

Manager of the Heart

Extract taken from “Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life” by Barry Oshry.

Life in the organisation may feel like a game of pinball,
but the organisation itself works more like the human body,
everything neatly connected to everything else.
However, when we don’t see the whole,
it can all feel like one chaotic mess.
Take the Manager of the Heart.

At times it’s a peaceful job.
A nice even supply of fresh blood comes in from the lungs.
All engines pump smoothly: Lub . . . dub . . . lub . . . dub.

Oh-oh! EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY!
Bells ring.
Buzzers sound.
Messengers come bursting into your office:
chemical messengers from the bloodstream,
electrical messengers from the nerve endings.
Who are these guys? Where do they get their information?
Who gives them the authority to tell you what to do?
“What emergency?” you ask. “Where?”
“THERE’S NO TIME TO EXPLAIN!” say the Big Shot
Messengers.
“JUST START SOME HEAVY PUMPING!”
So you tell your people: “FULL AHEAD ON THE PUMPS!”

You’ve got a good crew;
in no time they’ve got those pumps working away at full
capacity:
LUB . . . DUB . . . LUB . . . DUB.
You’re proud of your crew. You turn to those Messengers and
say:
“OK. Bring on that emergency. We can handle anything!”
But the Messengers aren’t looking at you;
they’re checking their pagers.
“Forget it,” says the electrical messenger.
“Cut back,” says the chemical messenger.
“Emergency’s cancelled,” they say.
Emergency’s cancelled? We’re just getting up a head of steam.
“CUT BACK! CUT BACK!” They’re desperate now.
“YOU’LL BURST SOME PIPES!”
“What’ll I tell my crew?”
“CUT BACK!!!!”

So you tell your crew.
“It’s for the good of the system,” you tell them.
“What do you want from me?” you ask them.

“I don’t make the rules around here.”

And then it’s calm again.
A nice even flow of blood.
Pumps humming along: Lub . . . dub . . . lub . . . dub.
And you start thinking.

You start worrying about your crew.
How many changes of direction can these folks take?
Will I be able to count on them in a real emergency?

You start thinking about those Messengers,
those Specialists,
acting like big shots,
giving out orders,
all that technical mumbo jumbo.
When was the last time any of them bloodied their hands
opening and closing a stuck valve?

You start thinking about the Bigwigs.
Whoever they are,
wherever they are,
are they just playing games with us or what?
Maybe they know what they’re doing,
maybe they don’t.
What do they do up there all day anyhow?
Maybe they’ve got the big picture,
but what if they don’t?
What if they’re just . . . crazy?

And then you start thinking about yourself:
All this stress,
the way you blew up at those Messengers.
They’re just doing their jobs after all.
Maybe you’re losing your cool.
Maybe you can’t cut it anymore.
Maybe you’re not half the heart you used to be.

Oh-oh! What’s that sound?
Who’s that racing along the bloodstream?
I know, I know.

EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY!