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Should School Feel Like a Family: Lessons from Business Controversy as Interpreted by Decision Making Theory

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SHOULD SCHOOL FEEL LIKE A FAMILY: LESSONS FROM BUSINESS CONTROVERSY AS INTERPRETED BY DECISION MAKING THEORY

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Traditional business theory promoted the ideal of business as a family: everyone should feel good about each other, all employees should feel good working together towards a joint goal. Recently, however, researchers claim that the well-promoted ideal is unattainable, it is a ruse causing everyone to overwork. Instead, these researchers propose a non-emotional collaboration of adults working temporarily on a joint project. In this paper, we show that this new trend is not just based on anecdotal evidence, it actually has a solid foundation in decision theory. So maybe we should apply this new trend to teaching too – and place less emphasis on the need for everyone to become friends and for team-building? Maybe -- like the new business trend suggests -- we should reserve our feeling for our real families?

SHOULD BUSINESS FEEL LIKE A FAMILY: A CURRENT BUSINESS CONTROVERSY

The traditional approach to managing a successful business used to always emphasize the desirability of having good feeling about each other, behaving like a group of friends. Numerous team-building exercises were used to bring people closer together.

An ideal company was viewed as a place where everyone is passionate and empathetic about everyone else, where there is no rivalry or indifference, and everyone happily strives towards a common goal -- working overtime if necessary.

No company has yet reached this perfect goal, but many are trying, and people are inspired by this great vision and work harder and better.

Teaching usually follows the same ideal: teachers and students should feel like a big family, caring about each other, helping each other, working together towards the same goal: learning.

All this sounds reasonable and familiar, but recently, a new trend of research appeared that claims that this idea is unattainable, that this is just a ruse to make people work overtime -- and that the employees' attachment to the workplace "family" comes at the expense of attachment to (and time spent with) their real family, at the expense of their own happiness.

Moreover, the new research claims that this desire to make work feel like a living family is actually counterproductive to the companies themselves: overworked, over-stressed employees make mistakes and are not as productive as they could be.

They cite examples of unorthodox -- and very successful -- companies that abandoned this quest for the unattainable ideal, companies that promote purely professional no-emotions relations between colleagues, without rah-rah-rah cheering, without team building, just a group of adults coming together for a reasonable time to do something which is beneficial to everyone involved.

WHAT DOES DECISION THEORY SAY ABOUT IT

One can cite -- as business books usually do -- examples of billions of dollars gained and lost by companies of different types, one can cite research about overworked Japanese salarymen and their high suicide rate -- or interviews with happy employees of big software companies enjoying their free lunches and yoga studios. However, this is all anecdotal evidence.

To get to the bottom of this controversy, let us analyze this situation from a more solid, more theoretical viewpoint. It all largely boils down to one major question: is the ideal company -- as described above -- attainable?

Definitely in some places, this has been attained to some extent, but no one would argue that it has been attained perfectly already. So is it an ideal worth fighting for, as the traditional management theories claim -- or is it an impossible ruse, as claimed by the new unorthodox (but already very popular) theories.

So let us get to the crux of the matter and analyze, from the decision theory viewpoint, whether the above ideal is attainable.

To perform this analysis, let us recall how mutual feelings are described in the modern decision theory. The main idea behind this description was first proposed in (Rapoport, 1956) and (Rapoport, 1969). It was then further developed by many others, including a Nobelist Gary Becker; see, e.g., (Friedman, 1986), (Berhnheim and Stark, 1988), (Bergstrom, 1989), (Kreinovich, 1990), (Hori and Kanaya, 1991), (Becker, 1991), (Bergstrom, 1991), (Tipler, 1994), and (Nguyen et al., 2009).

In this description, the happiness $h(i)$ (to be more precise, the utility) of each person i is determined by this person's objective conditions $c(i)$ and the happiness of other people:

$$h(i) = c(i) + a(i,1)*h(1) + ... + a(i,n)*h(n),$$

where each coefficient $a(i,j)$ describes to what extent the person i is passionate about the person j. This coefficient is 0 if i is indifferent towards j, it is positive if i cares about j -- and, of course, it is negative if i hates j, to the extent that i feels good if j is miserable ("these are your just deserves").

From this viewpoint, let us analyze the supposedly ideal company with n employees. In this ideal case, everyone is equally feeling good about others, so all the values $a(i,j)$ are equal to the same positive number $a(i,j) = a > 0$ -- a number significantly larger than 0. In the ideal company, everyone should also be treated equally well, so we can also assume that all the objective conditions are also equally good: $c(i) = c$ for some $c > 0$.

In this case, the above equation takes the form

h = c + (n -- 1) * a * h.

By moving all the terms containing h into the left-hand side, we conclude that

h * (1 -- (n -- 1) * a) = c.

And here we have a problem. The value n is large, the value a is reasonably positive. Thus, we have (n -- 1) * a > 1. So, the difference in the parentheses in the left-hand side is negative -- and thus, since h > 0, the whole left-hand is negative. But the right-hand side c is positive! This contradiction seems to confirm that the ideal situation is indeed not possible.

So how do we make sure that with c > 0, everyone is happy? In view of the above formula, the only way to achieve this is to make sure that (n -- 1) * a < 1, i.e., that a < 1/(n -- 1). For large n, this means, in effect, that a should be either 0 or negative.

Of course, no one advocates hating each other as a way to a productive business -- so the conclusion is that we should have a = 0. In other words, we should not try to entice warm feelings between employees, we should not try to make them feel like a family -- it is much better to have a group of willing adults who rationally decided to work together on a common goal.

Let us keep emotions where they belong: in the actual family.

SHOULD SCHOOL FEEL LIKE A FAMILY: PROBABLY NOT TOO

The same conclusion can be made about a school. It seems like attempts to make a school feel like a family, both to teachers and to students, may be somewhat misguided. Yes, we all work towards the same goal, but there is no need to develop an emotional attachment to your classmates, to your teacher, to your school -- such an attachment, as the above analysis (and anecdotal evidence) shows, can lead to unhappiness and negative feeling. Our common goal is learning, let us approach it rationally, as a group of rational kids and adults, and let this strategy lead us to new successes.

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