

Working in Australia: Management Insights from The Sopranos

Wednesday, 4 October 2006

Brendan Gullifer

How many people do you know who can be honest, really honest, about their jobs?

I reckon our work lives are like our sex lives. What we say about what goes on in the office is like what we say about what goes on in the bedroom. Regularly inaccurate, frequently generalised and, more often than not, unconvincingly positive.

How's the wife? How's the hubby? Busy, or she's great, or he's driving me nuts.

How's work? It's busy, or great, or driving me nuts.

[IslandAd]

Advertisement

Pat answers to questions that people ask out of courtesy, to make conversation, or just because they think it's expected.

Several years ago, I attended a conference of human resource managers and conducted an informal poll. Over coffee, or at lunch, or with the person next to me before a speech started, I asked the same question: 'How's morale in your organisation?'

The answers were uniform.

They spoke of toxic workplaces and organisations with unhappy staff, of cynical employees who kept their heads down in anticipation of another unwanted change program. And this was before the introduction of the latest IR legislation.

Companies spent a fortune on trying to motivate their staff — incentive programs, team-building, bonuses — and frequently just ended up making everyone more pissed off, and more skeptical of the workplace culture.

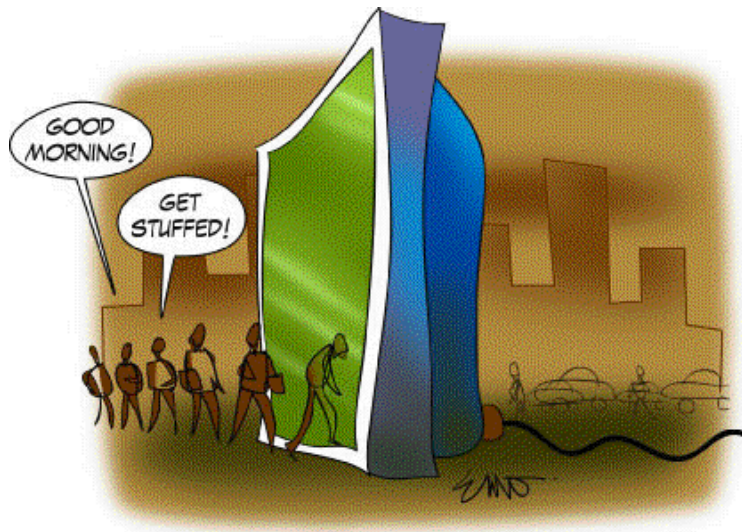
I have a friend who spent a short time working with a major management consulting firm: one of those brand-name groups that charge huge amounts to 'fix' government departments and companies. Supposedly, they re-organise workplaces and make things run better.

The stories he told would make your hair stand on end. Senior echelons were steeped in politics and ego and infighting. Partners were uncommunicative and patronising and ridiculously competitive with each other. Staff who were low in the hierarchy were abused and alienated.

If that company was a person, it would be an alcoholic surgeon with a convincing bedside manner, a therapist with a drug problem, or a bank manager addicted to gambling.

Since leaving corporate life to focus on writing books, I have taken to breaking up my day by watching TV shows on DVD. I intersperse my time at the computer and periods of writers' block with episodes of *The West Wing* or *House* or *NYPD Blue*.

Cop shows, law shoes, hospital dramas and even politics are all the stuff of great television drama. But maybe something else is working here?



Thanks to [emo](#)

How many successful shows that continue for years and draw big audiences focus on workplaces where things matter, where the employees are dedicated and acting beyond the call of duty, where the outcomes have significance and depth?

In *The West Wing*, for instance, an intelligent, committed and honest President of the United States has drawn around him a committed, intelligent and honest team, all of them lured to the biggest game in town because the man stands for something.

In most episodes of *The West Wing*, there is an opportunity — frequently thwarted — to bring about real change, to make a difference. We know a little about the characters' personal lives, but not much. Their relationships are with colleagues. Machine-gun dialogue, late nights in the office, and the pressure of managing competing agendas all create an intimate, even insular world where co-workers speak in the shorthand of family members.

People fall asleep at their desks, commit enormous errors, roll up to work hung-over or even drunk —

but life goes on. They are accepted and trusted. We trust them. Their colleagues trust them. Their humanity makes them appealing and believable.

And because of my writer's isolation, this daily fix of a vicarious workplace seems to fill a gap that my not going to work (not having a *proper* job) has left.

But even when work is bad, really bad, causing us insomnia or stress or leading us to drink or practically die of boredom (as reflected in the Ricky Gervais series *The Office*), I think, we still crave it.

The daily commute, moving like cows in a herd for milking, the coming together, the social contact — all this give our lives meaning and purpose, even if, like that famous painting by John Brack in the National Gallery of Victoria, we are automatons with beady eyes and sepia lives.

But then I think about one of my favorite shows, *The Sopranos*. Commentators say this mafia drama is more like a documentary in the way it accurately depicts organised crime in the USA. Maybe it's also more like a documentary about how work really is (think AWB or Telstra).

There's a sociopath boss, executives with addiction and anger-management problems, the slapping around of customers, the wiping out of competitors, and bundles of ill-gotten loot.

It's crass and depressing and violent. And for that reason, I find it totally compelling.

About the author

Brendan Gullifer is a Melbourne writer with a book on Australian history coming out in January.
