

THE SOFT OPTION

IF BOSSING PEOPLE AROUND ISN'T THE BEST WAY TO GET THEM TO PERFORM, IS THE ANSWER TO COMBINE WORK WITH WELLBEING, ASKS FLEUR BRITTEN

Before her eureka moment, the beauty executive Georgie Dawson was a self-confessed Sunday-night emailer who measured productivity in terms of how late she toiled. For her, the point of exercise was purely to improve body image. Fuel for meetings would be a tray of cupcakes, "though no one feels that great afterwards", she says.

Dawson had her epiphany on a "corporate athleticism" course paid for by her employer, Estée Lauder Companies. "Rather than hammer it during the week and face burnout by the weekend, I learnt about working at a steady pace," she says. "So I'm not going to apologise for leaving work at 5.30pm to go to the gym. You have to put things like that first." Meetings — now capped at 45 minutes — are held in cafes or while walking, because "being static stifles creativity", while the exercise and healthy snacks provided by the company, says Dawson, help her feel more centred and better able to handle deadlines. Freshly inspired, she found herself feeling valued, motivated and wanting to "give back".

Companies are starting to realise that they need to do more for their employees than simply command and control. These days, they need to nurture, listen, share and praise, almost like a surrogate family. The soft stuff is the new hard stuff.

For example, the advertising agency Mother gives its employees the Monday after Mothering Sunday off to spend with their mums, while the fitness brand Lululemon "gifts" all its employees a £350 personal development course, which, according to its community "guru", Amanda Casgar, helps in both their professional and personal lives and makes them more confident.

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Emotion and empathy are key. When the CEO of Thomas Cook, Harriet Green, collected this year's Veuve Clicquot Business Woman award, she quoted the Maya Angelou line that she keeps on her pinboard: "I've learnt that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." She has turned the travel company around after its near collapse in 2011.

The corporate exemplar that everyone cites is Google. Forget the in-house bowling alleys, pub lounges and rooftop pool, which some ex-Googlers have lambasted as the enemy of serious work — it's the touchy-feely stuff that apparently sets it apart. "Google wants to enable us to be fully rounded humans," says Sathya Smith, one of its London-based engineers. "With yoga, subsidised massage and gym facilities, they make sure I'm well fed, fit and healthy. I'm encouraged to grab a coffee with colleagues and discuss things outside work. If I'm affected by a sick relative, there are counsellors; if

I'm buying a house, there are financial helpers; and if I want to change careers, there is free training."

Empathy drives profit, says Belinda Parmar, the author of *The Empathy Era — Women, Business and the New Pathway to Profit*, and the founder of Lady Geek, an agency that runs empathy training for businesses. "The corporate world is in need of rehabilitation," she says. "Most business cultures are hierarchical and based on fear. They miss out on revenue because they think there isn't time to care." The least empathic industries are science, finance and automotive. "They've been designed by men for men, and are about status, individual progression and playing corporate hardball," she says. Companies have to get with it because, "if we're not happy, we now have the channels to make ourselves heard".

Enter "therapy for companies". Ewen Haldane, the business director at the School of Life, which runs year-long professional development programmes, says: "You can't expect to fix things in one go. It's a long-term thing." The school, whose clients include Innocent, Maybelline and Channel 4, wants to encourage businesses to be better at collaboration and communication, and more emotionally intelligent. "Being good at

your job is not enough any more," he says, adding that companies could create more opportunities to shine: "There is a growing realisation that everyone can be a linchpin."

Over at Performance Consultants, the corporate tears roll as its personal-development trainers dig into "the bottom of the iceberg, or what's happening deep inside ourselves", says its director of coaching, Tiffany Gaskell. "We're not encouraged to be human in the workplace, but when we finally get in touch with ourselves, it's such a relief to actually be who we are, it's like finding the truth for ourselves for the first time."

It's not unlike the new style of parenting, says the leadership coach Russell Amerasekera, who teaches clients empathy and how to express their vulnerability and authenticity. "If you want people to perform for you, you can't do it any more by ordering them, just as the moment you force your children to do anything, they will do the opposite. It's all about guiding, persuading and influencing." Companies that can't cope with the touchy-feely stuff may be able to sustain themselves in the short term, he says, but, with the way society is changing, this won't last long: "Anyone who doubts the validity of this, go home and shout at your teenagers and see how that works." ♦