

The extreme loneliness of the high level executive

Barry Knight

The ambition of many in professional careers is to rise to the highest possible senior executive position.

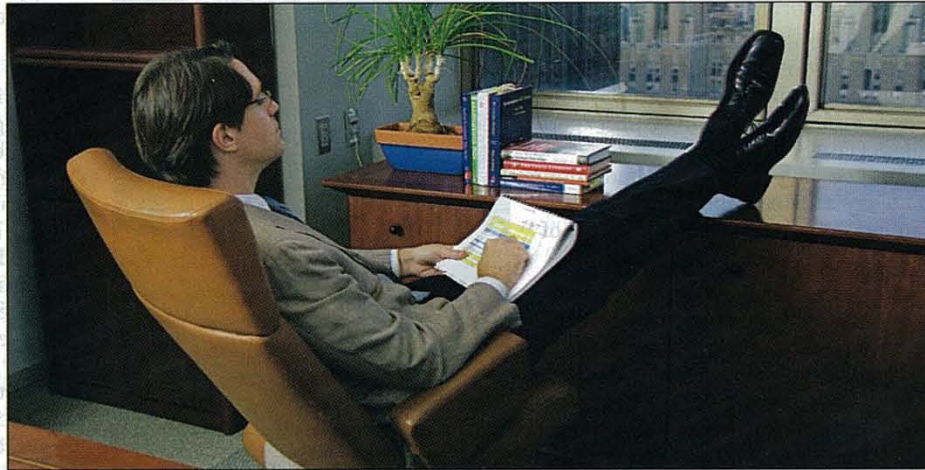
Driven by the challenge and the desire to be successful, aspirants also look for status, prestige and sometimes power.

The financial reward or wealth derived from such success is another prime motivator. Outsiders only see the trappings of success – the high remuneration package, top of the range vehicle, the designer suits, the executive home, the boat, the overseas holidays with family, children at private schools – the list goes on.

What is not often observed and certainly rarely talked about is the downside of such success. The reality of an executive role is that the average working week is somewhere between 55 and 70 hours.

It means catching the first flight out in the morning (5am start) and catching the last flight home at night. Both domestic and international trips are invariably pressured for the executive, who needs to maximise both time and opportunity during the trip.

For some reason no one



MR LONELY: There's a downside to the high salaries-and-perks lifestyle that's not so obvious to an outsider

is ever 100% relaxed with their senior or executive officer. Therefore executives must be on guard at all times particularly when travelling in the company of a subordinate either out of town or out of the country, a wearying factor in itself.

The amount of time spent alone in strange cities or countries, combined with the long and stressful working hours, all affects home, family and personal life. Personal interests inevitably get pushed to last position in the priority queue.

Loneliness can be a constant companion of the executive who generally

has a smaller network of close friends. The nature of the executive role is such that it is easy to grow away from a circle of friends the further one's career develops. Developing new and true friends can prove difficult.

Social unease

Many people are unaware that handling success is similar to coping with failure. Often executives and senior managers find it difficult socially being in the spotlight. Being constantly asked questions about the company, or hearing the grizzles about the share price, can be tiresome.

Many simply use any spare time to shut themselves off from people, which further exacerbates the loneliness problem.

Female executives, both with or without families, experience the same pressures and because of the male dominance that is still prevalent at executive level, often experience an extra dimension to executive loneliness.

Frequently there is no one to share concerns or worries with, particularly when the time comes to make tough decisions or calls that impact significantly on people. Or, as strange as it may seem, even

to share their success. While both can be shared to a certain extent with the board, subordinates, colleagues, staff members and family, there are limitations.

Many high profile executives exude confidence and outwardly give the impression that all is well. However, some of the most successful leaders have a lonely face behind the mask.

One of the most invaluable lessons I have learnt is making the time to meet peers who understand the pressures at an executive level. This can be done in a semi-formal environment through a networking organisation such as The Executive Connection.

This is formal in the sense that members meet regularly once a month as opposed to relying on making connections with other executives at social functions. The meetings represent an opportunity to discuss business problems with other chief executives.

The "undiscussable" can be talked about in total confidentiality.

Other priorities

Another positive is the emphasis on "leadership" as opposed to the old "com-

mand control" management style. Leaders do not have to be "workaholics" to succeed. Leaders are now permitted to place greater emphasis on home and family as personal priorities are being put back into perspective.

Home, family, leisure, personal activities, diet and fitness are now part of the daily plan rather than being fitted in or around business. Balance in all things is the ideal for today's executive, although most are still striving to achieve an acceptable level.

It has been said that success in life depends on one's willingness to risk failure. The personal sacrifice and self discipline required to be a top executive is something that is often glossed over in the trappings of success or title.

If senior executives are to continue to perform well and deliver positive results for shareholders and the employees, they must be self aware and address some of the challenges that come with their role.

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