



Walking Briskly through the Fog

Terri Morrissey and Richard Plenty

Association of Business Psychologists
Annual Conference Cambridge
May 10 2008

The Context

- Rapid growth of profession over last 50 years
 - People and organisation issues increasingly recognised as important
 - Many psychologists working in technical roles
 - What are the issues facing the psychology profession as it moves more into business mainstream?
 - How can these be addressed?
-
- Observations based largely on the personal experience of the authors

Our Proposition

As psychologists move more into the business mainstream

- The environment becomes more complex and uncertain (‘the fog’)
- Many psychologists will feel they are being forced to leave their technical and personal ‘comfort zone’
- To make an impact means finding a way of navigating through the fog (‘the beacons’)



The Fog

**What are the uncertainties and complexities
faced by psychologists?**

Elements of The Fog

The Professional Context

- **Fragmented Identity**
- **Shared Language**
- **Relevant Research**
- **Pressures to Specialise**

The Business Context

- **Difficult Clients**
- **Brands, Brains and Bureaucracy**
- **Difficulties of Defining Success**

Fragmented Identity

- Psychology does not have a clear identity
- Enormous scope - from molecules to organisations
- Draws on natural sciences, social sciences, humanities - with sometimes competing paradigms
- Large gap between researchers and practitioners
- Competing professionals - HR, management consultants?

- People don't know what they can expect from psychologists
- Allows a flexible approach – but lacks 'brand' coherence
- A concern for Heads of National Psychological Associations

Shared Language

- No agreed shared language and standards
- Psychologists have different mental models and standards
- Example organisation culture
 - Can you say ‘in this organisation, people are well motivated’
 - Issue: measures have different scales, questions , benchmarks
 - Reasons: genuinely different views, competing service providers
- Different psychologists may reach different conclusions and different interventions faced with the same data

Relevant Research

- Much academic research dense/difficult to access
- Topics often over specialised and too abstract
- Sample sizes small, not always representative
- Most work is in English, and may be culture specific
- How relevant to real issues/ international organisations?

Pressures to Specialise

- Professional technical focus ‘safer’ , more easily accepted
- ‘Professional integrity/ethics’ may drive towards caution
- But general issues require generalist input!

Difficult Clients

- Organisations will always have - dinosaurs, saboteurs, people with large egos who won't listen, people who lack the bottle or courage to implement change, managers who run their own department as fortresses
- Working at the top - consultants become 'lightning conductors' for the Chief Executive
- The client paradox - those who need psychology support the most least likely to think they need it; those who need it the least most likely to want it !
- Can be hard to tell the difference between clients who are genuinely people centered, and those who pay lip service and really just think of their people as costs

Brands, Brains and Bureaucracy

- Most psychologists are employed in small organisations or are sole traders
- Odds are stacked against small organisations getting substantive pieces of work
- Brand is important - ‘no one ever got fired for hiring McKinsey’
- Writing proposals nowadays needs deep pockets, an international network, and enough capacity to invest the time required
- Need to find ways of collaborating to get substantive assignments

Difficulties of Defining Success

- Success in the real world is multidimensional – business results, relationships, quality of professional advice all count
- Much depends on the client as well as the consultant
- Measurement can be expensive - and sometimes a distraction
- Framing, timing, skilful communication key considerations
- Consider objectives and evaluation processes from the start

The Beacons

What can psychologists do for themselves to be effective in a complex environment?

What are the beacons/guidelines to follow ?

The Beacons

Business Beacons

- Connect to the Business
- Address the Right Issues

Professional Beacons

- Bring Rigour, R(h)umour and Research
- Take Insights from Art and Life
- Make it Meaningful and Coherent
- Beware Rocket Science
- Walk Briskly through the Fog

Connect to the Business

- **Business not psychology must be the driver**
- **Psychologists must speak and understand the language of business - financial, technical, operations**
- **Connecting to business strategy is critical**

Address the Right Issues

- Diagnose accurately before prescribing
- Use an evidence based approach
- Have the courage to challenge/ reframe clients' views where this is appropriate
- Focus on the big issues

Bring Rigour, R(h)umour and Research

- **Rigour** - a consistent and systematic approach /process
- **R(h)umour** – informal conversation, humour, engagement
- **Research** - bring together material from multiple sources

Take Insights from Art and Life

- Arts and literature have some great behavioural examples
- Drama, video and music can all have an impact
- Sports metaphors and insights valued by some
- Experiential insights are important

Make it Meaningful and Coherent

- Implementing ideas and recommendations often a challenge
- Implementable solutions generally make sense and don't overload people
- Paint the overall picture – and give the facts
- Build ownership and responsibility so people can develop (some) solutions for themselves
- Simple approaches useful – frameworks, checklists, actions
- Use consistent language and style

Beware Rocket Science

- Many people and organisation problems are quite straightforward
- Don't use over complicated psychological techniques if not necessary

Walk Briskly through the Fog

- Have the courage to address the real issues
- Show a bias for action
- Get moving even when the end point not entirely clear
- Learn as you go - form hypotheses, look for evidence, test
- Take your clients with you
- Build ownership, capacity and capability
- Watch out for potholes
- Get up if you fall down!



A Broader Challenge?

Questions for Reflection

We have talked about psychologists as individual professionals – but what about the profession as a whole

- Are we making as much difference as we should ?
- Are we tackling really important/ societal issues and having substantive impact - or are we too mired in technicalities?
- Are there things we should be doing as a profession which we are not doing at present?
- Is our profession too fragmented?

About the Authors

Terri Morrissey, Director of This Is, focuses on organisation and leadership development, and holds a degree in psychology from University College Dublin and an MBA from Fordham University in New York. She has a particular interest in promoting women in leadership

Dr Richard Plenty, also a Director of This Is, focuses on organisation development and has many years international experience of working on strategic change in large systems. He holds a first degree in physics and postgraduate degrees in psychology/ergonomics

This Is is an organisation development and strategic change consultancy with a particular interest in vision, identity and culture