

Suicide as the Ultimate Response to the Effects of Globalisation? France Télécom, Psychosocial Risks, and Communicational Implementation of the Global Workplace

Sylvie P. ALEMANNO

University of Nice, France

Bertrand CABEDOCHÉ

University Stendhal at Grenoble, France

Abstract

The work-related suicides at France Télécom can be seen as a symbol of systemic failure deriving from a previous corporate culture – one in which top management largely saw success in terms of the economic results of the company. A company must operate as a system open to its surrounding environment in order to survive. But without any communicational implementation and managerial interpersonal skills, this system can be profoundly destabilized. This is particularly true when a dramatic launch into the *global market place* imposes a new rationalization of work in the form of a *project-based organisation*. We focus not directly on what might be termed *harassment* but rather on the mediation of global pressures that result in employees thinking that they, individually, are responsible for every failure. This in turn leads to a pervasive feeling of solitude and disconnection. The psychosocial risks ensuing from this deregulation of the system point to a failure of management, as well to a loss of meaning for individuals in regard to their work and a *symbolic disconnection* (*desymbolisation*) from the company.

Keywords: Organizational communication, work-related suicides, managerial ethics, psychosocial risks, cultural disruption, global market place, desymbolisation

Work-Related Suicides as French Idiosyncrasy?

Within the past two years, thirty-four France Télécom employees have committed suicide as a way, according to the major national newspapers, to escape “*the hell*” of their own company’s human resources management. The brutality of these suicides coincides with the violence of its economic take-off into the global market. France Télécom was initially a civil service company, operating within a national market as a monopolistic operator.

This impressive success of France Télécom seems to reveal an apparently singular and paradoxical characteristic of France: the ability within the context of *globalization* to very quickly engender a managerial culture acutely aware of all subtle economic indicators, but at the same time unable to identify the psychosocial and cultural risks of its international restructuring.

Indeed, the suicides at France Télécom, after those at Renault four years ago, and more recently at La Poste (the French postal service), seem to confirm an incapacity of French management to successfully relate to employees as human beings and to understand some

fundamental cultural specificities beyond the level of professional performance in a global market. The consequences of these risks have been profound, unlike companies in Great Britain, Canada, and Scandinavia, for example, which have seemingly managed to avoid such tragic outcomes over the past decade, or in Spain where *Téléfonica*'s recent mutation to adapt to global market requirements has been managed with a better understanding of human needs.

However, France is not the only country where work-related suicides within global organizations take place. France shares the highest rate of work-related suicides with Japan. Also, recently the Taiwanese company Foxconn that produces electronic equipment for Nokia, Sony, Dell and Apple suffered ten employee suicides. In fact, the Chinese newspaper *Zhongghuo Qingnian Bao* called it a "*France Telecom symptom*". In May and June 2010, some Chinese media focused on its similarities to France Telecom explaining the reasons of suicides among Foxconn employees, speaking in terms of "*sweat and tears workshops*", "*a lack of psychological and internal communication device*", "*negative reactions from top management*" or "*a general passivity from politicians*", according to Liu Daocai, journalist for *Zhongghuo Qingnian Bao*, in June 2010, published in *Le Courrier International*, 2010, p. 48)¹. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the incidence of work-related suicides is increasing in the United States too, at least since the 1980s (Moore & Viscusi, 1988).

Understanding what triggered the France Télécom symptom while the company was in transition from a national government-owned organization to an international project-based one is therefore crucial and relevant, not only for France, but also for many other multinational firms across the world.

Systemic and Socio-Clinical Approaches

Organization as an Open-Ended System

Traditional global marketplace theories consider differences of cultures, standards and structures as vestiges of the past. In addition, the assumption that consumer demands and desires are evolving uniformly, whatever is being consumed, leads to the conclusion that the behaviour of producers and workers must evolve in a parallel manner regardless of what is being produced (Levitt, 1983). During the early 1990s, this drive towards reconfiguration dominated management sciences, ignoring social and cultural factors, and giving primacy to the rules and logics of global trade. Today, however, companies are speaking the language of *glocalisation* rather than *globalisation*, recognizing – in principle – that individuals, human groups and companies as well as other entities have their own local identity, with specific needs to be met (Hampton & Wellman, 2002). At the same time, this depends on a rich environment from which it is possible for the company to draw the indispensable resources (Morgan, 1977, p. 36). This approach leads us to consider an organization as an open system (Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Le Moigne, 1984; Mucchielli, 1993) and to evaluate its opportunities in terms of *homeostasis*,

¹ According to Liu daocai, journalist for *Zhouguo Qingnian Bao* (June 2010, cited in "Le Syndrome France Télécom Frappe la Chine", 2010).

i.e., its ability to implement a self-regulating mechanism to preserve its stability (Dutermé, 2007, p. 72). To succeed against new economic challenges, it is now time to favour a matrix empowering culture (“*management matriciel*”) more than exclusively a hierarchical one. So, still more than before, internal communication includes every interaction and its own context as well. Every internal actor must be connected to the system, so that the “*interaction order*”, as Goffman would put it (Goffman, 1992), governs the fundamental context where exchanges become meaningful (cited in Mucchielli, 1993, p. 77).

Suicides as a Result of Desymbolisation

However, as in the case of France Télécom, this ideal theoretical management can be hindered by a strongly bureaucratic organization and a rigid hierarchy, which corrupts the intended empowerment and the potential of creativity attached to the project. As a result, the organization can no longer generate empowering symbols. The work loses its subjective and collective meaning and becomes reduced to instrumental action. The consequent psychosocial risks, including suicides, indicate a failure of management, as well as a loss of meaning for individuals in regard to their own work, including a loss of symbol connection to the company (a ‘*desymbolisation*’). Normally, the symbolic connection to the company ensures and reinforces a protective feeling of belonging among employees. As this link loosens, employees come to feel abandoned, adrift in a zone of insecurity. There lies danger. Thus, the hypothesis must be considered: suicides constitute a last tactical opportunity to make an impact (to create an *atmosphere*), in order to socially and virtually exist (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

We thus state that a bureaucratic national organization in transition towards an international project-based organization risks leading the system to self-destruction when no internal personnel-oriented communication is developed and ready to be implemented.

These negative effects correlate in part with the speed of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and news media broadcasting, harassing the human beings with details that they can no longer manage with the expected reactivity.

Method

Methodologically, our study of the France Télécom is a qualitative analysis of verifiable and recurrent news items and testimonies available from different concurrent sources. Specifically, our study is comprised of:

- 1) a media content analysis that we made of the coverage of France Télécom suicides;
- 2) interviews that we conducted with former advisers to France Télécom and several other external respondents;
- 3) testimonies that we obtained from books (Dervin & Louis, 2009; Du Roy, 2009; Moreira & Prolongeau, 2009; Talaoui & Nicolas, 2010, et al.) and directly, from our own inquiries;
- 4) data that we collected from various websites, such as Mediapart;

- 5) insights that we deployed from previous research and theoretical literature;
- 6) public reports from public relations of France Télécom.

Criteria for use of news item in this study: Each published and public item of news used to support our study, was validated by cross verification of at least three sources: generalist TV and at least two broadsheet newspapers.

Together, these materials allow us to probe both the epistemological and the praxeological impact of negative developments within the company, in particular the limits of the necessary psychological and communicational readiness (*a fortiori* when it is absent) in dealing with employees during a management project.

So, combining a systemic and socio-clinical approach to a company with the available data, our question is: can a company considered as an open-system restructure itself into a project-based organization if the top of its hierarchy is disconnected from its base? In other words, can it afford to ignore its responsibility to the ‘human factor’ at the expense of some of its employees’ lives?

A Failure Leading to an Infernal Spiral

Privatization and Scale of France Télécom Downsizing

France Télécom was initially owned by the French government as a part of the civil service operating within a national market. As soon as it was privatized and emerged on the international market, the company launched itself into the mercilessly competitive market of global telecommunications, until it showed a balance of fifteen billion Euros between 2002 and 2006 and appears now as a world leader within the telecom industry.

When they assumed their positions in 2005, the two heads of France Télécom, Didier Lombart (CEO) and Louis-Pierre Wenes (Chief Executive in charge of operations in France) shared the same ambition: to transform the company from “*grandpa’s telephone to internet livebox*”. Up until the first months of 2010 they were totally dedicated to making a success of the cultural revolution of globalization that the emerging organization required. They were leading the business based on their own understanding of Human Resources (HR): job relocation at least every three years connected to the necessary restructurings; multi-specialization rather than retraining; planning of voluntary retirements and departures among employees. The scale of their restructuring plan included 20,000 redundancies over three years with another 20,000 to follow during the N.E.X.T. (“Nouvelle Experience des Télécommunications”, or New Experience in Telecommunication) downsizing plan, all connected to the obligation for every manager to be a “*cost killer*”, as called by its employees.

They were convinced that human beings were primarily a resource, connected to know-how, and should become “*un centre de profit*” (a profit center). Employees were further considered as “*une variable d’ajustement*” (a variable that could be molded and adjusted) and ideally reduced in terms of salaries, in the same way as other costs.

Under their leadership, the management adopted the same approach: stigmatizing a “*lazy culture*” inherited from the civil service tradition, establishing individualized and systematic control of job performances, instituting compulsory job mobility, and proclaiming ambitious

project goals to stimulate excellence thanks to a permanently tense work atmosphere. One external agency, recruited as a communication and management advisor for France Télécom, considers such guilt-creating pressure to surpass and transcend oneself similar to that supposedly needed by a high level athlete: *“when you yourself believe that your work is finished, you should realize that it is only 50 percent finished”*.

Chronology of a Crisis

As France Télécom seems to offer its 34th human *“sacrifice”* on the *“altar”* of its economic success, how could we explain this heightened level of internal crisis over this four-year period?

Chronologically, a crisis within a company usually follows three stages (Ollivier, 1999, p. 21):

- 1) The first one corresponds to confusion about products and self-image of the company as well as among the personnel: *“I do not have a profession any more. I no longer take pleasure in coming to work”*². This bears witness to a shared nostalgia for a civil service model, when one could take pride in one’s expertise and service to the community, this being the only indicator of performance.
- 2) The second stage correlates with a permanent loss of the company’s credibility among employees (*“discreditation”*), when stigmatization erodes support and understanding: *“our leaders do not know what to do and how to do when they have to manage social and human issues; I no longer have any faith in them”*.
- 3) The third stage reveals a disintegration of the individual’s social identity: *“I am losing my motivation for life because of my loss of motivation for work”*.

Image Confusion and Cultural Disruption

First, the announcement of imminent change for France Télécom came in the worst possible way for employees: *“Now the mussel picking is over”*³, Didier Lombard infamously announced, seemingly ignoring that he was implicitly denigrating the traditional values of civil servants. He later tried to correct the blunder, claiming this was only a joke. But at this juncture, people were no longer inclined to laugh: the CEO had promised dark days ahead, without any concrete precision: *“we do not quite know what is going to happen [...but], the company needs to adapt in a hurry”*. For some employees, the message was clearly decoded: *“now, we are useless”*. The systematic job reassignment – *“time to move”* (in English, in Wenes and Lombard’s words) – seemed to reinforce this perception combined with the aim of attaining immediate multi-specialized integration for every transfer. *“I am barred from a job I liked, the management and maintenance of the network, to a task as an agent in a call center for which I have no skill nor desire”*.

² Every quoted citation in this paragraph comes from words of France Télécom employees.

³ Referring to a popular French song, singing the virtues of a slow and stress-free ordinary life away from the brutality and turmoils of an urban life, as a symbol of illusion and domination, progressively becoming as a symbol of globalisation (Sassens, 2001).

Progressive “Desymbolisation” or Discreditation

To insist on multi-specialization can become a paradoxical order from middle management: “*You must constantly be the best in every part of your mission. But don’t burn out*”. At the same time, training courses can play a somewhat perverse role. When a company provides training programs and imposes this as a way of fostering employee adaptability, the inability to live up to either of these statements is viewed as a confession of weakness and a lack of professionalism. It can be seen as an act of ingratitude and unkindness, especially if one just expresses doubts about *communication gurus*. In order to increase the level of performance of executives, consultants are now commonly hired by big organizations and literally infest those with pseudo-certainties, ensuring for themselves generous fees, domination of the trainees, or lobbying access to executive managers – an ideal opportunity and strategy for a sect of so-called *do-gooders* (Lardellier, 2008). But inside the system, disputing the basically inhumane and ‘dissocialized’ characteristics of these training techniques of pseudo-knowledge can be seen as a refusal to perform and also a direct challenge and a transfer of the employee’s or the middle manager’s own responsibilities to the hierarchy.

This difficulty to publicly disagree with the characteristics of the training proves that in a company, communication can be reduced to an instrument for professional control but cannot be used as a sphere of genuine discussion or debate. Here, a French peculiarity can in fact increase the pressure: the *social compromise* – i.e., the restricted frame for negotiation between top management and social partners. In France, this forbids any discussion about fundamental choices taken by upper echelons of a company, unlike in Germany or the Scandinavian countries. A whole range of debates comprising what Habermas calls *the public sphere*⁴ is thus denied to employees, even if decisions impact their own future directly (Floris, 1995; Le Moëgne, 1995). At France Télécom, some employees speak about a management of change being reduced to indisputable orders. While deriving from the workplace area, the consequences are strongly felt by the individual all the way outside the company, through to their private life.

Destruction of Self-Identity: Delocalization Leading to Dislocation

In this process of loss of genuine communication, managerial coherence dissolves, accelerating the loss of meaning among employees. Every manager in the hierarchy adds orders he considers he must give, often in an uncoordinated manner with different time frames. However, in evaluating nothing more than the desired result, he focuses on the *prescribed time* and not on the *real time* needed to obtain the result (Dejours, 1998). Soon, Wenes’ injunction “*time to move*” completes the dislocation, leading to the eradication of a feeling of recognition in every constitutive element (Honneth, 1996): **spatial dislocation**, when we know how the psychic balance of a human being needs to feel comfortable inside his/her own physical

⁴ Speaking in terms of public sphere, Jürgen Habermas describes this power of critical exercise of reason and, (in the first edition of his book) its decline under the effect of mass culture, organization of political life to the beat of public opinion polls and management of information (Habermas, 1989).

environment; **financial dislocation**, if we correlate relocation to the stagnation of home-buying markets, to the probability of unemployment for the employee's partner, to the increasing cost of commuting ("*I was transferred 300 kilometers away*"); **professional dislocation**, ("*when I was automatically moved from HR to a technical service, I felt incompetent, useless*"); and finally **relational dislocation**, ("*Now I feel afraid of hierarchies, colleagues, neighbors, friends, relatives. I don't dare to express myself any more*").

Thus, in a seemingly paradoxical way, some desperate people can assert their will to escape the "*non-choice*" with the ultimate and definitive act of suicide. This paradox is only a superficial one, if we consider that, as noted above, suicides could correspond to a last tactical opportunity to create an impact, in order to socially and virtually assert one's existence, according to Noelle-Neumann (1994).

France Télécom as a Symbol of a Mediatized and Global Psychodynamic

Media play a double role in this context, revealing but also accelerating the "*infernal spiral*" (or later, its reversal too), when the internal injunction is to obey a rule of silence about the dysfunctions deriving from restructuring. We must speak in terms of a *psychodynamic* when a media reframing tends to transform the relation to the situation and the meaning it takes on (Marc & Picard, 1984, p. 100) i.e., the way people see their own jobs and their own identity at work, for example. The media coverage that framed problems in terms of abstract organizational dynamics could also easily allow the *human factor* to re-appear (Dejours, 1998; Dejours & Bègue, 2009).

With the exception of *generalized public relations* (Miège, 1997), initially defined by large corporations, the media maintain difficult relations with such companies. Differences of communication patterns create misunderstandings between these two sets of actors. Journalistic coverage can provoke a stressful state of mind within a company. Furthermore, the media feed back an internal crisis, particularly when it turns into sensationalism. The character of the event constitutes one of the factors for media coverage and builds on all the elements of dramatic art (Revéret & Moreau, 1997, p. 20). So, the commercial media logic of attracting and retaining as large audiences as possible, the *effet de captation* (Charaudeau, 1997) (a catching effect) can explain the projection of the event into the journalistic limelight, as we witness in the mediated portrayals of recent suicides of France Télécom employees (hanging, jumping out of the window or from a bridge, hara-kiri, self-immolation by burning, suicide by shot-gun), sometimes on company premises.

In this way, France Télécom's internal crisis becomes an external one, which feeds back on the company itself. Because a situation of crisis corresponds – for at least some of the employees – to an absence of effective theoretical and procedural frames to evaluate what is taking place, (Coman, 1983, p. 116), communication skills are desperately needed. France Télécom, alas, has learned to mobilize them only slowly and painfully.

To manage such a crisis, the precarious state of the situation justifies an official recognition inside a company's communication department to be considered as a source for investigative journalism. But this recognition must also serve to reconstruct a new scenario inside the company, to feed back to the employees, after they have seen the coverage in the news media. Negative

media effects increase when a company communication department restricts its responsibility to only publishing an internal press release. Doing that, it forgets that the construction of the news always continues: *“To inform is to stage the event”* (Revéret & Moreau, 1997, p. 20). So, its role needs to be active in this way too, to support a psychologically enfeebled population of employees.

Yet France Télécom looms large as an example of a failure to implement precisely such successful internal communication (Cabedoche, 2009).

France Télécom’s Failure to Implement a Successful Internal Communication

Certainly, it is not easy to establish the relation between work and suicide, either in a medical or legal context. But clearly, we know now, it is a management mistake to wait for evidence of work-related suicides before acting, and to systematically develop a denial, claiming that proofs of a social pathology are not yet established. Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened. France Télécom’s leaders always worked with such a state of mind. They were systemically reluctant, delaying before giving any feed-back, maintaining a strategy of silence ever since 2006, when the company’s doctors already first warned of the situation (recently, one doctor offered his resignation from the Grenoble office, exhausted from being ignored). In 2009, the company CEOs Lombard and Wenes did not seem any more inspired, focusing exclusively on erasing any connection between work and suicides; blaming other factors without any inquiry (*“he had problems with his girlfriend”*, *“the media prompted the idea of death”*, *“labour unions manipulate the cases”*); disqualifying any interpretation that the suicides are work-related suicides, as other economic leaders used to say (*“to believe in the existence of something that does not exist is what psychiatry calls a delirium”*)⁵; speaking about a *“detestable fashion of suicides”*; at last, Lombard appearing on TV laughing and joking with a female journalist while a new suicide was being announced!

A Contaminating Effect

And for France Télécom, it seems that the CEO kept secret other suicides that took place two years previously, according to media sources. On the outside, this media coverage of deaths has provoked a progressive deterioration of the image of the company. But inside, the consequences must be analysed according to two paradoxical options. On the one hand, it could open free discussion for employees, at last authorized to speak about their own experiences and about management practices inside their company (Dervin & Louis, 2009; Talout & Nicolas, 2010, for example). On the other hand, when the system is rigid, media reports of suicides work as an accelerating factor for the phenomenon. A *contaminating effect* has already been proven beyond the France Télécom case: when an idea, for example, suicide, was previously

⁵ Mr Padieu, President of Committee of Deontology of French Society of Statistics, in « Sur une vague de suicides par René Padieu » [About a wave of suicides, with René Padieu] , *La Croix.fr*, october 28th 2009, 19h19, <http://www.la-croix.com/article/index.jsp?docId=2398353&rubId=53401>.

not considered an option, its actual occurrence, reported by journalists, turns it into a possible course of action for others. As such, a repetition of suicides (or suicide attempts) would constitute a strong warning, an individual's shouted signal about his or her suffering, with an ultimate solution in view. Media exposure becomes a booster when at the same time, clients become aggressive with operators, or when first level managers are ascribed guilt. Psychosocial risks are now moving towards passivity and torpor as well as towards desperation.

Resulting Psychodynamics

In such a system, the behavior of hierarchies is significant. Apparently, no one managerial layer seems to be '*contaminated*' with suicides. Our own inquiry allows us to define a profile of the typical suicide: a senior employee working in a sales division. But apparently, there were no suicides in the managerial echelons, at whatever level of seniority. This does not mean, of course, that these managerial layers don't suffer from pressure.

We can understand these developments in the light of a "*new ethic of capitalism*", founded on the project-based model of the organization of work. In developing this perspective, authors (Boltanski & Chapiello, 1999) explain that after May 1968, a part of critics against capitalism claimed that the nature of market society is an inauthentic one and is a disaster for the creative abilities of human beings. It is precisely this critique that business leaders have recovered later, arguing for their turn on ethics. In such a new spirit of capitalism (a libertarian one), the network model becomes an emblem. So, in this model, to be ethically promoted now presupposes that any employee demonstrates his own aptitude for mobility and adaptation, and any manager demonstrates too his own capacity to generate projects, i.e. the impulse to seemingly create connections to make things happen. The target is now to be integrated into networks, instead of the previous civil service meritocracy system which relied on qualitative results. But in fact, this model stands in stark contrast to what is called a "*connectionist world*" of constant networking, people being more and more isolated because the project-based model of the organization of work does not take care of the well-being of employees, but corresponds to what is needed for the well-being of contemporary capitalism.

Moreover, in a system like France Télécom, the lower levels of the company must integrate very quickly based on a hierarchical solidarity principle and minimize the disastrous effects of restructuring, to stand inside the managerial network. But at the same time, the management has to respond to the panic of its own employees – which of course connects with their own growing anxiety. Recent testimonies in the media confirm middle hierarchies in France sharing a feeling of being demoted⁶. One employee, 44 years old, a manager in a gas company, explains: "*We work hard to the benefit of our company, and we are the first victims of restructuring*". Another, 53 years old: "*We are less and less involved in any decision, but we are more and more under pressure to make it effective in the field*". A third one: "*We feel ashamed to be so psychologically disturbed: the rule is not to speak about that. Officially, we ask for some holiday*

⁶ "Le sentiment de déclassement monte chez les cadres" [A feeling of decommissioning is growing among middle management], *Le Monde.fr*, 2010, February 20th.

time and coming back, we try to seem as well as we should be". And others: "*Impossible to escape: with new information and communication devices, we must be connected at all times*"; "*and now, one more pressure comes from actual redefinition of criteria for retirement*".

Communicational Distortion Strategy

Coming back to France Télécom in such a context, we must speak in terms of a "*communicational distortion strategy*" (Dejours, 1998, p. 70), a reversal of Habermas' theory of *communicative action* where the initiative derives from the top hierarchy and successively steps down through the managerial layers to the lower levels.

Facing such a paradoxical situation, a lower managerial layer is legitimately involved in two key strategies that the top hierarchy is normally supposed to lead, according to principles usually associated with efficient management of a major crisis. On the one hand, a very quick decision needs to be taken, in order to limit any participative response from the employees and to facilitate the urgent adaptation of a strategy without losing time waiting for a consensus. On the other hand, a symbolic act is also required, externally and internally too, to boost the launching of other significant actions, and thereby, reduce the emergency (Plottu, 1998, p. 155; Gabay, 2001, pp. 16 and 194; Institut National de Recherche et de Sécurité [INRS], 2007).

Recent studies connect some of the suicides at work to a *moral harassment*, from reports of the company doctors leading to a trilogy: a harassor, a harassed and a passive silent group (Hirigoyen, 1998; Pezé, 2008). In the past, the literature used to speak in terms of a *collective denial*, to explain a social acceptance of distress and other psychological afflictions from human behaviors (not only at work). But they aim to explain a denial as a rejection of one's own responsibilities: "*I am not guilty, I was just one small link in a hierarchical chain*" (Cohen, 2001). With France Télécom, the denial must be analysed in a new light, mobilised in order to extend the responsibilities of every employee to every kind of event. The silence of the executive board is predicated not really on a denial of suffering but rather of any relation of the suicides to work, in order to protect the image of the company. So, everyone is required to see through this falsehood. In return, each one receives information only if it is useful for that target. This is why we can speak about communication in terms of a *distortion*, as some other authors say (Dejours, 1998, p. 78).

We know how even the small details of *speech acts* (Austin, 1962) and managers' behavior can have effects on employees (Gramaccia, 2010). Hence, in the current crisis stage at France Télécom, such CEO acts are particularly harmful to the confidence among managers, at whatever level of seniority in the hierarchy. Pride can quickly move into shame, from different converging factors: silence and passivity; lack of positive feedback from the company; public recognition of the failure to make the organizational project a success. As a result, the organization can no longer generate empowering symbols. The work loses its subjective and collective meaning and becomes reduced to instrumental action. Except for the very top management, every managerial layer is now dominated by a principle of a collective acceptance, based on fear and a trivialization of the company's mistreatment of its workers. For middle management, the threat looms that their work will now to be judged as incompetent, devoid of hope for a new promotion, or even disqualified for the future.

Limited Options for Survival

De Certeau's theories (De Certeau, 1980, pp. 62-63), particularly the difference he made between *strategies* (the construction of a theoretical totalitarian system and discourses) and *tactics* (the opportunities to transform a situation for one's own benefit), together with data we gathered from other companies can help us to establish a typology of the reactions manifested by various layers of the hierarchy, who are so vulnerable and subjected to conflicting demands. Their options for survival are limited.

- 1) The first one is to sublimate the constraint: I am the hero who assumes to do the *dirty work*, useful for the company's competitive edge. To confirm this, the hero selects data and a vocabulary to idealize the self-image linked to performance (Pagès, 1979): "*This is a job for you, who like challenges and on whom we can rely*".
- 2) A second adaptation tactic is to transfer the constraint. Living the same denial as his/her own leaders, a manager unloads the tension on his/her own employees by disqualification: "*it is true that they are incompetent*". In France Télécom, management forcefully took this view at a so-called *Red carpet* seminar, when top leaders humbled each department director in turn.
- 3) A third and last option is to override the criticism: to work a lot, putting oneself under higher pressure, to be out of the purview of any hierarchical criticism. "*I am a workaholic. So, nobody can scream at me*". In any case, the costs are very high: *karaoshi* (burn-out), isolation, depression. "*How to be a friend with such a person?*" "*Nobody likes me, not even I*".

To stop such an infernal spiral supposes that a top manager considers a crisis as a *constructive antagonism* (Loneux, 1999, p. 106; Mucchielli, 1993, p. 77). When a company works like that, the situation can stimulate tremendous creativity.

A Crisis as a Constructive Antagonism for France Télécom's Rehabilitation?

Under the pressure of the French government, still as one of the financial partners of France Télécom, measures were finally taken, both on a decisional and symbolic level.

Representing the face of "*management by terror*" by labor unions, Louis-Pierre Wenes was finally sidelined and Stephane Richard was introduced as the future CEO. Seen as open-minded to dialogue, his first decision was highly symbolic: the launch of a toll-free telephone number and a look-out observatory for suffering at work (even if the benefits of such devices had been evaluated as limited in other places).

To open negotiations, supposed to be a first corrective step for a company, France Télécom decided to suspend any systematic job mobility, any publicizing of individual objectives and performances. At the same time, 380 employees were recruited with permanent contracts. However, when such a fundamental level of crisis is reached, it takes more than internal communication and small measures of psychological help to successfully solve the problems.

Not Only Small Measures

Following the suicide of three of its employees in 2007-2008, Renault inaugurated a program of listening to its employees so that people could share their problems without any censorship. A D-Day (a “*dialogue day*”) was even established on this principle. In 2009-2010, France Télécom launched the same strategy, and the outcome of this consultation is supposed to bring about new attitudes. Based on the conviction that the first step towards social healing is to make the illness visible (Moreira & Prolongeau, 2009), training for managers to detect and handle work-related suffering and a rebalancing of workloads have been planned. It is also necessary to reengage with the employees and to deal with their understandable resistance. Thus, from September 2009, France Télécom started to speak in terms of “*a new social contract*”.

In February 2010, French Minister Xavier Darcos, decided to rank French companies according to their success in dealing with pressure at work (it is a diagrammatic scheme that uses colours to allocate shame: France Télécom’s notation is actually *orange*; *green* is the best notation, *red* the worse). In turn, France Télécom responded in July 2010 by planning a new strategy based on a human perspective and called “*Reconquest 2015*”.

The Old Ways Die Hard...

The balance is never guaranteed, however. In July 2010, against experts’ opposition, the new CEO Stéphane Richard decided to reclassify one of the suicides as a work-related accident. France Télécom continues to suffer, in spite of his statements and measures. Consider once more Renault as an example of treating suicides as a social pathology: three years after beginning its program of relieving job stress, the company suffered one more suicide. If these deaths are officially recognized as work-related suicides – which is probable for some of them – such a conclusion underscores that it is impossible on the one hand to lock a people into some managerial or communicational determinism and on the other hand to avoid oppressive and destructive circumstances inside a company’s management system. Even if a project-based city first appears as attractive...!

Conclusion

The social, religious and legal history of suicide inhabits the dark corners of contemporary societies; there is a lot of difficulty in speaking about work-related suicides. Usually, either colleagues, union activists or a staff at the top of the company impose silence about such deaths. But the phenomenon is not new. A lot of occupations have long been defined as high risk, such as prison guards or emergency doctors. But an everyday work exposure to death, violence, disease or crime is not the only condition for suicides. Even if causation is not so direct and systematic and does not cover all cases, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health defines work-related suicides *a priori* from a double criterion: *localization* (in the workplace) and *temporality* (during working time). However, the direct relation between suicide and the pathogenic environment of a company only began to be analysed in 2007 in Japan (Tsutsumi & et al., 2007).

When researching downsizing, human resources management systems and the restructuring of companies associated with a lack of internal communication, it is now historically easier to make the connection to the responsibility for suicide. First, as Durkheim argued in 1897, a company could be a source of a psychological disruption and beyond this, the whole society could be a cause of suicide: suicide is the utmost expression of *anomie*, and it represents a loss of harmony between the needs and the means of human beings (Durkheim, 1897). After Durkheim, the suicide phenomenon finds a social etiology that even the Enlightenment philosophers were unable to confer, trapped as they were in an irrevocable ethical condemnation stemming from the religious ideology (Crocker, 1952; Brunschwig, 1974; McManners, 1985; Cahn, 1999). The first genuinely reflexive and secular framework emerged only in 1810 when the Napoleonic Code enacted the decriminalization of suicide (Campéon, 2003, p. 6).

Other recent studies about work-related suicides link those to a ‘harassing’ trilogy: harasser, harassed and passive silent group (Hirigoyen, 1998; Pezé, 2008). To explain the social acceptance of distress and other psychological afflictions (not only at work), the past research literature used to speak of a *collective denial* and explain it as a rejection of one’s own responsibilities, as we said: “*I am not guilty, I was just one small link in a hierarchical chain*” (Cohen, 2001). With France Télécom, the denial must be analysed in a new light, mobilised in order to extend the responsibilities of every employee to every kind of event. As we indicated above, the silence of the executive board pivots not on denying suffering but on avoiding that any connection can be made between suicide and the realities of the workplace, in order to defend the public image of company. Everyone must play along, and receives only that information which is deemed useful for this goal. Here the notion of *distorted communication* — to speak as Dejours & Bègue called (2009, p. 78) — becomes relevant in a very compelling way.

To enlarge our reflections beyond the specific France Télécom case, we must conclude that the socially connected person, who was supposed to become autonomous at the turn of 1980s, has again fallen victim to the demand of *heteronomy*, both in terms of time and space. His/her own availability must be practically a total one, predicated on a condition of porosity between private and professional spheres. The company’s project becomes a tyranny with a permanent and uncontrollable momentum that changes one’s relations to money, to work, to colleagues, to relatives, and not least to oneself. All of that with the order for every employee to develop himself/herself, his or her own “*positive vision of the company*”. Consequently, connected to the objects of communication and the ceaseless exchange relieved by information and communication technologies, every opportunity of resistance or criticism is seriously compromised (even if it is still possible not to become determinist).

In this context, the much-discussed “*business ethics*” (Heller, 2009) takes on a certain ironic character. The “*humanity*” of a company engaged in such a brutal stampede into the *global market place* can be understood as a delusion in the enactment of organizational communication (Marzano, 2008, p. 110), strengthened with professional prostheses (Lascombes & Le Galès, 2004). It is supposed to facilitate professional interrelations and open space structures, yet enlarges the control exercised by the *panoptical institution* (Foucault, 1974, p. 241). For example, phone-tapping during exchanges with customers is presented as a decision-making support, but in fact becomes merely a practice utilized by the general manager project, and, worse, contributes in turn to moral erosion. The combination of the two key notions of

evaluation and *skills*, which characterize the world of work, now govern new anthropological and semiotic forms in which human beings are trapped (Alemanno, 2010; Cabedoche, 2009). Today, an implicit law dictated by financial markets demands a new competency of employees: an extreme geographical, psychological, cultural, linguistical and professional flexibility. So a new social stake is exponentially enlarging with globalization: “*les petits*” (the immovable lower echelons of the organisational hierarchies) who previously could only remain locked in place, are now pulled by organizational projects promoted by “*les grands*” (the elites), into a process of isolation and exclusion without a lot of chance to create new social links, merely because “*it is time to move*”!

As an alternative to this dehumanizing process of isolation, we can imagine the emergence of critical reflection within movements for standards of justice in a genuine socially connected world, built by the actors themselves who could be more autonomous against the power of global capitalist interests (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). Such movements would connect with the fundamental needs of human beings and social and local implanting of information and communication technologies. At the same time, we should avoid the illusion embedded in such notions as a new *hybrid* man (Appadurai, 1990): our analysis suggests we should know better.

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