

Industrial Relations in the Light of Individual Psychology¹

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Business and industry would gladly pay millions if a variety of pills could be invented that would cure such things as absenteeism, accident-proneness, malingering, carelessness, indifference, high turnover, excessive spoilage, and similar costly manifestations of inadequate human behavior. Enterprises have spent millions to date in an effort to study and cure these ills. They have made separate studies of each as though each was a thing-in-itself that could be treated independently. Not long ago, a conference on absenteeism was called by a certain executive, and an amazing number of our largest companies sent their industrial relations representatives to see if he had a cure for this malady. This alone gives us some idea of the low level of understanding in the field, as if anyone could produce a cure for absenteeism in and of itself. It also gives us an idea of how much Adler's conceptions are needed and how much light he throws on the human problem in work situations.

An organization, just as an individual, should be regarded from the holistic viewpoint. We must be able to see that both the good and bad manifestations are part of a unified pattern. But this is not the way Management views results. As things stand now, Management takes full credit for good production records and disclaims responsibility for the disruptive factors and results. These disruptive factors and results are attributed to "gremlins" that somehow haunt the shop to retard the good work. Management does not see that these disruptive manifestations are simply the less fortunate outgrowth of what we, as Individual Psychologists, would call *life-style* of the organization. We might say that the policies adopted by Top Management are the life-style from which both good and bad results may be

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expected. As psychologists, we are familiar with the so-called "good child" who does everything his mother wants during the day to her great pride and satisfaction, but whose perfection is marred by the unpleasant habit of wetting the bed at night as his revenge against domination.

If Management regarded an organization from the holistic viewpoint, it would waste no time and money trying to treat symptoms separately. I remember working for the Government during the war. Absenteeism was a serious problem in those days. Someone interested in turning up a fast dollar for himself and, happily knowing nothing about life-style or such things, sold the Government a variety of posters designed to cut down absenteeism. These were posted over the exits. One was a menacing, grinning Japanese army officer who was rubbing his hands together in great glee, and imploring the employees to "Please Take Day Off." Those who were planning to skip work next day grinned back at him as they left the job, and there was no notable falling off in absenteeism.

Absenteeism is an act of revenge, like bedwetting. The individual feels put back in some way and does not feel that he is any real part of the team or unit in which he works. No emotional tie holds him to his co-workers and he feels free to leave them with the burden. No picture or slogan alters this hostile attitude when he has a chance to embarrass his supervisor by taking time off wilfully. Nothing but better human relations in his work group will hold him on the job.

The philosophy of Top Management in handling employees, in many instances, has not changed much since the Pharaohs built the Pyramids in Egypt with task masters for supervisors. The whip of leather has been given up for a variety of other kinds of pressure. *Fear* of some sort is used to keep things moving. Fear is found all the way from the top to the bottom in every industry. Where fear is used as the main method of control, we shall find human beings moving *away from* such pressures as much as possible. If too much confronted by force, individuals retaliate with forgetfulness, careless accidents, absenteeism, spoilage, malingering, and often outright sabotage. They set up in themselves forces which are equal-and-opposite to pressures brought against them.

An excellent indication of the prevalence and effect of fear is found in a medical study reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 144, 2 December 1950, called "Exhaustion in the

Young Business Executive." Let me quote only a small part of this valuable study.

. . . These executives had many disorders interfering with their efficiency. Apparently, they started out on their jobs with all the zeal and enthusiasm and ambition to reach a goal which would give them prestige, affluence and security. Most of them were college trained and many had graduate training preparing them for their life work. Why did men with such drives manifest disabilities at an age at which they should have been most productive? Why did these men live under tension which not only affected them but projected their emotions on employees under their supervision? Why were some departments in industry more productive than others engaged in similar lines of work?

. . . Psychological studies have revealed that executives with somatic symptoms are as a rule dependent men whose insecurities and feelings of inferiority are great. Their drives to succeed are a reaction to their intense fears of being inadequate, which are expressed as ambition, producing somatic symptoms in the gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, respiratory and neuromuscular systems. The executive's interpersonal relationships *appear adequate on the surface* as far as their business associates are concerned. However, their reaction to their families is frequently hostile, so that their wives and children as a rule are injured. Frenzy and repressed aggressions, frequently on an unconscious basis, are present in most such persons, though they manifest strong defenses against expressing their psychological weaknesses. Their capacity for getting pleasure out of life is limited. . . .

. . . Another significant characteristic of the executives' thinking is *fear of failure*. (May I stop for a moment to remark what a familiar ring this has to an Adlerian!) . . . Even though the executive can look back with some pride on his accomplishments, there is always apprehension or fear that all will not be the same tomorrow. The fear is not so much loss of material things as *loss of pride!* . . . (Where have we heard such comments before about pride and ambition for personal prestige?)

From this quotation it is very clear that the average business or industrial situation is still a jungle filled with dangers that may attack at any moment. Regardless of what work-level one is on, the situation is not different.

This is a great tragedy when we think that one third of each day we live is given over to earning a living. The factor almost entirely

disregarded by Industry is that an organization is fundamentally a *social institution* and must provide above all else, *the feeling of personal validity* for those who spend the most important part of their waking hours within it. People cannot endure to live that amount of time in constant fear or with the feeling of being insignificant! If we want them to fulfill the work-schedule, we must see to it that the human conditions are such that they can fulfill themselves while working. They must get the feeling that they are valid and important to themselves and to others. If conditions in the work unit do not permit this feeling, then we must expect that employees will revenge themselves by staying away or by some form of sabotage.

Management has been taught by economists that human beings undergo a magical transformation the moment they punch the time clock. It is alleged that they cease being people and become what is called economic men whose principal motivation is to get a fatter pay envelope. As Individual Psychologists, we must insist that people remain human beings under all circumstances and pursue the same human goals of significance on the job as they do elsewhere. Management must give up the myth of the economic man and deal with the realities of human strivings for the feeling of validity. Human behavior is a continuum of strivings toward this goal.

Business or industry survives or fails (as is also true of each individual) according to its productivity. Production figures, unfortunately, have an hypnotic effect on Management. Supervisors live in terror that the production record of their departments may fall a bit. Here is the *fear of failure*. Their fear of punishment, in such cases, goads them to nag their men to faster action. Such nagging only sets up, inside the men, a force of resistance that is equal-and-opposite to the force of the one who nags them! This is why we get sabotage from them, instead of productivity. *Fear breeds fear* in most people. And fear produces stasis or contraction.

How would an Individual Psychologist approach the problem? First of all, he would realize that "Only contented cows give a maximum of milk." No cow lets down its milk properly in fly-time when it is irritated constantly. Moreover, an Individual Psychologist would realize that high production is the reward of good human relationships. High production is a good symptom. And good relationships exist only when men are not afraid of each other or in competition against each other.

A production unit is formed only when it is impossible for *one*

man to do the work alone. Because the job is too big for one man, a group is formed to work together and a supervisor is put in charge of the workers. Usually, this supervisor mistakenly imagines that his job is to "get the work out." In short, he has his eyes trained on production, which as we have said is only a by-product or symptom of good human relationships. Unfortunately, the supervisor in his anxiety to impress Top Management and his preoccupation with production, neglects the "goose that lays the golden egg." He neglects the human factor. In effect, he does not realize that the main job of every supervisor is to weld his group of assorted men into a *team*. Men who are not tied into a team by invisible bonds of mutual sympathy very quickly fall into personal competitions which disrupt team-work and therefore limit the production. Cliques and individuals struggle against each other for personal prestige instead of working for a common goal of group productivity. Hurt feelings and struggles for personal prestige spring up. The members of the group feel fearful and defensive toward each other and against the supervisor, so they have no feeling of security. The frictions and feelings of insignificance produced stimulate them to various kinds of revenge such as absenteeism and similar ills of relationships.

To take the curse-of-personal-opinion from a paper that is supposed to be scientific, one is tempted to share the blame with others. At this point, I shall review briefly the work of Western Electric Company along this line. They decided to do a controlled study of the effect of different degrees of illumination on work output. They selected a work-group for the experiment and planned to have all factors constant except the amount of light which they intended to increase or diminish as the study progressed. They recorded the output of the group before beginning to change the light intensity. Then they consulted the workers as individuals on all their life-affairs and arranged it so that there would be no sources of irritation arising from outside sources. They interviewed the individuals regularly on this score throughout the experiment. Then, at last, they began to increase and diminish illumination which was supposed to be the only variable factor in the experiment. But they did not take into account the effect of the human factor. To their consternation, the output kept going up all the time until it was doubled—regardless of the lighting. The surprising level of high production did not diminish until they got the illumination down to about the degree of moonlight, at which point the workers could not really see what they were doing.

Only then did the investigators finally face the fact that the so-called morale factor or human factor was the source of the increased production. By reducing human irritability and interpersonal competition in the group, they had released the psychic energy of the individuals for productive efforts. In short, under average plant conditions, half of the energy of the workers had been going into internal frictions or irritability and was not available for productive efforts on the job.

After about eight years' study, Western Electric published their findings. Their biggest discovery was that "*employees are people*" even though they are working for a living in business or industry. Individuals do not park their social life at the time-clock when they check in for work. They continue to behave most inconveniently like human beings and not like non-human machines built only to produce commodities. The main recommendation made by the investigators of Western Electric follows quite naturally from their main discovery. It was: "Make the human situation humanly straight!" In short, treat employees as if they are people and high production will be the by-product of your efforts. It is the same as saying that we must treat bees as bees if we want to gather honey from the hives.

This throws a clear light on the function of Management and especially on the function of the supervisor. The principal job of Management and the supervisor is not to get out production but to set up and maintain conditions that lead to *teamwork*, just as a good therapist would do. Teamwork will not exist except where everyone concerned regards all others as equal, valid fellow men and not as superior or inferior human beings. There can be no attitude of *big me* and *little you*. Such unfriendly comparisons disrupt teamwork and whatever disrupts teamwork lowers productivity.

It is important to understand the proper relationship that should exist between Top Management, supervision, and workers. Organizations or industries are set up to supply some need of the human community. This human necessity demands our services for its accomplishment. We might as well say, "The job is our only boss." Management, supervision, and workers are only three ways of serving this boss (Necessity). The work-level of any organization is the cutting edge of the tool of production. It is at this cutting edge that production takes place. Supervision is similar to the handle of the tool. The handle serves to guide the cutting edge. Top Management holds the handle and makes the policy as to how the tool shall be used. Top Manage-

ment and supervision share the task of keeping the cutting edge sharp. They must see that nothing dulls its edge. These three factors are equal and interdependent in importance. All three functions are in the service of the job to be accomplished by the industry.

Now we can see more clearly the contribution Individual Psychology can make to our understanding of the problems of Business and Industry. The problems we meet in those areas are not fundamentally different from those we see in schools, the home, church, government, or any other place where people must work together to accomplish some task of common survival. As Adler taught us, "All human problems are social problems in a social setting and there are no other problems." In the Old Testament is the story of the building of the Tower of Babel. It began well enough and progressed as long as everyone spoke the same language. They could work together as a team and get results. But, in time, everyone began to speak a private language (the language of *big me* and *little you*) so that teamwork or common understanding became impossible. After that happened, further building became impossible.

Business and Industry must reconsider its whole approach to the problems of management and work to achieve a common language of equality of human value. There can be no *big me* and *little you*, each speaking a private language. When a common language is achieved, men will delight in being members of the team and will not need to revenge themselves or sabotage each other. And until that happens, then absenteeism, spoilage, and such other ills are nothing more than a barometer which indicates the degree of the storm raging among the individuals in the industry that is complaining to us of its ills.

In summary let us say that the main problems you will find in Business and Industry arise from a lack of realization that teamwork has been made secondary to productivity. The cart is in front of the horse. Every stick has two ends and high productivity is but the other end of the stick we call *good teamwork*. Management is in trouble because it wants to get high production without the effort of learning anything about the conditions that foster good teamwork. Management wants the golden eggs without having the trouble to feed the goose that lays them. Very little thought or research is devoted to the human factors that influence teamwork.

The contribution that Individual Psychology can make to Management is much the same as that which a scientist can give any

poultry raiser. By improving the condition of the flock, the production of eggs is increased. Putting up posters or pep slogans in hen houses, or threatening chickens with an axe, does not help them lay eggs. The function of Management is to serve the cutting edge or work-level to keep it sharp. Every one in management or supervision is by the very nature of his function acting as a practicing psychologist who is creating attitudes in his workers. As things stand now, he is usually an anxiety-ridden individual who practices psychology or psychotherapy by ear, mostly out of tune. He must be trained in the attitudes and practices that promote rather than inhibit teamwork. Individual Psychology is admirably adapted in its concepts to understanding and removing those factors that inhibit teamwork.

When Management understands which end of the stick is the more important there will be no more posters of grinning Japanese or other silly slogans pasted up to exorcise the gremlins that appear to afflict workers. Management will, instead, concentrate on making the "human situation humanly straight" in each work unit, and thus reap the rewards of such effort in terms of high productivity. To be sure, no Utopias or Ideal Worlds will evolve. The shift in emphasis is similar to having a horse by the forelock instead of by its tail. The result will be vastly better in terms of physical and emotional health and in high production.

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"The oldest striving for mankind is for a man to join his fellow men. It is through interest in our fellow men that all progress of our race has been made." (ALFRED ADLER: "What Life Should Mean to You," p. 252)

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"It is only when he feels that he has reached a satisfying stage in his upward struggle that he has the sense of rest, of value, and of happiness." (ALFRED ADLER: "Social Interest," p. 72)