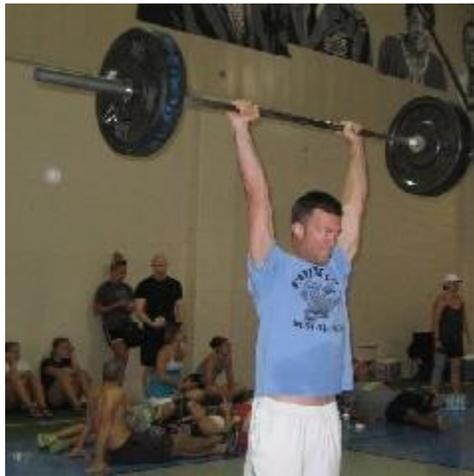


Fitting In: Extreme Corporate Wellness and Organizational Communication

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Employers have long been interested in looking for ways to make an employee more productive without increasing labor costs. More organizations have looked towards wellness as one possible variable to increase bottom lines. In response, critical researchers have started questioning the idea of organizational wellness (McGillivray, 2005; Thanem, 2009; Zoller, 2003). My dissertation takes a case study approach in examining the consequences of the next layer of organizational wellness, what I call, extreme corporate wellness. I define extreme corporate wellness as the push towards more radical fitness and workplace health promotion via intense exercise and lifestyle promotion. The fact that employees are now spending more time at work and receiving more of their health information while at work only speaks to the necessity of understanding the consequences of extreme corporate wellness programs.

I argue that the extreme corporate wellness discourse furthers a social-Darwinian viewpoint of 'survival of the fittest' not only in the workplace, but also in an employee's personal life. This study combined participant-observation with 28 semi-structured interviews in a large, corporate organization that had recently shifted to an intense workout routine and lifestyle promotion. By drawing on a critical-interpretive lens, I not only examined the organization's movement toward a more fitness-minded organizational culture, but also interrogated the implications of such a transition. My interest in this project stems from my own participation with certain exercise programs and interest in understanding masculinity, work, and organizational cultures.



The findings in my dissertation contribute to three areas of organizational communication and wellness: (1) organizational culture, (2) power and resistance, and (3) corporeal ethics. I theorized that these shared assumptions created through the organization's culture promoted the body as a political site between employer, government, and the public. Specifically, I demonstrated that body politics are perpetuated by an emphasis on the hegemonic masculine world of extreme fitness and that the implications of this fitness regime extend beyond the

confines of organizational architecture and extend largely through branding efforts (Christensen & Cheney, 2000; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

This powerful fitness initiative was then resisted by some employees, resulting in upended notions of organizational time and employer responsibilities. While there were certainly benefits to the program, my study weighs those benefits against the consequences of extreme wellness and its attendant discourse.

What I found most compelling about the study was that the notion of advocating for or against healthy workplaces was a dialectic. I illustrated how resistance was more of a struggle between extreme fitness and health (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). In the end, the case study demonstrates how managers, leaders, and subordinates all worked together to create the current state of the fitness culture at FitCo which ultimately allowed for employee choice. These implications could be useful in understanding resistance as a negotiation and from a practical perspective, in helping organizations wanting to create healthy workspaces without paternalistic mandates.

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