

Bog standard

By Stuart White
Printed in the Sunday Standard
Sunday 22nd August 2010

I am building a building. Well let me rephrase that - a group of Chinese builders are building my building. No, that's not quite true either because they are subcontractors. So although they are physically building my building, my building is really being raised by an assorted collection of people who are all partially involved with bits of the building of my building. I have architects, project managers, Beijing Bob the Builder and then worst of all city council, all more involved than me in building my building. If it's all sounding a tad too confusing – it is! Let me just say it feels like we are going around in circles with my building being built but it's not a round house or rondaavel. 'It's the nature of building', says the builder, I say it's stuff and nonsense and I am nearly demented!

I keep thinking of Lewis Carroll's book Alice in Wonderland where the Knave of Hearts is accused of allegedly stealing the Queen of Hearts' tarts, when in fact it was Alice who did so. The Queen of Hearts had made up her mind and wanted the Knave to be beheaded. A trial is set, but it is only a sham trial. She has pre-determined the outcome, her poor long-suffering husband has learned not to argue and he and the courtiers are only staging the trial to pretend that justice is being done.

'Let the jury consider their verdict,' the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.

'No, no!' said the Queen. 'Sentence first - verdict afterwards.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' said Alice loudly. 'The idea of having the sentence first!'

'Hold your tongue!' said the Queen, turning purple.

'I won't!' said Alice.

'Off with her head!' the Queen shouted at the top of her voice.

I feel as outraged as Alice but at the same time, like the Queen of Hearts, ready to behead the whole damn lot of them. Let me tell you why. It's a 3 ring circus and as mad as the Mad Hatter's tea party, the end result when everyone stops thinking logically, stops communicating, thinks about only themselves, forgets the clients and has to work with a set of regulations that only the writers of the rules understand. I am assured this is how all building projects go but what really infuriates and confounds me is the over emphasis on petty, bureaucracy – sticking totally to the letter of the law when it suits and ignoring them when it doesn't. Okay, how's this for madness.? To give you the context, my building has 3 VERY small floors – the total floor space is under 400 sq meters – that's way smaller than the whole of Primi Piatti restaurant for example. But although it is a relatively small space, its allocation of ablution facilities is very generous.

Regardless of the fact that we have only a dozen staff members we have to have a total of 7 separate toilet rooms – which equates to a grand total of 3 urinals and 7 toilet bowls presumably in case the HRMC team suddenly went down with a collective case of incontinence one day and we could each use a toilet simultaneously. That's not the only seeming overkill. On each floor we have a monstrous fire hose and 2 fire extinguishers – a grand total 9 pieces of equipment that looks like about enough gear to handle the Great Fire of London...

You don't have to be Einstein to see where I am going with this. Space and equipment is expensive – VERY. Whilst I accept that occupational health and safety is important surely there has got to be reasonable thinking involved in its application? When I first realised that nearly a third of our office space had been allocated to toilets we asked City Council if we could dispense with two of them, but this request was flatly refused. It's the law, we were told – it's the way things are done around here. Well, technically that's not quite true - it's the way things are done if you fall under the jurisdiction of Ramotswa where apparently all office workers are entitled to their own personal loos. In building it seems it's the luck of the draw because different rules apply or things are interpreted differently depending on the whims of the relevant Clerk of Works.

So our toilets are plentiful and perfect as are our fire fighting capabilities. The fact that you can open any window on any floor wide enough for any adult to jump out of (and I may just do that if things get any more infuriating) has been happily overlooked. So it's safety and health on some things but not in others.

I think what is most infuriating is people's unwillingness to look at the rules from a realistic perception and apply them to the unique situation, the needs of the customer and the situational requirements within the remit of proscribed health and safety guidelines – not just the blind adherence to ticks on a rigid checklist. Whatever way you look at it, I don't need 3 toilet areas on each floor. My staff can very easily and realistically climb one flight of stairs to go to the toilet on the next floor, 20 steps away – it's entirely reasonable, makes perfect sense and is the norm in many office buildings everywhere. In countries where there is appreciation for the growing cost of real estate they get this concept so whilst toilets may not be shared, at least hand wash basin areas can be for both sexes - this saves a lot of space. Even that we tried, but again this wasn't allowed either and was met with the same response – a straight No!

Hard and fast rules have their place but only if they are relevant and make sense. When they don't, it's simply bureaucracy and a case of the tail wagging the dog. So the town council may think it's a job well done – toilets for Africa and segregated soap basins while I'm left with a glorified corporate convenience with some leftover office space. Aargh – some vision and intelligent interpretation from the council staff please and a course on satisfying the customer's needs. With toilets, as with t-shirts, one size doesn't fit all and there should be provision for enough flexibility to find the right fit or everyone will have the same wee problem I have.

Agree or disagree with this? Don's twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana

Managing Director

HRMC

Phone: 395 1640

<http://www.hrmc.co.bw/>

Follow Stuart on twitter: http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana

Executive Recruitment | Strategic Planning | Organisational Transformation | HR Outsourcing
Management Assessment and Development | Training and Executive Coaching | Psychometric Testing

HRMC
Management Consultants

www.hrmc.co.bw