

Fast track can lead to a brick wall

A recent issue of Fortune magazine described how Dominic Orr, CEO of a Silicon Valley data-networking company, climbed the corporate ladder at a young age. According to Orr, he was successful by being “ruthlessly aggressive.” But he also discovered that he nearly ruined his life and destroyed his marriage and family in the process.

Orr left his family and traveled to California from Hong Kong the day after his second child was born. He traveled so much that when this daughter was 2 years old, she forgot what her father looked like. Orr went to a sales conference the day after his mother’s death, holding up her funeral for three days.

For decades we have been talking about work-life balance and how to achieve it. Some companies encourage finding ways to balance or integrate the two. Yet, Robert Reich, former Labor Secretary and the author of a new book, “Supercapitalism,” says that “in today’s job market there are only two tracks – the fast track and the slow track. ... The only track that leads to better jobs is the fast track.

That means working all hours, it means giving up time with family, it means very large sacrifices.” Orr made these sacrifices and ended up with no family and virtually no one who wanted to follow him.



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Why is this behavior sanctioned and rewarded? Orr admits he got caught up in the climb and was on a “high” because of work, and the rewards were great. But the more successful he became, the more alone he felt. The real issue is not about Orr, but about the culture that allowed him to behave in destructive ways and be rewarded for it. Behaviors that are rewarded tend to be repeated.

The good news is that some organizations are working hard to change the paradigm. The International Center for Spirit at Work (www.spiritatwork.org) gives annual awards to organizations that are creating a culture that nourishes the heart, mind and spirit.

During the past few years, I have been interviewing CEOs and other senior leaders from these organizations about exactly what they do and

why they do it. The main theme is that they believe it is the humane thing to do, and it actually improves productivity. Retention, productivity and satisfaction are all higher when people feel a culture is healthy.

For example, some companies reward people with well days instead of sick days. They pay for them to have time away from work for personal growth. Most of these companies are privately owned; they can focus on the long term and not be pressured by a short-term emphasis on the bottom line. About 70 percent of the companies on Fortune’s 100 Best Companies list based on employee surveys are private companies.

Central College now has a minor in non-profit organizations. More of our students want to work for organizations not driven by the bottom line.

Leaders should examine reward systems to ensure that desired behaviors are being rewarded and can be sustained for the long term. It would be good for the success of the organization as well as employees. □

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