Leap year antics

What is to be learned from the leap year tradition of allowing, and even encouraging, the female of the species to proposition the male? How did the tradition begin? Does it perhaps have any evolutionary significance?

The idea of role-reversal is not uncommon. Many institutions have copied the idea. In some military regiments, on one day of the year the officers serve the men in the mess hall. In schools, the same often applies. All very prescribed and good humored. Some universities do likewise, with an event such as a dance or ball. The women invite the men.

The events are good fun. They function as reminders to people of their roles. Some would say that, rather than being radical and threatening the established order, they actually reinforce it. By having a little light fun with the rules, they serve to entrench them.

But are there lessons to be learned from role reversal, or even from experimenting with different roles? And how does this apply to the world of work? Occasionally, a company gets a shot of PR when the CEO works on the complaints desk or at the coalface for a day. Note: a day (only); not a week. The PR is about the chief gaining a real understanding of the stresses and pressures the “little people” are under. The caring, sharing, understanding boss.

Information flows down organizations better than it does the other way. The view from the boardroom is very different when seen from the broom cupboard. No one dare tell the grown-ups about the real state of affairs. Staff surveys are carefully constructed so not as to address certain critical issues.

And so the senior people in the organization often have a rather different view from those at the coalface. Things are rosier, the outlook more optimistic. People who complain are considered to be a small group of troublemakers. The staff are happy, even engaged; customers are satisfied; all is well with the world.

Does the CEO learn much from his/her away-day? Certainly less if – as often the case – it is really little more than a publicity stunt. Everybody knows the game: customers are filtered, staff informed. So the whole thing soon becomes a meaningless charade for the newspapers.

It’s different if they go in disguise. And what is most interesting is that often the CEOs do not have to resort to wigs, make-up and putting
on “funny voices”, because their “real workers” have usually never seen them. True, their photographs are in the annual report, but these are so flattering that the flabby, graying “new recruit” is unrecognizable.

The requirement of the PR exercise – if it is exclusively such – is to issue three messages. First, what a brilliant job the staff do in (always) challenging times. Second, that the board now has a better, deeper and more profound understanding of the business practices and the needs of customers. Third, that various changes are taking place to ensure “better delivery” of our real product.

However, the CEO who does a real – not PR inspired – role reversal may be in for a significant shock. The vice chancellor who teaches a course to first-years; the bishop who does a month of service in a poor parish; the director of engineering who works in the assembly plant for a week.

All very Orwellian *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Anthropologists collect their data this way. So do other scientists. You can become wheelchair-bound for a week; blind for a month. You can be dressed in outfits that restrict mobility and make you become very old, with great difficulty in your movements. More controversially, you can have a sex or race “change” with a bit of clever make-up.

The idea is really to experience being “the other”. Many of us may have temporary experiences that give us some insight. An acute, but not a chronic, illness. A back problem that makes all simple movements – tying shoe laces, climbing stairs, having a bath – a nightmare. A broken limb which makes you an invalid for a time. These temporary setbacks give you some idea then of the small but persistent problems that many live with constantly.

Another version of this is where fairly lowly staff become customers. A chambermaid and head chef at a top hotel become guests for a night; a doctor becomes a patient in hospital. The council leader spends a week in a council flat. This is an attempt to get the customers’ perspective: to find what rules and procedures are petty, pointless and annoying; to see what is really good about the experience and what is not.

Taking or understanding the role or perspective of the other is a developmental stage. Developmental psychologists have long investigated that turning point when a child realizes the world looks different to others.

But back to the leap year frolics: the day when women can propose marriage to a man. In times past this role reversal may have had some impact, but surely less today? Do people propose any more? Clumsy,