

Corporate Fat Cats

By Stuart White
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What did you do over the Easter week-end? Perhaps you had a few friends over for a braai - boerewors, steak and chops with a bit of garlic bread standing in for the salad, because we really do like our meat in Botswana, don't we? And yet it's a bit weird I know, but I've always harboured a secret guilt complex about eating meat, some sort of masochistic compulsion to go veggie. I suspect it's a nostalgic throwback to my student days in the 80's when vegetarianism was trendy. Whenever I meet a vegan I always feel compelled to ask them why, when and how? Followed immediately by 'what's wrong with you?' and 'don't you miss it?' Well, they must do, mustn't they, because it can't be a barrel of laughs, chewing on raw carrots and supping soybean stew. Noble, granted; fun, absolutely not!

If I'm honest the real reason I haven't joined them is partly because I don't have their resolve and partly because it's a backward move. For thousands of years, we gathered a bit of fruit, a few nuts and some root vegetables. That was fine so far as it went, but we soon got bored with that so we invented spears and whenever there was anything to be caught, we hunted animals. And when we got back to the cave after a hard day's hunting, we ate what we caught. All of it – there were no fridges back then, remember, and besides, Neanderthal man didn't need to count calories since their periodic gorging was usually followed by enforced fasting when no food was readily available.

Today we are all consumed with our weight and our diet and as individuals we have taken this preoccupation into the corporate arena. And this obsession with size and shape may well be why ours will be known as the era of right sizing - downsizing, rationalising, trimming, cutting back, call it what you want – it all amounts to the same thing - waging a war against organisational fat. It all came to the fore recently as a result of the global recession – companies forcibly put on a starvation diet, retaining just enough of a skeleton staff to survive, rather like war-time rationing.

The word diet derives from the Greek 'diaeta' which means a way of life. A diet is nothing less than a philosophy for living, yet when we try to apply a sensible dietary regime to our organisations with a view to trimming them and turning them around, the emphasis seems always to be on the number of bodies we have as opposed to the weight of skills and talent they individually and collectively contribute. It's that old 'never mind the quality, feel the width' type of thinking – keeping on an unwieldy workforce because we are somehow convinced that big is beautiful. But if we're serious about improving our shape, the unwanted fat that we really need to shed is the unquestioned paradigm that length of service and years of experience are the ingredients for success.

It continues to amaze me that when we try to right-size our organisations, we first cut back on all the creative departments and people, and stick with what we mistakenly take to be the safe option – the tried and tested people and methods, forgetting that yes, they were tested but they were found wanting. It was that lack of a creative spark that got us to the mess we are in. And the 'last in, first out' downsizing tool is really a killer because it essentially says toss out the new, clean, invigorating blood. I guess it amounts to organisational bulimia! What really takes the calorie-laden corporate cake, however is keeping the Chief Executive Officer in place when that's who was basically responsible for the unhealthy weight gain in the first place. It's something you come across all the time, ineffective Board members completely taken in by a failing CEO who can point the finger of blame in any direction except their own and convince them that their continuation is a given.

So when we want to trim our organisations, we need to steer away from putting our employees on the conventional scale which only measures the bare facts of length of service, age and qualifications, and gravitate towards assessing the value factors and orientations of our employees – checking their psychological fit and fitness. Essentially ensuring employees who remain have the right philosophy and belief system about what is desirable and important within the corporate culture and that this is aligned with the organisation's aims. There are already clear indications that the recession is beginning to reverse and organisations will soon be able to do the same – hiring, not firing, expanding, not shrinking, but unless we apply those strict standards of corporate fit and value, those organisations will quickly return to where they were – fat and unhealthy and too out-of-shape to move!

It's exactly like yo-yo dieting - when you let go then re-recruit like crazy with no strategy or insight then all you are doing is purging and overeating in turn. It doesn't make you feel good, just bloated and lacking in energy. So here's some food for thought - be it human or corporate bodies, the only secret to good health is simply keeping fit, staying in shape and only taking in what you actually need to maintain that perfect size.

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