

Management by Emergency, US Style—why it feels good.

Posted by George Simons

Some years ago it was popular for OD consultants to observe that many US organizational cultures, "managed by emergency." In my several ongoing engagements with US groups, after living in France for some years now, it seems to me that all too many folks in these US organizations rush about in a constant state of urgency, "putting out fires." I won't tell stories at length or repeat the literature on the effects of this kind of management on planning, productivity and morale, but I do want to share an observation about it that I did not remember seeing in this kind of discussion. It is much more of a cultural and personal insight. It comes from my US soul with the perspective of living abroad for many years now. The urgency is both part of me and something I recognize in others like me.

US culture values time as money and wasting time as at least secularly sinful. We were taught in the Calvinistic vein that "idleness is the devil's workshop," rather than the Catholic ideal that "Leisure is the Basis of Culture." We are "unleisurely," according to Aristotle, in order to have leisure. But why then do we resist leisure even when we have adequate resources to take it and profit from it. What is the root of the compulsion, greed, insecurity that leads to chronic workaholism? In short, why, in a US restaurant does the bill always land on the table before I have finished my coffee?!

One of the psychological mechanisms that drives us to live in and even revel in states of urgency is that they preserve our identity and self worth, hence, our importance to self and other. The roots of this passion for work go back to the Puritan concept of salvation brought to these shores by the British émigrés in the first half of the Seventeenth Century. One's activity, dedication to vocation and condemnation of vacation and celebration, and subsequent abundant fruitfulness was a sign of divine predestination. This theological framework may have faded into the background for most US Americans, but the religious zeal with which "time is money" is if anything, more intense as are the extremes of "workaholism" that many of us are prone to.

In US culture we are largely defined by what we do rather than by our origins or pedigree, so doing has become the foundation of identity and self esteem. Our accomplishments are our titles and not a second should be wasted in pursuing them. Urgency is the attitude that broadcasts to ourselves and others that we are here to do what we do and to be heroes at it when faced by emergency. Having something to do helps me sense my worth; having something urgent to do undergirds my sense of capability as well as tells others that I have a role, an identity in something that concerns us all. That this is productive and brings wealth and status symbols is our secular salvation.