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AGRIBUSINESS MANAGEMENT

THE MANAGER AND HIS BETTER HALF

The Setting

The situation was one not very atypical of the agribusiness industry. The location was a “private lounge” of a new motel near a major West Coast metropolitan area. The occasion was a private “going-away” party presented in honor of Mr. B. J. Albert (not his real name), General Manager of a relatively large agribusiness corporation with its regional headquarters in the nearby city.

I had known Mr. Albert for about three years. In 1968 I had worked with Mr. Albert’s firm in an attempt to facilitate a merger. While the merger attempt failed to materialize, I had maintained some professional contact with Mr. Albert from that time on. In the industry, Mr. Albert’s name was well known and his professional background was near legend. He returned to college after serving in World War II. However, marriage and a child gave Mr. Albert a new set of responsibilities, and he did not finish an engineering degree. Instead, he moved to the coast with his young family and took a job driving a feed delivery truck. He was ambitious and he possessed a delightful personality. These two characteristics soon assured Mr. Albert of a new job selling farm machinery. Over the following years, a series of related jobs, and after a rather rapid sequence of promotions, Mr. Albert found himself in the General Manager’s position. His managerial

performance was almost flawless. His firm’s sales and profits improved. He worked long hours and was never satisfied with a project until every last detail was taken care of. Finally the offer came for Mr. Albert to accept this new position and he was now officially accepting the best wishes of his West Coast colleagues and business acquaintances.

The Tragedy

The going-away party noted above was a truly gala affair. The before-dinner cocktails were flowing as freely as was the friendly conversation. It was well known that Mrs. Albert always chose to remain quietly in the background of her husband’s professional career. Yet on this particular evening, Mrs. Albert was in attendance, and I had the opportunity to meet her for the very first time. Her forced smile made it obvious to all that she was feeling most uncomfortable in this particular and most unfamiliar setting. Perhaps it was her uneasiness that encouraged her to make a series of rapid advances on the cocktail bar. The results were both predictable and devastating. Dinner was still almost an hour away when Mrs. Albert began to lose her reserve. For the next thirty minutes, Mrs. Albert staggered from one corner of the room to another blurting out, in a loud tone of voice, a long series of serious domestic problems which had plagued her marriage and her family in recent years. Mrs. Albert was not present for dinner that evening. She retired to her motel room as her husband occupied the honored chair at the head table;

his image was shattered, his confidences violated, his indiscretions publicly disclosed, and his deficiencies as a husband and father now fully known by all those in attendance.

Mr. Albert has now moved to the Midwest. Yet his old business colleagues will never forget the going-away party. It was actually a blessing that Mr. Albert moved to a new position because he could never regain control of his old firm. Employee respect was diminished, customer loyalties were shattered, and general industry gossip would forever haunt his career.

A Broader Perspective

The incident described above was true. It relates to a personal tragedy that is no more common to the business world than it is to American society, as a whole. Yet, somehow, the impact of a domestic squabble between a business manager and his wife is more traumatic, longer lasting, and more pervasive as it affects not only the parties directly concerned, but also the firm's operations and the livelihood of its employees. The natural question is, "How could Mr. Albert do such a magnificent job managing his firm, while allowing his domestic affairs to become so anarchistic?" One may argue that a separation of a manager's personal and professional life must be maintained. Such an argument is based on the falsehood that the two are emotionally separable and functionally independent. When a broader perspective of the situation is taken, one begins to surmise that a manager's two lives are emotionally inseparable in all but the rarest cases, and that each is functionally complementary to the other. The objective of this paper is to develop more fully this theme of interdependence. In particular, I will dwell on the two most common areas of manager-wife conflicts and offer some thoughts as to ways such conflicts can be minimized or

avoided. While the bulk of this discussion relates to a manager's domestic stresses, it should not be forgotten that a major end product of an improved family life is improved managerial proficiency.

Note: I am not a sociologist or a psychiatrist. Nor am I proposing to become a professional marriage counselor. In fact, I would admit to very nominal qualifications in this area: e.g., I can only point to 9 years of my own happy marriage, 5 years of observation of managers, and a little outside reading on my own. Yet, I believe the subject to be important enough to warrant some comment, even if it is from the mind of a novice.

A Prisoner of Your Position

Most managers, I am sure, never consider the imposition their professional position might have on their wives. Yet in many ways, your wife is being asked to carry some of the burdens of your job. Sound absurd? Not really. For example, consider the well-known imposition that occurs when you telephone your wife at 4:30 p.m. to inform her that you will be bringing a customer home for dinner that evening. Or, because of her fear of handicapping her husband's advancement, the wife conditions herself to conceal her complaints. In some cases this may be common courtesy, but in other situations, this represents another imposition. These and other impositions contribute to the domestic stress that exists in all families. It is when this level of stress reaches unmanageable proportions that trouble begins. As a group, executive wives are unique in that two types of domestic stress are particularly prevalent in their day-to-day lives. First is the stress associated with the husband's susceptibility to a job transfer. The average woman does not react favorably to a situation which places her and her family on notice of immediate transfer.

The second stress is that associated with being married to a man whose professional demands set him apart from the average 8-to-5 wage earner. Each shall now be discussed in more detail.

The Nesting Instinct

Sources of domestic stress imposed by a potential job transfer lie deep within the psychological differences between men and women in our society. Most women liberationists would disagree, of course, but in my judgment, most women have a “nesting instinct” which motivates them to create a warm and comfortable home for their family. Whether this “instinct” is a natural born trait of all women, or whether this pattern of conduct is the result of societal pressures is an argument I have little desire to pursue. I maintain only that the pattern does exist. Not only does the woman seek some degree of permanency in her home, she devotes a great deal of time and energy to the home’s decor so that it becomes an expression of her own personality. Moving to a new location, therefore, becomes a traumatic event. The husband-manager forgets that his professional prestige automatically accompanies him to his new location, while his wife must start again from scratch in establishing her identity in the new community.

Just recognizing that this problem exists and discussing it with your wife will likely help to dissipate the fears associated with an anticipated move. Once the move occurs, a slightly different policy would seem warranted. The demands of your new job will be great and you will be tempted to spend some extra long hours at the office. Unfortunately, your wife is also struggling with the change, e.g., getting the kids enrolled in school, seeing that a telephone is installed, the garbage is collected, and

worrying about whether her furniture will arrive on time and undamaged. It’s exactly at this time that you should make the decision to spend an extra hour or two at home every day helping your wife and family get settled. A quick weekend vacation, an afternoon’s drive in the country, or even a special night out on the town might help break the tension which inevitably builds up over the relocation process.

Balancing Your Needs

The ultimate solution, of course, is to discuss the relocation difficulties prior to the decision to accept the transfer. The family, as a whole, must attempt to balance the benefits of the new occupational opportunity against the negative impact the move will have on each member of the family. Your son may have gained status and respect in a local sports program. Your wife may be deeply involved in a community project. These and many other considerations must be balanced against the husband’s personal need to pursue a promising managerial career. The husband’s lifelong professional goals may be fully satisfied with his present job. Or, his own goals in the corporate hierarchy may be only partially fulfilled, and the fact that his family appears to be holding him back may foster an ugly resentment that becomes most difficult to dissolve.

At such times, emphasis should be given to full family involvement in the planning process, individual life goals, and desired life styles. Unfortunate incidents, like that described in the introduction, tend to occur when the wife and family just drift, automatically following some programmed sequence of advancement by the husband-manager who maintains the position that “only I” count.

Do You Take Your Job Home with You?

A long-standing debate revolves around whether or not the husband-manager should discuss his business activities with his wife and family. Good reasons and sound judgment support both sides of the debate.

In my opinion, wives have little desire to share company secrets. Yet a modest knowledge of their husband's occupational pursuits is necessary. Typical is the misunderstanding many wives have regarding their husbands' business trips; e.g., while hubby is away dining in the best restaurants of San Francisco and Denver, the wife is stuck at home minding the kids and tending to her many assorted domestic chores. The wife is convinced that a business trip is just a legitimate way for her husband to take a vacation. Yet I find very few professional men who truly look forward to an extensive business trip. Why do these divergent views exist? The answer to this relates directly to the second major factor contributing to unhappiness between a manager and his better half, i.e., a sense of professional jealousy between marital partners. The wife is envious of her husband's mobility, his jet set travel and accommodations, and his apparent burden-free life style. In turn, the husband-manager is envious of his wife's stability, her access to a more placid and serene life, and her ulcer-free domestic accomplishments. One way to reverse this selfishness is to begin to recognize each person's individual interests and accomplishments. Many wives develop interesting projects in their homes or communities. That such projects do not produce a paycheck should not mean that the husband's work is important and his wife's frivolous.

Our cultural heritage says that the man is the "head of the house." In many professional families, however, that authority is

delegated to the wife. She handles the records, pays the bills, maintains the house, and buys all the provisions. In brief, she may be as much of a business manager as her husband. A few well-placed compliments will restore her self-respect. Take note of the fact that her approach to managing the household is not so dissimilar to your approach to managing a business.

What Is Your MMI (Manager's Marriage Index)?

Many truly successful managers look upon their careers as an enjoyable and challenging means to an end -- with that end being a more comfortable family life. With this attitude, the manager will likely find that in the long run, his on-the-job performance will increase. A good family relationship is well worth the effort because the major byproduct of domestic happiness is enhanced management productivity.

How do you stand? Answer "yes" or "no" to the following questions and then check your own MMI.

_____ At the end of a working day, do you look forward to the dinner meal with your family?

_____ Yesterday did you make a point of spending a few minutes alone with your wife, sharing your thoughts and feelings?

_____ Do you recall what grades your children received last semester in school?

_____ Do you know your family's weekly food budget?

_____ Does your -wife know your total annual income?

_____ Is your wife familiar with what you actually do at work?

_____ Does your wife know your business friends and associates?

_____ Have you ever cancelled a business appointment to participate in your wife's favorite civic activity?

_____ Do you know the title of the book your wife last read?

_____ Do you know the names of your children's playmates?

_____ Did you and your family mutually agree on the plans for your last vacation trip?

_____ Can you name three of your wife's most favorite restaurants?

_____ Can you list your children's favorite television shows?

_____ Have you discussed your

_____ Did you accompany your wife to the last meeting with your children's teachers?

Your MMI Rating:

11-15 Yes answers -- you and your wife are probably coping well with the stresses imposed by your career.

6-10 Yes answers -- your job may be taking too much of your time. More attention to your family's activities is in order.

1-5 Yes answers -- take a serious look at your family life. Change your work pattern, and save more of your time and energy for your wife and family.

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