

Coffee Cup Challenge: Professor Cary Cooper

Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health

Having seen some of his work on YouTube, I was absolutely overwhelmed to have been given the opportunity to sit down with Professor Cary Cooper, leading psychologist and Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health.

We visited Professor Cooper at The Work Foundation, which in essence is a think tank that explores all issues to do with the workplace from youth unemployment to health and wellbeing at work. After a quick look around, we were able to find out more about Professor Cooper's work.

Organisational psychology looks after people in the workplace, on every level. Professor Cooper's university spin off company, Robertson Cooper Ltd, identifies what makes people ill at work, by carrying out 'psychometric tests' on all staff (anonymously) and then pinpoints problems and helps to resolve them. They work with privately owned companies, the police, hospitals, government and many other public and private sector bodies.

Professor Cooper used an example of visiting a GP to demonstrate the role of organisational psychologists, "You go to a GP because you are showing symptoms, then your doctor works out the best treatment for you based on diagnostic results such as blood tests, blood pressure, MRIs, etc - that's exactly what we do for businesses." Professor Cooper and his team are often brought back in once changes have been made within the organisation to evaluate their impact.

We also discussed Professor Cooper's journey through his working life and discovered that he too was surprised by the direction his life has taken him in, "When I was 15, I wanted to be the first in my family to go university. If you'd asked me then, or even when I was 21, if I ever thought I would get a PhD I would have said, 'who me? No way!'"

He then went on to say, "The lesson of life is take the opportunities and learn as much as you can. I don't think when you're fifteen you know the path; there's a forest in front of you, you pick a path through the woods that exposes you to many interesting things and you find yourself going in different directions."

Professor Cooper also spoke about a 'currency of education' and shared that his drive as a young person was, "the drive to gain knowledge, something you can take with you wherever you go." He shared his story about how getting a job as a social worker in Los Angeles 'changed him entirely' when he saw real poverty. And that was the first time that he realised he wasn't going to go into law or accounting like all his friends wanted to, but rather he was going to do something to help people in stressful life situations.

Research has shown that whilst most sickness related illness at work used to be injured back related, nowadays the majority of sickness related illness at work is caused by stress.

As we wrapped up, I couldn't leave without asking for a some advice for young people starting out in their working life. This was Professor Cooper's response, "Take all the opportunities you can do, test yourself, travel, get exposed to the different cultures - risk it - just go and do different kinds of jobs. University is not the answer for a lot of kids, it makes you self-reliant, but a lot of young people that go to university don't end up doing what they studied as a career. The best thing you can do is be exposed to all aspects of life".