Can Organizations Make You Sick?
Can Overworked Leaders Hurt Organizations?

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The answer to these questions, in short, is "Yes." And it all boils down to how organizations and their leaders manage collective and individual energy.

When I began my career in Organizational Dynamics in the 1980's, I was convinced that the variable of "energy" was a pivotal, yet unrecognized, component in the physiology of organizations. Knowing that there were cogent and historically viable models of energy, I set out to learn and apply ONE system of energy for diagnosing *and* intervening that could be used simultaneously with individuals, teams and organizations, rather than using different metrics and models for each domain.

With help from colleagues at the Merriam Hill Center and with fine advice from two of the founders of NTL, I pursued what has been a 35 year quest to develop and apply methods that build, rather than only use up, the energy of people in workplaces.

In addition to carefully noticing the results of countless interventions with organizations, my learning process was aided by formal education as I attained a graduate degree from the Maryland University of Integrative Health in Acupuncture and PHD in Organizational Behavior. As you all know so well, teaching helps one learn and I've taught organizational change and team dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania in their Master's program in Organizational Dynamics, at Wharton's Executive school (where I first taught "Bring Your Body to Work" and at Temple University's Executive MBA program.

Here is some of what I've learned:

Wellness programs alone do not work—but when they are paired with productivity initiatives that manage four main variables, they work splendidly. In short, we can do our best work if we look at energy from the systemic level, not just treat individuals who are unwell as a result of workplace stresses.

If we manage:

1. **The volume of work,**
2. **The pace of work,**
3. **Trust our immediate supervisor, and**
4. **Have a work environment that is physically and emotionally safe,**

we can increase productivity, health, and employee satisfaction, while cutting costs.

Research from the World Health Organization, Towers Watson, Comcare (Australia's equivalent of OSHA) and the American Psychological Association shows that when **health and productivity programs are linked, the following stunning business results are achieved:**

- **11% increase in revenue per employee**
- **28% higher shareholder return**
- **26.6% reduction in sick leave**
- **26.1 % reduction in health costs**
- **32% reduction in workers compensation and disability claims**
- **Better high performer retention.**

Yet we continue to be addicted to speed and often choose NOT to manage overwork.

Let me give you an example:

Company A is a reputable business with a fine regional market, showing 8-10% growth in annual profits over a decade. The CEO, Mr. Tweed, is a fine manager, has a reputation as smart, is trusted by his board and has built a senior team that respect his leadership. Company employee surveys show good employee satisfaction, though with scores getting lower the closer the respondents are to the front line. Senior leader satisfaction is excellent as is C suite compensation.

Tweed has good health habits, is a runner, is trim, is married (to a woman who runs a national non-profit), but is childless. They live busy lives, enjoy a second home on some weekends, and are philanthropically generous.

As the market for Company A's product changes, it is clear to Tweed that they must expand to stay viable, so they acquire a less solvent competitor. During the acquisition, the senior team takes on significantly more work while also retaining high powered national consultants to assist with the "merger." The consultants are not well liked, and the previous environment of trust is damaged.

The dramatic increase in work caused by preparing for the merger affects everyone, but Tweed continues to send very positive messages to his team as he demands, and also exemplifies, the ability to do more while maintaining a high performance level. The "We are Fit to do More" message is carefully crafted and promoted by the VP of Marketing, though a series of sponsored 5K runs in which senior managers and lower level employees are encouraged to literally and figuratively run further than they'd normally do.

During year one of the merger, employee and C suite satisfaction drops significantly as work-load increases and compensation stagnates. Profitability drops to only 3% resulting in cost of living increases only: the first time in 15 years that salary increases are essentially flat.

In addition, non-runners, employees with high needs families, pre-existing conditions, or who just aren't athletes, feel alienated. Thoughtful mid-level managers realize that the culture is showing signs of strain and company metrics show that overall performance has dropped. More people take less vacation and many work nights (after children are asleep) and on weekends.

At the end year party, I hear the same message from many people: "we are tired. When will this end?" Some mid-level managers tell me they are losing some of their higher performers, top people who have been headhunted to less stressful jobs with guarantees of better opportunity and compensation. In a few cases, long time employees—culture heroes—move to other companies, leaving the remaining folks stunned and questioning their own loyalty.

I notice that many senior team members have gained weight during the year as they've sacrificed the time to make and eat food and exercise when their workload rose. A few mentioned marital stress as spouses feel neglected.

After the party, Tweed admits to me that he, too, is tired and has been getting odd cardiac symptoms – dysrhythmias, with no apparent cause. He says his sleep has been regularly disturbed, and he gets less sleep overall since the merger as he needs his nights to think. He is confident, however, that this stage will end soon and awaits his Christmas vacation. During his time off, however, he gets a bad cold and spends most of his time in bed.

By the second year of the merger, most EVPs and VPs are occupied with improving the poor performance of the acquired company. Mid managers feel abandoned by their bosses. The HR VP takes the lead in trying to settle the mid and lower levels of the company which takes its toll…her weight gain has been noticeable, and she confides to me that she's become diabetic, a condition she never expected to manage.

Tweed calls me and asks for help with his increasingly conflicted senior team. An evaluation shows that many underlying strategic and personality conflicts are at a high as not all had agreed with the need for the merger. Those active in its implementation were more invigorated by being closer to the CEO, but also more fatigued by the workload. One trusted VP leaves suddenly, sending shock waves through the organization.

You know the outcome of this tale… Tweed burns out, is replaced by his board, a new CEO comes in and cuts cost and the once thriving culture falls apart, signaled by mass departure of the old guard.

But the health impacts of this story often go untold.

Anecdotally, I learned of countless sleep deprived people, now brittle with each other as a result of overwork. Less available at home, they pass the burden of their depletion to their families who greet an empty shell. We know they suffer sleep deprivation, but only hear of its ripple effects: depression, anxiety, lowered immunity, increase in severity of pre-existing conditions (asthma, allergies, diabetes, PMS, etc.) If you look around at any meeting, you see tired, sunken, overworked people.

Yet, in the United states, we do not measure the impact of overwork, nor the health impacts associated with rapid or significant organizational change. No one measures the energy depletion, but everyone feels it.

We do measure "satisfaction" and at the executive level we may employ "Health Risk Assessments" which measure cardiac function and PSA levels (for prostate cancer risk), but don't think about the main measures that influence health, ENERGY, nor do we construct interventions that improve it at the system level.

Since the United States is not a leader in workplace health, I look to international research for good process. **The World Health Organization identifies the need to create organizational strategy and whole company implementation plans that manage volume and pace of work, in addition to psychological safety in the workplace.**

In short, you can't cure overwork and psychological instability with mindfulness, yoga, massage or therapy. There are the few who will undoubtedly benefit from direct self-care. But the organizational system has to be healthy for the benefit to be for the many.

In my example Tweed did what many leaders do: step up and just take on more. He understood financial survival in a limited way and only asked for help with organizational issues that he could identify coaching support for himself and a team intervention for his senior team. As stressors grew, he left money on the table by not managing the four key variables *and* he lost many of his top performers.

I think that, as organizational dynamics professionals, we often are not bold enough to identify variables that our clients cannot see. As his Executive Advisor, I only had the authority and responsibility to coach him and do a team level intervention, while what was clear is that what was needed was a system-wide commitment to sustainable work patterns, including variables like "overwork" or "psychological safety".

As the Chinese say, "a balance between expenditure and replenishment of energy."