

## Reflections on the wearing of the veil

Article written by Roy Childs, April 2007

### The dilemma

Ever since the Jack Straw episode – when he revealed that he asked Muslim women who came to his constituency surgery to remove their niqab – I have wondered about what I would do in parallel circumstances. Parallel, for me, means running a team-building event or a coaching session. I have imagined the situation where at least one of the participants was wearing a veil. I must admit that this would, indeed, feel challenging. Why should this be? Do I not subscribe to a philosophy that people are individuals and have the right to express themselves and be true to their beliefs and values? Do I not respect people who have values that transcend immediate gratification, materialism and economic well-being. Do we not live in a society which emphasises individual freedom? Have I not been known to quote with passion a saying which is attributed to Voltaire (some say inaccurately):

*"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"*  
Voltaire

However, the very essence of our work with people is to improve communication, increase understanding, build trust and develop openness. This means removing barriers between us, becoming more accessible and increasing our levels of communication. Even without the veil there is a big challenge. We all protect ourselves by erecting barriers and being less open than we might be. Sometimes these were necessary survival strategies we developed when we were very young. Often they are based on perceptions of danger and threat in our current circumstances. We all get defensive at times. Therefore, to some extent, all of us wear a metaphorical veil!

Our work at Team Focus involves creating the conditions where more of us feel safe to dismantle some of our defences, to open up channels of communication and to let others in – in other words to remove the metaphorical veil. Therefore, if I were to face a physical veil it would touch many issues, two of the most important being:

- In the context of building relationships it does bring a symbolic and a physical element of concealment which may imply defensiveness, protection and lack of trust.
- It physically reduces the channels of communication. It is well documented how facial expressions are one of the richest sources of information about how a person is feeling – and this is essential part of developing understanding, appreciation, empathy and tolerance.

Wearing a veil is starting from further away and makes the journey more difficult. That may be the current reality – and you always need to start from where you are before setting off for where you want to be. Would I do a "Jack Straw" and ask for the veil to be removed? I think not – but I would not avoid the issue. Such a potent symbol could not be ignored. We would need to discuss how wearing the veil reduces the richness of interpersonal communication; how not being able to see someone's face, with its ability to convey thousands of expressions, curtails the development of interpersonal understanding – and feels one-sided.

### Wider issues

So far, this discussion is taken from a very specific perspective – that of building relationships and trust in small groups. However, the Jack Straw incident showed how this issue can move from the issue of communication between two people to the integration between communities very quickly. It also touches wider questions such as the concealment of identity. Both the veil and that other media feast – the hoodie – arouses justifiable fears and passions. We are dealing with an underlying paradox between individual freedom and responsibility to our community and society. We know that individual freedom can only be guaranteed within a social structure. Individuals only are free to act within a sense of community responsibility. Without this sense of community, individual freedom could become selfish and divisive. No society can guarantee total individual freedom. All must ask for some sacrifice of impulses and personal preferences in order to create a sense of community and tolerance.

### **The relevance to our work at Team Focus**

The relevance of this debate for Team Focus is based on our guiding philosophy – the need to create a more relational workplace. Our premise is that successful businesses depend on how well people work together (Relational Capital). Furthermore, long-term success considers Relational Capital both inside and outside the company (i.e. it considers relationships with the wider community – a factor which was dramatically absent in the Bhopal disaster). Ultimately relationships are fundamental to the equation for calculating success and well being.

To build stronger relationships that can weather the storms and overcome the flood of challenges and difficulties of modern life, we need to develop better understanding between individuals. Few would disagree that strong relationships are the key to success in difficult times. The building blocks involve helping people to know themselves, to build trust and develop their confidence, to let down barriers, become more open, stop pretending and to acknowledge mistakes, weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

A psychologist's tool was once the one-way mirror. Few now use it – for us it symbolise an inequality of power that goes against the values of openness and trust. I am struck by the parallel between one-way mirrors and wearing the veil. Our work metaphorically invites people to "remove the veil." We accept that this needs to be done in a supportive environment and that this needs to be achieved through encouragement rather than coercion. However, it is a necessary part of building a relational climate in which people can thrive together.