About Ladder Shakers

First, a little story to explain the name of my blog.

My boss had just returned from a tour of our off-shore, outsourced centres in India. In our management meeting, he observed that while one of our offshore team was metaphorically up the ladder changing the light bulb, six of our company staff were holding the ladder. "John\*," I said "they're not holding the ladder, they're *shaking* it." From then on, we referred to people who have jobs that achieve nothing and indeed get in the way of the people who are doing productive work as **Ladder Shakers**. Typically, these are people managing relationships between departments or in dedicated process-focussed roles such as Problem Managers, Change Managers, Incident Managers and so on. They usually have little technical expertise but are well versed in process.

Another term we coined around the same time was the **Truth Ceiling**. We saw that people up to middle management and a rare few senior managers recognised how dysfunctional the organisation was, but above that senior management was blind to it. Senior managers had invested considerable time and reputation on the reorganisations and outsourcing deals that are the root of the problem, so it is no surprise that they were unwilling to acknowledge what was crystal clear to everyone else.

This blog isn’t just about ladder shakers, but they are a clear symptom of the malaise in modern organisations that stops the ‘workers’ from being productive. This blog will talk a lot about why these roles are created and why it’s so hard to get rid of them. This is one reason why Ladder Shakers seemed like a great title for the blog. The second is that I intend it to be somewhat subversive, and I hope those below the Truth Ceiling will shake the ladder to wake up senior management.

So, what is the blog about? It is born out of my frustration in the later years of my career at how hard, often insanely hard, it was to get even simple things done. My programme once needed to get a single line added to one file on one system. I know the job takes less than five minutes and is very low risk, because I used to do that exact change earlier in my career. This time though, it involved at least a dozen people, took six weeks, required many phone calls, meetings, forms and approvals and constant chasing. Through many attempts to fix the problem I looked at the underlying causes which are deeply entrenched and therefore intractable. I spent my 30+ year career with one major multi-national, but I have spoken to many people in other organisations in both the public and private sector who have the same experience. My intent is to set out why this happens, why it is so intractable and how to change your organisation to fix it.

I will describe

* how the massive advance in communication technologies has been a blessing and a curse
* why consolidation fails to deliver the expected business benefits
* how common outsourcing and offshoring models kill productivity and increase costs
* the loss of trust in skilled professionals
* the cost of excessive aversion to risk
* how planning processes cause waste
* the downside of big data

and many other topics. I will offer solutions, but these will not be quick fixes; undoing 20 years of creeping paralysis won’t be easy, not least because you will have to fight against the career ladder shakers and silver-tongued consultants who undermine you as soon as you look to be a threat.

I intend to be provocative and I hope to start a lively debate; perhaps we can help to swing the tide back to sanity. Please do share your experiences and comment even if you disagree.

\*Not his real name