

The Economist

## How to run a calm workplace

A management book that is refreshingly different



MANAGEMENT books have a deservedly poor reputation. Too often they are written by people who confuse insight with jargon, the types who love to call a spade a “manual horticultural utensil”. At the other end of the scale are tomes containing a plethora of pithy platitudes about “breaking the mould” and “worshipping the kill”. The choice, in short, is between the incomprehensible and the inconsequential.

So it was a joy for Bartleby to read “It Doesn’t Have to be Crazy at Work”, by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson, who run a software company in Chicago called Basecamp. Their book is funny, well-written and iconoclastic and by far the best thing on management published this year.

The authors argue that it is perfectly possible to run a business with consistently growing profits (as they do) without requiring employees to work madly long hours. Tired workers will not be productive since “creativity, progress and impact do not yield to brute force”. Sleep-deprived managers are likely to be counterproductively impatient.

Basecamp employees have a 40-hour week, except in the summer when the company runs a four-day, 32-hour week. They also get three weeks’ holiday every year (subsidised by the firm to

the tune of \$5,000 per person), a month-long sabbatical every three years, and a monthly massage at a spa.

Those are the right sort of perks, say Messrs Fried and Heinemeier Hansson. The wrong kind, found in many offices, include free dinners, games rooms and snack bars, which are all devices to keep employees at the office for longer. Workers should also beware of companies that declare “we’re all family here”—a ruse to get workers to put their employers ahead of the needs of their real families.

Another criticism of corporate culture levelled by the book is that offices have become interruption factories. People are working longer and later because they cannot get stuff done at the office any more. At a conference attended by 600 people, the authors asked how many had recently enjoyed 3-4 hours of uninterrupted work; only 30 hands went up.

Open-plan offices are particularly bad at providing an environment for calm, creative work, they argue. So “library rules” are imposed at Basecamp. Conversations are kept to a whisper and there are separate rooms when meetings are needed.

Meetings are avoided, especially those involving lots of people. As the authors rightly point out: “Eight people in a room doesn’t cost one hour, it costs eight hours”. Workers do not need to be kept abreast of every single corporate development via memos or all-staff emails. The firm encourages JOMO, the “joy of missing out”, so employees can concentrate on their own work projects.

Another way to reduce stress is to avoid turning deadlines into “dreadlines”—unrealistic targets for project completions accompanied by ever-changing requirements. “Goals are fake,” the authors write. In their telling, made-up numbers function as a source of unnecessary stress until they are either achieved or abandoned.

Nor should workers demand that their colleagues deal with a query straight away. In almost every situation, the expectation of an immediate response is unrealistic. Allowing workers more time means they can come up with a more considered and helpful answer.

The overall aim of the firm should be couched in modest terms. Too many businesses talk about “changing the world” and becoming a “disrupter”. Such aims are far too grandiose and put everyone under too much pressure. As a manager, if you set out to do a good job for your customers, and to treat your employees fairly, things will probably turn out fine.

In short, the book aims to persuade managers to take their “mission” less seriously and to take their employees more so. Furthermore, executives should stop equating the work ethic with the practice of working long hours. Work should not be frantic. A calm company can be good for employees and very profitable as well.

Whether or not it is as nice to work at Basecamp as the authors make it sound is hard to tell from the outside. It was voted one of America’s best small companies in 2017 by *Forbes*, a magazine. It helps that the group is private and has no activist investors to please. Some of its practices

might not be possible at a giant, listed firm. But a lot more executives ought to reflect on its message. A relaxed ethos in the office might work better in the long run than the hard-charging approach that, at the moment, is all too common.

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