

A Sustainable Treatment of People

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In a February 2010 article in *The Academy of Management Perspectives*, Jeffrey Pfeffer, a renowned Stanford scholar, raised the important issue of how we define sustainability in management practice and research. In essence, he argues that practitioners and academics have been primarily concerned with the effects of organizational actions on the physical environment: the natural world or cultural artifacts. Pfeffer uses the metaphor of efforts to conserve polar bears or indigenous milk jugs as the focus of the mainstream sustainability practices and thinking. At the same time, he argues that in their attempt to be recognized as socially responsible entities, organizations do not pay enough attention to how their management practices impact the physical and psychological well-being of people working there. Pfeffer mentions the availability of healthcare, effects of layoffs, challenges of increasing work and decreasing family time, work stress, and inequality as factors that have a direct impact on the physical and psychological well-being of employees. Recent cases of work-related suicides at France Telekom suggest, in fact, that the issue of sustainability of human capital is a matter deserving serious attention.

Taking the contemplations of Pfeffer further, I would like to note that psychological well-being and overall sustainability of organizational members is a matter that not only affects the organizations employing them. Society at large can notice signs of stress and pressures in a modern employee, particularly the one working in a business setting. Leaving aside the dramatic cases of physical violence that can be traced back to work-related challenges, we can easily think of examples in which inadequate attention is being paid to the human side of sustainability. For example, decisions about having children, an important factor regarding the survival and continuity of societies, are often related to the perception of

career progression opportunities or limits presented to a specific individual or couple. Responding to organizational demands, time-limited opportunities or challenges, many individuals feel pressured to postpone having children or decide not to have them at all. The issue of gender inequality at the workplace and limited opportunities for women to re-enter the career race after maternity time does not help either. The psychological challenge of making a choice between family or career or reconciling what seems to be irreconcilable can be exhausting.

For those individuals who do have children, work-related challenges and the ways of dealing with them have an impact on family behavior and role modeling for future generations, including their willingness to invest effort in preparing themselves for careers in the future. The latter, naturally, has implications for society. For example, weekly commuting between work and residence, a phenomenon quite developed in Europe, may in fact lead to the effect of raising children in an incomplete family. Even when parents are at home every day, if one or both of them suffer at work and bring elements of this into their family life, they may not be the role models their children need when they imagine their own jobs. This results in the next generation entering the workforce starting to question what their parents do at work. They hear about endless meetings, telephone conferences, email writing, and political fighting. Moreover, they witness their parents becoming addicted to mobile communication devices, hear them talk about work related issues over weekends and on vacation, and generally paying less and less attention to the individuals around them. Seeing their parents work hard per se has not caused harm to anyone yet, but seeing parents work hard without the meaning attached to it, and coupled with constant anxiety or unhappiness related to work, may kill motivation to work in a traditional organizational setting.

Interestingly, modern management practices may be detrimental to the sustainability of employees despite the best intentions. Take a recent case of a large multinational corporation wanting to increase the participation of employees from Southeast Asia in its global management and professional ranks. Having launched an expensive talent development program in the region, the organization declared it wanted to hand jobs with global reach to talented and successful Southeast Asian managers and, for this purpose, relocate them to London. The HR employees were surprised when at one of the career development seminars, a participant told them, in her culture children do not send their

elderly parents to nursing homes at the end of their lives and leaving for a London-based job, would mean betraying the trust of the parents, breaking the norms of the society, and jeopardizing the links to the community in which this employee was embedded. Here a career opportunity was clearly perceived as a potential source of stress and anxiety.

There is a difference, of course, between human beings and polar bears or indigenous milk jugs. The former, arguably, can and should take control of their destiny, particularly when it comes to career-related choices, at least in what is considered to be modern democratic societies. In other words, unlike polar bears passively suffering from destructive actions of human beings, people in organizations can and should deal with the human sustainability challenges they encounter. Moreover, it would be naïve to expect that these challenges decrease in magnitude in the future. If we again look at recent suicides at France Telekom, it is very unlikely that anyone would consider this to be a productive way of getting out of a difficult work situation. Still, there are quite a lot of less dramatic responses to work-related challenges that are not productive either and that lead to deterioration of the psychological well-being of employees. The latter can be caused by both the actions or inactions of the organizational leadership, and by the way employees respond to these challenges. The suffering often comes not only from the challenge itself, but also from seeing oneself as a victim of the situation.

Sustainability and responsibility when it comes to organizations and well-being of the humans in them can and should involve thinking and acting on the sides of both the leadership and the followers. The former has to create conditions for monitoring the working conditions, relationships in the organization, work load, resources available, etc. Employees, on the other hand, have to learn to be personally responsible for the career choices they make, the behaviors they exhibit in organizations, and the way they deal with the challenges arising during their work.

More detailed this means:

- open discussion of career opportunities between HR and employee; solution-oriented discussion of problems
- clear and realistic description of the demands the next promotion entails
- employee must be able to reject a promotion without later punishment

- company creates a system of multiple career paths which allow for career acceleration and deceleration as well as for side and re-entrance
- employee support with the help of coaching and workshops
- employees have to know what their performance means to the company/team in which they work
- lifelong learning accompanied by educational offers to keep their employees professionally up-to-date.