

THE HUNTING PARTY

WHY UNCERTAINTY IS MAKING HUNTERS IMPORTANT AGAIN

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PROMOTIONAL EXTRACT FROM *THE HUNTING PARTY*

The Ferry

What people believe they are allowed to do

The Hunting Party explores how people and organisations respond when reality stops following the script. In this extract from Chapter 12, Chris Kempt reflects on an earlier ferry journey, later trips with DFDS and the difference between people being trained to stay inside their job description and being trusted to move towards a problem.

CHAPTER 12 / 'THE FERRY'

EXTRACT 1 / CHAPTER 12

Changing ferries

After that I started using another ferry company, and what surprised me was how quickly the difference became noticeable.

The basic product was almost identical. Drive onto a large ship, sit around for a while, consume something moderately disappointing, then drive off at the other end. I wasn't expecting the choice of ferry company to teach me anything particularly profound about organisational culture, but the other one simply felt calmer. There seemed to be fewer visible staff, if anything, yet the people I did encounter were more cheerful and more present. Things didn't carry the same low-level atmosphere of somebody being asked to do something which wasn't quite their problem, and if something needed attention people seemed more likely to move towards it.

At some point I got talking to a fairly senior member of staff and asked him why the place felt different. His answer was almost disappointingly straightforward.

'They look after us. They pay us reasonably. They train us well. They look after us.'

He also talked about cross-training. People weren't restricted to one extremely narrow job and could move between functions when circumstances required it, which meant the crew had more possible ways of responding when something unexpected happened. That landed with me because I'd recently experienced something which felt like the opposite. One organisation had left me with the impression that responsibility became increasingly narrow the moment something unusual happened, while here was somebody explicitly describing a company which made its staff broader.

The important thing wasn't that everybody could do everybody else's job. On a ferry there are quite a few responsibilities where I very much want the person involved to know exactly what they're doing. The point was that the boundary around competence wasn't unnecessarily tight. If somebody knew enough to help, the organisation appeared to give them more room to help.

EXTRACT 2 / CHAPTER 12

P&O

Years after my own experience, P&O Ferries became nationally notorious when it dismissed 786 seafarers in 2022 and replaced them with cheaper agency labour.

It would be very easy to connect that event backwards to my own experience and produce a satisfying story. I don't think I can do that. My incident happened years earlier, involved a tiny number of people and gave me no meaningful view of the company's internal decision-making. One unpleasant journey does not provide some magical early warning of a corporate decision a decade later, and pretending otherwise would be exactly the kind of model-building error I've spent several chapters warning about.

It did make me think again about the smaller signals, though, because culture is normally experienced long before it becomes visible at corporate scale. Whether somebody moves towards a problem or away from it, whether staff talk about senior management as 'we' or 'they', whether an unexpected request produces curiosity or irritation, whether helping somebody requires first establishing whose job the problem technically belongs to. None of those things proves very much by itself, but together they become the experience of being inside the organisation.

The later P&O decision was public, dramatic and involved hundreds of people. Most organisational signals are nowhere near that obvious. Quite often they are simply the sense that people have learned not to care very much about something they presumably once would have cared about, and you don't necessarily know whether that comes from the person, the manager above them, an old rule, somebody getting punished three years earlier or twenty other things you cannot see.

That uncertainty matters because otherwise the comparison becomes far too easy.

EXTRACT 3 / CHAPTER 12

The danger of the tidy comparison

There is another difference between the two companies which makes an appealing story if I let it. DFDS has long had a significant long-term ownership connection through the Lauritzen Foundation, and it would be very tempting to draw a straight line from that structure to stability, from stability to abundance, then from abundance to the cheerful member of staff explaining that the company looked after him.

I don't trust the line enough to draw it.

Ownership matters, but so do management, pay, training, labour conditions, the particular route, the particular ship, local leadership and whether everybody has had a terrible night's sleep. There are far too many steps between corporate ownership and one person's behaviour on a ferry for me to pretend I know which one caused what. All I really know is that I encountered two organisations doing almost exactly the same job and experienced them very differently, then asked somebody inside the one which felt healthier why it felt

healthier and he connected it directly to the way the company treated and trained its people.

That seems worth listening to without turning it into a law.

There is also a fairly important flaw in any attempt to cast DFDS as the hero of the chapter, which is that its IT was fucking dreadful. At one point I encountered a 404 page carrying the message UNCHARTED WATERS, which I almost respected. If a ferry company's website is going to fail, at least the error message can commit to the bit. The actual booking experience was less charming and could be clumsy, confusing and unnecessarily difficult.

That was useful because it stopped the comparison becoming too neat. A company can create a healthy environment for the people working on its ships while also operating a terrible digital system. Different parts of the same organisation can learn completely different behaviours, and a strong local culture can exist inside something much messier.

What stayed with me wasn't that one ferry company was good and the other was bad. I don't know either organisation well enough to make a judgement that broad. It was the difference in what people appeared to believe they were allowed to do.

Once you have felt that difference, company culture stops looking like something written by HR, it starts looking like something you can walk into.

THE HUNTING PARTY

Why Uncertainty Is Making Hunters Important Again

Chris Kempt



ABOUT THE BOOK

The Hunting Party: Why Uncertainty Is Making Hunters Important Again explores why some people notice patterns, risks and possibilities that others miss, how systems shape behaviour, and why organisational culture becomes visible when the ordinary script stops working.

This extract is from Chapter 12, 'The Ferry', which considers trust, competence, cross-training and what people believe their job includes when something goes wrong.

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