

**I have long been fascinated by the habits and messages in organisations. One in particular intrigues me – parking.**

“ In 90% of organisations I still see “President” or “Chairman” or “Big Boss” enamelled, carved or spray-painted on the wall. ”

Parking is not a mere six square metre spot – it is a symbol of your place in the holy hierarchy. It is Par-KING for some!

It is such a sensitive topic – there is a lot at stake, especially of the personal kind. In the face of such sensitivities, companies have come up with a variety of plans and policies to manage it.

In 90% of organisations I still see “President” or “Chairman” or “Big Boss” enamelled, carved or spray-painted on the wall. Even if they are away on a three-month business trip to New York, that space is held open until they return.

Those who park close to the stairs, lift or front door are more senior, more important, higher up than those who walk two hundred metres or drive 15 stories up. In fact, there is often a whole arsenal of policies to organise the parking hierarchy.

Whichever way we consider the parking situation, I believe the important issue to understand is that it communicates something. There are sub-texts and ego strokes; there is differentiation and power allocation. Above all else, it is a visible reminder on a daily basis of the state of power.

Therefore, parking is political.

In the times we live in, business ethics are under greater threat than ever before – we have all

seen the costly implications of deals or dealings that are driven by executive greed, blind spots and self-centredness.

I believe that we have to look at both the big and the small things that drive executives' behaviours and encourage greater accountability for their actions. One of the clues is in the parking. Parking is just one of a variety of perks that tells executives that they have achieved beyond the average person. If you start adding the many perks together, there is a compound yet clear message being communicated to these leaders: you are powerful.

If these leaders need their egos stroked, these perks will go a long way towards achieving that. They can interpret these messages as “I am more important”. Over time it can spin into the higher orbit of “I am beyond certain rules”. It feeds a potential misperception and, over time, as more and more indirect messages affirm this egoist belief, it can turn into something even stronger like “Because I am the boss, I know better”.

In the movie Frost/Nixon, we are reminded of just how far this can go when Nixon says “If the president did it, it cannot be illegal”. To get to such fundamental illogical conclusions, it starts somewhere much smaller. There are countless gateways in the journey to the top, transition points where leaders are taught that they are, by definition, elevated above the rest, implying, maybe, even

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above the law.

Even as value systems have shifted in the world to include greater democracy and the gradual acceptance of the equality of genders, races and cultures, it is as if the old value system of “the boss is superior” refuses to budge. Corporate beliefs have not kept up with society’s changing world view.

Of course there is a power difference between leader and employee, but if the power is healthy and held by a person with awareness, that power will be legitimate, not of the purely positional kind.

And this is where perks like parking are so dangerous, although on the surface it may look harmless. Parking, among other things, tells people they get something because of their position - not because of legitimate leadership.

Eetsko Schuitema defines a legitimate leader as someone who uses their power to empower the subordinate and to serve the agenda that will benefit the whole. If all executives and leaders were legitimate leaders, surely we would sit with a very different world economy right now. We know they are more inclined to live by more selfish and egotistical rules, yet we do not consider how the organisational policies encourage them to flourish.

The more signs of power they own – from their parking space through to the big car that stands in it - the more they are prone to believe that people respect them because of who

they are. They confuse the respect they demand for respect people bestow willingly. They become blinded to their own power.

I suggest it gets flipped on its head – the parking, at least.

Leaders should park further and further away from the entrance of the building as they get promoted higher and higher in the hierarchy. The highest-ranking leader should park furthest away – to ensure that s/he walks past all the cars owned by other employees.

Such a policy will provide clear messages. Not that they are more important, just that they have greater power. Not that they are equal, but that they have greater responsibility. To be more precise, this policy will say:

1. “Look at how many people you affect by your actions”. They need to walk past more and more cars every time they get promoted, and this walk will show them daily how many people they need to lead and be accountable to.

2. “Be aware of your rank”. Leaders need to be reminded they have rank. It is easy to forget and to take things for granted.

3. “Remain aware of the income gap”. They will walk past cars that belong to people who earn considerably less than they. It will be a visual reminder of that gap, because these cars look different. It communicates a message that the higher their salary, the more value they need to add to justify such a gap.

4. There is also a message it gives the employees: imagine what the new clerk will think if he drives past the MD, walking with his files clutched under his arm towards his parking space closer to the front door?

The sad thing is there are a good number of leaders who know that their positions are not about power for its own sake. No policy can let them believe they are better than others and belong to the aristocracy. Yet, too great a percentage of leaders are of the more

egotistical kind, and if they are marginally so, then tiny, seemingly innocent trappings of power can, over time, swing them into the land of ego.

With this understanding, I hope that organisations can begin to think between the lines of the messages they communicate to the talented individuals they choose to lead them – and recognise the potential they have to damage their business, their people, their country and even the world economy.