

A Well, thanks to Amazon, I've just finished buying my niece a doll for her birthday.

B It really is convenient to do your shopping like that. A Yes, but I did have some qualms about buying from Amazon this time round. Did you see the newspaper article about working at Amazon?

B I sure did. In the article, they mentioned the long hours employees have to work. They even said that sometimes employees would receive emails after midnight, and then a text message if the email wasn't answered fast enough. There's an aggressive and combative work atmosphere. One former employee even said that he saw nearly every person he worked with cry at their desk.

A In a letter to shareholders, Jeff Bezos, the CEO, said that if you wanted to work at Amazon, "You can work long, hard, or smart, but at Amazon.com you can't choose two out of three". He even said that when he interviewed potential hires, he warned them, "It's not easy to work here".

B Jeff Bezos codified fourteen leadership principles that all employees have to follow. One of them is "Hire and develop the best", the idea being that the company will create an empire of elite workers. These elite employees hold one another to high expectations, so that things like red tape and office politics don't stop them from doing their utmost.

A Another principle is "disagree and commit". The idea behind that is that you should criticize your colleague's ideas harshly. In that way, you'll make the best decisions.

B I'm not sure that disparaging your colleagues, or being so blunt that people's feelings are hurt, is good for the harmony of the company.

A Well, perhaps the most distinctive of Jeff Bezos's management notions is that harmony is often overvalued in the workplace. It would be much easier and more socially cohesive just to compromise and not have any discussion, but that might lead to the wrong decision. He always wants employees to arrive at the right decision.

B The reporter who wrote the article interviewed employees and found they praised the work ethic. They said that they thrived there precisely because they were being pushed past what they thought were their limits. They were motivated by "thinking big".

A I guess you could say that it has worked. Amazon has a market valuation of two hundred and fifty billion dollars, and Jeff Bezos is the world's fifth wealthiest person. Not too shabby.

B Yes, but at what price? There were other examples of work intruding into personal life. Some bosses criticized their staff members when they weren't able to log on to the Internet during their vacations. Most employees spent hours working at home most nights and weekends. There's even a name for these Amazon robots - Amabots.

A One of the most shocking things in the article was the description of the Any time Feedback Tool. Employees were encouraged to praise or criticize their fellow workers by writing comments about them, and sending those comments to management. An Amazon spokesman said that most comments were positive, but I'm not too sure about that. I think that you could easily make negative comments about others. The worst thing is that those comments could be used when reviewing an employee's performance. They could get fired because of them.

B That's an interesting point you make about job performance. I was amazed when I read that forty-year-olds were worried about being replaced by thirty-year-olds who could put in more hours, and the thirty-year-olds were sure that they were going to be replaced by twenty-year-olds who could outwork them.

A Well, you could say it's the survival of the fittest at Amazon. In their recruiting video, a woman warned that "you either fit here or you don't. You love it or you don't. There's no middle ground."

B How did the top people at Amazon react to the article?

A Jeff Bezos said that "the article doesn't describe the Amazon I know." He also said that you'd have to be crazy to stay at a company like that.

B It sure did strike a chord with the readers though. There were over four thousand comments on the newspaper's website. It's one of the most read articles of the year. The question is: will you still continue to buy stuff from a company like that?

Outline Amazon has a market valuation of two hundred and fifty billion dollars and Jeff Bezos is the world's fifth wealthiest person, but at what price has this been achieved?

A newspaper article about working at Amazon provides some answers. Employees have to work long hours and most spend hours working at home most nights and weekends. Among the fourteen leadership principles Jeff Bezos codified is "disagree and commit", that is, you should criticize your colleague's ideas harshly to make the best decisions. Employees are encouraged to praise or criticize their fellow workers by writing comments about them, and send those comments to management. Employees interviewed for the article praised the work ethic, saying they thrived there precisely because they were being pushed past what they thought were their limits.

Questions

1 What is your opinion of the management techniques at Amazon? 2 Will this type of management become more prevalent in coming years? 3 Is it a good thing to be forced to surpass oneself, to do better or more than one imagines one can? 4 Is the management style that is best for the employees also the best for the company?