

## The 'always on' Leader<sup>1</sup>

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You're probably wondering why I find it so important to protect time. Well, time is an endangered species in the business world.

Meet Michèle. Born in France, she is a successful senior executive in an American company and has been living in the UK for the last five years. She is married to an Englishman, has no children, one big dog and a large country house close enough to Heathrow airport. She is first-and-last in the car park each day (first to arrive, last to leave) like a punctuality check for the security staff – *"if this is Michèle, it must be 7 o'clock"*. Because of the time difference with the USA, when she gets home, Michèle connects to her email system via the company-paid home broadband.

Evening glass of wine in hand, she often picks up the phone to talk to an American colleague if she sees something on screen that needs immediate attention. When travelling, she uses, of course, her Blackberry and laptop so flow of email is more or less 'all the time/always on'. She uses all possible wi-fi spots in airport lounges or wireless internet in hotel rooms. She checks her voicemail system several times a day. Michèle has staff reporting to her in Germany and France and a boss in San Francisco. The latter likes to call her at 'any time'. Michèle's mobile is never switched off – it is not the number of calls from her boss (not many, to be fair) but the necessary feeling of 'just in case'.

Michèle is a case of a 365/24/7 connected employee. She is an always-on executive.

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<sup>1</sup> Initially posted on [www.theleaderwith7faces.com](http://www.theleaderwith7faces.com), January 2008

Her husband, an IT manager, told her once that she was in reality an 'extension of the network'. Michèle's contract says something about 38 hours a week but she is in fact working for her company 'all the time'. She is part of a tribe of global managers with an unofficial, unwritten 365-days-a-year commitment who are 'permanently on call'. Whether in the middle of cooking fettuccini or in the bath, Michèle is 'never disconnected'. Her favourite verbal stereotype is "*I have no time.*" She usually means she is in a hurry but, in reality, the statement is actually a pure representation of her reality. She literally has *NO* time. She does not possess it anymore. She is part of an era described by Jacob Needleman, professor of Philosophy at San Francisco University, as 'the time famine'. Michèle has given up her most valuable asset. Her last.

### ► **21<sup>st</sup> Century presentism**

We all know one Michèle or two. Perhaps she is you? Forget all that stuff about work/life balance. The Michèles of this world have an all-in-one package. Corporations have reinvented 'presenteeism' (the old insistence that you must be at your desk, every day, clock-checked, etc.) in the form of a '365/24/7 on call, online, wireless, Blackberry, real-time manager'. In fact, for many senior managers, there is no longer the expectation of a nine-to-five physical presence at the office and the 'rules' have been 'relaxed' (!) or replaced with occasional or, indeed, pre-agreed working-from-home days. Nine-to-five is no longer a good sign of commitment. 24h-open-shop is. What is largely perceived as liberation is nothing more than a sophisticated form of dependence. Place has been traded off for time. The company office or module has been traded off for a mobile telephone, a Blackberry and a fast internet access line at home.

Far be it from me to draw a picture here of malicious corporations with Machiavellian plans for a slave workforce, a subtle form of 24h control of people's lives, written down by the Board in a secret black book. If there is any guilt at all, it is three-fold: employers, employees and the nature of the Information Era.

In the current knowledge economy, it is difficult to escape the multi-task, multi-assignment, any-place, any-time job. Technology allows us to be 'anywhere'. Emails have brought an 'end-of-distance' to our desks. They bring to you instant data, and ask you for an instant answer from your instant knowledge pool (whilst you are probably drinking instant coffee). It is real-time business, a '24 hour society'. To be a successful manager progressing towards a bigger corporate destiny has become incompatible with a nine-to-five job or, indeed, a Monday to Friday one.

Airports on Sunday afternoons are full of executives ready to fly for a Monday morning meeting somewhere far away. Michèle does that. An additional problem is that she had not *realised* that fact until a colleague asked her recently to spend a few minutes on her own calendar. Michèle's perception was: "*Leaving on a Sunday evening? I do it occasionally.*" In reality, for the previous six months, she had hardly had a full weekend at home. 'Insight' went out of the window in the company of 'time'.

There is a real danger for organisations today to allow or promote the progressive evolution towards an entire always-on managerial and leadership class. Time-less leaders will be no good to anybody, corporations or families. When there is no time to think, there is no time for being. Time-less leaders are *doing* all the time, they have no time for *being*. If it sounds a bit New Age, so be it! Intelligent corporations, large or small, deserve intelligent leaders.

Intelligent leaders will have to encourage the protection of employees' time as opposed to the absorption and further commoditisation of their last remaining asset. The more they act to protect a sort of endangered species, the more they will benefit from people with a functional brain who are actually capable of using their minds, as opposed to logarithmically multiplying the email traffic and skilfully contribute to the internal information pollution of the company. There is still time. Isn't there?

You can read more about this dimension (Time and Space) by choosing from this list:

- [It's time, stupid!](#)
- [Protecting time](#)
- [Leadership and the end of time](#)
- [Leadership is creating spaces](#)
- [Social space](#)
- [Sitting quietly alone](#)
- [But I never heard the builders](#)
- [100K investment lost](#)
- [Intrapreneurs at the gates](#)

You can also read more about the other two dimensions by choosing from this list:

2. [Homes](#)
3. [Legacy](#)

If you want to read more about leadership or want to continue reading from the above, you can read it all in my book [\*The Leader with Seven Faces: finding your own ways to practice leadership in today's organization.\*](#)