

Experiences

MUTUALISM BEGINS AT HOME

It is easy to talk of mutualism but more difficult to really feel it. Johnnie Moore offers a practical experience.

We sometimes use the term mutual to refer to a specific type of organizational structure. I'd like to put forward an idea of mutualism that any group of people can use.

In fact, I'd like to offer you an *experience* of mutualism. Journals like this, and marketing in general, have lots of good ideas and theories, and I think it's good to make sure we get some practice as well.

For me, mutualism is the spirit of reciprocity between human beings. In business, there's a tendency for that reciprocity to be seen as a cautious exchange of one thing for another, where each party needs to be careful not to lose out in a zero-sum game.

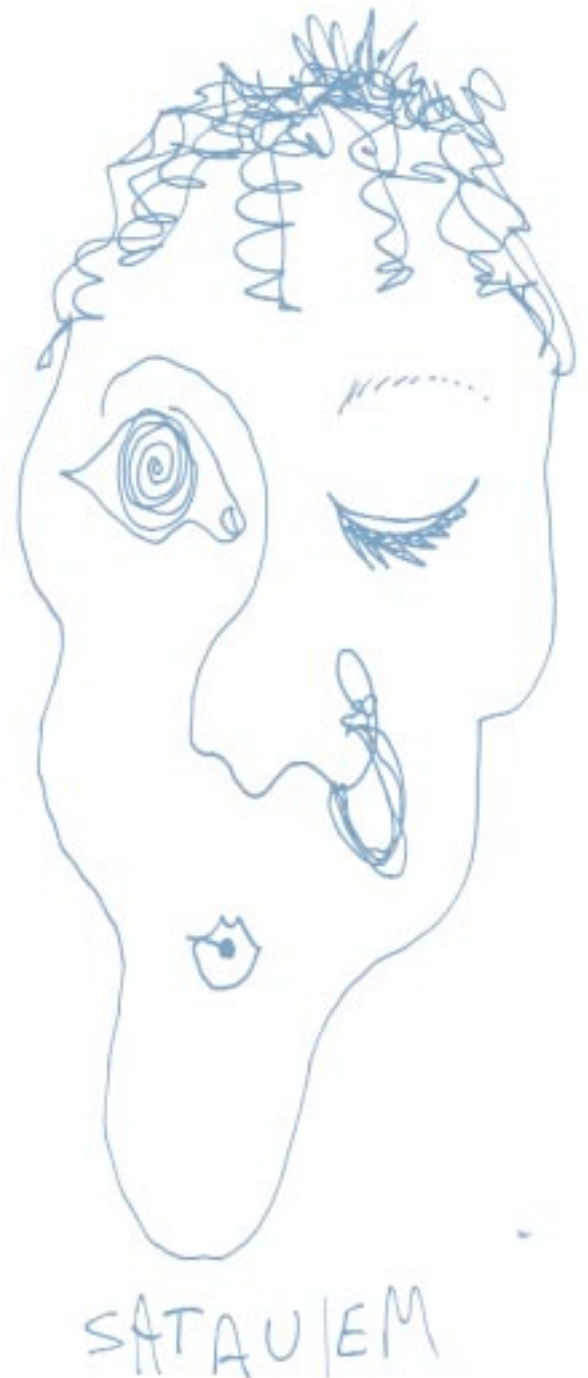
Of course, it doesn't have to be like that, and frequently it isn't. If we look at most human relationships, we can't in reality manage them like a spreadsheet of gains and losses. When mutual organizations flourished in Britain, I believe

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they were driven by an understanding that communities can create more together than they can apart. And any organization, in the long run, will only grow if it manages to create this kind of synergy between people.

It's fun to talk about how to increase that sort of synergy in business. What I like to do, more and more, is to focus on creating synergy **here** and **now**. So let me try to do that, even though I'm separated from you in real time ...

As I'm not there, you'll need to recruit at least one other human being to do this with. And no – you can't do this on your own, that's part of the point. If you can do this with two or more people, so much the better.





Paired drawing

The first activity is paired drawing. I've illustrated this with one or two examples. Not to show you the "right" answer, but to reassure you that we're not expecting Picassos here.

(If there are more than two people taking part, break them into pairs. If you've got an odd number, you can adapt this to a threesome).

The exercise is simple: you're going to draw a face, together. It won't be a familiar face (probably) but one you're making up *between you*.

Once you're ready, you work silently. Resist the urge to discuss the picture as it develops and don't comment on each other's ideas. (You probably won't be able to suppress laughter though.)

The first person draws just one feature of a face. It's up to you what it is: it could be an ear, an eye, a nose, a tattoo, an eyebrow ... whatever. Rule of thumb: when you lift the pen off the paper, you've finished your turn. And remember: as you're working silently, don't explain what you've drawn.

Then your partner takes the pen and he or she draws a feature. It may be another ear or eye, or it could be

something else. Whatever it is, you then get the pen and carry on. Even if you're not sure what has been drawn.

And if you don't know – don't ask! Just carry on adding features as best you can.

Keep going like this for a few turns, each adding a single feature with each turn.

When someone gets the pen and hesitates about

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what to do, this means the face is finished. So that person now puts down the first letter of the name of this character. Keep adding letters until someone hesitates – and then you've finished.

And again, don't comment on what your partner writes, whatever you may think!

I suggest you do this at least three times. It's interesting to see how the experience changes with each repetition.

Review

You should now take a few moments to reflect with your partner on what it was like to do this together.

What was it like to create something *mutually*? Do you sense that what you drew is different from the picture either of you might have created alone?

Did you find that what your partner did sometimes surprised you? Was some existing plan of your own for "how things should be" disrupted?

Did you sometimes find the process amusing and enjoyable? If so, what was enjoyable about it?

What did you learn about working together from doing this?

I usually find that people engage with the exercise with ease and often enthusiasm. I often ask why we engage in games like this with more commitment than many business meetings that, in theory, are about much more important topics.

I'm going to resist offering you a detailed analysis of what this game teaches us about mutualism.

Instead, let's play another game.

One word story

This can be played in pairs, but is even more interesting in groups of all sizes. If there are more than two of you, it helps to sit or stand in a circle.

Decide on a title for a story. Any title will do – for

example, “Fred’s visit to Doncaster” or “The pirate king goes to Sainsbury’s”. Whatever.

Now you, as a team, are going to tell this story together, with one simple rule: you’ll tell it one word at a time.

The first person will say the first word, and the person on the left says the second word, and so on. You’re allowed to start a new sentence if you judge that the last one has ended.

Stop playing when you feel the story has run its course.

Ultimately, that must be the function of any organization, whether it labels itself as mutual or not.

Almost certainly, this process will break down in places, people will get stuck and confused. Please don’t worry about this, and don’t waste time in *post mortems* or asking people to change their words – just carry on as best you can. You’ll probably find that, after stumbling, the team gets better at doing this as you go along. (I think there’s a big lesson here about mistakes and how we deal with them.)

I suggest you try running this for two or three stories, and I usually find that the faster you play, and the less

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hard you try to “get it right”, the more fun you’ll have and the more satisfying the result will be.

Again, after playing, take time to review together what this experience was like.

I offer you the thought that building an organization is rather like building the story – things don’t go to plan, but with enthusiasm and goodwill, something rather pleasing can emerge from the apparent chaos of individual choices.

A richer sense of mutualism

These exercises give an experience of how individuals can combine to create together something different from, and richer than, what they can create on their own. Ultimately, that must be the function of any

organization, whether it labels itself as mutual or not.

However, many companies are so attached to their specific idea of how they should operate that they reduce to a minimum the sort of spontaneity that allows interesting things to happen when their stakeholders engage with each other. The trouble with many vision statements and brand platforms is that they’re based on the idea that their creators know exactly what stakeholders want, and must create it **for** them, not **with** them.

In order for these exercises to work, each player has to respond flexibly to the offers made, moment-by-moment, by fellow players. When you sit down to do paired drawing, it’s actually an impediment to have a clear idea in your head of what the finished product should look like. The satisfaction of the exercise comes from responding to the evolving picture. It helps to be open to surprise rather than fearful of it.

Many organizations struggle to engage with their own employees, as Gallup surveys consistently demonstrate.

I think this is partly because they are so in the grip of ideas of best practice that they leave little room for individual initiative and make it hard for people to feel they are adding their own special value to the group.

I’m not saying organizations should not have a plan. Napoleon put it well when he said:

A battle was never won according to plan ... and a battle was never won without a plan.

For me, the spirit of mutualism is not entrenched in a particular financial structure, but in the way an organization gives scope to stakeholders to be truly involved in where it goes. Many traditional building societies provide no more customer engagement than their quoted rivals.

The principles that make these exercises work could well apply to you:

- You have to risk making mistakes.
- Creating value together is sometimes a messy process.
- Deep down, people value openness more than perfection.

In great improv, the players learn not to “script-write” – basically using their own contributions to dictate the whole plot of the unfolding drama. That’s because engaging drama is not based on everyone knowing exactly where it’s going, but on sharing the excitement of seeing how it unfolds, and realizing there is room for each to contribute.

A good place to start would be with your immediate colleagues. Can you – at least for a morning – put aside the organizational scripts and improvise where you would like to go ? □

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