve current models for an ever changing world. In his introduction to the book, Ken Wilbur presents a colour-coded system of evolutionary organisational forms, starting at: Red with the ancient Egyptians, then Amber, Orange, Green up to the 20th century. At that point Teal, Purple, Indigo and Violet are still to come. This suggests Teal is our next

evolutionary step and Laloux cites examples that have reached this stage. Though any evolutionary step may take many centuries to emerge, each model of organisation continues to have its uses. Thus, the different models co-exist hence, when we think about organisational development, we need to consider where we are in the spectrum and whether our efforts are contributing to evolution or to maintaining the status quo.

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Think about organisations since the industrial revolution and there are excellent examples of bold experiments: Salt's Mill, New Lanark, John Lewis Partnership, Scott-Bader Commonwealth, all broke new ground. W. L. Gore is an outstanding example of a different way of organising that delivers growth, innovation and very happy employees. Now we are all challenged to invent forms fit for the digital age, able to harness technology for the greater good, by making the most of the human capability by which we organise. All living systems are evolving, willy-nilly. Some will continue to evolve for millennia to come and some will reach a dead end, if they fail to adapt to changes in their environment. Will that apply to humanity? Let's face it, the way we organise is archaic. Are we content to polish the outdated form we inherited, or dare we invent its successor? According to Laloux, Teal organisations exhibit three defining characteristics. These are; evolutionary purpose, self-organisation and an aspiration to wholeness. We can readily acknowledge these three, because they are archetypal for any group or individual who sets themselves on an evolutionary path. They relate to the basic triad of function, being and will; inter-related characteristics that, fully developed and integrated, bring living beings to maturity and wholeness. Although we may apply a healthy degree of scepticism to Laloux's enthusiasm for Teal, there is surely value in the idea of evolution of organisational forms. The

"Corporate Rebels" (Joost and Pim) suggest that Ken Wilbur is in danger of elitism when he claims "so-called levels of consciousness - as with Laloux's organisational levels - tend to create a misplaced feeling that some are more evolved than others". We can suppose that some people will always feel superior to others and usually for wrong reasons. Nevertheless, a sensible society would certainly acknowledge that some humans are more developed than

others, though more evolved does not imply superior. Indeed, is it ever in society's interest to overlook the idea that beings who are more evolved should find their place as role models, teachers or mentors?

I conclude, like Laloux, that evolution can clearly be seen to be at work. Individuals may choose to mature fully, seeing aspects of their work as a means to do so. Teams are most effective when they have clear purpose - by which team members develop shared identity - and wholeness - without which they are only ever a group. Similarly, on a larger scale, organisations can aspire to be like living organisms, with a clear sense of purpose, self-organising like whole living systems. Apart from anything else, such organisations are extremely lean and effective. These are the Teal organisations Laloux describes. A few do exist, even if only briefly - some more Teal and some less so. Laloux lists a dozen he examined in his research and I too have worked with a few. But, as in the early days of any bold innovation, these are daring experiments, that have varying degrees of success and can be hard to sustain. Because they are embedded in a culture, they are sometimes seen as aberrations to be corrected, rather than new models to be embraced. A difficulty is that any organisation seeking to make an evolutionary step tends to be held back because the people within them go home. They have other aspects to their lives in

which different values and visions influence their being. Some people can happily bridge the gaps, whereas others become divided. Some will be instrumental in spreading new ideas into society, whereas others will cling to society's values and compromise organisational change. This is a really important reason for an organisation to reach out to its community and champion its evolutionary spirit. CSR can lift society rather than merely serve it.

We can strive to reach Teal, but we are handicapped by the need to persuade people of the long-term benefit. A major factor is that you cannot have a highly-evolved organisation, if it is populated by unevolved individuals, just as you will not have a winning team of mediocre performers. This puts the idea of lifelong learning into a different context, in which the learning required is not merely acquisition of knowledge, but a kind of learning that takes us to a different level of being (Bateson's Learning 2 or Argyris's double loop learning). We need to develop the capacity to think at a different level. We need the personal capacity to willingly embrace conflict and complexity. As individuals, we need a clarity of purpose that is passionately pursued. Through our organisations, we must help people to see the development of personal maturity as a worthy aim - not merely growing older, which is inevitable, but countering it by acquiring a quality of being worth striving for. This kind of personal development must operate in parallel with organisational development, in order that the way we organise can move to Teal and beyond. As we learn to organise more holistically (becoming more organic than mechanical) everyone can learn to think differently - to see the world through new eyes, not zero-sum - not either/or, with no dichotomy between work and life and no division between life and nature. The challenge for HR is to change organisations to be fit for purpose in a dramatically evolving society. If Laloux is right, this brings great benefits by way of efficiency, adaptability and responsiveness. More particularly, it helps people strive for personal development through contributing to the evolution of the organisations they work for. ●

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