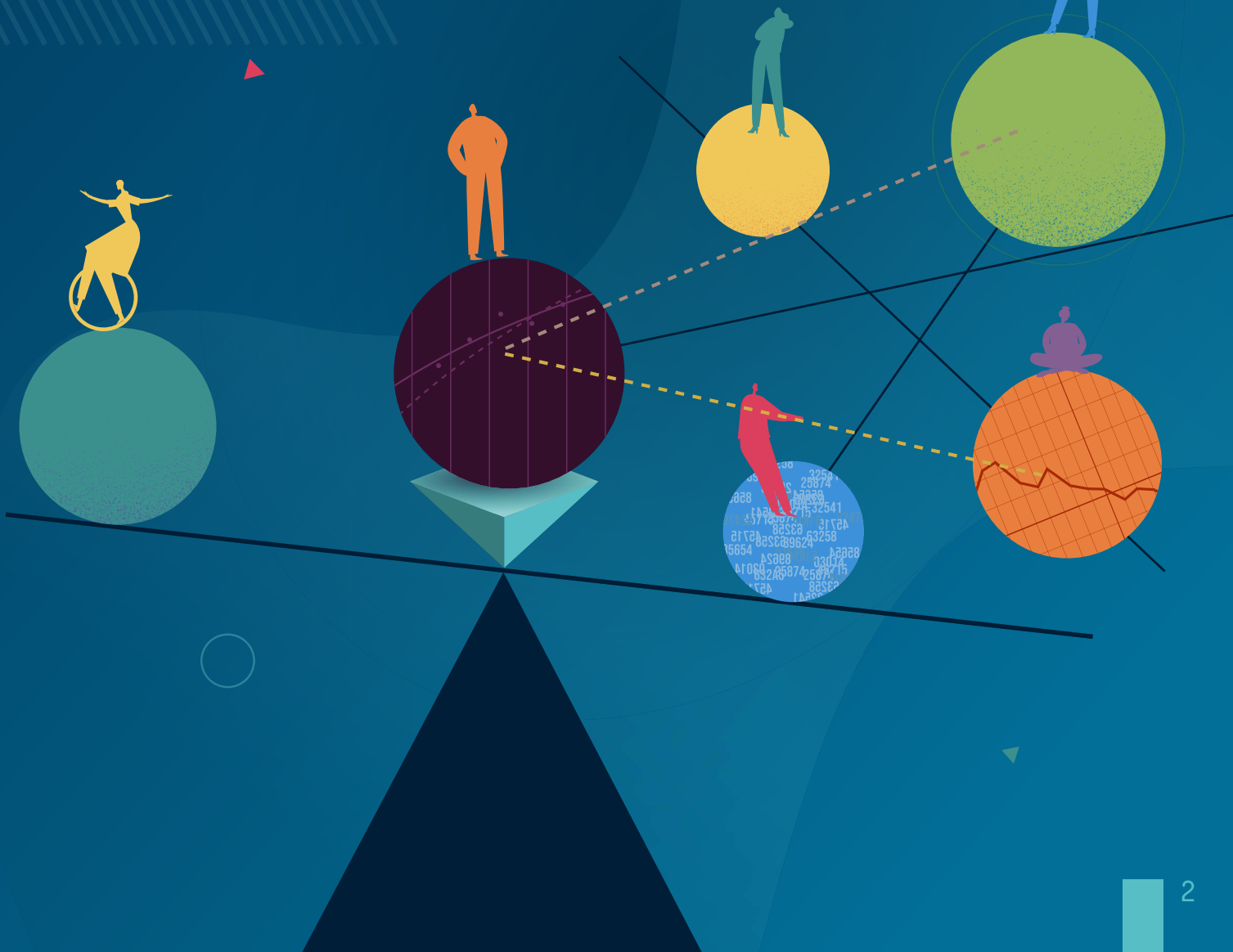


by Mike Thackray

Balancing Individual and Organisational Power

A recent internal meeting included an interesting debate about the state of the job market. From conversations with clients, most of us were sensing that the power had shifted significantly in favour of the employee. Increased choice in how and where employees work, along with employers' greater understanding of preferences, personal circumstances, working patterns and the need to play to strengths had delivered worthy changes for individual employees, but was also resulting in certain challenges for the organisation (as we'll see later)...



Who's Got the Power?

A more individual-centric approach to how, when and where employees work is something to which most forward-thinking organisations aspire. Indeed, a failure to adapt to these employee ideals may have had a hand in the rise of what has previously been described 'The Great Resignation', and more recently the 'anti-work' and 'quiet quitting' movements, whose subscribers are wondering whether they have been striking the right balance between work and other worthwhile activities (see a recent Guardian article 'A bigger paycheck? I'd rather watch the sunset!': is this the end of ambition?').

We have certainly seen much progress in the number of employers making real headway in the journey towards respecting people as whole human beings – with complex lives and unique needs. In some organisations, the opportunity to 'be who you really are' is actually promised as an employee offering. So, are we living in a time when the Individual has the power?

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Returning to our internal meeting, it is also clear that this is by no means a unified picture that permeates all sectors and organisations. A colleague who had been listening intently from the beginning spoke up at one point and stated that she didn't recognise the world we had described at all. For some of her clients, work was still very much 9-5, managers still acted in ways that allowed their staff little autonomy, and everyone was expected to be present in the workplace unless there was an 'exceptional' justification for working from home. The more individual-centric working practices were still a total anathema to some of her clients, and further discussion amongst the wider team seemed to confirm this division.

As we move into a time of recession and a cost-of-living crisis, we may see more leaders and managers revert to even tighter 'command and control' as they seek to cut costs. And in this scenario, will the employee, fearful of job-loss, acquiesce power to the organisation?

There is clearly a varied picture in where the power lies at present.

Learning to Flex

Part of the challenge in this age of polarised debate, is perhaps the reluctance to acknowledge that there can be equal merit in two apparently competing arguments.

It is perfectly possible to value a power shift towards the individual, in understanding the importance of work-life balance, and all the positive outcomes that come with it, whilst at the same time acknowledging that in some situations it has become counter-productive for the organisation as a whole.

The debate runs the risk of becoming polarised to a point where accusations of 'snow-flakery' or 'wokeness' get thrown about to anyone speaking up for individual needs, and similar insults to anyone who dares to admit that rules help create the foundations on which an organisation can legitimately operate, and need following.

It is not the intention for this journal to add to the above debate, but rather to understand the optimal balance required for your organisation and develop the leadership capability to flex along that point.

No one who works for an organisation of any size works in isolation. So how do we reap the benefits of an individualistic approach whilst balancing the needs of the organisation so it can function effectively? And what ensues when this alignment is less than perfect?

To explore this idea we have created a number of articles, each looking at the theme of 'individual vs. organisation' from a different perspective:

- Firstly, Felicity takes us through the do's and don'ts of recruitment if your goal is greater authenticity. If we want individuals to be truly authentic, then at the outset we need a more honest recruitment process that ensures that the brand of authenticity is one that will work for the employee and the organisation.
- Next, I discuss the focus on the challenges of authenticity as a concept, on performance in organisations and recognising where shortfalls occur, and ultimately how to manage it.
- Paolo then shares his experience about what counts as a legitimate explanation for a shortfall in performance and what is simply an excuse that needs addressing...
- In a fifth article, Lucy looks at why being 'kind' isn't necessarily good for business performance and building effective feedback mechanisms. A culture that enables employees to feel comfortable to share their opinions and be included is still critical, but there's a complex balance between nice, kind, constructive and brutal.
- And finally, Jodie discusses the way individuals need to adapt and thrive as part of a team, and how organisations can utilise the unique skills, preferences and views of individuals.

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Finding an Optimal Balance

It's a fascinating time in the world of work.

At the time of writing we're seeing the UK Government under pressure to find stability amidst ongoing market volatility and economic uncertainty. Organisations that will weather the next series of storms will have leaders who can balance organisational and individual needs; cutting costs to drive efficiency and simultaneously continuing to invest in the individual employee.

In summary, perhaps the key leadership challenge is navigating a balance between focusing on individual autonomy and preference, versus organisational rules and expectations. What rights should the organisation retain, and what can realistically be left to the individual to decide?

Aside from those extremely rare cases where the unregulated raw behaviour of thousands of individuals is precisely what an organisation needs to survive and thrive – organisations will constantly be striving to find that happy point between control and autonomy that hits the sweet spot. It is those that successfully do so, that will have the true power.



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