

# Increasing effectiveness through building high performing teams

**Alex Brown**

## **ABSTRACT**

During the last decade organisations from all sectors have endeavoured to improve the way they work through changing their strategies, systems, structures and more importantly the way in which their people operate. In recent years attention has centred on the satisfaction of customer (or custodian) needs through the creation of team based organisation and customer focused teams (CFTs). The parable of the custodian focused team (CFT) is a vivid illustration as to the journey to increased effectiveness, to empowerment and to greater levels of satisfaction in organisations.

## **THE JOURNEY TO CFT**

"That's it!" said Domino, "I'm escaping from the land of Hierarchy... it never really gave us what we wanted". Domino was a large black Doberman who had given much to Hierarchy. Indeed it could be said of him that of all the people in the organisation Domino could be guaranteed to get results. Now this in itself was a good thing but at times his energy to achieve results was seen by some as a quest for power. A few in the organisation had read 'Animal Farm' and on reflection viewed it as an indication of how power and control could get out of hand.

The leaders of Hierarchy had managed the organisation in the same old fashion as they always had. "Command and control", they said, "brings it's own results", but Domino for one had started to question this. In his search for truth Domino sought counsel with one of the other animals.

Connie was a most conscientious tortoiseshell cat who could be relied on to analyse situations and bring a high degree of accuracy to everything she did. Connie knew about psychology and those deep things such as change, learning theories and teamwork. "They think differential reinforcement is the key", Connie uttered to Domino, "they stimulate us and we respond accordingly". "Now that might work for pigeons but not for the real custodian centred organisation", said Connie. "It was Pavlov's theory!" explained Connie to Domino, "do you know of it?". "Well I can't say the name rings a bell", replied Domino as a bead of saliva dropped from his jaw.

At that point Isodara the Iguana appeared on the scene. She was a team player, outgoing and could always be relied upon to lift the spirits of others in the organisation. She was also very good at working with the Custodians but felt somehow Hierarchy had stifled her. Bedecked in lavish green and red she sidled into Domino. "You know darlings, we really should move this organisation to a higher social level where we can interact more with the custodians". (Custodians was a new term in animalistic language centred on relating more effectively with customers as we may refer to them in our human sense and regarding them as being 'Custodians of our future').

"Well I was thinking of leaving the organisation", said Domino. "It took me three levels of bureaucracy to get a DiSC profile for my collar ... it's so frustrating and I'm not meeting the Custodians needs". "Perhaps we should approach the management and seek some changes", said Connie. "I've been watching a re-run of Top Cat the famous philosopher and the way he delegates to Choo-Choo, Benny the Ball and the like is purrfect organisation". (Officer Dibble hates it but there are reasons for that.) "We simply must take the bull by the horns", she exclaimed.

At that point Socrates the Sloth appeared on the scene. (As Custodians of the animal persondome we must be careful here because Sloths quite frankly get a bad press!) Socrates was a deep thinker and a very steady member of the organisation. He had the knack of sitting back for a while and then coming in with the gem of an idea which would shake the organisation.

Unfortunately Domino knew little of this talent and often grew impatient with Socrates. Connie on the other paw thought him to be responsible and sensitive. Isodora dugged his personal CD player. "What we have here dear friends is 'the challenge of change!'. "We could all leave or we could recognise that the Custodians need more from us ... we should approach the managers with a plan ... thus proving that you can 'lead a horse to water and assist it to drink!'" Connie pondered the thought - "was that really the way it went?"

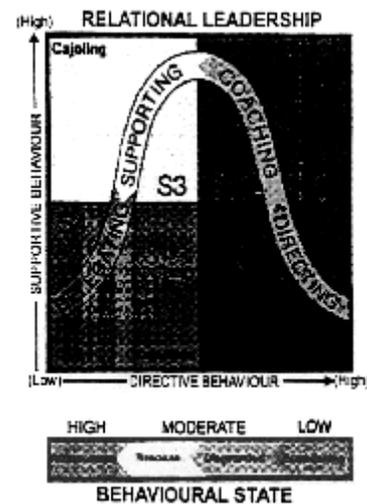
"You know", Connie shouted, "we'd get on a lot better if we knew more about each other and the management also knew more about us". Not since he'd read James Herbert's *Fluke* had Domino heard such wisdom.

A day passed by and the newly formed 'Custodian Focused Team' had devised their plan. (You might be drawn into thinking this was quick but animals have shorter life cycles than we humans and hence a far greater sense of urgency.) Connie had been one of the instigators of the plan and had incorporated a 'model' on leadership called 'relational leadership'. This was a key component in the new CFT way of doing things.

What it meant in practice was that we have to take account of the animalistic typology ie the Dominant Dog is very different from the Steady Sloth and we have to adjust our behaviour accordingly in our everyday dealings, and particularly so as custodian leaders. In addition we also need to take account of the fact that some are more competent than others. For instance, a Conscientious Cat may be far more suited to doing detailed work than an Influential Iguana who might be more attuned to the more socially orientated aspects of the organisation. The secret is to link them and focus on the strengths in the team.

The model also included a way of measuring where the CFT was at in focusing on the behavioural state of the team and the necessary leadership approach which would best fit (also useful for relating voice tone and signalling in training) as follows:

In the plan he CFT outlined the PURRFECT model which establishes the necessary steps along the journey to effective teamwork and also the emphasis on 'experiential learning'. "We should do most of our good work outdoors or in the field so to speak", said Connie which was quite a relief to Domino as nature really called upon him more than most in the organisation. The plan further contained clear goals and steps as to how the teams could be 'empowered'. This appealed to all in the team. Hence the plan was put to management and as they do management deliberated, and they deliberated and they deliberated much to Isodora's annoyance because she likes things to happens quickly.



Then came the day and the CFT of Socrates, Connie, Isodora and Domino was summoned to management. "We love the plan ... let's just do it!" said Nicky the spokesperson for the management. At that point Napoleon a ranger and custodian from the local community entered the room and sat with the whole team ... and the animals looked at the managers and the managers looked at the animals and just smiled!

*nb. no animal was hurt in the writing of this paper.*

## REFERENCES

Philosophical influence from James Herbert's 'Fluke'

Behavioural tendencies courtesy of Carlson Learning's DiSC Leadership model based on Blanchard Situational Leadership II

Inspiration provided by Top Cat, Warner Brothers

Psychological aspects from Pavlov, 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'

Political insights induced by George Orwell's 'Animal Farm'

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alex has a passionate interest in behaviour in organisations and animal behaviour spanning over forty-two years. As the co-custodian of Sapho the border collie and a history of being looked after by animals Alex has had the dubious honour of living with Tushka the cat who sucked his tail, Toby a really laid back golden retriever and Trevor the gerbil who in fact accompanied Alex to University in 1978. Trevor unfortunately did not appreciate the protocol of University life and presented Alex with three sleepless nights, whereby Trevor twirled endlessly on his little wheel. Despite padding of varying sorts to drown out the noise and other tried technological solutions, Trevor was fostered out to a more suitable home (he did bite my finger as well).

Alex is father to Ben (and soccer coach) and Georga (yes, I do like Irish dancing!) and a full-time facilitator with Modal specialising in Organisational Change and Team Development. Alex has consulted to numerous major organisations in the public and private sectors over the past twenty years. He has facilitated organisational redesign strategies and learning sessions for local government, the health service and many individual custodians of animal behaviour. Alex has also taught at UWA, Curtin and Edith Cowan Universities and in Europe.

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