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Between Earth and Sky:
Formal Organizations as Instruments in Creating Gross National Happiness

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The concept of GNH is based on the premise that true development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other.

– Lyonpo Jigmi Y Thinley, Prime Minister of Bhutan

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

– Declaration of Independence, USA

Abstract

The realization of GNH through the lived experience of people in formal organisations requires a compatible organisational infrastructure. This paper makes two main points: First, one's experience in organisations is a source of happiness or suffering, and; second, there is a viable way of operating organisations to allow happiness to flourish if people are willing to take responsibility for its emergence.

Prelude

Humans are natural seekers. From the beginning, people have pursued their happiness in many different ways guided by very different philosophies, motivations, and circumstances. You might say the pursuit of happiness is the fundamental human project.

Today, there are various models of the good life, many ideas about what happiness is, and many ideas about how to create societal systems that foster its attainment. It is notable that the epigraphs on this page point to two completely different approaches to acquiring happiness: one is to protect the individual's ability to define it and pursue it in an environment of maximum personal freedom unfettered by societal (government) interference. In that environment happiness is believed to be a very personal matter. This is one extreme; not quite anarchic, but disdainful of obligations or interference (particularly through taxation) from a societal mechanism not of their choosing. The inclusion of the "pursuit of happiness" in one of the United States' founding documents may have been the first such mention of the concept by a people. Indeed, the United States was the world's first intentional country, self-designed, and launched with the consent of the people.

Another approach to happiness requires the conscious creation of a societal structure and requisite processes that will result in people's wellbeing as a consequence of national policy. In that regard, Bhutan, by calling for an index of Gross National Happiness, to replace GNP, suggests that a government's primary function should be creating an environment in which happiness is a natural by product of living life from day-to-day. In calling for this measure and, presumably, utilizing the machinery of government to insure that societal instruments actually stimulate the development of national happiness; Bhutan may be the first country in human history to do so. This may be the most incredible national vision of our time.

Happiness

Though philosophers have wrestled with the idea of happiness for millennia, people seem to know it when they feel it. Or they think they do. The new discipline of positive psychology tells us that happiness is not related to simple pleasures, but is something deeper. They call that something gratification, reflecting what the ancient Greeks called eudemonia. It is the state of mind that is created when one is lost in the process of living. It is the "flow" that is created unselfconsciously that results from completely losing oneself in the present (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). It is possible as long as basic needs are met.

The three pillars of positive psychology are, according to one of the field's founders, Martin Seligman (2002): 1) positive emotion, 2) positive traits, 3) positive institutions – democracy, strong families, and free inquiry. All pillars are a way to understand the idea of how some people exhibit qualities associated with happiness as an observable part of their character within an open society. From one perspective it can be strongly posited that Buddhism prepares one to have a very positive psychology as a consequence of following the Noble Eightfold Path.

What Buddhism and positive psychology tell us about happiness, contrary to the widespread belief in the west that it emanates from consumption and power, is that it is an internal phenomenon almost never achieved through striving.

Chasing the so-called "American Dream" – basically a plan for continuous, conspicuous consumption - makes it almost a certainty that happiness will be forever elusive.

In contrast, the "Bhutanese Dream" is an effort to create a state of national wellbeing as part of the continuous cycle of life. It is also, if pronouncements by the government are fully understood, an effort to insure a sufficient quality of life in a supportive cultural web within which each person can realize their happiness.

While individuals' psychology and early nurturing may be responsible for their orientation toward happiness, one thing is almost certain: happiness derives from optimism, kindness, love of learning, curiosity; and, involvement in a purpose larger than oneself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Seligman, 2002). Measuring GNH may be important from a public policy level to assess the actual state of being of a people according to characteristics such as public health; literacy and educational opportunities; access to fresh air and water; sanitation; cultural events and celebrations; or other societal characteristics, but these measures ignore the internal experience of people within families and within organisations. Current discussions of GNH seem incomplete in that regard.

It is important that an index of the quality of work life be considered a component of GNH. Whether people work in government, private or non-governmental organisations, their experience in organisations is a major source of satisfaction, personal growth, and meaning, or it's a source of violence, repression and pain. Considering the growing number of Bhutanese devoting half their waking lives working in organisations, it is critical to insure that the experience contributes to individual and collective happiness.

Earth: Present reality

Though Bhutan is experiencing growth in its urban centres, it is still primarily a rural society and individual lives revolve around a distinct locale. Individuals focus on family and social ties supported by rituals and celebrations nearby. Therein, longstanding family and cultural practices constitute a tradition of long understood individual behaviour, beliefs and obligatory social roles. The manner of interpersonal relationships has also been long established. An understanding of those relationships is very clear to all Bhutanese. One's place in the human family and in the community is secure. Indeed, in small communities one may even perceive everyone there as part of an extended family; in this cocoon of relationships, people are firmly grounded.

The experience of life in this context (meeting obligations, engaging in the work necessary for family and community, performing deeply held obligations to others and the community) develops within people a deep meta-conscious connection to one another. Perhaps within tight knit communities people may not even perceive a separation from one another. There is, in everyday life, enough time and compassion to accept each person's uniqueness and see one another firmly fixed in each other's world.

This is quite similar in rural communities the world over. It may be a fundamental quality of being in "community," enjoying the kind of personal understandings and mutual self-sufficiency that accrue to small scale, personal, environments. This is not to romanticize rural life. There is no doubt that rural poverty is also psychologically crushing. Though 30 percent of the Bhutanese population is below the poverty line it tends to remain cohesive and bound by strong traditions. This does not, however, mean they are happy; that they experience deep personal gratifications as a matter of daily experience; it does not mean that they are engaged in activities that align with what most fulfils them. The question to be asked is, "How do we create a realistic expectation that every individual will find work with others that speaks to their soul's code (Hillman, 1993) and may result in their experience of happiness?"

Sky: Buddhist practice

For many, the approach to life probably emanates from a deep understanding of the Buddha's teachings: that the nature of life is suffering, attachment leads to suffering, but relief can be found by following the Eightfold Path with meditation being the way of moving along that path. As a foundation, Buddhism provides an unimpeachable foundation for establishing collective happiness.

The potential for constructing an environment that can lead to an increase in personal and collective happiness is possible. The search for GNH measures at this conference is testament to that fact. But as we grapple with the earthly realities and strive to imagine a lofty vision that unleashes the prospects for real personal and national

happiness, the power of intentional organisations to facilitate or stifle that possibility should be understood.

If the past was characterized by small scale systems, and human involvement, and the present is characterized by large scale systems and bureaucratic control structures, a middle way of creating deliberate workplace community and determining indicators of happiness at one's work is appropriate.

Between earth and sky: Interpersonal relationships in organisations

If the present reality is Earth, and Buddhist practice is sky, our interpersonal relationships are the bridge. Specifically, our intra-familial, intra-organisational, and interpersonal experiences are hugely influential in establishing experiences that may lead to our personal happiness or suffering. The focus here is on the intra-organisational experience.

Perhaps this wouldn't be necessary, if society were static. If it were static, community level relationships would function as they always have. Intra-organisational relationships would equate to current community relationships and perhaps express a benevolent paternalism. But change happens.

Discos and bars come to Thimphu, satellite dishes spew countercultural messages over every viewer, young girls in red bikinis are displayed in "glossy advertisements" drinking fizzy water (Dorji, 2007), and new roads make it easy to explore distant towns where individuals are less constrained by local customs.

So-called development practices do lead to more than infrastructure improvement and satisfying basic needs. Once begun, the development process leads directly to an increase in desires and unanticipated consequences. The temptations that drive people to believe happiness is attainable through consumption are part of the fallout. Eventually, once treasured simplicity and traditional

practices are seen as provincial and lacking. It also leads to the creation of impersonal, sometimes very large organisations.

Development has brought with it to the United States a profound alienation from "community." Famous for its mobility; pursuit of self-actualization, and happiness, individually defined; and living in urban and suburban settings where neighbours are virtual strangers, work has become, to many Americans, impersonal to the point where people are merely interchangeable parts in the production equation.

There are cultural, demographic, geographic, economic, and historical reasons for the peculiar evolution of this state of being in the U.S., but the phenomenon of being alienated to the point of becoming a wage-slave is common everywhere. An employee has a contemporary status of servant. And as long as that mental model prevails, the gap between people in the workplace will remain. As long as the structure and processes of the workplace reinforce separation, competition, fear, dependence and powerlessness for the employee and power, domination, control and discretion to the owner or designated managers, the imbalance will create an environment ill prepared to stimulate the deep personal gratifications that we call happiness.

According to Scott and Hart (1990) the current organisational imperative includes two value propositions and four rules that dominate our organisations. The two values are: "...whatever is good for the individual can only come from the modern organisation" and, "...all behaviour must enhance the health of such organisations." The rules that buttress these two main propositions require employees "...1) to be obedient to the decisions of superior managers, 2) to be technically rational, 3) to be good stewards of other people's property, and 4) to be pragmatic (Scott & Hart, 1990: 30)."

As the organisational imperative has matured it has come to mean much more. It assumes the willingness of the individual to sacrifice for the good of an organisation in which he or she is not a

stakeholder beyond wages received. It also assumed that property rights, as exercised by owners of organisations over their material wealth, extend to the virtual ownership of the employees who work for them. One is reminded of the frail nature of the attachment to his or her workplace with an oft-repeated reminder that employment is "at will." One may quit or be dismissed "at will."

The consequences of the typical workplace relationship is a reinforcement of the idea that people must constantly look out for themselves and treat their work only as an instrument of their needs. This is a mutually destructive environment because the individuals are stuck there out of economic necessity and operate at less than full capacity while having their potential ignored.

There are alternatives. Contrast that thinking with the individual imperative that states that "Individuals have the civic obligation to realize their full potential, otherwise they diminish self. When self is diminished, the life of every individual in the community is, correspondingly, diminished. Second, all individuals have the civic obligation to promote human diversity, since pluralism is an essential precondition of self-actualization. Third, all individuals have the civic obligation to reject all forms of human instrumentalism: individuals are ends in themselves, not instruments for attaining other goals. Finally, all individuals have the civic obligation to dissent when any individual, institution or organisation abridges the Founding Values (Scott & Hart, 1990:161)." (In this case the Founding Values are: individual dignity, people as ends in themselves; full participation in the decision making process at all levels, either directly or through chosen representatives, gain/pain sharing, and equal protection of the laws.)

It may be odd to think of this distinction between owners/managers of organisations occurring in Bhutan, but wherever there are class distinctions or labour has migrated (internally or externally) for work, this is a very real possibility. Why? Because there are characteristics that develop naturally in an organisational enterprise based on the loss of community: the need for efficiency, productivity, attention to the use of time, and profit seeking.

Interpersonal competition for additional personal advantage is the only way to get ahead. And you *do* have to get ahead because costs rise; growing families have additional economic pressures, inflation cuts your spending power and savings get eroded. Yet, organisations that are driven by traditional hierarchical, bureaucratic control and reward systems, inevitably resemble the exploitative environments found in more alienated cultures where the sense of meaning is missing from work and people, paradoxically, augment their suffering, not reduce it.

It would be ironic if Bhutan, a Buddhist society, were to "develop economically" but increase suffering rather than diminish it. Even though the organisational imperative is at work everywhere and traditional organisational forms are easy to replicate, an alternative is possible – one that I suggest may be amenable to the Buddhist community of Bhutan.

Some aspects to consider in looking for organisational behaviour conducive to GNH are: the worksite environment; the safety and comfort of people at their workstations; the use of materials, processes, and tools to insure an ecologically compatible exchange with the environment; the relationships between worker and manger/owner/ government; the reward structures; sense of purpose; the match between the skills used on the job and the interests and abilities of the individual; and opportunities to learn and to share the good fortune (as well as the inevitable setbacks) with all workpartners.

Can living the Eightfold Path be encouraged in the workplace environment? Will all work eventually constitute Right Livelihood? Right Intension?

Involvement is one viable approach

Because traditional organisations are conceptualized as an extension of the personal resources and prerogatives of the owner or manager, talking about involvement at work is often a subversive act. It challenges the class system, tradition, and prerogatives of power.

Involvement is about being a legitimate participant in a process of determining the nature of one's work life. It is having the opportunity to express oneself and to be recognized as a rightful member of the community on the same footing as everyone else.

Involvement, and its attendant attitude of commitment, stimulates synergies and serendipity when people participate in the natural flow of information and resources to solve problems, coordinate activities, serve customers, and improve processes; and, to give and receive accurate feedback about how the work is going. These kinds of outcomes are inhibited, if not destroyed altogether, unless individual initiative is released. A participatory system is also motivational.

The major barriers stopping the transformation of abusive systems into humane workplace communities are the difficulty in overcoming the mental model born of traditional prerogatives and unregulated capitalism. Bhutan will benefit from cultural compatibility with community building exemplified by its Buddhist traditions.

It will come as no surprise to the GNH conferees, that an example of grassroots community building along Buddhist teachings has shown that it is not the system that is the problem, but the mental models and motives of those who enjoy power, privilege and the control of resources.

The Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka builds bottom-up democracy where councils at the local level, discuss all aspects of mutual problems in an open manner. A similar model is used in Bangladesh where BRAC has established local micro-lending organisations for people to take control of their own destiny. Both of these examples are alive and well - succeeding at the grassroots level among people with little formal education.

The key is to engage individuals by inviting them into the process through participation on teams of variously skilled and experienced individuals.

Organisational community building

In the GNP model, workplaces are constructed environments where relationships between people are necessarily formal and instrumental to achieving the purpose of the organisation. Though they consume at least one-half of people's conscious time at least five days a week, the purpose of being there is not, in the overwhelming number of cases, about personal growth or collective happiness. They are the loci of an exchange: labour for wages. Some may enjoy the experience more than others; some may even derive great personal satisfaction and fulfilment from the work they do and the people they meet. For them it may indeed be a means to achieving their personal happiness, but that is incidental. For the vast majority of workers, around the world it is not only instrumental in creating a product or service but the only means for individuals to earn a living.

In the GNH model, being conscious about our workplace environments is a necessary requirement in order to stimulate two important aspects of gross national happiness: positive relationships and a sense of purpose.

Working in organisations with people who are strangers to you requires developing an understanding of one another. A socialization process needs to take place where the nature of relationships, expectations, responsibilities and rights are spelled out. But unlike traditional orientation programs that take on a legalistic tone that benefits the organisation, this takes the form of a social contract that evolves as circumstances change; clarity about what works and what doesn't work is gained with experience. In effect, each organisation takes on community-like properties.

With the establishment of a shared purpose, workplace community (Nirenberg, 1993) assumes a balance between the individual and the group. Once a person is selected there is an obligation to sustain that person's relationship in the organisation so long as he or she lives up to designated responsibilities. Community conveys a felt concern for the success of the organisation and the individual members in it,

and that concern is felt at a fundamental personal level. Members, in turn, have a responsibility to live up to expectations.

There is a sense of personal efficacy in the role one plays by participating in the creation of the ends toward which the community strives. Each person determines how she or he will serve the community and the means through which they achieve their personal responsibilities. All roles are necessary and there is no hierarchy of importance even though some jobs are more pressing or are more fun or more visible or more central to the fulfilment of the organisation's goals than others at different times. Time is spent explaining and clarifying where the organisation is going, what it is trying to achieve, and how well it is doing, much like in an ownership organisation (Stack & Burlingame, 2003).

Community requires continuous learning. Community, by encouraging individuality and mutuality as it does, can never be totalitarian; it strives to move beyond democracy to consensus yet it focuses on realism; accommodating multiple perspectives and dealing with dissent. Authority is decentralized – more accurately, specialized – wherein those with expertise, training and experience take the lead in responding to challenges in technical areas whether it be taxation, enforcing supply chain accountability standards, or process design for workflow efficiencies. Community strives to become a group of all leaders, however; managers or facilitators of projects may serve for the duration of the project or for a designated period of time after which the position rotates or the group re-forms assignments. When experience shows all is operating smoothly, there may be collective assent to maintaining the status quo.

There is a fair and equitable package of financial and other benefits reflecting each person's contribution, knowledge and skill. With experience, members can even determine pay and privileges (Semler, 2004).

There are no sides; a group can hold various viewpoints but the test is about what will work best, not a particular person's preference for its own sake.

As it develops in sophistication, community develops a structure that provides avenues for the expression and resolution of conflict and protects the existence of diversity of thought. Power is task centred not person centred. Unilateral veto powers, if they exist at all, are assigned by the workplace constitution as are other rights and responsibilities while the separation of powers and checks and balances are built into the process.

Each member can be as involved in additional responsibilities as he or she chooses through being allowed to serve on administrative, policy and various committees. A community forum exists for decision making in these areas. Each person is directly or indirectly involved through the selection of representatives. Work groups and the community process determine operating rules and processes.

Community allows the full, authentic expression of one's whole personality and encourages completely honest communication; and also encourages humility, self-examination and vulnerability - the ability to truly be oneself.

Community means more, of course. It means mutual aid, cooperation, respect, friendliness, individual efficacy, responsibility and good treatment of strangers - those we don't know or don't work directly with but whom are part of the organisation. Personal relationships must be worked at daily.

Eventually it means no layoffs or policy changes without working it out in the community. The purpose is to keep everyone in the governance process and informed. The work group or representative body would also decide issues of hiring, socialization of new members, establishing performance expectations, assignments, scheduling, benefits, rewards and punishments, and dismissal. It would also arrange for the mediation of disputes between individuals and handle grievances rooted in the organisational policy, rules or structure.

Community means inclusion, acceptance, efficacy, freedom of expression, and having social as well as organisational goals

legitimated. It is also being able to communicate openly and freely. In effect, you are expected to speak your truth and assumed to care about the organisation.

The community allows spirit to emerge from within the group as a natural outgrowth of the community building process.

For an organisation to become a workplace community and foster GNH certain conditions must prevail. Each person who is selected by and freely joins the organisation is expected to be involved in decisions affecting their day-to-day work and the governance and maintenance of the organisation to the extent they are able. The form may be direct or through representative involvement.

The individual's acceptance by, and usefulness to, the organisation is assumed. Personality and relationship issues are dealt with separately from competence and task related issues. This requires agreement on fundamental understandings at the time of recruitment. It also requires the individual's willingness to recognize and to commit to the legitimacy of the fundamental values and associated requirements of the employment agreement.

In short, the acceptance of individuals as full members of the community is dependent on their living up to their role, responsibilities, and group function. In return, the individual takes part in determining the organisation's future and in pursuing his or her own path to happiness within the workplace community. The community stimulates its own growth and group development by creating a learning environment and providing opportunities for individuals to develop fully.

Suitability of workplace community with socially engaged Buddhism and Bhutan's GNH Effort

The idea of workplace community and universal involvement in determining the quality of work life environment and organisational processes seems to be quite consistent with Buddhism.

Speaking from a development perspective, Sulak Sivaraksa, a leader in the movement for socially engaged Buddhism said, "Economists measure development in terms of increasing currency and material items, thus fostering greed. Politicians see development in terms of power, fostering hatred. Both measure the results strictly in terms of quantity, fostering delusion. From the Buddhist point of view, development must aim at the reduction of these three poisons – greed, hatred, and delusion, not at their increase. We must develop our spirit (Bond, 2004:120)." Community building is an effort to do so.

Considering the successful lifelong efforts of A.T. Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka, which were remarkably similar to the ideas expressed here, experience validates the application of a systematic approach to creating a viable workplace community. In his case, his democratic development model expressed through Sri Lanka's largest NGO, Sarvodaya applies the concept of Shramadana, the sharing of labour as a vehicle for the "awakening of all." In so doing they demonstrate the fact that "We build the road and the road builds us," a saying they use that beautifully captures the spirit of their development effort. For Ariyaratne, his work at grassroots development weren't explicitly about happiness. Instead he addressed "the ten basic needs that include: 1) a clean and beautiful environment, 2) a clean and adequate supply of water, 3) minimum clothing requirements, 4) a balanced diet, 5) a simple house to live in, 6) basic health care, 7) small communication facilities, 8) minimum energy requirements, 9) total education, and 10) cultural and spiritual needs (Ariyaratne, 1996:xiv)." Nevertheless, through meeting these needs working together as part of a self-managing community, people come to experience their happiness.

Sarvodaya is 50-years old this year and still serves as an exemplar of how an organisation can help people move toward their collective betterment where "…equality, sharing, constructive activity, cooperation, pleasant speech and love as well as freedom prevail (Ariyaratne, 1996)." Perhaps lessons from the Sarvodaya experience

could be usefully applied in Bhutan. No doubt Bhutanese already know this.

As a by-product of building workplace community it might also be possible to temper the consumption epidemic spreading around the planet like a wildfire. Ariyaratne reminds us "…whereas the Western economic models depend on the creation of desire, Sarvodaya's aim is to eliminate both desire and suffering…" (Bond, 2004:5)

Instead of relying solely on traditional relationships in the workplace, consciously augmenting them and designing organisational environments that apply processes, structures and policies in such a way that workplace community is created, will help make GNH a reality.

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