

**LEARNING TO BE FREE AND EFFECTIVE IN WORK-PLACE RELATIONSHIPS USING THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH\***

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The English poet, Matthew Arnold, writes about “The Buried Life” as follows:

I knew the mass of men concealed  
Their thoughts, for fear that if revealed  
They would by other men be met  
With blank indifference, or with blame reproved;  
I knew they lived and moved  
Tricked in disguises, alien to the rest  
Of men, and alien to themselves.

In contrast, American psychologist Carl Rogers writes of what I will refer to as “the unburied life”: in Rogers words this “unburied life” is described as Becoming a person, Freedom to be, Courage to be and Learning to be free.

In the light of these two contrasting descriptions of life I ponder the two questions: what does business want from its employees? And how can I as an employee get what I want through my work-place relationships?

Often business is seen as disregarding persons in the interest of the bottom line. Often employees expect business to take care of them from the womb to the tomb.

I propose that there are many in the work-place who fit the description of Matthew Arnold of the buried life: “if I can keep my nose clean and not makes waves” I can get by. I also propose that there are many business people who have a bureaucratic disregard of persons—believing that people can be forced to do what they are told: that the way to manage people is to subject them to an iron will informed by the bottom line of the organization.

I reject the notion of the buried life as a work-place ideal and affirm Carl Rogers' notion of the unburied life as the path to work-place relationship satisfaction, efficiency and effectiveness for both the individual and the organization. The unburied life is a riskier road, a road filled with more anxiety than the road of the buried life; the unburied life requires the development of the extraordinary courage to be oneself; the buried life is a life of the tragic giving up of one's very self in the interest of safety and necessity; the unburied life is a life of the tensional existence of both necessity and possibility—requiring the ability to eschew the serenity of the known toward -----

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the greater creative potential of persons being “all that they can be.”

What is involved in moving towards this unburied life: a life describe by Carl Rogers as Becoming a person, Freedom to be, and Learning to be free? In the unburied life a person moves away from blame and victimhood towards responsibility, away from meeting unspecified expectations and towards accountability for his or her promises, away from seeking approval from others towards the ability to give oneself unconditional positive self regard, and away from incompetent communication patterns towards more skillful competent patterns.

One way of facilitating the individual towards moving towards responsibility, accountability, self-regard and competency is to provide opportunities to learn the skills of the person-centered approach: the skills of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard. In learning PCA skills, one becomes able to make choices in this more mature direction; no assumption is made that a person should move in the more mature direction; but that they may become increasingly able—if willing—to move in that direction. The “able” has to do with becoming competent with the skill; the “willing” has to do with one’s attitude from moment to moment in choosing the skill in their relationship.

Axiomatically I claim that all work gets done through relationships and that PCA offers necessary and sufficient skills for the successful conduct of relationships. I claim that when I learn the PCA skills of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard that I become able to be competent; though this “ability” to be competent does not assume that I always make the competent choice.

Regarding the skills: learning congruence is a matter of learning to own my experience, to be clean about what I believe, feel and want—to learn to move away from a billiard ball mentality towards seeking responsibility for my own experience, to reclaim the internal locus of evaluation and to reclaim responsibility for my own life.

Learning empathy has to do with being able to set myself aside and follow another while the other grows; empathy is on behalf of the other with a secondary benefit to myself in that I have a more fully functional, unstuck partner or team-mate. As a part of empathy there is the skill of empathic listening which is applied when I want to understand something from the other for my own reasons; with empathic listening, the sender is the validator that I have indeed understood.

Learning unconditional positive regard has to do with being able to prize the different other while not giving up any of my own integrity; this skill has to do with viewing doubts and opposition as a precious gift from the other, while at the same time not giving up the self in compromise or compliance.

This learning of the PCA skills of congruence, empathy, empathic listening and unconditional positive regard is not a counsel for narcissism or selfishness.

Rogers makes the bold claim that such a process of learning to be free leads to more mature and full functionality; even intimating that as a person reclaims the internal locus of evaluation and accepts responsibility for their own lives, they will move in positive, social directions, even in the direction of making a constructive contribution to the whole species.

When thinking about taking responsibility for one's life: I am not saying that a person should be responsible for their own life. I believe the assumption of the person-centered approach, as understood by Carl Rogers, is that a person is responsible for their own life; and that in assuming the inherent worth and sovereignty of the person, the person centered practitioner treats the other with this fundamental respect and prizing. If I take the position that the person is not a sovereign being responsible for their own life: is this not a form of contempt!!!?

Finally, in terms of the questions posed above: what does business want from its employees? And how can I as an employee get what I want through my work-place relationships? I propose that through a program of competency in the skill of the person-centered approach that there can be up to a 99 reduction in the number of transactions that it takes to get a message sent and effectively heard: a series of 1,000 painful interpersonal transactions may be reduced to 10 satisfying transactions. Perhaps my numbers are a bit high: consider the possibility of a 30% reduction of the inefficiency, ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction; I'll take that and run to the bank.