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What's Become of Loyalty?

The loyalty of people to other people, to institutions and ideals, has always been crucial to the conduct of an orderly society. Is it dying? No, the desire to be loyal is just as strong as ever, but loyalty will never again be blind ...

The audience at the seminar was made up of managers and professionals in human resources. The speaker was a well-known industrial psychologist from the United States. The subject was the new breed of North American worker. The mood was sober, if not downright grim.

The speaker reported: "It is more difficult [than in the past] for companies to motivate employees to identify with corporate goals because they have no feelings of attachment to the employer." He went on to cite research findings which indicated that similar attitudes were prevalent among young people in their relationships outside of their work.

In fact, he said, they tend to shy away from lasting attachments of any kind, regarding their most intimate ties as being subject to severance unilaterally and without notice. How, he asked, could people with so little sense of permanence be expected to dedicate themselves to a job they may easily leave?

In discussing this phenomenon, the psychologist made liberal use of the jargon of his profession, referring to detachment, alienation, and disassociation. A less expert and more old-fashioned person might simply have said that these people lacked loyalty.

But then, that same old-fashioned person might wonder whether anyone under the age of 35 had ever heard the word, let alone grasped its full meaning. Looking around our society, it often seems as though loyalty has become obsolete, surviving only as a quaint reminder of a more innocent age.

Even the terms used to describe it have an anachronistic ring. The primary definition of "loyal" in the Oxford Concise Dictionary is "true, faithful, to duty, love, obligation ...". It has been a long time since people have spoken of "being true" in the sense of standing steadfastly by an ideal or a leader. It has

been equally long since "duty" has figured prominently in the civilian vocabulary of the western world.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary reaches even further into the past for its interpretation of what it means to be loyal. Its leading definition of loyalty is "unswerving in allegiance." Derived from Middle French, allegiance originally meant the obligation of a vassal to his "liege lord" under the feudal system. In medieval times, that system was the dominant form of social organization for countless millions of people in Europe, India, China and Japan.

Feudalism owed its very existence to loyalty. The higher nobles pledged their fealty to the top ruler, the lower nobles to their overlords, and so on down to level of the serf. In its purest form, feudal loyalty was an exchange of commitments. According to one historical account, when a fief or grant of an estate was formally conferred, "The vassal, kneeling before the overlord, put his hands in those of the lord and declared himself his man, and the overlord bound himself by kissing the vassal and raising him to his feet."

What the overlord "bound himself" to do was protect and generally look after the underling. The underling, in turn, bound himself to pay rent in money or kind to the estate, and serve in the overlord's cause in time of war. It was all based on the theory that loyalty is a reciprocal affair.

No doubt the theory of feudalism all too commonly differed from the practice. The loyalty of vassal to lord could be secured under brutal duress. Yet the system could not have been without its sincere practitioners among the barons who held the power. Feudalism was widespread, and it lasted for many centuries. If it had proved a bad bargain for the mass

of the people it covered, more major revolutions presumably would have occurred.

In any case, the concept of political loyalty which evolved under feudalism did not disappear along with the system. Today, in countries around the world,

Not blind, but not good at seeing the other fellow's point of view

people continue to swear allegiance in the age-old manner to the symbol of supreme authority, whether a monarch, a president, a constitution, or a flag.

In the armed services and other uniformed organizations, allegiances are displayed in emblems and ceremonies of gothic provenance.

To a practical person, all this may seem irrelevant and not to make much sense; but it does, because loyalties are crucial to the conduct of civilized society. They perpetuate the most important of all human relationships, among couples, relatives, colleagues and friends. They serve as the guarantors of civil order. In countries where oaths to constituted authority are not taken seriously, constant power struggles occur.

Flags, uniforms and the like are the visible expressions of the pride people take in their associations. Human beings have always drawn a good part of their identities from the institutions to which they adhere: their country, religion, etc.

Usually our institutional loyalties are to the representative agencies of others of "our kind" — our compatriots, co-religionists, people with a common ethnic background or compatible political opinions. The drawback to such common causes is that those who are *not* of our kind stand to be despised, dreaded or hated in the course of forming faithful relationships with our associates. Loyalty has often been described as being "blind;" if it is not, it certainly tends to be incapable of seeing the other fellow's point of view.

Nothing so seals the loyalty of one person to another as a common enemy. In time of war for a good cause or bad, loyalty becomes the stuff of valour. Unfortunately, it is also the stuff of the bigotry that so often causes wars in the first place. Short of actual hostilities, it is an ingredient in the poisonous racial and religious rivalries that wrack so much of the world.

The belligerence associated with loyalty is in keeping with the theory that it has its roots in the family. In prehistoric times, every family group had to protect itself against hostile marauders, if they were not actually marauders themselves.

In circumstances of mortal peril, it was imperative

to be able to trust absolutely in the others in the group. So it was tacitly agreed that as head of the family, the father or grandfather must enforce that trust by punishment of those who were disloyal or who were deemed to be. The usual punishment for treason was death, which shows how seriously loyalty was taken. Next to that was banishment, which drew its deterrent effect from a natural horror of being ostracized as a traitor to one's kind.

When people transferred their familial ties to political, economic or spiritual authorities, the role of the patriarch as law-giver and enforcer was carried over into the broader society. Thus the king became the surrogate "father of his people," the priest dispensed parental blessings, and the company proprietor saw himself as the head of one big happy family. Because these father figures were seen to be responsible for keeping the order that was necessary to the survival of the community, the common folk bowed to their will.

The trouble with patriarchal authority is that not all fathers are good fathers. Fallible men are likely to extort obedience by force and betray their trust. An example of this was once found in the Scottish Highlands, where the people were intensely loyal to their clan chiefs. An English observer in the early 18th century wrote: "The ordinary Highlanders esteem it the most high degree of virtue to love their chief and pay him blind obedience although it be in opposition to the government, the laws of the kingdom, or even the law of God."

Originally, all the clan's lands were held in common, but later they became the property of its head, whose particular family had risen to dominance out of the ranks of his relatives. An implicit understanding existed between him and the clansmen. As John Prebble explained it in his 1961 book *Culloden*, "If he had the right of life and death over his people, he was equally responsible for their welfare, and most chiefs honoured this obligation. As landlord, father-figure, judge and general-at-arms his power was great, but it was not always absolute, and on occasions he would debate major issues with the leading members of his family and clan."

By the time of which Prebble writes — 1746, when the clans made their forlorn last stand against the English crown at Culloden — many of the chiefs had come to abuse their kinsmen's fealty. No longer did they consult on policy. For their part, men were no longer necessarily willing to die for the chiefs in battle. Many who fell for the Jacobite cause at Culloden had been forced into service under the threat of having their houses burned.

The final betrayal of Highland loyalty came gradu-

ally over the next century, as described in Prebble's subsequent volume, *The Highland Clearances*. One after another, the chiefs rudely evicted their kinsmen from their ancestral lands and replaced with them with more profitable sheep.

What makes the Highland Scots' story relevant today is that they never lost their famous capacity for loyalty. Though persecuted, impoverished and dispersed, they went on to form some of the greatest regiments in the British Army; their descendants also

*The end
of paternalism,
but not
of ideology*

formed some of the finest fighting units in the Canadian Army. They transferred their loyalty from their clan chiefs to their regiments. In so doing, they gave their highest loyalty to

each other as mutually dependent comrades in arms.

If nothing else, their bitter experience shows that human beings have a need to be loyal. The eminent psychologist Erik Erikson believed that what he called "fidelity" is a necessary stage in psychological growth. "Fidelity," explained Erikson, "is the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions and confusions of value systems." It comes when the narcissism of adolescence has passed.

Loyalty is connected with maturity because it requires the kind of unselfish sacrifice of personal autonomy that can only be made by a self-confident adult. A mature person sees no conflict and no threat in giving loyalty to someone else, providing it is earned. That proviso also applies to institutions. If people today seem apathetic towards governments and other organizations, perhaps it is because those bodies cannot demonstrate that anyone really owes them loyalty.

In Eastern Europe, the strong loyalties to the former Communist establishment have been destroyed by abuse, suggesting that we may be witnessing what the sociologist Daniel Bell called, in a 1960 book, *The End of Ideology*. But Bell, too, believes that human beings have an irrepressible need for attachments, and hence loyalties.

"I did not say that all ideological thinking was finished," he later wrote. "In fact, I argued that the exhaustion of the old ideologies inevitably led to a hunger for new ones." This raises the point that even rebels have a desire to be loyal. They simply replace a loyalty to the old order with a loyalty to the new.

Like every generation before them, people today want to cling to something. The difference now is that it must demonstrably be worth clinging to. The old blind loyalty which once impelled otherwise sane in-

dividuals to shout "my country right or wrong" is obviously dead in places where there are effective mass communications and high educational standards. Political parties lately have been learning this. No longer will citizens vote out of sheer staunch support for a party, as their forebears once did.

Shrewd political tacticians are well aware that the least likely way to appeal to potential followers these days is to tell them to leave everything to you; you will take care of it all; you know better than they do. Paternalism is a spent force, permanently discredited by individuals in various positions of respect who have been exposed as betrayers of trust.

A deep scepticism has overtaken the public mind which has serious implications not only for politicians, but for business people both as marketers and employers. In marketing circles, they now talk about the new breed of "tough customers" who will stick to a brand for only so long as it is clearly superior in its class.

The readiness to jump among an ever-broadening array of choices is not confined to buying. Speaking in support of his contention that North American society has entered the "postmodern" era, futurist Jay Ogilvy recently commented: "Postmodern man and woman are all dressed up with everywhere to go. They have costumes for every occasion, but no truly compelling reason to prefer one occasion over another, one career over another, one life over another."

For management in North America, postmodernism means having to deal with workers whose commitment to an employer can never be taken for granted. This does not, however, mean that they have no emotional investment in their employment. According to attitudinal research, they feel angry and guilty when the organization they work for violates their personal values. They are no longer willing to let management unilaterally dictate policy on external issues such as ecology. If they feel strongly about their employer's negative actions, they feel just as strongly when it does things which they perceive as positive. Thus a company that makes its people feel they are engaged in doing something socially worthwhile can be the beneficiary of a degree of motivational money can't buy.

But unquestioning loyalty to the firm is history, and nowhere more so than in corporations that have had to trim their payrolls in the interests of productivity or simple survival. The assumption behind old-fashioned dedication was that there was a more or less permanent pact between employees and employers. They would throw themselves body and soul into their jobs in return for (nearly) life-long employment. In the present atmosphere of intense competition and



financial stringency, no North American company is in a position to make that sort of guarantee.

According to Toronto lawyer Brian Grosman, "Traditional concepts of loyalty will not survive. Loyalty — like business itself — will change, adhering to leaders whose actions, not doublespeak, command respect and commitment." The "doublespeak" he mentioned includes cosmetic language which misrepresents the increasingly tough corporate reality — the kind of language that speaks of a firing as a "de-hiring," and the like. "In a corporate world that softens every blow with positive rhetoric about employees being members of the family, both the employer and the employee feel failure and guilt when the need arises to make decisions in the corporate interest, contrary to the employee's interest," Grosman said.

If corporate loyalty has to be redefined to contend with the hard new facts of life, it must be done from the employee's point of view, not from that of an employer who expects heroic efforts from people in return for a pay cheque which might not be forthcoming in the near future. It may seem a difficult task to elicit dedicated efforts from people whose future is insecure, but the fact is that they basically want to think well of the company they work for, because it means thinking well of themselves, their friends and colleagues. They will recognize the need for retrenchment, technological change and bigger individual workloads as long as it is honestly explained to them.

A major Canadian corporation recently conducted an attitudinal survey among its hourly-rated employees. In it, the employees consistently talked about restoring a sense of pride and team spirit to the operation, which had been considerably "down-sized." They urged management to trust them to do a good job without heavy-handed supervision. Above all, they said, they wanted to be treated with respect.

When thinking about corporate loyalty, it is hard not to think of Japan, where the workers' wholehearted commitment to their firms is legendary. Watching television clips of Japanese workers starting the day by singing the company song, people in the West may be inclined to think of their dedication as a carry-over from Japan's feudal past. But if vestigial feudalism exists in Japanese business life, it reflects the pure idea of the system, in which reciprocal commitments between the superior and subor-

dinate are solemnly made and cheerfully fulfilled.

In a 1989 article in *Harvard Business Review*, business scholars Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad noted that all of the Japanese companies that have come from the back of the pack to dominate markets in the past 20 years "created an obsession with winning *at all levels of the organization* [our italics] and sustained that obsession over the 10-to-20-year quest for global leadership." They did so by "motivating people by communicating the value of the target" and leaving room for individual team contributions. "Japanese companies win not because they have smarter managers, but because they have developed ways to harness the 'wisdom of the anthill,'" the authors wrote.

While Japanese workers are kept fully engaged in carrying out company strategy, their American rivals are often kept in the dark. In one case the authors studied, "the only time the work force heard about the company's competitiveness problems was during wage negotiations when problems were used to extract concessions. Unfortunately, a threat that everyone perceives but no one talks about creates more anxiety than a threat that has been clearly identified and made the focal point for the problem-solving efforts of the entire company. That is one reason honesty and humility on the part of top management may be the first prerequisite of revitalization. Another reason is to make participation more than a buzzword."

This brings us full circle back to Erick Erikson's theory of fidelity. In Japan, corporate loyalty has become a matter of mature adults "freely pledging" commitments in an atmosphere of mutual trust in which they know that their abilities are respected and their work is prized. It is no accident that the outstanding corporate performers in North America and Europe in recent years have developed the same type of working atmosphere.

Although there are many brilliant exceptions, it seems that we in the West have yet to make the complete transition from the old authoritarian *demand* for loyalty to the new egalitarian *appeal* for loyalty among interdependent parties who have something to offer each other. We would be wise to re-examine what loyalty really means to the well-informed and well-educated people of today.

