

Dinosaurs in the workplace

Andrew Clements provides an organisational psychology perspective on the blockbuster film *Jurassic World*

As an organisational psychologist, one of the questions that intrigues me about the *Jurassic Park* film series is, 'How does that organisation manage to stay in business?' Despite the preceding three movies suggesting that health and safety might be an 'area for improvement,' as of *Jurassic World* the park is a functional site with large numbers of visitors managing to spend time near dinosaurs without being promptly devoured. But this is a *Jurassic Park* movie, so it's no 'spoiler alert' to reveal that chaos ensues.

While I came for the dinosaur-related mayhem, I found the organisational problems interesting in their own right. Until Hollywood hire me to write a fifth instalment in which a team of occupational psychologists address the key challenges, I'll settle for writing this review. The issues that I will focus on are leadership and the organisational culture.

Leadership

The owner of the Jurassic World attraction is Simon Masrani, although I am not certain that he constitutes the real head of the organisation (see Claire Dearing, discussed later). His taste for adventure (as with Richard Branson and his ballooning and space flight), along with his interest in the happiness of others over profitability, put him firmly in the 'charismatic leader' category. Interestingly, research suggests that a charismatic leadership style is associated

in beneficial ways with the financial performance of organisations (Wilderom et al., 2012), attracting outside investment (Flynn & Staw, 2004) and the performance of workers (Cicero & Pierro, 2007).

However, there are also potential pitfalls for charismatic styles, such as a focus on impression management with the risk of hubris (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Some scholars have argued that the concept of charismatic leadership promotes the notion of heroic leaders (e.g. Yukl, 1999). To an extent, I think that the pitfalls are realised in Masrani, who has a somewhat rose-tinted view of his business and his own capabilities. Masrani gives a sense of being 'larger than life', and there are indications that his subordinates find it difficult to challenge some of his risky behaviours, echoing evidence that followers restrict their emotional expression in the presence of charismatic leaders (Menges et al., 2015). At first Masrani appears charming, and his confidence is presented as humorous, but it contributes to the disaster that unfolds in *Jurassic World*.

A sharp contrast is apparent between Masrani the charismatic CEO, and the operations manager Claire Dearing. While her anxiety is presented for comedic effect, such as during a helicopter flight, it seemed quite justifiable to me given the context. My concern was that Masrani did

not acknowledge Dearing's misgivings, and, as mentioned above, I saw signs that this restricted Dearing's ability to challenge some of Masrani's behaviour.

When Masrani asks Dearing whether the dinosaurs are happy and the visitors enjoying themselves, Dearing relies upon metrics to respond. This is meant to be a sign that Dearing is too focused on opinion polls and data, but her role is to manage the functioning of the attraction. It seems reasonable to me that she tries to base judgement upon evidence. Masrani informs her that the secret of a happy life is to accept that one is never in control – but I am not sure that this would be a desirable attitude for someone in Dearing's position. I would suggest that this reflects a lack of appreciation for the individual differences that may lead people to be suited for different roles. Given Dearing's attitude towards control, planning and instances in which her anxiety is emphasised, she may well be relatively high in trait levels of conscientiousness and neuroticism.

People with neurotic tendencies may be suited for roles that involve monitoring and reporting progress, while conscientious people are suited towards planning (Fisher et al., 2001). This

maps well to Dearing's role in the organisation, and I think it is

a shame that her style of working gets little recognition. Dearing is recognised as a good manager, but this is somehow treated as distinct from her personality by a number of key characters in the film.

Of note is that both key leaders in *Jurassic World* are minorities in management. Ryan and Haslam (2005) identified a phenomenon in which companies experiencing either poor performance during a financial downturn, or fluctuating performance during a positive economy, were more likely to appoint female leaders to the company board. They termed this the 'glass cliff' to reflect that women were more likely to be

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made leaders under precarious circumstances. Cook and Glass (2014) found the glass cliff effect occurred both for women and ethnic minorities, and that these leaders appointed in precarious circumstances were likely to be replaced by white males if company performance did not improve. While Masrani and Dearing are Indian and female respectively, there is no indication that they rose to their position during desperate times: as far as we know, as viewers, the attraction has been operating successfully for years. However, it is interesting that later in the film a white male becomes the organisational leader (in a somewhat murky process). Ethnicity is not presented as playing a role in this process, but perhaps in a time of crisis the park's backers have turned toward their stereotyped view of what a leader looks like?

Organisational culture

Organisational culture can be thought of as a set of norms and values that are widely shared by a group of people (Bezrukova et al., 2012). It is often assumed that organisational cultures are homogeneous, essentially reflecting

claims made by senior management about what the culture is, for example a culture of excellence.

Yet there may also be multiple cultures within the organisation, some of which have goals counter to those of senior management (Martin & Siehl, 1983). An obvious example is that departments, and other easily recognised groups within an organisation, may have particular cultures – the culture of human resources may vary from that of the technical support team. There can also be division within these groups, and some

departmental boundaries (Martin, 2002). In *Jurassic World* the attraction is owned by the Masrani Corporation, but other concerns are also present. The genetic engineering of dinosaurs is outsourced, and the secrecy around the process becomes a crucial plot point in the film. There is also a military-affiliated project (although the relationship between the project and the Masrani Corporation seemed a bit unclear) which

is focused upon testing whether velociraptors can be trained, with the project's sponsor, Vic Hoskins, advocating the use of velociraptors for military purposes. When the inevitable disaster occurs in *Jurassic World*, Hoskins uses the opportunity to become more powerful, gaining the ability to test his ideas.

The objective of Hoskins's group is in stark contrast to Masrani's goals for Jurassic World. Yet there is little sign that the cultural differences

Key implications

- | Efforts should be made to encourage communication within the organisation, particularly for raising safety concerns.
- | The existence of subcultures within Jurassic World should be taken seriously by senior management.
- | Senior management – particularly the CEO – should be challenging the secrecy involved in key operations.
- | Greater appreciation of the complexity of managing the organisation is required – and the need for attention to detail.
- | Senior management should be encouraged to confront the CEO regarding unsafe behaviours.

within the organisation are recognised by anyone other than a handful of velociraptor trainers. Certainly Masrani does not seem to be doing much to address the lack of consensus – although a lack of communication within the organisation may also be evident. Consequently a bad situation is made worse (although it does culminate in a memorably silly climax).

Typical problems brewing

There is individual psychology at play in *Jurassic World*. People fail to follow safety guidelines, which could have prevented the initial outbreak. The 'sunk-cost fallacy' obstructs a solution advocated in Jurassic World's control room – in an attempt to save a financial investment, the organisation ends up facing a much greater threat to the organisation's existence. But it is organisational factors that are the main contributor to the disaster. Masrani's leadership is over-confident, and neglectful of the devil in the details. The agendas of groups within the organisation develop in secret, without the knowledge of senior management until it is too late. As a result, problems that have been brewing in the organisation prior to the film come to the fore at a time when sitting down for a calm mediation meeting is unlikely to help. Like many action movies involving businesses, the organisation is at fault. It is nevertheless refreshing that the problems are to an extent typical of organisations, rather than particular to the evil companies with obscure business plans found in other series.

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