Defining an organisation

Alun Rees discusses business success

“It’s a very personal thing, but throughout my career – from my time as a teacher, to my time as a banker – I have seen just how important culture is to successful organisations... Culture is difficult to define, I think it’s even more difficult to mandate – but for me the evidence of culture is how people behave when no one is watching... Our culture must be one where the interests of customers and clients are at the very heart of every decision we make; where we all act with trust and integrity. But it’s not just about how we behave towards our customers and clients. It’s also about how we work together with our colleagues, because if you have to deliver for customers with 150,000 colleagues around the world, as we do, you better be able to work as a team. As far as I’m concerned, if you can’t work well with your colleagues, with trust and integrity, you can’t be in the team. Culture truly helps define an organisation.”

Fine words and there is no one who can dispute them. It’s the sort of statement that a leader in any business or organisation should be making. However when you discover that the words were spoken last year by Bob Diamond the recently ex-CEO of Barclays Bank whilst giving the Today Business Lecture in 2011 your opinion might change.

I am old enough and have enough memory of my ‘right-on’ days to retain a suspicion of Barclays because of their involvement with South Africa in the years before the end of apartheid. In recent times the stories of Mr Diamond’s “compensation package” and bonuses have made me wonder what he actually did - but like many I wondered, with just a hint of jealousy, what I would do with so much money.

His appearance a couple of days ago before a committee of MPs, each of whom seemed to have a separate agenda resulting in most of them missing the target, apart perhaps from having their voices recorded for posterity, made me reflect on Mr Diamond’s name. Bob Diamond or perhaps Diamond Bob could have been a dark suited card sharp on a Mississippi river boat, a small revolver concealed in his sleeve for settling arguments without debate. Or perhaps it’s more redolent of Las Vegas where he might have fronted a mob owned casino. If the latter then his appearance before the committee this week is reminiscent of Al Pacino’s Michael Corleone in
Godfather II facing down the federal inquisitors investigating organised crime.

To return to Mr Diamond’s talk: my grandmother had many wise sayings, one was “Fine words butter no parsnips”. The modern equivalent amongst those of us seeking to be ethical professionals is “Walk the Talk”. Both of these are comparable with “the evidence of culture is how people behave when no-one is watching”. Yet in a much more complimentary context the perception has become that the culture of the organisation is wanting, to say the least, because of the actions of a few individuals.

I speak about, consult on and coach what I know, and that is dentistry and people. We are constantly being encouraged by business pundits and gurus to be authentic, honest and sincere. Sadly the cynic in me is reminded of the words of Groucho Marx who said: “To be successful all you need is sincerity; once you can fake that you can fake anything.”

One of the first things I attempt (I admit I don’t always succeed) with clients is to get them to work out what they truly want to do with their lives. Yep it’s that “vision” thing again. Until they know their destination I can’t help them to find their own road, but one thing I truly know is that until they have a dream, a desire, an aspiration they will go around in circles or worse they will wander down someone else’s path because “it seemed to have worked for them.”

Unless those dreams are congruent with their conscience, unless they are doing what they do for the right and therefore ethical reasons they will end up disappointed and frustrated. Ultimately they will need to confront their own version of Diamond Bob’s time of reckoning even if it’s only by facing their children or by staring into their own eyes in the mirror every day.

I often come across this lack of consistency when I talk about the subject of sales and selling in professional life - it seems that as long as it’s said to be “ethical” and “low-key” then it’s OK. What I find is that people have been on sales courses and have learned the words, the techniques of rapport and closing and so on without working out exactly what it is they are trying to achieve for the greater good of the patient.

That’s where “selling without the S-word” came from - a challenge from a client to encourage his team to “sell” without them realising that’s what they were doing. It takes high quality leadership (another overused and poorly understood word) to ensure that the culture of a business is imbued with that “trust and integrity” that Bob Diamond mentioned, if you’re not a leader that can be trusted 100 per cent or whose integrity can be called in to question then don’t be surprised when your organisation performs poorly.

Until every team member from cleaner to principal is doing what they are doing for the long-term benefit of the patient and truly understand and embrace that, until they truly walk the talk then success will be an illusion.