

Boston Business Journal

July 23, 2004

AS WE LIVE AND WORK



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The Perils of Low Carb Management

Several years ago, one of us (BSG, a physician) was approached at a cocktail party and asked “What do you think of zinc?” Caught by surprise at such an offbeat question, he responded with tongue in cheek “Are you a metals trader?” “Of course not,” replied the questioner. “I mean taking zinc tablets to enhance longevity.”

Now, zinc is a critical metal, necessary for certain body functions. But it’s a quantum leap to tie zinc to long life. That’s a classic example of over-simplifying the complex, which is true of most fads that trumpet simple solutions to intricate problems.

We’re all citizens in the world of fads. And the hot fad at the moment is the low carb diet, along with the vitamins that enhance digestion of these carbs. Carbs have been branded with a dirty name. A slice of bread, the staple of life, has been downsized from 80 to 60 calories. Pasta and other foods rich in carbs have joined a shameful list of no-no’s. For a while, people were hooked on a low-fat diet, then the Atkins high-fat diet, then a high protein one. Years ago, it was a combination of wheat germ, yeast, and blackstrap molasses that were promoted as essentials for a long, healthy life. Each diet seems to have its day, replaced in

time with a new one that promises to be the “final word.” Of course, fads don’t just happen with food. There are clothing fads, sports fads, car fads, and a whole laundry list that take center stage for a while, disappear, and are never heard from again.

And of course there are business fads. In the 1960’s and 70’s, T Groups were the rage. Companies would sponsor off-site weekend retreats in which people would let it all hang out, say painful things to one another, fold up their tents, return to work on Monday, and smile at each other as though nothing had happened. It was believed that this uncontrolled freedom of expression would promote closeness in which people would more effectively deal with each other’s feelings. And that in itself would promote better relations at work, as well as increased productivity. Too naïve a concept. And the poor results proved that point.

In the 1980s, following the enormously successful book “In Search of Excellence”, the word “excellence” had to be compulsively inserted in every consulting proposal and conversation. That was replaced in the 1990’s by Reengineering, TQM (total quality management), and Six Sigma -- business processes enabling companies to increase profitability, streamline operations, improve quality, and eliminate defects. In the new millennium, the hot term is “Innovation” -- using our gray matter to reconfigure ways of creating new solutions.

To illustrate our point, imagine for a moment that businesses have developed their own version of the low carb diet. We’ll call it “low carb management”. To make themselves leaner, meaner, and more competitive in the triathlons of every-day business, companies that subscribe to low carb management would downsize their workforces while fattening the wallets of their leaders. Two workers would do the job previously done by three. After a while the employees would become irritable and tired, lose confidence in their leaders, and would take their frustrations out on their customers and families. As with the low carb diet, in which reduced fiber leads to constipation, low carb management would result in immobilization, a lack of nimbleness, and a stuck-in-the-past attitude of “we’ve always done it that way”. And like the bad breath associated with the low carb diet, low carb management would drive away talent and customers.

It seems as if some companies are already adopting the techniques of low carb management. But ingesting too few carbs -- whether in health or management -- has a number of downsides. For example, limiting fresh fruits and vegetables may lower cancer-fighting antioxidants. Similarly, limiting fresh input and a healthy dose of creativity reduces a company’s capacity to strengthen its product line and face its competition. Loading up on animal fat increases the risk of arteriosclerosis, heart disease, and stroke; hoarding perks and benefits for leaders’ personal use cuts off companies’ vital pathways of communication and credibility with their employees and shareholders. And heavily restricting carbs

may result in the loss of lean muscle, the ultimate injury for both the body and business.

Every specialty has its buzz words. Every idea clearly thought through has its merit. But there is no silver bullet. One idea or one diet will never solve all problems.

It's no coincidence that the word "corporation" is derived from "corpus", a body. Bodies and companies are too complicated and their parts too interdependent to believe that simple cause-and-effect fads will resolve complex issues. There is no magic in a term or a concept. New ideas have value when they meet the needs of a company and maintain the complex balance of the organization.

Bodies and businesses function best when each of their parts has a functioning purpose, when there is a sense of balance, and when one part of the system does not overpower the other. Bodies and businesses should not be run by fads. The key to success for both of them is perspective and balance.

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