

Traffic Management and Business Performance: A White Paper

By Ian Prosser

There is a quiet revolution taking place in the dark art of traffic management. Since Kensington Borough Council removed most of the “safety” features, signs and traffic control systems on Kensington High Street, the number of pedestrian KSI’s (killed or serious injuries) has dropped by over 60%. Traffic moves more smoothly and the appearance of the street has been improved.

Yet this seems to fly in the face of all conventional wisdom. Cars, after all, are immensely powerful potential killing machines. They, and as a consequence, their drivers have to be controlled.

And it’s not just the power under citizens’ right feet; it’s also their exclusion from normal human intercourse. Pedestrians or, indeed, men on horses make eye contact; they are forced to acknowledge their mutual humanity. But at anything over 20mph you can’t make eye contact, and contemporary car design is unhealthily obsessed with convincing drivers and passengers that they are in another, better world than everybody else. People in their cars, watched only by researchers’ cameras, sing, nosepick and cry, the latter behaviour having its own special name - “grieving while driving”. In addition, of course, otherwise mild-mannered people drive like complete bastards.

For the last 50 years the driving principle of traffic management has been to try and control human nature and psychology – to do as much as possible to remove unreliable, unpredictable and occasionally psychotic people from the equation. It has been a kind of institutional shouting. Or bureaucracy.

A Dutch traffic engineer, Hans Monderman, finally challenged this wisdom. His idea was simple. The modern car and all the traffic management paraphernalia have had the effect of putting both physical and emotional distance between road users. It undermined and diminished peoples’ sense of personal responsibility. It made people stupid and selfish.

His notion was that if all the controls and systems were removed, people would have to make decisions. They would actually have to “connect” with other road users. They would have to become more personally responsible for their decisions and actions and this would make them better and safer drivers.

This radical idea was put to the test in the town of Oudehaske in Holland. All control signs; traffic calming and pedestrian safety measures were removed. The division between road and footpath were deliberately blurred. And the results have been spectacular. Average car speeds dropped over 20%, yet journey times through the town were shortened. There was an 80% reduction in the number of traffic and pedestrian incidents.

Rather than trying to manage and control the psychology of the human being behind the wheel, Monderman recognised and used the positive aspects of human psychology to transform behaviour, which in turn transformed performance and results.

Across Europe, the Oudehaske experiment is being repeated with similar success. The Kensington High Street project is being extended to include Exhibition Road and its environs.

Why should this be of any interest to business leaders? Is there a metaphor in this phenomenon that has relevance to the business world?

The focus and intent of traffic managers is to improve performance (how people behave) and results (better flow and fewer accidents). Transform performance (behaviour) and results follow.

Their abiding philosophy has been that you need command and control people to get the behaviour and results you want. Much the same as many business managers.

Provide instruction, systems, controls and penalties for transgressions, Much the same as many business managers.

Yet the most effective idea has been to remove these constraints and re-establish relationship and communication between all road users, from pedestrians to truck drivers. There are simple rules: don't hit anyone, don't walk in front of anyone, give way to traffic coming from the right.

The result – a 60% reduction in accidents, a 25% improvement in traffic flow, a 25% reduction in speeds.

Traffic managers are learning that a philosophy based upon some notion of command and control is out-performed by a philosophy based upon establishing genuine relationship between road users, drivers and pedestrians alike.

Improved performance flows from strengthening the relationship between people whose wellbeing is profoundly connected to each other's behaviour.

Arsene Wenger, the coach at Arsenal, considered by many to be the best performance coach in the land, saw his philosophy in the press after a paper was left lying about. He made it clear that the key to performance is all in the relationship between everyone in the team, players and support staff.

He makes it clear – work on the operational relationships as a priority. If the relationships are right, performance, productivity and results will follow.

But in business we have become caught in the thrall of systems and technology. We see people whose main training is based upon how to use and work the system. The traffic lights, lane divisions, multiple signage and a plethora of cameras to capture transgressors. We treat people like idiots who need every step explained. We seek the "fool-proof" solution and in the process make our people apparently idiotic and foolish. They become slaves to the system.

We need to appreciate that systems are not problem solvers. Systems are rarely flexible and adaptable. They are time-consuming and expensive to change. And they have no sense of responsibility or accountability. They are not intelligent or have the ability to respond to exceptional circumstances.

Yet these qualities are inherent within human beings. They exist within our nature. Use it or abuse it.

Just like modern traffic managers (and Arsene Wenger) perhaps it is the time to understand that the strength and integrity of our relationships, the appreciation of our interdependency, the fact that I cannot succeed without you and visa versa, is the foundation of true and lasting success - and to make this our priority.

Unsurprisingly, virtually every business on the planet that would not want high levels of collaboration, genuine team work, shared accountability to deliver business aims and a real sense of responsibility to work for the well-being of the enterprise.

To achieve this companies invest in team-building workshops, motivational speakers, dubious incentive and bonus schemes, encouraging or threatening missives from the chairman and “performance reviews” that are little more than the business version of speed cameras.

But all these efforts are all elements of the same command and control philosophy that has driven traffic management for so many years. Lights to tell us when to stop and when to go, signs that shout at us about how we should behave, cameras to monitor behaviour and penalise the non-conforming behaviour.

Modern traffic management demands that people establish relationships with each other and collaborate to make the process work. And the results are spectacular.

There have been many grand ideas in business management theory. Managing by objectives, managing for results, managing the business process, managing from the balance sheet. Make your own list. And none of these things are bad ideas in themselves. But none place the focus on the relationships that exist between those who have to deliver.

But just as the problems of safe and effective driving have been transformed by placing the responsibility on those who actually drive (rather than the controllers), so the issues and challenges in business are best resolved by those who have to implement (rather than their managers).

Just as traffic managers had to “think differently”, so it is for business managers.

If we made relationship the priority, what would such an organisation look like? How would we organise our decision-making and problem solving? How do we ensure that people who are dependent on each other actually behave in a way that demonstrates that inter-dependency?

Maybe these are the questions we need to be asking in the modern corporation.