

Love in the Time of the 12-hour day

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When we hear the term 'exploitation' used in reference to a workplace environment, for many of us the first thoughts that come to mind are either a one-sided sexual advance with abuse-of-power connotations, or possibly a grim image from somewhere in the developing world of people working for pennies in desperately poor health, if only to keep us all in affordable khakis and home theaters.

Indeed the prevailing socio-economic rhetoric since the heady days of Reagan and Thatcher, with its stigmatization of unionism in all its forms and glorification of the entrepreneur as our new mytho-economic hero, has made it such that people tend to shift in their seats whenever something so archaic as 'workers rights' comes up as a topic of conversation. Entrepreneurs, after all, are men and women of genius and determination, the body and blood of the American Dream: common managers and staff are lesser beings just along for the ride and – one of my favorites – *lucky to have a job*.

Little surprise then that even the most over-worked white collar employees tend to relegate notions of workplace exploitation to an exclusively blue collar mentality. In the same way that social justice issues have failed to resonate with lower income voters because they prefer to imagine themselves as 'potential millionaires', so many people contributing to companies as managers and administrators don't dare consider notions so plebeian as fairness in the workplace – it's just so *unsalaried*.

What they do instead is cling to the notion that because

they wear the same suits and ties (or smart-casual equivalents) and happen to ride in the same elevators as their VPs and CEOs each morning, they're therefore 'potential senior management' – in the same club.

But just like the low-income parents spurning social action and compassionate political leaders so that they can focus on that next big shot at the neighbourhood VLT, this corporate 'club' mentality has its roots in something far more akin to a dream than a reality. The hard truth is that in too many (especially larger) companies today, ordinary managers and employees, people with things like families and mortgages and a few scratches on their minivans, are being systematically overworked and discarded in a shamefully disguised charade that we all let pass for respectable management technique.

I would argue that if there is any kind of white collar club, then obviously the only true members are the ones benefiting from the privileges of their membership. Given that the average CEO today is making seven times as much money for the same job they did back in 1980, it's safe to say they're benefiting from some sort of membership. We'll call them 'in the club'.

Run-of-the-mill managers or employees meanwhile, who although working on average 15-20% more than their parents did tend to enjoy a *lower* standard of living for themselves and their own children, are much more like those pathetic maître d's who get deluded daily by their own dress code into identifying with the people whom they serve.

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A brief look at the annual Business Week magazine survey of U.S. CEOs is an excellent place to confirm the degree of remunerative disparity that's at the heart of what I'm getting at here. It's numbers from past decades reveal that the average CEO in 1980 was making approximately 42 times as much as their lowest paid employee. By 2004 that ratio had grown to 301 times as much.

To put this in more down-to-earth terms, the average US employee today (365 companies are sampled for these results each year) earns \$517 a week, while for the same five days of work their CEO counterparts take home no less than \$155,796. If we take a similar average using the ROB remuneration listing of Canada's top 50 CEOs, our own biggest big shots earned on average \$328, 513 for every week they worked last year, not to mention any unregistered perks or vacations.

Quite obviously these CEOs are not particularly evil or greedy (lets leave the Ken Lays, John Rigas and Bernie Ebbers-types out of this for the time being) and this dynamic really has been more of a cultural process that has slowly produced a class of men and women who feel they need to make this sort of money if they're to be on the same level as their counterparts – in the club.

I can almost understand how individuals sitting atop multi-billion dollar corporate empires could convince themselves that their leadership has this type of value. It's an abstraction similar to the one that has allowed actors to feel that they're worth millions of dollars for a few weeks of being housed, fed, dressed and told what to do on a movie set.

The point though is that as these men and women have ascended through that byzantine system of salaries and stock options they call remuneration, ordinary people

working in their companies have slowly begun to be treated worse than they were before. Call it the dark side of this culture of CEO excess.

I want to stress that identifying this dark side isn't about whining and it isn't about sour grapes. It isn't about entrepreneurs struggling to get their dream off the ground and choosing to leverage short-term personal life and sanity against future comfort and success. It isn't even about companies experiencing painful downturns and having to make the tough decisions that sometimes need to be made, if only to allow the basic operation is to survive.

What this is about is essentially larger, well-fed companies that refer to people as 'resources' to their faces. It's about the cultural sanctioning of overworking and underpaying employees to achieve growth and prosperity that revert almost exclusively to senior management and stockholders. It's about CEOs who sweep into organizations, gut employees of their health and their morale to generate spectacular short-term numbers, and then leave an empty husk of an organization in their trail when they head off in search of bigger and better packages.

Primarily though it's about what the sanctioning of this type of system says about our society at large, and how we need to assert our collective dignity back into the equation to make sure this never happens again.

The grim realities of white collar social structure met me head-on recently when I was offered and accepted a management position in a large international organization.

Prior to this posting I had been running and enjoying a reasonably successful consultancy, but with my wife and I wanting to get on with starting a

family, and it seeming very nice on paper that I could go out and get a job and she could take over the servicing of my company's clients from home (we work in the same field), I found myself being lured by the steady paycheck, paid vacations and banks-just-love-me respectability of a 9-to-5 existence.

I know, I can hear that "*Yeah, right*" going through your mind even before you think it. It's very telling that salaried employees today will look upon any notion of an eight hour work day as some form of quaint anachronism. Ten hour and even twelve hour days are simply *de rigueur* in most large companies these days, and management has learned to glorify and enshrine the commitments of young, single go-getters who basically don't know any better, while further marginalizing those of us who may have decided at some point that we were going to start something called a family, or who simply aspire to have goals and interests in our lives that may not directly relate to our corporate responsibilities.

I can't really point to a particular moment when eight hours a day stopped being enough for people to work, but certainly while they were doing so in previous decades plenty of companies survived and even thrived, people got very rich leading them, and yet employees could still take time with their kids in the evening or on weekends instead of catching-up on e-mails or finishing up reports.

To keep employees in line, higher-ups have learned how to make lots of motivational speeches filled with expressions like "First in, last out", or "More with less", employing vocabularies and mythologies of teamwork and toughness and very often feigning camaraderie with employees as they remind them how lucky 'we' all are to have a job, or perhaps how the challenge ahead has 'nothing to do with money'.

This is one of the most spurious aspects of the new big business culture. It's spurious because these particular corporate value systems more closely represent the antithesis of fairness and true co-operative spirit, and it's especially spurious because of course it is precisely about the money. Much of this is nothing more than senior management rhetoric – another in a long line of

vocabulary-based strategies (lies) designed to do what senior management is supposed to do: increase shareholder value and their own VCPs (variable compensation packages).

However you're only a member of this company 'team' as long as you're willing to work like a dog and earn senior management their bonuses. As soon as you start working what you're actually contracted to work they label you a 'C' player, you become part of the problem, and if you're ahead of the game you might start brushing up on your security escort small talk.

It's fair to argue that his new management culture has little or nothing to do with great commercial leadership or acumen, which in their truest forms express themselves very simply as sound market analysis, innovative solution-finding, and the charisma to communicate those solutions in an effective, inspiring manner.

A few of our corporate leaders still possess these qualities, and we should be grateful that they do, but show me those CEOs whose only method of generating growth is by cutting their workforce and demanding constantly of their remaining employees that they perform 'more with less', and I'll show you leaders without sufficient industry knowledge or the managerial perspective and imagination needed to chart their company's continuing success.

The situation wouldn't seem quite so unjust if all the managers and employees were at least getting paid their fair share for all this extra work and ingenuity being demanded of them. In the organization I went to work for, however, existing management and staff hadn't seen any pay increase in over five years despite the added workload, and any form of commitment to the employees had been replaced by a Jack Welch-ian culture of fear masquerading as a culture of change.

The only real pay increases offered to employees under this regime were special bonuses for 'star' or 'A' players, decided upon not through a fair and transparent method of measuring employee contribution, but rather by a group of directors behind closed doors arguing with one another over coffee and pastries.

This need to be part of a collective is perhaps our most basic desire, be it a family or a company a hockey team or simply a group of close friends. It helps to explain that all-too-familiar sense of dread that we feel when we hear that a co-worker has been terminated. We not only react on a self-interest level from fear that the same will happen to us, but we realize on a deeper level that something has gone terribly wrong with the basic equation of our social existence.

I lived under this system for about five months, working the requisite ten-to-twelve hours a day and on at least 75% of my weekends, and I probably would have left much sooner had I not been sucked in to the dynamic of pressure and stress that was all around me.

Part of what had sucked me in of course was the sheer scale of the challenge the position offered, and my own pride in believing that I could solve the problems it presented. Part of it was that inevitable sense of responsibility that we all feel to our co-workers. Leaving would be abandoning them to face this alone I thought. How could I do that to my staff? My fellow managers? My increasingly stressed-out assistant director?

And so I stayed, barely managing to get done what needed doing, meeting regularly to come up with new ideas to fix things, never finding the time to implement those new ideas, meeting again, and again, and again...

I soon realized then that the leaders in my company weren't really leaders at all. I realized that a very few at the top had any clue about what this organization was and how it worked. I realized that these men and women would ask anything of anybody so long as it improved their bottom line in the short-term, and helped them to move on to a new job in a new company with numbers generated on the backs of anyone they could fool into working for them. I knew that to stay would mean agreeing to fail at what was being asked of me, and I decided that, all loyalties aside, this was simply a job that I wouldn't do anymore.

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For the most part the prime mover of big business culture over the past 20 to 30 years is best reflected in those CEO salary comparisons we made above.

In illustrating those CEO remunerations earlier, the point I was really getting at is that no one in this world, and I mean no one, is worth the type of compensation now being enjoyed by today's business leaders. I would further argue that no single human being anywhere on this planet is worth 300 times more than any other human being – I don't care how smart, talented, lucky or hardworking they may be.

This truth is at the heart of a discussion which we avoid at our peril as a just and reasonably peaceful society, and one which current levels of income disparity demand that we now grapple with.

Working with and listening to co-workers during my time at the company I described above, it's clear to me that everyone there realizes how unfairly and unrealistically they're being treated. After word of my impending resignation began to circulate, manager after manager streamed into my office to tell me how lucky I was that I had other opportunities to fall back on. I became a sort of father confessor to these ordinary, hard-working people, and listened to one after another as they complained about barely being able to handle their workload, never feeling the satisfaction that comes from producing something of quality, or of how they were simply feeling so tired and helpless in the face of it all.

What they knew was what we all know and feel deep down inside ourselves: we know that we want to be part of something greater than ourselves; we know that we want to contribute to the realization of goals as part of a team. Anyone in any form of organization feels the same way when they collectively achieve what they have set out to do – it's a feeling that resonates with our deepest instincts, the ones that drove us in the very

beginnings of our history to form communities and to work together against the challenges that confronted us.

This need to be part of a collective is perhaps our most basic desire, be it a family or a company, a hockey team or simply a group of close friends. It helps to explain that all-too-familiar sense of dread that we feel when we hear that a co-worker has been terminated. We not only react on a self-interest level from fear that the same will happen to us, but also on a deeper societal level when we realize that, of late, something has gone terribly wrong with the basic equation of our social existence.

The problem is that too many employers today are placing philosophy above necessity and forcing even reasonably healthy companies to adhere to ever more commercially narrow forms of efficiency. In the company I worked for hundreds had been laid off despite consecutive years of reasonable growth, all so the new CEO could get the right sort of quotes printed about him and ensure that his 'tough-guy' approach to change was well-enshrined in the annals of CEO stardom. But the fact that his personal and financial success was predicated upon the destruction of so many basic livelihoods demonstrates that he employed an efficiency that society should be actively seeking to manage and restrain.

Our history and poli-sci textbooks have taught us to count on our democratic processes and the governments they produce to counterbalance this type of social injustice. Given the strength of the cultural forces that are now being employed to convince people that they have to work harder and harder at every turn, I'd absolutely agree that our only realistic recourse is to generate this discussion, reveal the obvious injustices at the heart of it, and look to our elected representatives for new laws and new regulations to keep today's merchant kings and robber CEOs behaving more like reasonable, at least semi-compassionate human beings.

This is likely wishful thinking under the current Liberals – they and our country along with them have been more or less beholden to Paul Desmarais and Power Corporation for the past decade at least, and our current Prime Minister is far more

comfortable in limousines and country clubs than he is trying to understand what everyday, hard-working Canadians really look for in their political leadership. Mr. Martin's cavalier use of the EI billions to reinforce his place in debt-reduction history is one of the more glaring testaments to this fact.

Perhaps a simple first step would be to ask our governments to simply get rid of corporate taxes altogether for larger companies. We could instead demand of them that they adhere to a new and fairer code of conduct with respect to their employees and society at large. A good friend mentioned this idea to me recently and, seeing as most large companies wear tax avoidance like a badge of honour anyway (CSL's history here is yet another demonstration of Mr. Martin's true citizenship), I thought it made a lot of sense.

This code of conduct could reflect the fact that human beings thrive and bring the most they can to any challenge when they are able to grow and nurture themselves with friends and family as well as co-workers; when they have time to grow and learn about other areas of personal interest that they can then bring to the workplace in the form of new perspectives and thus new opportunities for innovative solution finding. Best of all it could seek to tie senior management remuneration to the pay levels of the median-and lowest-paid workers in a given company, thus ensuring that everyone involved in a failure or success shares more-or-less equally in the losses and the gains that ensue from their efforts.

It could do this and it could do lots more, all requiring debate and discussion among the leaders of our companies and our society, but one thing is for certain – it could help bring to an end this Age of the Merchant Kings that has dominated our culture for the last 30 years or so, an age of unbridled greed that has reached the point where it is simply no longer tenable with the just society we are supposed to aspire to live in. ■