

# Where does the buck stop at the Post Office?

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I keep watching the performance of Paula Vennells at the Post Office inquiry with almost complete bemusement.

I have been a director of a number of companies in my time. I do not pretend that any were the size of the Post Office. That would be completely untrue but, even so, there are translatable experiences.

That is most especially so because I usually worked as a part-time executive director of many of the companies I worked for. In that role what I learned very early on in my career was that I needed information systems that made me aware of what was actually going on in the organisations for which I was responsible in law.

The systems for doing so did, of course, vary. With my involvement in finance, I inevitably developed good relationships with the accountants working in all those companies. Doing so was, however, never enough for my purposes. I knew I needed to know a great deal more about these organisations if I was to be sure the information that I was getting was reliable.

After all, as someone who had read about the way in which organisations work and who had developed their understanding of this issue from reading *The New Industrial State* by J K Galbraith at an early stage in my professional development, I knew that organisations do have a tendency to filter the information they pass up the hierarchy to senior management. To be sure I really knew what was happening I needed ways to work around that constraint.

I did just that. For example, one organisation of which I was a director for a number of years undertook quite sensitive microbiological work. As a result I went out of my way to visit our laboratories. I did not just talk to the manager, but to their staff as well, even though I readily admit that I had little technical competence in this area. That

made me a specially aware of the need to understand what we they were doing, and the risks it created.

In another organisation, the company ran a 24-hour shift system for part of the year. The night shift ran a limited range of activities and were, therefore, by and large left to get on with things by themselves. Those processes were, however, pretty important in making sure the workflow for the rest of the day happened. I needed to be sure I understood why and what was involved and that risk in all its forms was being managed. As a result, I made a point of occasionally turning up to join those on that shift in their middle of the night break, to make the coffee and have a chat. That way I hoped to understand what was happening in hours of the day when risk might have arisen. I also got to know the people a bit and why they were willing to work in this way.

That last point was always critical. I always made a point of knowing as many staff as I could. I tried to recall things like partners' and children's names. Interests were also important to make sure that there were always points of communication. It was amazing how much information you could find out if you started a discussion with someone about the previous weekend's football results.

I never forget the reception staff either. Like taxi drivers, they always known what is going on. They were always well worth talking to.

Why say all this? Because if Paula Vennells is to be believed, she apparently undertook her tasks as chief executive of the Post Office in some sort of bubble, entirely isolated from the organisation for which she was paid a considerable amount to lead.

Again, if she is to be believed, she did not apparently know about significant parts of its organisation, or about the activities of those for whom she was responsible.

As a result, it is not at all clear that she knew very much at all about the basic operations of the Post Office, and most particularly so when it came to the sub-post offices, which were the backbone of the organisation where much of its activity took place.

I cannot help say that I am forced to come to one of three conclusions.

She was either incompetent, as well as totally unsuited to her role, both of which are entirely possible.

Or, she totally naïvely believed that she could obtain all the information she needed without checking its credibility. That is what I think she would have us believe.

Or, she is simply not telling the truth.

I am not passing judgement: she has not finished giving testimony. What I am saying is that her apparent belief that there were large parts of the activity of the organisation that she led that she did not know about because, she claimed, she was not qualified in a particular area of expertise, strikes me as marking her out as totally unsuited to having a senior management role. It is to precisely those areas that I think a good company director has to pay the most attention - because they cannot avoid their responsibility for them by passing the buck to others, as she seems to have done.

That, then, leads to another question. That is how did someone so apparently unaware of the demands of a job at senior director level get appointed as CEO of the Post Office? Was it precisely because she did not ask awkward questions?

Nothing removes her responsibility for what happened on her watch. Paula Vennells was well paid for the stress she is now suffering, and she probably still enjoys a considerable pension from the Post Office. I am not in anyway seeking to excuse her. But I cannot help but think that the buck in this case goes higher, and most especially to the ministers who, as the representative shareholders of the organisation, appointed her. They need to be questioned in a great deal more detail on this issue. The failings are as systemic as they are personal.