



CENTER FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES

TO: WBC AND MICAH PARTICIPANTS
FROM: MONSIGNOR RICHARD LIDDY
SUBJECT: *Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace*
DATE: SEPTEMBER, 2015

Woodstock Business Conference Mission Statement

The mission of the Woodstock business Conference is to establish and lead a national and international network of business executives to explore their respective religious traditions in order to assist the individual executives:

- To integrate faith, family and professional life,
- To develop a corporate culture that is reflective of their religious faith and values, and
- To exercise a beneficial influence upon society at large

The Conference, grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, welcomes believers who are open to and respectful of one another's religious tradition. It is committed to the conviction that ethics and values grow out of one's religious heritage.

Scripture Reading: Exodus 18: 13-26 *Appointment of Minor Judges*

The next day Moses sat in judgment for the people, who waited about him from morning to evening. When his father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he inquired, "What sort of thing is this you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone while all the people have to stand about you from morning till evening?" Moses answered his father-in-law, "The people come to me to consult God. Whenever they have a disagreement they come to me to have me settle the matter between them and make known to them God's decisions and regulations." "You are not acting wisely," his father-in-law replied. "You will surely wear yourself out, and not only yourself but also these people with you. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now, listen to me, and I will give you some advice, that God may be with you. Act as the people's representative before God, bringing to him whatever they have to say. Enlighten them in regard to the decisions and regulations, showing them how they are to live and what they are to do. But you should also look among all the people for able and God fearing men, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain, and set them as officers over groups of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. Let these men render decisions in all ordinary cases. More important cases they should refer to you, but all the lesser cases they can handle themselves. Thus your

burden will be lightened, since they will bear it with you. If you do this, when God gives you orders you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.” Moses followed the advice of his father-in-law and did all that he suggested. He picked out able men from all of Israel and put them in charge of the people as officers over groups of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. They rendered decisions for the people in all ordinary cases. The more difficult cases they referred to Moses, but all the lesser cases they settled themselves.

Quiet Reflection.

READING Topic: *Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace*

The company is conducting an experiment in how far it can push white-collar workers to get them to achieve its ever-expanding ambitions.

SEATTLE — On Monday mornings, fresh recruits line up for an orientation intended to catapult them into Amazon’s singular way of working.

They are told to forget the “poor habits” they learned at previous jobs, one employee recalled. When they “hit the wall” from the unrelenting pace, there is only one solution: “Climb the wall,” others reported. To be the best Amazonians they can be, they should be guided by the leadership principles, 14 rules inscribed on handy laminated cards. When quizzed days later, those with perfect scores earn a virtual award proclaiming, “I’m Peculiar” — the company’s proud phrase for overturning workplace conventions.

At Amazon, workers are encouraged to tear apart one another’s ideas in meetings, toil long and late (emails arrive past midnight, followed by text messages asking why they were not answered), and held to standards that the company boasts are “unreasonably high.” The internal phone directory instructs colleagues on how to send secret feedback to one another’s bosses. Employees say it is frequently used to sabotage others. (The tool offers sample texts, including this: “I felt concerned about his inflexibility and openly complaining about minor tasks.”)

Many of the newcomers filing in on Mondays may not be there in a few years. The company’s winners dream up innovations that they roll out to a quarter-billion customers and accrue small fortunes in soaring stock. Losers leave or are fired in annual cullings of the staff — “purposeful Darwinism,” one former Amazon human resources director said. Some workers who suffered from cancer, miscarriages and other personal crises said they had been evaluated unfairly or edged out rather than given time to recover.

Even as the company tests delivery by drone and ways to restock toilet paper at the push of a bathroom button, it is conducting a little-known experiment in how far it can push white-collar workers, redrawing the boundaries of what is acceptable. The company, founded and still run by Jeff Bezos, rejects many of the popular management bromides that other corporations at least pay lip service to and has instead designed what many workers call an intricate machine propelling them to achieve Mr. Bezos’ ever-expanding ambitions.

“This is a company that strives to do really big, innovative, groundbreaking things, and those things aren’t easy,” said Susan Harker, Amazon’s top recruiter. “When you’re shooting for the moon, the nature of the work is really challenging. For some people it doesn’t work.”

Bo Olson was one of them. He lasted less than two years in a book marketing role and said that his enduring image was watching people weep in the office, a sight other workers described as well. “You walk out of a conference room and you’ll see a grown man covering his face,” he said. “Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk.”

Thanks in part to its ability to extract the most from employees, Amazon is stronger than ever. Its swelling campus is transforming a swath of this city, a 10-million-square-foot bet that tens of thousands of new workers will be able to sell everything to everyone everywhere. Last month, it eclipsed Walmart as the most valuable retailer in the country, with a market valuation of \$250 billion, and Forbes deemed Mr. Bezos the fifth-wealthiest person on earth.

Tens of millions of Americans know Amazon as customers, but life inside its corporate offices is largely a mystery. Secrecy is required; even low-level employees sign a lengthy confidentiality agreement. The company authorized only a handful of senior managers to talk to reporters for this article, declining requests for interviews with Mr. Bezos and his top leaders.

However, more than 100 current and former Amazonians — members of the leadership team, human resources executives, marketers, retail specialists and engineers who worked on projects from the Kindle to grocery delivery to the recent mobile phone launch — described how they tried to reconcile the sometimes-punishing aspects of their workplace with what many called its thrilling power to create.

In interviews, some said they thrived at Amazon precisely because it pushed them past what they thought were their limits. Many employees are motivated by “thinking big and knowing that we haven’t scratched the surface on what’s out there to invent,” said Elisabeth Rommel, a retail executive who was one of those permitted to speak.

Others who cycled in and out of the company said that what they learned in their brief stints helped their careers take off. And more than a few who fled said they later realized they had become addicted to Amazon’s way of working.

“A lot of people who work there feel this tension: It’s the greatest place I hate to work,” said John Rossman, a former executive there who published a book, “The Amazon Way.”

Amazon may be singular but perhaps not quite as peculiar as it claims. It has just been quicker in responding to changes that the rest of the work world is now experiencing: data that allows individual performance to be measured continuously, come-and-go relationships between employers and employees, and global competition in which empires rise and fall overnight. Amazon is in the vanguard of where technology wants to take the modern office: more nimble and more productive, but harsher and less forgiving.

“Organizations are turning up the dial, pushing their teams to do more for less money, either to keep up with the competition or just stay ahead of the executioner’s blade,” said Clay Parker Jones, a consultant who helps old-line businesses become more responsive to change.

On a recent morning, as Amazon’s new hires waited to begin orientation, few of them seemed to appreciate the experiment in which they had enrolled. Only one, Keith Ketzle, a freckled Texan

triathlete with an M.B.A., lit up with recognition, explaining how he left his old, lumbering company for a faster, grittier one.

“Conflict brings about innovation,” he said.

A Philosophy of Work

Jeff Bezos turned to data-driven management very early. He wanted his grandmother to stop smoking, he recalled in a 2010 graduation speech at Princeton. He didn’t beg or appeal to sentiment. He just did the math, calculating that every puff cost her a few minutes. “You’ve taken nine years off your life!” he told her. She burst into tears.

He was 10 at the time. Decades later, he created a technological and retail giant by relying on some of the same impulses: eagerness to tell others how to behave; an instinct for bluntness bordering on confrontation; and an overarching confidence in the power of metrics, buoyed by his experience in the early 1990s at D. E. Shaw, a financial firm that overturned Wall Street convention by using algorithms to get the most out of every trade.

According to early executives and employees, Mr. Bezos was determined almost from the moment he founded Amazon in 1994 to resist the forces he thought sapped businesses over time — bureaucracy, profligate spending, lack of rigor. As the company grew, he wanted to codify his ideas about the workplace, some of them proudly counterintuitive, into instructions simple enough for a new worker to understand, general enough to apply to the nearly limitless number of businesses he wanted to enter and stringent enough to stave off the mediocrity he feared.

The result was the leadership principles, the articles of faith that describe the way Amazonians should act. In contrast to companies where declarations about their philosophy amount to vague platitudes, Amazon has rules that are part of its daily language and rituals, used in hiring, cited at meetings and quoted in food-truck lines at lunchtime. Some Amazonians say they teach them to their children.

The guidelines conjure an empire of elite workers (principle No. 5: “Hire and develop the best”) who hold one another to towering expectations and are liberated from the forces — red tape, office politics — that keep them from delivering their utmost. Employees are to exhibit “ownership” (No. 2), or mastery of every element of their businesses, and “dive deep,” (No. 12) or find the underlying ideas that can fix problems or identify new services before shoppers even ask for them.

The workplace should be infused with transparency and precision about who is really achieving and who is not. Within Amazon, ideal employees are often described as “athletes” with endurance, speed (No. 8: “bias for action”), performance that can be measured and an ability to defy limits (No. 7: “think big”).

“You can work long, hard or smart, but at Amazon.com you can’t choose two out of three,” Mr. Bezos wrote in his 1997 letter to shareholders, when the company sold only books, and which still serves as a manifesto. He added that when he interviewed potential hires, he warned them, “It’s not easy to work here.”

Mr. Rossman, the former executive, said that Mr. Bezos was addressing a meeting in 2003 when he turned in the direction of Microsoft, across the water from Seattle, and said he didn’t want

Amazon to become “a country club.” If Amazon becomes like Microsoft, “we would die,” Mr. Bezos added.

While the Amazon campus appears similar to those of some tech giants — with its dog-friendly offices, work force that skews young and male, on-site farmers’ market and upbeat posters — the company is considered a place apart. Google and Facebook motivate employees with gyms, meals and benefits, like cash handouts for new parents, “designed to take care of the whole you,” as Google puts it.

Amazon, though, offers no pretense that catering to employees is a priority. Compensation is considered competitive — successful midlevel managers can collect the equivalent of an extra salary from grants of a stock that has increased more than tenfold since 2008. But workers are expected to embrace “frugality” (No. 9), from the bare-bones desks to the cellphones and travel expenses that they often pay themselves. (No daily free food buffets or regular snack supplies, either.) The focus is on relentless striving to please customers, or “customer obsession” (No. 1), with words like “mission” used to describe lightning-quick delivery of Cocoa Krispies or selfie sticks.

As the company has grown, Mr. Bezos has become more committed to his original ideas, viewing them in almost moral terms, those who have worked closely with him say. “My main job today: I work hard at helping to maintain the culture,” Mr. Bezos said last year at a conference run by Business Insider, a web publication in which he is an investor.

Of all of his management notions, perhaps the most distinctive is his belief that harmony is often overvalued in the workplace — that it can stifle honest critique and encourage polite praise for flawed ideas. Instead, Amazonians are instructed to “disagree and commit” (No. 13) — to rip into colleagues’ ideas, with feedback that can be blunt to the point of painful, before lining up behind a decision.

“We always want to arrive at the right answer,” said Tony Galbato, vice president for human resources, in an email statement. “It would certainly be much easier and socially cohesive to just compromise and not debate, but that may lead to the wrong decision.”

At its best, some employees said, Amazon can feel like the Bezos vision come to life, a place willing to embrace risk and strengthen ideas by stress test. Employees often say their co-workers are the sharpest, most committed colleagues they have ever met, taking to heart instructions in the leadership principles like “never settle” and “no task is beneath them.” Even relatively junior employees can make major contributions. The new delivery-by-drone project announced in 2013, for example, was coinvented by a low-level engineer named Daniel Buchmueller.

Last August, Stephenie Landry, an operations executive, joined in discussions about how to shorten delivery times and developed an idea for rushing goods to urban customers in an hour or less. One hundred eleven days later, she was in Brooklyn directing the start of the new service, Prime Now.

“A customer was able to get an Elsa doll that they could not find in all of New York City, and they had it delivered to their house in 23 minutes,” said Ms. Landry, who was authorized by the company to speak, still sounding exhilarated months later about providing “Frozen” dolls in record time.

That becomes possible, she and others said, when everyone follows the dictates of the leadership principles. “We’re trying to create those moments for customers where we’re solving a really practical need,” Ms. Landry said, “in this way that feels really futuristic and magical.”

Company veterans often say the genius of Amazon is the way it drives them to drive themselves. “If you’re a good Amazonian, you become an Amabot,” said one employee, using a term that means you have become at one with the system.

In Amazon warehouses, employees are monitored by sophisticated electronic systems to ensure they are packing enough boxes every hour. (Amazon came under fire in 2011 when workers in an eastern Pennsylvania warehouse toiled in more than 100-degree heat with ambulances waiting outside, taking away laborers as they fell. After an investigation by the local newspaper, the company installed air-conditioning.)

But in its offices, Amazon uses a self-reinforcing set of management, data and psychological tools to spur its tens of thousands of white-collar employees to do more and more. “The company is running a continual performance improvement algorithm on its staff,” said Amy Michaels, a former Kindle marketer.

The process begins when Amazon’s legions of recruiters identify thousands of job prospects each year, who face extra screening by “bar raisers,” star employees and part-time interviewers charged with ensuring that only the best are hired. As the newcomers acclimate, they often feel dazzled, flattered and intimidated by how much responsibility the company puts on their shoulders and how directly Amazon links their performance to the success of their assigned projects, whether selling wine or testing the delivery of packages straight to shoppers’ car trunks.

Every aspect of the Amazon system amplifies the others to motivate and discipline the company’s marketers, engineers and finance specialists: the leadership principles; rigorous, continuing feedback on performance; and the competition among peers who fear missing a potential problem or improvement and race to answer an email before anyone else.

Some veterans interviewed said they were protected from pressures by nurturing bosses or worked in relatively slow divisions. But many others said the culture stoked their willingness to erode work-life boundaries, castigate themselves for shortcomings (being “vocally self-critical” is included in the description of the leadership principles) and try to impress a company that can often feel like an insatiable taskmaster. Even many Amazonians who have worked on Wall Street and at start-ups say the workloads at the new South Lake Union campus can be extreme: marathon conference calls on Easter Sunday and Thanksgiving, criticism from bosses for spotty Internet access on vacation, and hours spent working at home most nights or weekends.

“One time I didn’t sleep for four days straight,” said Dina Vaccari, who joined in 2008 to sell Amazon gift cards to other companies and once used her own money, without asking for approval, to pay a freelancer in India to enter data so she could get more done. “These businesses were my babies, and I did whatever I could to make them successful.”

She and other workers had no shortage of career options but said they had internalized Amazon’s priorities. One ex-employee’s fiancé became so concerned about her nonstop working night after night that he would drive to the Amazon campus at 10 p.m. and dial her cellphone until she agreed to come home. When they took a vacation to Florida, she spent every day at Starbucks using the wireless connection to get work done.

“That’s when the ulcer started,” she said. (Like several other former workers, the woman requested that her name not be used because her current company does business with Amazon. Some current employees were reluctant to be identified because they were barred from speaking with reporters.)

To prod employees, Amazon has a powerful lever: more data than any retail operation in history. Its perpetual flow of real-time, ultradetailed metrics allows the company to measure nearly everything its customers do: what they put in their shopping carts, but do not buy; when readers reach the “abandon point” in a Kindle book; and what they will stream based on previous purchases. It can also tell when engineers are not building pages that load quickly enough, or when a vendor manager does not have enough gardening gloves in stock.

“Data creates a lot of clarity around decision-making,” said Sean Boyle, who runs the finance division of Amazon Web Services and was permitted by the company to speak. “Data is incredibly liberating.”

Amazon employees are held accountable for a staggering array of metrics, a process that unfolds in what can be anxiety-provoking sessions called business reviews, held weekly or monthly among various teams. A day or two before the meetings, employees receive printouts, sometimes up to 50 or 60 pages long, several workers said. At the reviews, employees are cold-called and pop-quizzed on any one of those thousands of numbers.

Explanations like “we’re not totally sure” or “I’ll get back to you” are not acceptable, many employees said. Some managers sometimes dismissed such responses as “stupid” or told workers to “just stop it.” The toughest questions are often about getting to the bottom of “cold pricklies,” or email notifications that inform shoppers that their goods won’t arrive when promised — the opposite of the “warm fuzzy” sensation of consumer satisfaction.

The sessions crowd out other work, many workers complain. But they also say that is part of the point: The meetings force them to absorb the metrics of their business, their minds swimming with details.

“Once you know something isn’t as good as it could be, why wouldn’t you want to fix it?” said Julie Todaro, who led some of Amazon’s largest retail categories.

Employees talk of feeling how their work is never done or good enough. One Amazon building complex is named Day 1, a reminder from Mr. Bezos that it is only the beginning of a new era of commerce, with much more to accomplish.

In 2012, Chris Brucia, who was working on a new fashion sale site, received a punishing performance review from his boss, a half-hour lecture on every goal he had not fulfilled and every skill he had not yet mastered. Mr. Brucia silently absorbed the criticism, fearing he was about to be managed out, wondering how he would tell his wife.

“Congratulations, you’re being promoted,” his boss finished, leaning in for a hug that Mr. Brucia said he was too shocked to return.

Noelle Barnes, who worked in marketing for Amazon for nine years, repeated a saying around campus: “Amazon is where overachievers go to feel bad about themselves.”

A Running Competition

In 2013, Elizabeth Willet, a former Army captain who served in Iraq, joined Amazon to manage housewares vendors and was thrilled to find that a large company could feel so energetic and entrepreneurial. After she had a child, she arranged with her boss to be in the office from 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. each day, pick up her baby and often return to her laptop later. Her boss assured her things were going well, but her colleagues, who did not see how early she arrived, sent her negative feedback accusing her of leaving too soon.

“I can’t stand here and defend you if your peers are saying you’re not doing your work,” she says he told her. She left the company after a little more than a year.

Ms. Willet’s co-workers strafed her through the Anytime Feedback Tool, the widget in the company directory that allows employees to send praise or criticism about colleagues to management. (While bosses know who sends the comments, their identities are not typically shared with the subjects of the remarks.) Because team members are ranked, and those at the bottom eliminated every year, it is in everyone’s interest to outperform everyone else.

Craig Berman, an Amazon spokesman, said the tool was just another way to provide feedback, like sending an email or walking into a manager’s office. Most comments, he said, are positive.

However, many workers called it a river of intrigue and scheming. They described making quiet pacts with colleagues to bury the same person at once, or to praise one another lavishly. Many others, along with Ms. Willet, described feeling sabotaged by negative comments from unidentified colleagues with whom they could not argue. In some cases, the criticism was copied directly into their performance reviews — a move that Amy Michaels, the former Kindle manager, said that colleagues called “the full paste.”

Soon the tool, or something close, may be found in many more offices. Workday, a human resources software company, makes a similar product called Collaborative Anytime Feedback that promises to turn the annual performance review into a daily event. One of the early backers of Workday was Jeff Bezos, in one of his many investments. (He also owns The Washington Post.)

The rivalries at Amazon extend beyond behind-the-back comments. Employees say that the Bezos ideal, a meritocracy in which people and ideas compete and the best win, where co-workers challenge one another “even when doing so is uncomfortable or exhausting,” as the leadership principles note, has turned into a world of frequent combat.

Resources are sometimes hoarded. That includes promising job candidates, especially precious at a company with a high number of open positions. To get new team members, one veteran said, sometimes “you drown someone in the deep end of the pool,” then take his or her subordinates. Ideas are critiqued so harshly in meetings at times that some workers fear speaking up.

David Loftesness, a senior developer, said he admired the customer focus but could not tolerate the hostile language used in many meetings, a comment echoed by many others. For years, he and his team devoted themselves to improving the search capabilities of Amazon’s website — only to discover that Mr. Bezos had greenlighted a secret competing effort to build an alternate technology. “I’m not going to be the kind of person who can work in this environment,” he said he concluded. He went on to become a director of engineering at Twitter.

Each year, the internal competition culminates at an extended semi-open tournament called an Organization Level Review, where managers debate subordinates' rankings, assigning and reassigning names to boxes in a matrix projected on the wall. In recent years, other large companies, including Microsoft, General Electric and Accenture Consulting, have dropped the practice — often called stack ranking, or “rank and yank” — in part because it can force managers to get rid of valuable talent just to meet quotas. Working endless hours making someone else the fifth richest man in the world for put downs and back stabbing is just plain stupid. I always...

The review meeting starts with a discussion of the lower-level employees, whose performance is debated in front of higher-level managers. As the hours pass, successive rounds of managers leave the room, knowing that those who remain will determine their fates.

Preparing is like getting ready for a court case, many supervisors say: To avoid losing good members of their teams — which could spell doom — they must come armed with paper trails to defend the wrongfully accused and incriminate members of competing groups. Or they adopt a strategy of choosing sacrificial lambs to protect more essential players. “You learn how to diplomatically throw people under the bus,” said a marketer who spent six years in the retail division. “It’s a horrible feeling.”

Mr. Galbato, the human resources executive, explained the company’s reasoning for the annual staff paring. “We hire a lot of great people,” in an email, “but we don’t always get it right.”

Dick Finnegan, a consultant who advises companies on how to retain employees, warns of the costs of mandatory cuts. “If you can build an organization with zero deadwood, why wouldn’t you do it?” he asked. “But I don’t know how sustainable it is. You’d have to have a never-ending two-mile line around the block of very qualified people who want to work for you.”

Many women at Amazon attribute its gender gap — unlike Facebook, Google or Walmart, it does not currently have a single woman on its top leadership team — to its competition-and-elimination system. Several former high-level female executives, and other women participating in a recent internal Amazon online discussion that was shared with The New York Times, said they believed that some of the leadership principles worked to their disadvantage. They said they could lose out in promotions because of intangible criteria like “earn trust” (principle No. 10) or the emphasis on disagreeing with colleagues. Being too forceful, they said, can be particularly hazardous for women in the workplace.

Motherhood can also be a liability. Michelle Williamson, a 41-year-old parent of three who helped build Amazon’s restaurant supply business, said her boss, Shahrul Ladue, had told her that raising children would most likely prevent her from success at a higher level because of the long hours required. Mr. Ladue, who confirmed her account, said that Ms. Williamson had been directly competing with younger colleagues with fewer commitments, so he suggested she find a less demanding job at Amazon. (Both he and Ms. Williamson left the company.)

He added that he usually worked 85 or more hours a week and rarely took a vacation.

Molly Jay, an early member of the Kindle team, said she received high ratings for years. But when she began traveling to care for her father, who was suffering from cancer, and cut back working on nights and weekends, her status changed. She was blocked from transferring to a less pressure-filled job, she said, and her boss told her she was “a problem.” As her father was dying, she took unpaid leave to care for him and never returned to Amazon.

“When you’re not able to give your absolute all, 80 hours a week, they see it as a major weakness,” she said.

A woman who had thyroid cancer was given a low performance rating after she returned from treatment. She says her manager explained that while she was out, her peers were accomplishing a great deal. Another employee who miscarried twins left for a business trip the day after she had surgery. “I’m sorry, the work is still going to need to get done,” she said her boss told her. “From where you are in life, trying to start a family, I don’t know if this is the right place for you.”

A woman who had breast cancer was told that she was put on a “performance improvement plan” — Amazon code for “you’re in danger of being fired” — because “difficulties” in her “personal life” had interfered with fulfilling her work goals. Their accounts echoed others from workers who had suffered health crises and felt they had also been judged harshly instead of being given time to recover.

A former human resources executive said she was required to put a woman who had recently returned after undergoing serious surgery, and another who had just had a stillborn child, on performance improvement plans, accounts that were corroborated by a co-worker still at Amazon. “What kind of company do we want to be?” the executive recalled asking her bosses.

The mother of the stillborn child soon left Amazon. “I had just experienced the most devastating event in my life,” the woman recalled via email, only to be told her performance would be monitored “to make sure my focus stayed on my job.”

Mr. Berman, the spokesman, said such responses to employees’ crises were “not our policy or practice.” He added, “If we were to become aware of anything like that, we would take swift action to correct it.” Amazon also made Ms. Harker, the top recruiter, available to describe the leadership team’s strong support over the last two years as her husband battled a rare cancer. “It took my breath away,” she said.

Several employment lawyers in the Seattle area said they got regular calls from Amazon workers complaining of unfair treatment, including those who said they had been pushed out for “not being sufficiently devoted to the company,” said Michael Subit. But that is not a basis for a suit by itself, he said. “Unfairness is not illegal,” echoed Sara Amies, another lawyer. Without clear evidence of discrimination, it is difficult to win a suit based on a negative evaluation, she said.

For all of the employees who are edged out, many others flee, exhausted or unwilling to further endure the hardships for the cause of delivering swim goggles and rolls of Scotch tape to customers just a little quicker.

Jason Merkoski, 42, an engineer, worked on the team developing the first Kindle e-reader and served as a technology evangelist for Amazon, traveling the world to learn how people used the technology so it could be improved. He left Amazon in 2010 and then returned briefly in 2014.

“The sheer number of innovations means things go wrong, you need to rectify, and then explain, and heaven help if you got an email from Jeff,” he said. “It’s as if you’ve got the C.E.O. of the company in bed with you at 3 a.m. breathing down your neck.”

A Stream of Departures

Amazon retains new workers in part by requiring them to repay a part of their signing bonus if they leave within a year, and a portion of their hefty relocation fees if they leave within two years. Several fathers said they left or were considering quitting because of pressure from bosses or peers to spend less time with their families. (Many tech companies are racing to top one another's family leave policies — Netflix just began offering up to a year of paid parental leave. Amazon, though, offers no paid paternity leave.)

In interviews, 40-year-old men were convinced Amazon would replace them with 30-year-olds who could put in more hours, and 30-year-olds were sure that the company preferred to hire 20-somethings who would outwork them. After Max Shipley, a father of two young children, left this spring, he wondered if Amazon would “bring in college kids who have fewer commitments, who are single, who have more time to focus on work.” Mr. Shipley is 25.

Amazon insists its reputation for high attrition is misleading. A 2013 survey by PayScale, a salary analysis firm, put the median employee tenure at one year, among the briefest in the Fortune 500. Amazon officials insisted tenure was low because hiring was so robust, adding that only 15 percent of employees had been at the company more than five years. Turnover is consistent with others in the technology industry, they said, but declined to disclose any data.

Employees, human resources executives and recruiters describe a steady exodus. “The pattern of burn and churn at Amazon, resulting in a disproportionate number of candidates from Amazon showing at our doorstep, is clear and consistent,” Nimrod Hoofien, a director of engineering at Facebook and an Amazon veteran, said in a recent Facebook post.

Those departures are not a failure of the system, many current and former employees say, but rather the logical conclusion: mass intake of new workers, who help the Amazon machine spin and then wear out, leaving the most committed Amazonians to survive.

“Purposeful Darwinism,” Robin Andrulevich, a former top Amazon human resources executive who helped draft the Leadership Principles, posted in reply to Mr. Hoofien's comment. “They never could have done what they've accomplished without that,” she said in an interview, referring to Amazon's cycle of constantly hiring employees, driving them and cutting them.

“Amazon is O.K. with moving through a lot of people to identify and retain superstars,” said Vijay Ravindran, who worked at the retailer for seven years, the last two as the manager overseeing the checkout technology. “They keep the stars by offering a combination of incredible opportunities and incredible compensation. It's like panning for gold.”

The employees who stream from the Amazon exits are highly desirable because of their work ethic, local recruiters say. In recent years, companies like Facebook have opened large Seattle offices, and they benefit from the Amazon outflow.

Recruiters, though, also say that other businesses are sometimes cautious about bringing in Amazon workers, because they have been trained to be so combative. The derisive local nickname for Amazon employees is “Amholes” — pugnacious and work-obsessed.

Call them what you will, their ranks are rapidly increasing. Amazon is finishing a 37-floor office tower near its South Lake Union campus and building another tower next to it. It plans a third next to that and has space for two more high-rises. By the time the dust settles in three years, Amazon will have enough space for 50,000 employees or so, more than triple what it had as recently as 2013.

Those new workers will strive to make Amazon the first trillion-dollar retailer, in the hope that just about everyone will be watching Amazon movies and playing Amazon games on Amazon tablets while they tell their Amazon Echo communications device that they need an Amazon-approved plumber and new lawn chairs, and throw in some Amazon potato chips as well.

Maybe it will happen. Liz Pearce spent two years at Amazon, managing projects like its wedding registry. “The pressure to deliver far surpasses any other metric,” she said. “I would see people practically combust.”

But just as Jeff Bezos was able to see the future of e-commerce before anyone else, she added, he was able to envision a new kind of workplace: fluid but tough, with employees staying only a short time and employers demanding the maximum.

“Amazon is driven by data,” said Ms. Pearce, who now runs her own Seattle software company, which is well stocked with ex-Amazonians. “It will only change if the data says it must — when the entire way of hiring and working and firing stops making economic sense.”

The retailer is already showing some strain from its rapid growth. Even for entry-level jobs, it is hiring on the East Coast, and many employees are required to hand over all their contacts to company recruiters at “LinkedIn” parties. In Seattle alone, more than 4,500 jobs are open, including one for an analyst specializing in “high-volume hiring.”

Some companies, faced with such an overwhelming need for new bodies, might scale back their ambitions or soften their message.

Not Amazon. In a recent recruiting video, one young woman warns: “You either fit here or you don’t. You love it or you don’t. There is no middle ground.”

Full memo: Jeff Bezos responds to brutal NYT story, says it doesn’t represent the Amazon he leads by John Cook on August 16, 2015 at 10:37 pm

Jeff Bezos responded to a piece in the NYT, asking employees to report issues that they see at the company.

The cruel and back-stabbing environment described by The New York Times in a report this weekend on the workplace culture at Amazon.com has struck a nerve with Jeff Bezos. In a memo to employees this weekend, obtained by GeekWire, Bezos says he doesn’t recognize the company described in the article.

(RELATED STORY: Amazon employees on ‘ludicrously comical’ NYT story: ‘Some people don’t belong here, maybe’)

In the memo, Bezos encourages Amazon employees to read the report, and requests that anyone seeing the type of abusive culture described in the piece should report it immediately to human resources or directly to him.

“The article doesn’t describe the Amazon I know or the caring Amazonians I work with every day,” Bezos writes. “But if you know of any stories like those reported, I want you to escalate to HR. You can also email me directly at jeff@amazon.com. Even if it’s rare or isolated, our tolerance for any such lack of empathy needs to be zero.”

He adds later, “I strongly believe that anyone working in a company that really is like the one described in the NYT would be crazy to stay. I know I would leave such a company.”

And he concludes, “But hopefully, you don’t recognize the company described. Hopefully, you’re having fun working with a bunch of brilliant teammates, helping invent the future, and laughing along the way.”

It is rare for Bezos to respond so directly to a news report. Faced with criticism throughout its history — whether dealing with book publishers or diversity issues — Amazon’s approach has been to stay quiet. Amazon authorized “a handful of senior managers” to talk with the Times reporters for the article, but declined to make Bezos or other top leaders available for interviews, according to the story. But the reporting clearly has Bezos’ attention now.

The New York Times piece — based interviews with more than 100 current and former Amazon employees — cited several cases of alleged employee mistreatment, depicting managers who were unsympathetic to employees even when they were faced with illnesses or family issues. Reporters Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld describe a hard-charging environment at Amazon where employees often are pushed to the point where they nearly “combust.”

Here’s the full memo from Jeff Bezos, as obtained by GeekWire:

Dear Amazonians,

If you haven’t already, I encourage you to give this (very long) New York Times article a careful read: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>

I also encourage you to read this very different take by a current Amazonian:

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/amazonians-response-inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-nick-ciubotariu>

Here’s why I’m writing you. The NYT article prominently features anecdotes describing shockingly callous management practices, including people being treated without empathy while enduring family tragedies and serious health problems. The article doesn’t describe the Amazon I know or the caring Amazonians I work with every day. But if you know of any stories like those reported, I want you to escalate to HR. You can also email me directly at jeff@amazon.com. Even if it’s rare or isolated, our tolerance for any such lack of empathy needs to be zero.

The article goes further than reporting isolated anecdotes. It claims that our intentional approach is to create a soulless, dystopian workplace where no fun is had and no laughter heard. Again, I don’t recognize this Amazon and I very much hope you don’t, either. More broadly, I don’t think any company adopting the approach portrayed could survive, much less thrive, in today’s highly competitive tech hiring market. The people we hire here are the best of the best. You are recruited every day by other world-class companies, and you can work anywhere you want.

I strongly believe that anyone working in a company that really is like the one described in the NYT would be crazy to stay. I know I would leave such a company.

But hopefully, you don't recognize the company described. Hopefully, you're having fun working with a bunch of brilliant teammates, helping invent the future, and laughing along the way. Thank you,

Jeff

Questions for Reflection:

Be Attentive: What did you hear in the NYTIMES article about the culture of Amazon. What are your reactions upon reading the article?

Be Intelligent: How did you read Jeff Bezos's response to the article? What is your assessment of him as a leader?

Be Reasonable: What good did you see in each interpretation? What did you see that was troublesome? Given the lens of Catholic Social Teaching and Jesuit values of common good, cura personalis and Magis, how do you reflect on both articles?

Be Responsible: As you reflect on the Amazon culture how does it compare and contrast with your work culture? What is your reaction to the Amazon's 14 Leadership Principles? Would you work there or would you encourage your sons and daughters to become part of Amazon? And how will this conversation today impact your day?

- **John J. Fontana**

**Woodstock Business Conference
At Le Moyne College
847.703.5836**