The king of all the wild things: It’s lonely at the top

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What is loneliness?

- Aloneness?
- Isolation?

- Loneliness is the distress associated with feeling alone, either emotionally or socially.
- Someone must have the longing or desire to be with another individual or group of individuals (Hartog, Audy & Cohen, 1980).
  - Thus aloneness and isolation are not the same as loneliness, although they often are precursors to it.
Who is lonely?

- We normally associate loneliness with those who have...
  - poor social skills
  - shyness
  - an “unlikeable” personality
  - social phobia
  - depression
It’s lonely at the top

• The words ‘loneliness’ and ‘isolation’ are often mentioned in the popular media when a leader or senior executive is estranged because of his or her business or political life.

• Anecdotally, heads of department, team leaders, those promoted above their colleagues, managers and CEO’s report loneliness at work.

• None of the characteristics generally ascribed to lonely people are typical of senior managers who (in general) are intelligent, socially skilled, articulate etc... a paradox between the literature and organisational life.
But what about the social context?

• Personality tends to be overestimated as the reason for loneliness and little attention is given in the literature, to environmental factors such as organisational climate, friendship and camaraderie, social support, community spirit or person-organisation fit, as the potential causes of loneliness...

• Particularly relevant for managers / senior people in organisations
“Max said “Be Still!”
And tamed them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once. And they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things...”
Even when people get on well with their boss/supervisor...

Previously close peer relationships become more difficult to manage and maintain if one individual is promoted.

There is more dual role tension in relationships between status unequal colleagues. Motives are questioned (both within the dyad and also by those on the outside looking in).
“Max, the king of the wild things, was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.”
The current study...

• Online survey part of a 3 year longitudinal study on social relationships and employee retention
  – Action research model with interventions each year to improve “morale” and retention, e.g. a leadership development programme, introducing a common room, etc.
• 188 employees responded (46% response rate); Government employees
• The UCLA-R loneliness scale (Hawkley, Browne & Cacioppo, 2005) was used to measure loneliness
Results

- The analysis shows that having even a single friend at work lowers the mean score of loneliness by 7.9
- 31.1 for 0 friends, 23.2 for 1 friend
- $F(11) = 4.89, p < .001$
Results

Multivariate analyses also suggest that having fewer friends at work, little emotional commitment to the workplace, experiencing low levels of co-worker support, and feeling disengaged are antecedents of work-related loneliness.

\[ F(9, 178) = 30.0, p < .001 \quad R^2 = .61 \quad \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .59 \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Standardised Beta Coefficient</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Affective organisational commitment</td>
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<td>.02</td>
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<td>Normative organisational commitment</td>
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<td>Job engagement</td>
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<td>Supervisor support</td>
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Conclusion

• Having a friend at work can be very powerful in overcoming feelings of loneliness.

• Lonely people tend to perceive situations and social environments through a negative lens (compared to non-lonely people), which has an effect on their ability to create and maintain meaningful relationships with those around them, perpetuating existing feelings of isolation and loneliness.
Implications

• Implication for
  – (a) workplace relationship dyads
  – (b) the wider organisation

• Suggestions and recommendations
  – (a) individual level
  – (b) organisational level
Thanks for listening... let the wild rumpus start!