**Schumpeter: Here Comes Super Boss**

A cult of extreme physical endurance is taking root among executives

In a crowded field, a contender for most absurd business-related tweet of the year must surely be the World Economic Forum (WEF) for its “14 things successful people do before breakfast”. They get up with the lark, avers the article being promoted in the tweet. They exercise furiously. They spend time on a “personal-passion project”. (“Novel-writing and art-making are easy to skip when you’ve been in meetings all day.”) They connect with their spouses. (“What could be better than pre-dawn sex to energise you for the day?”) They make their beds (because this is supposedly correlated with increased productivity). They spend quality time with the family. They network over coffee. They meditate to clear their minds. And so on. But they still find time to work on an important business project.

The tweet was quickly drowned in ridicule. One commenter said this represented a busy month for him. Another noted that it appears successful people don’t take showers or get dressed. But for all its inanity, the WEF’s tweeting does point to something real: a growing cult of extreme performance among the Davos crowd. In the pre-industrial world, elites abided by a code of conspicuous leisure. In the era of gentlemanly capitalism, they replaced this with a code of effortless superiority. Today’s code is all about effortful superiority: the successful deserve their success because they get on the treadmill and sweat.

Successful people make a great fuss about getting up early. Laura Vanderkam, a “time-management expert” who inspired the WEF’s tweet, says that, in a straw poll of 20 executives, 90% woke up before 6am on weekdays. Brett Yormark, the boss of the Brooklyn Nets basketball team, is said to get up at 3.30am; and Indra Nooyi, the CEO of PepsiCo, at 4am. Bob Iger of Disney reportedly rises at 4.30am; whereas Jack Dorsey apparently slouches in bed until 5.30am, despite running two companies, Twitter and Square. Your columnist once had a 7am breakfast with Michael Milken, the inventor of junk bonds. Offered a sticky bun, Mr. Milken declined on the ground that “I’ve already had a pre-breakfast breakfast with a Nobel prize-winner.”

An early start is followed by furious exercise. David Cush, the CEO of Virgin America, is on his exercise bike shortly after getting up at 4.15am. Tim Cook of Apple is in the gym at 5am. However strenuous the workout, it is often combined with other tasks. Mr. Cush reads, makes phone calls and listens to a sports-radio station while cycling. Mr. Iger once told the *New York Times* that, while exercising, “I look at e-mail. I surf the web. I watch a little TV, all at the same time.” And all while listening to music.

A striking number of bosses are going further and becoming devotees of extreme sports. John Rost, the president of Fiesta Insurance Franchise Corporation, has climbed the highest mountains on seven continents (the “seven summits”). Rick Davidson of Century 21 Real Estate spends his spare time climbing mountains, skydiving, scuba diving, racing NASCAR vehicles and flying fighter jets. Sir Rocco Forte of Rocco Forte Hotels and Michael Johnson of Herbalife are among the bosses who take part in regular “CEO Challenges”, in which they push themselves to their physical limits through such things as triathlons and 100-mile mountain-biking trails.

This cult of hyper-performance is nurtured by a growing army of personal trainers and yoga coaches who make their living by fine-tuning and de-stressing business leaders. For example, Ursula Burns, the CEO of Xerox, schedules an hour with a trainer twice a week at 6am. Business magazines bulge with articles on how to train like a Navy SEAL or how to achieve “cognitive fitness”. Business schools and corporate in-house “universities” compete to have the most expensive gyms. Deloitte’s new $300m training facility, near Dallas, Texas, has a 12,000 square-foot (1,100 square metres) fitness room whose classes start at dawn; and SAS, a software firm, has run a 90-day “leadership and energy for performance” programme for its high-flyers.

**Pill-popping**

The cult of super-performance may now be spreading into more troubling areas. First, brushing privacy concerns aside, some companies are experimenting with using wearable devices to monitor their executives’ vital signs. One provider of such monitoring systems, Peak Health, lists Goldman Sachs, Bank of America and several hedge funds among its clients.

Second, according to one CEO, several of his peers are now dabbling in mind-boosting drugs such as Modafinil and Ritalin, which aid concentration. This trend is likely to intensify: surveys of American university students suggest that one in six now use mind-boosting drugs to get through their exams, a habit they may continue in their subsequent careers. Once again business is learning from both the sporting and military spheres. Sports teams routinely use biometric devices to track their star athletes (and occasionally drugs to boost their performance). America’s armed forces are experimenting with “go pills” that help fighters function for long periods without sleep.

It is time to call a halt on all this hyperactivity, before it gets out of hand. There is no doubt that many bosses have heavy weights resting on their shoulders. But are they likely to make these decisions better if they arrive at work exhausted and sleep-deprived? Working around the clock is probably a sign that you are incapable of delegating, not that you are an invincible hero. Frenetic multi-tasking – surfing the web while watching TV while listening to music – is a formula for distraction, rather than good management. And bosses who think of themselves as supermen and superwomen can weaken their companies. As Peter Drucker, a management guru, once pointed out, “No institution can possibly survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organised in such a way as to be able to get along under a leadership composed of average human beings.”