Going thin on top: work intensification and the neglect of personal support of senior managers

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Abstract: As organisations from the early 1990s flattened, senior managers have to a large degree been asked to cope with much less by way of personal support for the execution of their duties. Personal assistants are increasingly rare, senior managers are commonly expected to perform quite menial tasks (typing and filing) that have little overall impact on their work effectiveness, and the private lives of these senior managers becomes impoverished as a result. A series of organisational failures arising from this refusal by many organisations (government, private sector and church-based) are critically assessed. The moral implications of the failure by many organisations to support senior managers are examined, and an effort is made to generate a debate in support of this often well paid, but poorly supported part of the modern workforce.

Keywords: work addiction; wage packaging; senior managers; work hours; work-life balance.

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The corporation was not caught unawares by the death of its CEO, Giovanni. His health had been in decline for some time. The corporation had a federal structure that enabled it to cope fairly well until a new CEO could be identified and confirmed from among the ranks of its senior managers.

Albino was a very capable and warm man, and very modestly accepted the endorsement of his peers to take on the CEO role. Since the death of Giovanni, some
major issues within the corporation had been neglected, Albino readily and energetically threw himself into addressing the backlog of work. Tragically, within a month, stressed and working long hours, he died alone of a heart attack.

The corporation was, of course, the Catholic Church. Giovanni was Pope Paul VI, his successor Albino was John Paul I. Wacky conspiracy theories aside, the likeliest explanation for the untimely death of John Paul I was that he had run out of medications. He had simply been too busy to get to either his doctor or his pharmacist. The organisational demands on his time had left him unable to attend to the most basic of needs necessary for his effective functioning, looking after his own health.

This is a pattern of events that has repeated often over the past 30 to 40 years. The example of the New Zealand Prime Minister, Norman Kirk gives us another ready instance. In a newspaper interview just prior to his sudden death of a heart attack in 1974, a journalist asked what he did with his spare time. His response was that he could not find anyone reliable to mow his mother’s lawns, so most weekends he would fly from the capital Wellington, to Christchurch, and get mum’s lawn mown. For Kirk, there was no spare time. In Western economies today we have a strong service sector that, if it had existed in Kirk’s time, might have enabled him to find someone reliable to do the lawn-mowing. The key point is that for Kirk the Prime Minister’s job description, and his whole employment condition did not enable him time to attend to a very private concern, the welfare of his own mother.

Private sector instances, whether of family owned or listed companies are a lot less easy to identify. It simply is not good press for a CEO to exit, citing a poor work/family balance. The burnt-out CEOs and senior managers are generally well paid to go quietly, though the GM of Microsoft Australia not only ‘came out’ regarding his leaving the organisation because of poor work/life balance, but wrote of his experience (Petre, 1998). A third, internationally recognised instance is the case of Enron. As detailed in the riveting documentary, ‘The Smartest Guys in the Room’, the work hard/play hard culture within that organisation ultimately resulted in not just serious criminal behaviour, but the suicide of a senior manager, J. Clifford Baxter. More recently the neglect of family by two leading CEOs, Jeff Immelt of GE (Colvin, 2011) and Howard Stringer of Sony (Gunther and Lewis, 2006) have received only muted commentaries. As one commentator notes, society is harsh when working class parents neglect their children, but when senior managers do so in the name of serving the corporation, no sanctions are applied (Trunk, 2011).

What do these cases tell us about the state of the modern corporation? The premise of this paper is that not only does the modern organisation ask too much of its base-level employees, but even at the most senior levels the denial of the interests of the individuals, and the subordination of their individual concerns to the health of the corporation are both amoral and ultimately dysfunctional.

Doubtless, much the same pressures operate for base level employees within corporations. The difference are that:

1 when those base-level employees die ‘on the job’ or otherwise leave, the impact upon the organisation is minor relative to the same happening to a CEO or very senior manager

2 the financial support to senior managers is often so large that it is likely that with some intelligent redirection of that support, the work/life balance of the managers could be improved.
The exploitation of the mass of workers is structural at a societal level; the exploitation of senior managers is largely of themselves, and a matter that they could choose to address.

What then drives what is essentially an exploitation of senior managers by themselves, and of their peers? First, it must be acknowledged that there is a long established and seemingly reasonable basis to the exclusion of the personal interests of managers. One hundred years ago, Henri Fayol established the notion of the separation of interests of the managers from the day to day exercise of their managerial rights. This resonates well with not just organisational citizens, but also with the wider community, that public corporations in particular not be used as the piggy bank for its managers, (a financial separation of interest), and that the managers’ staff not be deployed to meet the personal needs of managers. So a manager cannot ask his PA or secretary (generally a woman, another clue to the recent strength of this tradition) to do his personal shopping on her lunch break.

With some notable exceptions (Burke and Fiksenbaum, 2009; Burke, 1999; Graves et al., 2007; Lyness and Judiesch, 2008) academic attention to work/life or work/family balance has largely focussed on the needs of base-level staff, rather than senior managers. This is driven perhaps by the presumption that senior managers have the power and control to look after their own interests.

Second, there is probably at the root of these practices a degree of Protestant denialism, an aesthetic of self-denial. A certain strictness of managers with themselves, a denial of personal needs in favour of attending to organisational needs, is seen as positive. Associated is the problem of work passion, which can readily degenerate into work addiction (Burke and Fiksenbaum, 2009). Through such mechanisms organisations can become ‘instruments of domination’ not just of wider society (including governments), but certainly of staff (Morgan, 1997).

Third, new managerialism and the de-personalisation of management serve to perpetuate destructive patterns (Letiche and Van Hattem, 2000; Willmott, 1990). This is compounded by the pervasive norms of manager’s reference groups, including their perceived ‘teams’ (Barker, 1993).

A fuller explanation can be found through examining the structural elements of our society, in particular the perverse effects of the capitalist system.

Within his most recent work, Harvey (2010) recognises the almost agreed collective blindness that helped set up the sub-prime mortgage crisis. Particularly when markets are buoyant, it is seen as almost treasonous for individuals within the system to declare that the ‘emperor has no clothes’. So leading up to 2008, nobody dared mention that the US home mortgage regime was not sustainable. The maintenance of confidence in the market was then, and probably still is, seen as a higher, more worthy concern than to warn of impending dangers. Similarly with the work-life balance of senior manager within the corporation. To question whether the efforts of senior managers can be sustained is to really question the continuing health of the cooperation. We get to the same conspiracy of silence, and then are shocked when our most senior managers die on the job, take their own lives, or bail out with a nervous breakdown. Why did not they tell us they were labouring with the imbalance of their work and private lives? The answer is because to do so might break the ‘can do’ spell, the illusion of invincibility that is cast over so many modern organisations.

Third, as alluded to above, the work intensification experienced by most organisational members, including senior managers, is to some extent driven by the fashion for ‘lean’ organisations. Beginning in the early 1990s, business process
reengineering and IT integration into many organisations enabled a radical re-think of the role of many workers, including the middle to senior managers who previously had spent a great part of their working lives working out how the organisation was performing. Modern production systems, with their capacity to yield vast amounts of data removed the need for many of these managers.

What can we do to address these problems? The ready approaches focus upon the coping with, and amelioration of the issue at an individual organisational level.

One aspect of senior manager burnout is the insistence by many organisations that senior managers handle for themselves some of the most ordinary of their tasks. The writing of correspondence (e-mails included) is a ready instance. In the case of MasterFoods, a massive, family-owned multinational, a senior manager in the Oceania headquarters commented to the author that if he wanted a letter written, he would probably have to write it himself, as he shared a secretary with 11 other people, including the Oceania region CEO. Another interviewee commented that while the organisation might require him at short notice to fly the next day to sort out some problem in their Chinese operations, the quid-pro-quo was that when family circumstances required it, senior managers at least had the flexibility to attend to pressing private matters (Meacheam and Hobson, 2004, 2005). Another really notable coping mechanism of the MasterFoods organisation is that in an atmosphere of high trust, not just between MasterFoods staff but also with their suppliers and customers, a highly verbal culture has emerged. On a day-to-day basis in many modern organisations, staff compose memos and correspondence in an effort to have a ‘paper trail’ available when anything comes into contention. If enough trust exists in an organisation, when verbal directions or requests are enough to enable ‘things’ to happen, then not only do we enable efficiencies, but managers and staff are left with more time to attend to the substance of their working roles. It should be noted though that MasterFoods has a dark history of bullying of senior managers by some in the Mars Family (Saporito, 1988, 1994; Sherrid, 1999; Waters, 1999; Wells, 1995). Seemingly, the bullying of some of the Mars Family of senior staff is/was balanced by more a more considerate approach by senior managers of their peers (Meacheam, 2010).

A second mechanism would be a reversion to the higher levels of personal assistant (PA) and other staffing that was commonplace up until about the 1980s. Anyone who worked through that era can probably recall both higher individual productivity, and lower workplace stress levels. As alluded to above, one of the consequences of such an approach is that the managers concerned are likely to be males, and the PAs and secretaries are likely to be women. The old masculine power structures would be reaffirmed.

A third approach is for organisations to convert part of the usually high wage of individual managers into a form that will enable them to address work/life balance issues. Such assistance might include the capacity for managers to ‘buy out’ some paid time in favour of family time. Pulskamp, obviously writing from personal experience, gives a range of (mostly obvious) pointers for managers who have over-committed to work, such as living close to the workplace and ‘being in the moment’. One of his valuable pointers is to arrange for managers child-care fees to be paid for out of pre-tax dollars (Pulskamp, 2004). This approach, part of what is commonly referred to as wage-packaging, takes a small part of a managers wage and ensures that it is applied to spending that supports a work/life balance. The author’s experience of thoughtful, family-oriented Hong Kong residents employing expatriate domestic staff (generally young Philippine women) is that
bonuses are given in the form of phone credit, to help ensure that the staff can maintain healthy contact with their families.

Alternatively, managers could help a new type of personal service organisation to evolve that takes care of the private concerns of managers. Organisations with high levels of managers deployed internationally already do this (Allen, 1989; Bowman and Meacheam, 2000). The BHP Billiton executive deployed in Beijing whose child is in a private school does not have to jet back to Melbourne for the parent-teacher interviews, BHP Billiton headquarter staff can pick up that job.

These approaches however do little to address the root causes of the problems. There is a very worthy argument that properly addressing any such issue needs to involve a fundamental re-think (if not a revolution) regarding the role of capitalism and state regulation of business. Flowing from the neo-liberal reforms of the 1970s, peaking in the 1980s, government fled from their roles as regulators of business.

How then might this be addressed? In the absence of national will to address these issues, multinational and trade bloc attempts at regulation are more likely to succeed. The EU is regarded by some as a regulatory nightmare, but increasingly the Union’s insistence that those trading with member states conform to at least some minimum labour standards can be seen as driving positive change.

Another approach could be through adoption of a widely recognised set of family friendly workplace standards. As consumers and investors we can now quite readily recognise firms that are certifiably ‘green’ in their operations. Though the standards differ between markets, there is also an evolving system for identifying firms that employ family-friendly employment approaches, though at present we cannot have any ready insight as to whether those family friendly practices are applied at the top of the organisations.

Both approaches are however only one step above the simplistic, ameliorative approaches previously identified. At the heart of the problem is a whole economic system that not only pits firm against firm, but individual employees against each other. Competition, the key driver of capitalism remains the deadlest of enemies. Finally, as individuals, organisational citizens we need to develop the habit of speaking out.

References