Interview: Professor Andrew Kakabadse

Intimacy at Work

| SM | This is a Cranfield School of Management Podcast. I am Steve Macaulay and I am interviewing today Professor Andrew Kakabadse about a subject that many people don't talk about openly, and that is intimacy at work – close relationships at work. Now Andrew, give me some background. You conducted a survey and the book is about the results from that survey. Tell me some more about the background. |
| AK | The book first – in my opinion the book is boring. And the reason the book is boring is that it was very scientifically presented, the data is very scientifically presented and the reason for that is that it was very scientifically, methodologically, systematically and rigorously conducted. Now, the reason for conducting such a systematic survey – it's almost as if you are looking into a type of drug for a particular type of illness, you have to be so exact – was because of the controversial nature of the subject. And it was important for Nada and myself, my wife, when conducting this survey to identify just what does the term intimacy mean. Because the more we delved into it at the early stages of the study, the more we were finding that it has substantial meaning in organisations. The whole study started with observing a colleague at another university who basically had fallen in love with his doctoral student; this is reported in the book, and that colleague was pilloried by his community and almost had to leave. The difference was the colleague was in his mid fifties and well respected, the doctoral student was in her mid thirties and almost a millionairess – this is not the sort of girl that you push around. The colleague, when the relationship became a relationship, admitted it and made sure that the girl had another supervisor – although in reality he was the best supervisor and she said so, and he said so, and that was the best thing that could have happened to her – but he did play the game. And he was still hounded. And we had to ask the question, first of all, why should an organisation interfere so much in anybody’s personal life when all possible governance avenues have been attended to; and secondly, there is no complaint from either party. These two people are in love. And these two people have married and some of the people that were hounding them have long since divorced and these two are still married. So, what right has anyone to interfere in your private life when you have done the basics, which is right for that community? And the reason for this guy was that he was unpopular. I knew of other escapades that other faculty members got into, but they were popular and all those were hidden. So the |
first assumption was, number one, it’s not fair. Number two, how many ‘not fair’ occasions arise?

So we started with interviews and then we went into questionnaire survey – the questionnaires were lengthy and detailed and were meant to be so, so they weren’t exactly user friendly. And do you know what we found? From Muslim to Christian to Jew to whatever religion, young or old, male or female, the norm is about sixty per cent of people who work in organisations have some sort of intimate relationship or other. And I am not just talking here friends, I am talking friends plus. Now that intimacy may not go to some sort of sexual stage, but it’s close to it. And it is certainly close enough to disrupt the previous relationships and form a new one – whether that happens or not is another matter. What is interesting is the other forty per cent don’t know it is happening right under their noses. So for the remaining forty per cent they can’t believe that X has got a relationship with Y until it comes out in public and then they say well, why didn’t we find out about it.

So we were also interested to find out why people kept their relationships so secret and the fear was that they would be hounded just like my colleague. Now, were most of those relationships abusive ones? Was a boss chasing the secretary or did you have a female boss that chased some of the younger males, or some sort of situation like that? Nothing like it. In fact most of the relationships at work were people of similar level in terms of organisational status, they may or may not have been in the same department, but they were petrified of being found out. So they went through all sorts of hoops to hide this, therefore, it was then important to say, well what is there to fear? Because two people have a relationship at work, does it upset the team, does it upset other relationships, do people get irritated, is performance affected?

And the most amazing finding was that performance improves. Not just a little bit – substantially. So the idea of being more happy, and it is interesting to see in how many corporate statements is there a word called ‘happiness’ in that statement, which is something to do with the mission of the organisation – very, very few. Only John Lewis has it. With performance improvement and a greater sense of personal exhilaration and warmth, both parties improve their performance – their colleagues mentioned it and their colleagues liked it and when for so many times the relationship became public, their colleagues supported that.

So, where was the problem in the organisation? Well, it had something with legacy, number one. Here is an issue that we can use to pillory somebody. The second concern in organisations was management, and in fact most managers that we spoke to and surveyed were reluctant to intervene and only unless a problem occurred they tended to close their eyes. So there was in a sense a conspiracy of not wanting to do anything because there was basically nothing to do, and the moment you did something,
something worse would occur rather than better. But when for any reason the issue came to the surface and mumblings started and people showed their irritation, the response of management was punitive.

Very few managers seemed to have the emotional strength of character to say hold on, let’s really look at this one and see what is the real problem here. So they didn’t know how to withstand the tensions that were in the organisation and put, if you like, a ring around these two to identify the core concern and then act. So the most successful approach that management could use to intimate relationships was case by case. One of the least used strategies was case by case. When case by case was used well, the couple said it was the best way forward, other colleagues in the department or the organisation said it was the best way forward, and the manager on reflection said it was the best thing I could have done.

So if you looked at all stakeholders the case by case approach was the one that all preferred, and yet it was the one that was least used and when we talked to managers who found themselves in a difficult circumstance, they themselves stated that they should have used a case by case approach, they knew they should have done it, but they were caught up in some sort of emotional trauma.

| SM | Now one of the prescriptions that you have got or conclusions or inferences, is that companies ought to look at this as an issue – ought to formulate and take a stance on how aware are our managers of these issues, what are the implications and what should be done? Now from what you have said, that doesn’t actually happen very often. It’s much more a ‘behind closed doors’, deal with people in a punitive manner. What sort of things would you suggest that organisations do to be more intimacy aware and to take a responsible attitude? |
| AK | I think intimacy should fall into the category of diversity and at the moment we seem to have interpreted diversity as a gender issue – it’s not. Diversity has many meanings in many organisations and one of them is people forming personal relationships in the workplace simply because they are number one overworked; number two they have very little time to spend elsewhere; and number three the demands of work push various people together. So I can see intimacy just naturally coming out because of the pressures of work today. I don’t think we need many policies. I know the few companies that do something, they have a policy, like once the relationship becomes known one person leaves the department or leaves the organisation altogether. I cannot see the benefit of that. But what you could do, as part of your human resources training and development for your managers and also your HR managers, intimacy should be one of the items in the programme and simply an
understanding of what is it, does it occur a lot, what is the problem here? Are we just dealing with idle gossip? Why then deal with this idle gossip as opposed to any other? Are there any better ways of handling personal relationships? Is the only problem when that personal relationship goes wrong in the organisation and it becomes public? Because what we also identified was, like anywhere else in life, intimate relationships in the organisation, some continue well and some don’t. But of those that do not, very few become public and very few become problematic. To the two people, they may be going through a personal problem, but they have the professionalism to ensure that that doesn’t become an organisational problem.

So it’s good to have it on the programme of development for managers. It’s an executive development input. And if then we are having very particular problems and the intimacy goes into a bullying or harassment type of circumstance, by all means let’s have a policy on that – in fact we should have a policy on that. But intimacy is different from that.

So what were our people telling us? They were afraid of being bullied and harassed by the organisation for essentially having done nothing wrong, when all around them were saying they have done nothing wrong, they never were a problem in the first place – we didn’t even know they were having an affair. They were just presumably doing quite well in their job.

SM Your book came out a couple of years back now – I imagine given the very emotive content and reactions that you have described that the book itself caused some waves.

AK It did. It became the fifth bestselling book in India and I think in two days 120 press outlets wrote about the story across the world. So it was causing big waves and the biggest wave of all was, number one, it is happening to such an extent; number two, it’s not a problem; and number three, the gender harassment bit, which is the boss harassing a female employee – which is one of the normal assumptions with intimacy, this is why we have got to watch it – the gender harassment bit was reported less than gay relationships at work.

So when you actually statistically looked at where does harassment lie in this whole hierarchy of intimacy, actions and personal development, it was right at the bottom. It was the least critical issue. Now that doesn’t mean to say that when any harassment occurs you shouldn’t act – you should act. But harassment is a completely different topic to intimacy and on that basis it is well worth remembering that there are certain cultures across the world that actually encourage intimacy in the workplace – one of them being the Japanese corporation. They basically say it is good for the company. Some of our best executives, when they fall in love
with their secretaries, or whoever, they stay in the company and it provides stability.

So there is a whole body of people who are taking a contrary view to the western view – or should I say very particularly the Anglo American view which I never understood why we have this hang-up about intimacy in the workplace with Anglo Americans because the French don’t have it, the Italians love it and the Greeks think it is sport.

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<td>Andrew, we have taken a brief look at a very controversial area and thank you for raising the lid on this. I think what you have done really is to help people at least start to think about what is, after all, a very vital, a very important issue.</td>
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