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Is practical magic the answer to office tensions & reaching your potential?

The latest word in work dynamics is office alchemy. Industrial psychologist and shaman Chantel Oppelt of Institute for Applied Alchemy tells us more ...

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Office alchemy gets to the root causes of behaviour.

Image: 123RF/Aleksandr Davydov

Should I marry him? Should I emigrate? What should I do about my brother? And my boss? What about the money I'm owed? Am I going to have a child? These are familiar and perennial human concerns.

Written on small, folded pieces of lead, they can be read 4,000 years after they were directed to the oracles of Zeus at Dodona, which, according to Herodotus, was the most ancient of oracles in Greece, older even than the oracle at Delphi. On receipt of the burning questions the priests and priestesses would listen to the rustling of the leaves of the ancient oak tree growing over the sacred stream, and answer.

The desire to make sense of the world through a belief system is probably hard-wired into us. Geneticists have attempted to show that there is likely a predisposition in our genes to make sense of it all via the idea of the supernatural. Some people call this the God delusion and have identified the precise calibration of genetic material that determines our experience of spirituality.

This should come as no surprise. Direct observation of people's God-praising social media profiles, the many acts of war in the name of God in the Caliphate and the significant correlation between being a millennial and the belief in your Sunday horoscope are all sides of the same coin.

Clearly irrational ideas - like the notion that celestial pinpoints of light slowly shifting across the skies multiple millennia ago and finally registering on our eyeballs here on little planet Earth are somehow affecting our moods, personal preferences in lovers and our ability to curtail the nasty things we want to do to our colleagues - are taken at face value. Apparently more so in times of great anxiety, insecurity, social unrest and upheaval. What do you do if you are stressed out by Trumpism, Brexit and Kim Jong-un's finger on a button, never mind Jacob Zuma and your Instagram account? Blame it on Mercury - particularly when it is in retrograde. And make a meme about it. I know I do.

Millennials, who are fully immersed in this kind of magical thinking as a generation, report that more than meaning, astrology gives them a framework or language on which to hang the random acts of incivility that are the general course of life as we know it. It's a trend - but one that has grabbed the public imagination by the gut.

Which is how I found myself in a session with the team that drives the work of the Institute for Applied Alchemy. It is the brainchild of Chantel Oppelt who introduces herself as an industrial psychologist by trade and a shaman by birth.

Fourteen years ago Oppelt was working in a behemoth of an organisation using traditional methodology to make sense of the work space and the human interactions in it. But bubbling below the surface was a feeling that she knew more. Her knowledge of her brother's fatal illness before he knew it himself spurred her on to radically alter her way of working and to set up her institute to essentially short-cut the often tedious organisational development and human resources processes that, according to Oppelt, frequently only scratch the surface of what is really going on in an organisation. Given that I spend most of my day at work, this sounded intriguing.

Oppelt says : "I have taken business principles and intuition and I have created a methodology I call the business integration model. And partly what happens in that space is that it allows you to excavate, to understand, to unearth the things that people shadow, or the things that we would say hold us back or keep us stuck.

It's deep, it's dark, it's soul-searching, but in the middle of the process you suddenly feel a shift in the atmosphere. They have cracked something quite profound. And it definitely feels like magic

"Because I am able to traverse so many different worlds, I am able to get to the issue quickly. I am able process what exactly needs to happen. And what the individual does is that they then find a piece of gold that they didn't know existed. For them it would have felt as if their life was stuck, they felt as if they weren't going anywhere and it would have felt that they don't have what it takes to reach the potential that they feel they have - so I started the Institute of Applied Alchemy."

Alchemy, says Oppelt, is about taking lead and turning it into magic. "So what we do with this process is that we excavate the parts that hurt, excavate the parts that wound and we find the magic out of that."

This may sound "hey shoo wow", but let me tell you, sitting around a table with Oppelt and her colleagues is like a jolt of truth serum - highly unusual in a corporate environment. I meet them in a rather stolid boardroom, no scented candles or dreamcatchers in sight, which for a slightly cynical yet open person is a relief.

When I walk in at the tail end of a brainstorming session for a proposal, the team is looking rather fraught. There is a prickly energy in the air and no-one looks happy to be sitting in this meeting. The difference, however, is that instead of letting this unspoken stuff fester in business jargon and distracted typing on your laptop to avoid eye contact with your colleagues, this lot go for the jugular. They immediately launch into a live demonstration of their process. If I was struggling to understand what they meant by excavating the lead, this round-table discussion immediately enlightens me.

From what I gather, nobody came into the brainstorming session with their best foot forward. But unlike a particularly "eyes rolling into the back of your head" episode of *The Office* where the team stumbles back to their desks in a funk of depression and lethargy, this team get to the root causes of their behaviour. It's deep, it's dark, it's soul-searching, but in the middle of the process you suddenly feel a shift in the atmosphere. They have cracked something quite profound. And it definitely feels like magic.

Oppelt has created several tools that may aid the process, like "sticker medicine" and "when I know" cards, but even without these psychic prompts or aids I can see the value in this process for an organisation. It seems pretty liberating and really rather interesting - like a session with a particularly insightful psychologist who cuts through the mumbo jumbo and gets to the heart of your problems. Fascinating, revealing and quite refreshing, given the usual tropes of organisational behaviour. I am a convert, despite myself.

Now I just need to shift the chakras in the next management meeting. Perhaps I will call in the shaman to sprinkle a little organisational gold dust.

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