

From the Kitchen

15 September 2010



How often do we worry about the structure and neglect the substance? We do it within families, in business, in government and individually. A working structure is useful in any enterprise and essential in some, while many activities can be enjoyed with no structure at all.

Many businesses will develop a business plan and a budget. Both are a good idea in order to have a yardstick against which to measure the health and, perhaps, growth of the enterprise. However, rigid adherence to the plan can mean the inability to respond to changes in circumstances, including new opportunities, new competition, etc. Good bookkeeping is a different matter and is always essential. It is too easy for a business, or an individual, to go broke; as I heard someone say once: “If your outgo exceeds your income then your upkeep can be your downfall.”

A family can be a good place to learn both structure and flexibility. Parent’s rules can be defined by gender, upbringing or economic considerations. All of these can be adhered to or negotiated. Children’s roles within the family necessarily change with age and can form a valuable part of their preparation for eventual life as autonomous adults.

Structure can also be useful for individuals; it can help with organising a busy life or can give form to people with too much time on their hands. For the busy ones it can help to fit activities together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle (and, as with a jigsaw puzzle, it helps to be able to see the complete picture); for those in danger of being at a loose end, it can help prevent a sense of wasting time. Schedules are also useful to create a sense of commitment to such things as regular visits to the gym or volunteering at a homeless shelter.

Businesses and governments are capable of inventing empty structure – consisting of dazzling display and wonderful promise – and then not fill it effectively, if at all. The new public transport ticketing system is an example, as is the ‘service’ promised by my new ISP. In the former case, it appears unbelievable that, with all the available knowledge and technical expertise available, a ticketing system takes years and hundreds of millions of dollars to get right and then it still isn’t. In the latter case, it is more than frustrating that it takes one of the largest Internet Service Providers 3½ months to progress from my signing up for a service to their actually providing the service I signed up for, rather than a number of variations on it. Their ‘structure’ was not designed to correct their numerous mistakes and they have had to compensate for this by not charging me for the service for the next six months. After weeks of almost daily phone calls, it is at least a happy result for me, though not, perhaps, for the ISP.

For all of my money-making enterprises I have had to structure my life with the aid of a diary. Often this has been a bulky and expensive item. Being paper-based, it has required manual transcription of information on a regular basis. Even so, I valued the ability to flick through pages quickly, to compare entries and to organise myself. I resisted going digital, as the physical diary was already a random access memory system. I have finally made the leap and I have migrated it all to a digital organiser on a notebook computer which is smaller and lighter than the ring-bound diary and, after a short familiarisation period, just as quick to use. It means less effort to have my daily structure serve the substance of my commitments and dreams, my promises and pleasures.

The purpose of schedules, plans, budgets, meetings and spread sheets is to get things done. There is a dire problem if the resources that go into producing, maintaining and updating these are greater than the benefits they produce. However, this seems often to be the situation in commercial and government enterprises, with too much bureaucracy and paperwork getting in the way of getting things done. Like so many other aspects of life, it comes down to striking a balance that works: enough structure to allow many processes to run smoothly and enough flexibility to make the most of changes, mistakes, innovations and disasters. Get the balance right and it is like a waltz: there is a $\frac{3}{4}$ tempo (the structure), with lots of room for self-expression and exploration of possibilities within that.