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Collaboration: Our human nature @ work

“Being told what to do, when to do it and how much you will earn is an alienating experience that leads to depression, precarity and economic inequality.”

This was published on November 11 2022 by a post-doctoral fellow of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts who described four major problems related to work [1].

1. Workers are not in control at work and do not find work meaningful.
2. Workers are not paid full value when increased productivity is factored in.
3. Workers are literally running out of time and are “time poor”.
4. Automation puts jobs at risk.

The author concludes the democratization of work, where companies are owned and operated by the workers themselves, is the solution that will humanize work. This may or may not solve the ill trends. As is the case with deductive theoretical propositions, we must wait to see if the theory proves to be efficacious and an unintended effect of waiting is the continuation of illbeing – in this case alienation, as we wait.

I do not think we need to wait.

I began studying living and working well together in 1979 employing people whose lives were endangered from abuse and neglect in Oregon state run hospitals.. In the 1990’s I was a research assistant at the University of Oregon studying the social impact on productivity new policies for employing people with developmental disabilities was having. I was using multiple research methodologies [2] and in 2000 began practicing my social action research at Hewlett-Packard. The first study showed the transformation in HP’s supply chain from a network of competition to a network of collaboration resulting in decreasing new product development by 15 weeks [3]. A subsequent study showed how a dynamic, cross functional network improved inkjet cartridge quality saving HP over \$200 million. Here is how HP Inkjet Business Unit’s George Greenfield described the accomplishment.

“The business results were stunning. Equally important, however, was the way employees and vendors felt about their role in the work. A feeling of well-being and accomplishment permeated the organization. Being at work was a joy. We were happy with each other. And best of all, we knew we had made – and could continue to make – a difference to the business through a new way of getting our work done.” [4]

Our human nature is social

At the same time the social action research at HP was being done, Humberto Maturana spoke at the first annual meeting of the Society for Organizational Learning. As a biologist, Humberto spoke of our human nature and how love expands intelligent action.

Most problems in companies are not solved through competition, not through fighting, not through authority. They are solved through the only emotion that expands intelligent behavior. They are solved through the only emotion that expands creativity, as in this emotion there is freedom for creativity. This emotion is love. Love expands intelligence and enables creativity. Love returns autonomy and, as it returns autonomy, it returns responsibility and the experience of freedom.

Now, I am going to tell you what love is, not as a definition, but as an abstraction of the coherences of our living—and I pretend that this is all that one needs to know. Love is the domain of those relational behaviors through which another (a person, being, or thing) arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself. [5]

Humberto was not presenting a theory but a realization that in our daily living we humans are emotional as we coordinate our collective actions. Love, not competition, brings forth autonomy, creativity and intelligent social actions, and in the case at HP enormous cost savings and productivity. I saw, and continue to see, collaboration as a relational preference humans have to live and work well together and are free to follow those preferences at work we collaborate.

Listening

We hear all of the time but choose to listen some of the time and listen well even less of the time. While our hearing is always on, triggered by sound waves caressing our ear drum and inner ear, listening is a desire brought forth by loving the one(s) we are with.

Imagine you are at a party when someone begins playing Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band on the phonograph. Some in the party ignore this. They are hearing the title track but not listening, so they go about their idle chatter as if nothing has happened. Then there are others who suspend their conversation, listen momentarily, and acknowledge that this is their favorite Beatles album. Still others, pause their conversations to listen to a song or entirety of the album.

Notice how the listening changes based on the desires of the listener and as the listening changes our knowing changes. The nature of our listening is such that the more we listen from

love the more we know. Remember here that Humberto reminds us that love is ordinary, a regularly occurring feeling in our daily living. It makes sense to me that when we love those we listen to, our listening produces understanding. And even though I have described love and listening, like any human, my listening and understanding waxes and wanes even with those I love the most.

Understanding

Our social nature to love and listen is happening to us all in a network of conversations happening in a much larger and complex network of conversations. Theories such as management by control can obscure our human nature but it can not deny it. In management control networks, we live in a world of logical decision making that impacts our loving nature. Sometimes it feels as though we are living two lives and we begin to see the world of work separate from the world of life and living.

Our human nature, and perhaps human evolution, depends on us understanding each other. When we are free to follow our natural preferences, understanding is not a explanation the listener makes. Understanding is an explanation those listened to make about the listeners quality of listening. This too can be obscured if understanding becomes the listeners logical explanation of others, including themselves.

We like to be heard and we love to be listened to. When love inspires another to understand us we feel cared for and supported. Healing occurs in this network of conversations as we all feel we are living and working well together. We not only understand each other, we also understand how we do what we do when we are living and working well in a network of relationships where we are free to conserve and expand our preferences to live and work well together. When we apply the criteria of validation to understanding, everyone in the network accepts everyone else in the network as an observer who understands the social network that conserves and expands our living and working well together. I call this network of relations a social system.

Trusting

Culture arises in a dynamic network of conversations occurring in a spontaneously changing present. In a culture that conserves and expands understanding, we *trust* that our relationships will conserve the coherences of our daily living. Coherences arise as regularities in our daily living. We feel the change of the seasons in our daily living as a re-occurrence triggering our multi-sensorial memories such as the smell of freshly mowed sweet grass in the summer, or the sting of frost on our cheeks during a cold winter's day. In our social relations, coherences regularly occur in networks of conversations. Trusting is born in our collective reflection on the coherences of our daily living when we live and work well together. Sebastian Gaggero of Matriztica and I practiced social action research in a scientific lab in Scarborough Maine. The scientists had invented and produced a diagnostic for the H1N1 virus. When they reflected

upon how they accomplished this, bringing \$100 million income to their employer, one scientist replied “*There is always cake!*”. We came to trust this explanation because over the five days we were in the lab, there was always cake!

Because we live in a constantly changing present coherences are dynamic. They occur and reoccur in networks of conversations until the networks no longer conserve the coherences. Trust is a feeling brought forth by the reoccurrence of the coherences in our daily living that feels well to us. We do not speak of trust when we are living well together, but we do feel well when we trust we will conserve our understanding of how we do what we do when we live and work well together. When we feel this way, we know we are collaborating.

Collaborating

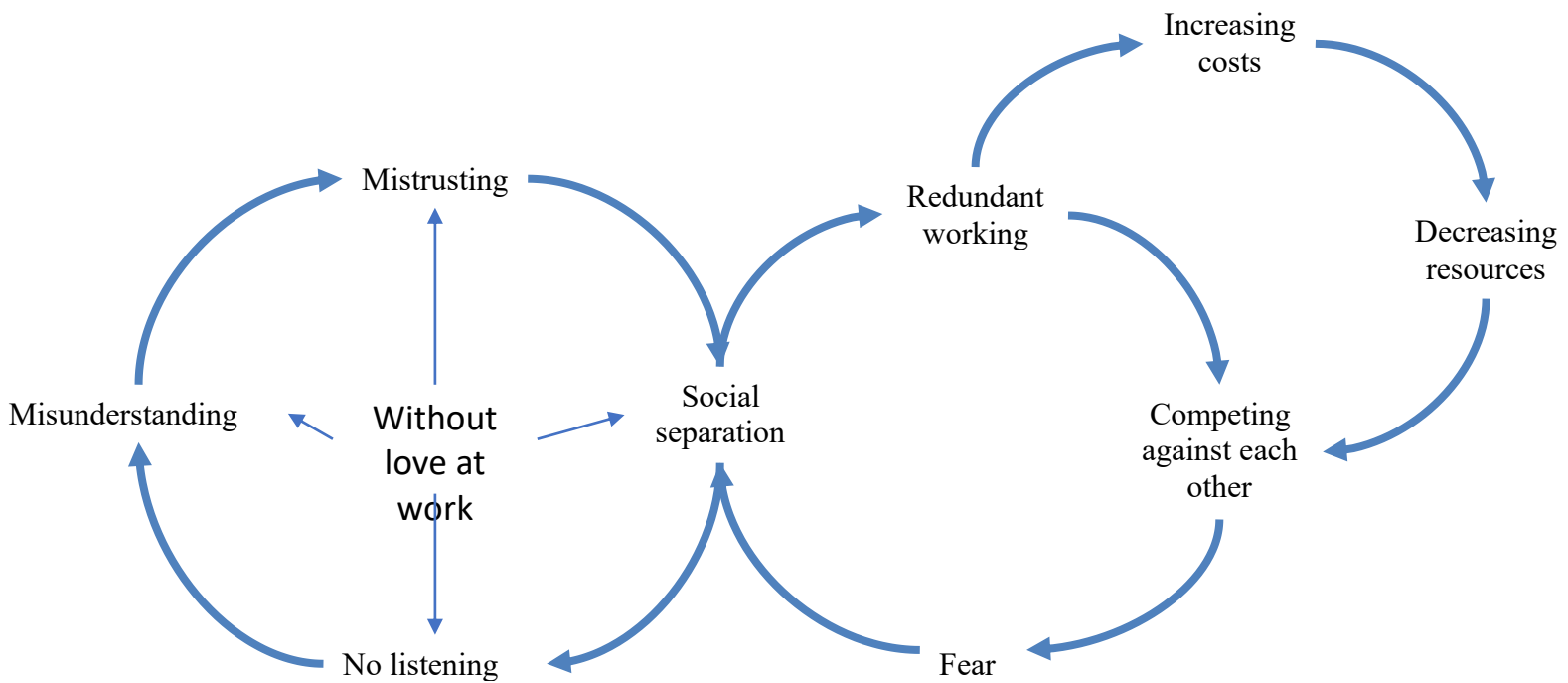
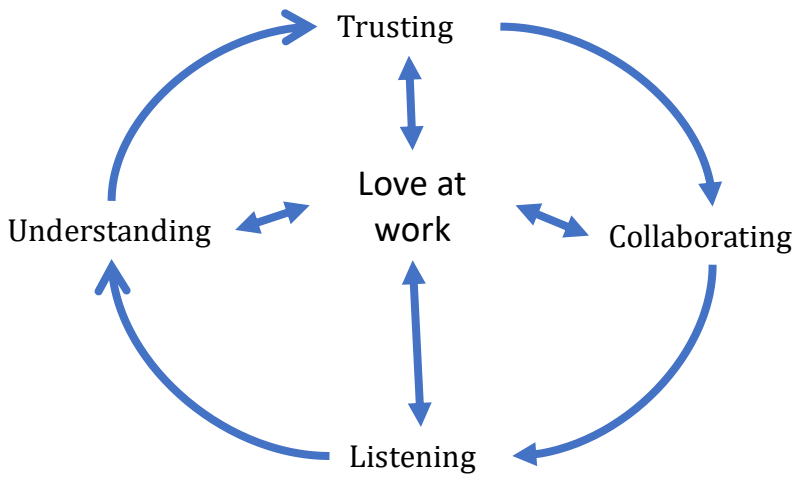
It is in our human nature to collaborate and when we are free to do so we do our best work both individually and collectively. Collaboration arises when those of us in a network of conversations trust that we will conserve those coherences arising from love, listening and understanding how we do what we do when we are living and working well together. This is fascinating!

When we are free to collaborate, we are free to be ourselves. As Humberto Maturana, Ximena Davila and Sebastian Gaggero have explained, love is letting the other appear – free to be who they wish to be. When we are free to collaborate, we feel peace, tranquility and harmony because our human nature to love, listen, understand and trust is accepted, not only as our own preferences but the preferences of those managing the organization we work for.

Like language, collaboration is not a skill, it is our preferential relations. We collaborate because it feels good to us and because it generates innovation, high performance, and productivity. Language is how we as individuals coordinate collective action and collaboration is how we collectively coordinate action not because we were trained to talk or trained to be a team but because this is our human nature.

Collaboration while, being our natural preference for living and working well together, can diminish. After the 9/11 attack on NYC, I suspected a collaborative social network was the source, not a nation state. The Society for Organizational Learning members include the National Security Agency and the HP division I was studying [3, 4]. I asked the HP engineers I was working with what they thought was the most effective to disrupt collaboration. Their answer came quick and was clear – rumors, deceit and lying. A lesson as valid today as it was then.

The consequences of accepting love as the human emotion that generates intelligent action, or not, have enormous financial implications. To end this blog, I will update a graphic that I originally published in the Society for Organizational Learning journal Reflections.



1. Stubbs, A. *American workers feel alienated, helpless and overwhelmed – here’s one way to alleviate their malaise*. The Conversation, 2022.
2. Sandow, D. and D. Olson, eds. *Integration at work: Multiple methodologies in research*. 1991, University of Oregon: Eugene, OR. 94.

3. Jewell-Larsen, S. and D. Sandow, *Personal Development: The Key to Change Acceleration in Global Operations*. Target, 1999. **15**(4): p. 15-20.
4. Sandow, D. and A.M. Allen, *The Nature of Social Collaboration: How work really gets done*. Reflections, 2005. **6**(2/3): p. 13-31.
5. Maturana R, H. and P. Bunnell, *The Biology of Business: Love Expands Intelligence*. Reflections: The SoL journal on knowledge, learning and change, 1999. **1**(2).

Next months blog : Our hearing problem @ work