Book Review

Rhona Rapoport, Lotte Bailyn, Joyke K. Fletcher, & Pettye H. Pruitt
Beyond work-family balance: Advancing gender equity and workplace performance
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002. (244pp)

Reviewed by Mark Hammer

It is hard to pick up a newspaper these days and not read something about workload, work-life balance, or anything else related to the difficulty of "having a life" in today's workplace. As expectations of organizations rise, whether private-sector ones accountable to anxious shareholders, or public-sector ones accountable to citizens, and the downsizing cycle of the 1990's still lingers in spirit and organizational structure if not in headcount, employees and organizations are expected to do more with less, which often translates into overwork. At the same time, with ever more mothers in the workforce, the desire to provide jobs and workplaces that are "family-friendly" has also increased. Work-life balance has become a rallying cry in HR management, and is certainly being leveraged as a recruitment and retention tool by many organizations, but is it really the most sensible way to frame the many issues that are connected to it? Do work and non-working life share an adversarial relationship or some basic incompatibility, such that when one wins the other loses? Is the goal of an organization to achieve an acceptable stalemate between the two by simply tacking on benefits (parental leave, on-site daycare, etc.) or looking the other way when life needs a little helping hand and a few hours?

Rhona Rapoport and her co-authors have collectively been in the gender-equity and organizational development game long enough that I'm ashamed I hadn't stumbled onto them before. However that is less a comment on my reading habits than it is a recognition that the book is the culmination of a lot of lucid and informed thought about both organizations and gender-equity over a lifetime of experience. In a pleasingly slim tome, Rapoport et al., advance another approach which, while superficially appearing to be a slight twist on all of this, is an elegant and powerful little idea. The crux of their thesis is what they refer to as the "Dual Agenda of equity and effectiveness". The Dual Agenda is different than the traditional concept of work-life or work-family balance in that it assumes that work and family or life are not necessarily adversaries, or mutually exclusive entities, for whom a balance or compromise must be struck. Rather, the gist is that everyone wants a life and everyone also wants rewarding work and an organization which is effective, and that often what makes an organization more effective are some of those very things that impact on quality of nonworking life and time to devote to it; that in some sense tackling gender-equity need not detract from the bottom line and may even add to it by uncovering maladaptive organizational practices so entrenched as to escape everyone's awareness. The book goes "beyond" the balance notion by the manner in which it questions how work is done in the first place. What gets lumped together as work-life balance problems in any given organization may well reflect an organization collectively beating its head against a wall and not knowing it. The prescription may well be a redesign of how work is conceived and done, from the ground up. When the recipe is right, both the organization's performance, and the non-working lives of those who work there, are improved.

The complement to this stated goal of pursuing the dual agenda is the belief system that shapes the organization. The authors contend that it is often organizations' belief systems, deeply ingrained in their local culture, that hold them captive. At an individual level, this finds its parallel in what is called "Rational Emotive Therapy" (RET); one of the contemporary forms of psychotherapy which is effective in treating some types of problems in living. The goal of RET is to help the client identify and replace those beliefs they unwisely (and often superstitiously) hold to which are in fact obstructing their progress and contentment as persons, and perhaps even causing them stress. Rapoport, et al., describe and advocate a type of organizational intervention, which they call *Collaborative Interactive Action Research* (CIAR for short), which is a kind of RET for organizations. The objective is to identify and explore those deeply held beliefs about work, performance, and commitment which form part of the organizational culture, and restructure work and organizational functioning in a way which removes the shackles of such beliefs. More than simply a consultation and report full of recommendations to be acted upon, CIAR is very much an extended iterative exploratory method. I don't know that I understand all the nuances of it, but I can safely say that, as a method, it very much reflects the difficulty and timeframe required to change deeply entrenched and institutionalized belief systems. The jaded may shrug it off as a sales pitch for more billable hours. The reality is that you can change your clothes overnight, but changing your theology of work may be a somewhat more involved task and a road travelled one trudging step at a time.

Two of the most salient aspects of the organizational belief system to be explored concern what might be loosely summarized as the schematics and semiotics of work (my terms, not theirs). They suggest that many organizations have drawn their conceptions of what work is, and what organizations are, from highly gender-stereotyped post-war notions or schemas, when the workplace was more homogeneously male and organizational life was different than it is now. Their concern is perhaps not so much that workplaces are gendered in this manner, but that gendered organizations may not work very well anymore, and may not work at all, depending on one's business lines or mandate. By "gendered workplaces", the authors mean not only that women and men may have different jobs, or even that there may be gender inequities in career opportunities or advancement. Rather, gender enters into it in the way one thinks about the organization or the individual employee operating at their peak. The prototypic notion of a top-notch employee may be accompanied by all sorts of implicit assumptions about undertaking heroic tasks under heroic circumstances, and the extent to which they have the role-flexibility to devote themselves to the work. The image of *who* does the work is a powerful shaper of *how* the work will get done and how the organization plans for it to *be* done. If contemporary life was like 1950's TV family dramas, with the same division of household labour, it probably wouldn't be quite so problematic. The difficulty arises when one factors in parents who are managers (and the order of nouns matters), those caring for frail parents, those who want to garden during daylight, people who want to coach soccer, or simply expand their knowledge base at evening courses. The organization that predicates itself on a monolithic masculinized notion of work will do just fine if that's who works there, and if they are either single or part of a single-earner couple, but of course that's generally not who works there anymore. As Rapoport, et al., point out, sometimes the hardest battle in redrafting one's organization is being able to step back and recognize exactly how much the work and organization really *is* gendered.

The second half of their model of the role of beliefs is what one might call the "semiotics" of work: the symbolic or signification function of what one does in the workplace. We not only do work, we do it in ways to mean something to others in our organization, and also to ourselves. What is the way that you perform your job intended to convey? What do you think colleagues and management perceive about you by how you do your work? To what extent is one's work behaviour intended to signify something with reference to the model of the ideal post-war masculine employee? The authors suggest that many work-life balance issues stem largely from the way that the organizational culture infers *commitment* and *competence*. If long hours or unlimited availability are deemed to signify commitment to the organization then work may well be constructed so that employees can put in long hours, and employees will do their work in such a way that they get to show commitment in that manner. But who does such an indicator of commitment leave out and who does it penalize? Perhaps the more important question from Rapoport, et al.'s stance is whether the organization itself is well-served by such a tacit belief about the behavioural signs of commitment. An example from the popular comedy show *Seinfeld* illustrates this nicely. The character of George Costanza (the very image of the bad hire) ends up leaving his car in his parking space at work overnight for reasons completely unrelated to work. The following day he finds that people compliment him in the halls on his dedication, so he exploits it by continuing to leave his car there so that it's the last vehicle people see when they leave at night and the first they see in the morning − his apparent hours are interpreted as a sign of commitment event though he is actually shirking his duties. It's not just cars in parking spots, though. Few of us have not received a work-related e-mail from someone where the time-stamp evoked the reaction "Wow, they put in a long day!". If you're like most, it likely impressed you, and may have even evoked a twinge of envy or shame, since they were working "harder" than you. Colour me guilty, too.

Rapoport, et al., argue that the things that people think they ought to be doing to signify, and be perceived as having, commitment and competence, images of what leadership ought to be, and what "real" work is, may well be a source of overwork, a disincentive to overlooked efforts which add value to the organization, an obstacle to having a life and meeting one's personal commitments outside of work and, in the final analysis, not at all helpful to the organization. That's not to say the faults lie entirely in the employees' misconstrued notions. Certainly individual motives enter into it, but the organization provides a culture in which those motives become translated into specific activities or ways of doing things; there is more than one way to demonstrate commitment. They provide a nice checklist for introspecting about how one's organization signifies commitment and competence, and even if they didn't say it themselves, it's a terrific place to start the dialogue about what could be better in the organization.

A goodly portion of the book is devoted to the process of pursuing the Dual Agenda via their CIAR technique. I'm still not so sure it is a wholly unique approach deserving of a name, but it is thorough and intensive if nothing else. The brunt of it is, not surprisingly, uncovering the beliefs about how commitment and competence are signified and perceived in the organization, and finding out how time is used. A second pillar involves fleshing out how these conceptions are reflected in ways that create both hardship for individuals and counterproductive practices for the organization. As an example, the authors note an instance in a client organization in which projects would invariably be tackled by a "team all-nighter". Following completion of the

project (with copious amounts of overtime), there would typically be a team celebration whose aftermath would take a few days (and a few pots of coffee) to wear off. The recuperation phase was not construed as time lost, and the impact of the period of absence on those other employees needing to interact with the team members was never thoroughly considered. The image of work as a heroic masculine achievement simply gummed up the works for everyone, demanded setting aside non-working life and family obligations, and added little value to the organization..

A third pillar involves coordinated experiments in work restructuring that may be fine-tuned as they go along. The fourth pillar involves evaluating the impact of these mini-experiments. Since the recommendation is that the CIAR technique is best carried out by outsiders, in some respects this component of the book is directed more at consultants than at managers. Much of the same kinds of advice regarding overcoming resistance and sustaining change found elsewhere can be found here as well. If there is a failing in this segment, it is that the authors have a penchant to discuss the technical practicalities of engaging in the consultative work they do with organizations is terms which are perhaps a bit too abstract. Maybe it's me, but the mind wandered too easily here.

To their credit, though, they cite many examples of how there appeared to be an improvement in an organization, but over time (and sometimes over a few years) there was a reverting to pre-intervention ways. Such examples are not only refreshingly honest, but particularly illustrative of how difficult directed culture change is, how painful it must be, and how seldom it simply takes care of itself when launched. It is also a testament to the many ways in which subtler features of the organization and its' gendered work beliefs may be so opaque to its members that they can't even tell when they are falling prey to them.

The authors note that it has been their experience that it is easy to "lose gender" when engaged in dialogues with employees and organizations. In other words, pursuit of the dual agenda can quickly become pursuit of a single agenda when the benefits of work reconceptualization appear to apply to all. They emphasize that there is much to be gained by continuing to incorporate gender issues in the dialogue, not just for fairness, but because it also tends to lead to deeper understanding about the organization.

What is perhaps most delightful about this book, and what makes it such a gift to leaders who wish to foster real change within their organizations, is that it simply asks the questions how *do* you do your work, and is it possibly hurting your organization and your employees? Sometimes the simplest of questions provide the biggest levers for innovation and biggest sparks for change. A quick and rewarding read.

About The Author

Mark Hammer, Ph.D. Mark Hammer is a psychologist and research analyst in the Research Directorate of the Public Service Commission, where he has worked on, among other things, the 1999 and 2002 Public Service Employee Surveys. Dr. Hammer is also a part time professor at the University of Ottawa.