

# Office politics

Judith Mair makes her staff wear uniforms and says the workplace should not be fun. Andy Law gave his company to his workers and puts personal development first. Who would you rather work for?



PHOTO LEFT: WOLFGANG HARTIG/REUTERS. RIGHT: MICHAEL COOPER/REX

**J**udith Mair runs a small Cologne-based media agency called Mair UA. Her handful of employees wears uniforms and is not allowed to discuss private matters during office hours. There's a strict 9 to 6 working day and the walls are bare to prevent distraction. Mair says work is simply work, and is not meant to be "fun". In her book, *Schluss mit Lustig* (End the Fun), she dismisses the shibboleths of the 1990s office as a distraction - football tables are time-wasters and brain storming with a beer after hours is indulgent. Instead, she promotes discipline and for-

mality. She maintains that her style gets the job done more efficiently and reduces stress at work because employees know exactly what is expected of them.

Andy Law prefers the 1990s. When he co-founded the advertising agency St Luke's in London in 1995, he turned it into a symbol of the new freewheeling era. It was a workplace where meetings were open to everyone, no one had an office or a personal desk and the interior was periodically, and unexpectedly, redesigned. The agency was co-owned by the employees, did away with hierarchies and encouraged personal development. No longer at the agency, Law says that any company can benefit from experimentation and creative management.

Are his ideas still valid in these more straightened times? Or is Judith Marr's dogged focus on the job the way forward?



## "BINDING STRUCTURES AND RULES PROVIDE UTTER RELIEF BECAUSE THEY PRODUCE CLARITY"

### Judith Mair

**Is initiative and responsibility in employees something to be fostered or feared?**

It's imperative that you give your co-workers responsibility, so they work independently and can make decisions. However, in more and more businesses, staff are given objectives that are purely results-oriented. "Do what you want, but make it profitable," has become one of the most popular guidelines of modern management. In the past, clear structures, limits and requirements functioned as a formal framework, setting out who, when, where and how work was carried out. But now these often have been heavily watered down and eroded. In their place is a vacuum, which frequently leaves employees swamped by too much responsibility.

When you look closely, you see that the kind of coercion that existed before hasn't been done away with — it's merely re-emerged in a new form, as subtle pressure.

**Andy Law argues for putting a worker's personal growth and development ahead of business growth. Should an employer have responsibility for a worker's personal and creative development?**

The manager-employee relationship is based on barter: the worker puts his manpower at the company's disposal and the employer pays him for it. That's what distinguishes a business from a self-discovery workshop, psychoanalysis or a painting course, which can only address the creative or personal development of the people who do them. In addition, something as fundamental as personal development can't be taken on as a corporate assignment.

And it's hardly in dispute that the meaning and purpose of a business is, above all, to be commercial and not to worry about its employees' personal advancement. I think it's quite sufficient to try to offer your employees an interesting field of responsibility that suits their professional skills and qualifications, and to allow them development opportunities that draw out their particular abilities.

**Explain why you advocate strict discipline in the office. Do you not end up treating staff as robots?**

Order and discipline operate within this office but not as hard and fast values, set in stone like they were in the 1950s. Unlike my grandmother, who still held fast to these values even when they clearly did her harm, I see these as instruments, as a means to an end. These rules operate as voluntary restrictions.

For me this is not about bringing everyone down to the same level, nor reducing them to sheep-like takers of orders. Rather, binding structures and rules provide an utter relief because once they've been formulated they produce clarity. They spare you the effort of negotiating so many things afresh.

**You are in the media business, where creativity and imagination is important. Is this not stifled in such a formal working environment?**

Creativity is one of those notions that I really dislike. I have nothing against creativity, but the term has been used so carelessly for so long that it's now almost meaningless. To me, someone is creative when they have original and intelligent ideas, come up with ingenious flashes and are in some way inventive. That's a gift that's naturally worth fostering.

Inside our office we make a clear distinction between form and content. The form — the rules — works as the lowest common denominator which we can, and have to, agree upon, precisely so that the content of the work can remain variable and non-uniform. You can still have a stimulating discourse even if you address each other formally as "Sie".

**What evidence is there that your approach works?**

I can only speak for myself, my office and my own experience. I haven't set out in my book to talk up a universal recipe for success that shows how to respond to the demands of the "knowledge society" and radical changes in the job market.

I'm very satisfied, and the others are too, that we've learned to separate work and leisure and make a distinction between personal friendships and work relationships. It's also interesting to note that we get many more job applications than average.

Of course our office doesn't exist in a vacuum outside the free market and of course every so often we do stay on for a few hours instead of going home at 6 o'clock. I don't think a client would show much understanding if I said, "Sorry, the draft concept I showed you isn't ready yet, we've still got things to add, but last night we shut up shop at 6 pm as we always do."

### JUDITH'S DOCTRINE

- Discipline
- Rigid punctuality
- Uniforms at work: suits when meeting clients; uniform tracksuits when in the office
- Strict 9 to 6 working day. No work on the weekend
- No office keys for employees
- No private phone calls. Mobiles switched off during office hours
- Private email at lunch time only
- No discussion of private matters
- Compulsory half-hour lunch break
- No work to be taken home
- Colleagues to be addressed formally in the office
- Desks cleared at the end of the day
- Strict hierarchies: majority of decisions taken by executives, who also have the final say on all matters
- Employees discouraged from meeting after hours

### FROM SCHLUSS MIT LUSTIG

"THE OFFICE IS NOT AN AMUSEMENT PARK!"  
"THE WISH FOR QUIETNESS AND CONCENTRATION IS TO BE RESPECTED."  
"WORK IS NOT AN EVENT. WORK IS JUST WORK."

## Andy Law

**Is initiative and responsibility in workers something to be fostered or feared?**

At some point every employer wants employees to have some initiative and responsibility, even if it's a tiny amount and in pursuit of a small aim, so they ask for it. That's where the trouble starts. How much? When? Where and how?

At St Luke's I learned a hard lesson. I had given the employees the company and not really understood the importance of firm leadership. I had no legal right in ownership terms over anyone else, so when I saw co-owners making conventional and, to my mind, backward-looking decisions, I was powerless to stop them. People seemed to take responsibility for steering their careers into safety. I learned that being a leader in an innovative organisation actually means taking your people where they don't want to go.

they didn't want to lose it. This is fine in a conventional company but, to my mind, a disaster in a creative one. In my new venture all the old fashioned virtues will be to the fore. But workers today bring other values very naturally, which must sit alongside all the ones Judith believes in. Like curiosity and socialising.

**How timely are your ideas? Will they be taken up by other companies in this time of global recession?**

Taking on my idea does not mean a root and branch overhaul of an organisation. It just means creating the right outlets and opportunities for your employees.

People are changing, Work isn't. People choose democracy when given a choice. Work is positively feudal. At work there is no freedom of speech and travel, and all men are not equal. It's a crazy situation to find ourselves in. I have a rule: "If businesses can normalise, they will." Inspirational leadership is what is needed in business – and politics.



## "YOU DON'T NEED TO BE ZANY TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE THROUGH CREATIVE MANAGEMENT"

**Could your ideas of an "entrepreneurial collective" apply to a bank?**

An entrepreneurial collective is a type of organisational behaviour. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh invented micro-lending – tiny amounts, mainly to women. Aggregated, they gathered huge funds from millions of small investors and borrowers. First Direct persuaded customers that banks did not have to have branches. If you look at these organisations, they have entrepreneurial management and empowered employees. First Direct only focuses on the delivery, not the peripherals such as office design.

Any company can act more creatively. Any company can be more innovative. Creativity and innovation are not the same as risk and danger – you don't need to be zany to be more effective through creative management. And you certainly don't need to change your operational standards or protocols. There is enough space in any company, including broking houses, for experimentation. I can't stand managers who say, "This is it, it works, don't meddle with it." Thinking like that would never have produced the Dyson vacuum cleaner or the CD.

Judith Mair looks back to and admires the values of her grandparents' generation (conscientious work, punctuality, accuracy). Why are these not good enough for your business?

They are very important. I believe in them very much along with never being late to meetings – it's rude – and common decency – it's how we get on with each other in a civilised society. When I was at St Luke's I tried to ban fear, greed and ego, though not always successfully. I felt fear, greed and ego would inhibit free creative contribution. But it is impossible to stamp out. One side effect at St Luke's was that people liked it so much they didn't leave. The problem was, costs rose and boredom and convention rose too. Once people "had it"

**What evidence is there that your approach works?**

A worldwide survey by the UK Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) demonstrates very clearly what I am saying. CIMA says that consumerism requires innovation, that creativity and restlessness can aid company growth. In the survey, 71 per cent said that creativity was very important as a tool of business success. Only 2 per cent said it was not important at all.

CEOs today put staff retention and creativity on the top of the list of what they think are going to be the main drivers of business. Interestingly, with my departure, none of the founding fathers are left at St Luke's. Everyone has been jet-propelled into amazing new jobs. It's as if St Luke's was a school for innovative entrepreneurs.

### ANDY'S LAW

- Decentralised organisation, with parts linked by a belief system
- Co-ownership of business by all company employees
- High levels of personal responsibility
- Personal development and creativity before profit
- No 9 to 5. Working away from office/ at home acceptable
- Everything is shared. No offices or personal desk space
- Social conscience
- All meetings and information (except personal reviews) public
- In-house artists encouraged to remake the office in order to "stimulate and satirise"
- Make Yourself More Interesting Fund to actively promote individual growth
- Free-flowing organisational style
- Work to be "human, humane and humorous"

### FROM EXPERIMENT AT WORK

**"LOOK FOR CONFUSION AND PARADOX."  
"CREATIVITY IS THE DEFEAT OF HABIT  
BY ORIGINALITY."  
"OUR VISION IS TO OPEN MINDS."**