



EDITORIAL by FABRIZIO PERRETTI*

The Sentimental Re-education of Businesses



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On April 20th, the experimental launch of Starship, the most powerful rocket ever built, took place. This rocket is intended to return humans to the moon and possibly to Mars. The launch was followed live by millions of people and received extensive media coverage. Just minutes after liftoff, the rocket lost control and was made to explode. In the now long history of space flights, this was not the first unsuccessful launch. So there should be no surprise, except for that right after the explosion, the employees of SpaceX, the company founded by Elon Musk, reacted with a long applause. The images showed smiling faces, raised hands in approval, and voices filled with enthusiasm.

If we had tuned in at that precise moment, we would have assumed that the launch had been successful. The positive reaction to the failure created a cognitive dissonance, making it difficult to reconcile two con-

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trasting and seemingly incompatible phenomena. Why did the employees react this way to a negative outcome? If the outcome had been positive, we would have expected the same reactions. What significance, then, should we attribute to the fact that two opposite outcomes can generate the same emotions?

One possible response came directly from the company in one of its tweets. In fact, it argued that it is wrong to interpret the outcome as a failure, and instead, the launch should be considered a positive result, a real accomplishment, as success will come precisely from what they will learn from what did not work. This response is consistent with the so-called blameless culture, a culture particularly widespread in high-tech companies like Google or Amazon, which refers to a work environment where errors and problems are addressed without seeking to assign blame or punish the individuals involved. A company that believes in “failure as an option” recognizes it as part of the learning process. Every unsuccessful experiment provides valuable feedback for the company to draw upon to decide how to move forward and can be used to achieve success.

In the past, NASA has also recognized the importance of “learning failures.”¹ At the same time, however, it emphasized that “failure in any form cannot be considered acceptable. Success must be sought on the first attempt, and every reasonable effort is aimed at achieving that result.” Failure could be a source of learning, but it should not become a cause for celebration. The blameless culture, therefore, is not solely based on recognizing errors as part of the learning process but also, and above all, on the concept of psychological safety.² It involves creating an organizational environment that celebrates failure as a positive event, precisely to avoid blaming people for failure and discouraging employee participation. The manifestation of all this, however, has some paradoxical aspects: to avoid generating negative feelings, it is necessary to artificially create and reproduce positive collective emotions.

The control of employees’ emotions has been a historical characteristic of all organizations. Manipulation of emotions, on the other hand, is a relatively more recent feature. Traditionally, businesses have focused on evoking emotions from consumers through marketing. On the employees’ side, the initial focus was on containing emotions. The industrial society (including the advanced society described by Marcuse in the 1960s) initially aimed to strip work of its affective and expressive elements, render-



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ing it a purely instrumental relationship in which employees were defined solely by this dimension.³ Over time, companies have increasingly focused on the emotions of employees, moving away from a purely pragmatic view of the work environment. Employee satisfaction and emotional wellbeing have become central.

However, it is one thing for companies to be a source of such emotions, and another when they become places where specific emotions not only can but must be collectively expressed and represented. Companies have long accustomed us to collective company events aimed at creating a sense of belonging and facilitating interaction among employees. These events often mix TEDx-style presentations with group activities (often recreational) and cocktails, implicitly expecting everyone to demonstrate enthusiasm and enjoyment. As in other cases, these are emotions that the company now demands by definition, authorizing the employer to subject employees to increasing pressures.⁴ However, the logic of congruence is at least maintained here. I have designed a context to entertain you, and I expect to elicit consistent emotions. Whether employees actually enjoy themselves or pretend to do so to fit into the context is another matter.

It's a different story when people are asked to express collective emotions that are contrary to what is normally expected, with the aim of creating a safe environment that protects employees from psychological suffering and trauma resulting from a negative perception of failure. To avoid negative emotions, false collective positive emotions are created. The result is not only grotesque but also unsettling. The danger lies not only in the fact that employees are subjected to the dominance of this manipulation, but also that managers surrender to an ideological system based on psychological safety and the artificial and grotesque construction of emotionally secure environments. Furthermore, all of this happens at the same time when companies have embraced the rhetoric of authenticity: honest products, authentic places where sincerity is felt, and where it is important to be oneself.⁵

No one disputes the desirability of work environments that provide satisfaction, and yet, it is necessary to recognize that they also generate disappointment and dissatisfaction. The goal of a company should not be to contest disappointment, deny its existence, or its representation. Disappointment is in fact a central element of the human experience.⁶ As an opportunity for learning and redemption, disappointment is the natural counterpart to humans' propensity to conceive grand perspectives and



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aspirations. NASA is perhaps the most evident example of this. Without hiding the disappointment of its failures, NASA managed to land astronauts on the moon, carry out Space Shuttle missions, play a leading role in building and operating a space station, launch an incredibly powerful space telescope, and send multiple rovers to Mars. Today, with the aid of a totally opposite managerial model, we are still unable to return humans to the moon. And apparently, we can't even successfully launch a rocket capable of orbiting the Earth. However, we are happy, or at least some people appeared to be.

This issue's dossier is dedicated to luxury, and it is not a coincidence that it follows the previous dossier dedicated to poverty. However, it is worth remembering the words of Coco Chanel: "Some people think luxury is the opposite of poverty. It is not. It is the opposite of vulgarity." The luxury industry is certainly a very important component of the economy and industrial fabric, especially in our country. The dossier helps us understand its characteristics, complexity, and new frontiers. The focus of the DEVO Lab at SDA Bocconi, on the other hand, is dedicated to the new frontiers of the digital world. Enjoy reading!



¹ <https://history.nasa.gov/SP-4211/ch10-4.htm>

² See, for example, A.C. Edmonson, *The Fearless Organization*, Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2019, It. translation: *Organizzazioni senza paura*, Milan, F. Angeli, 2020.

³ H. Marcuse, (1964). *One Dimensional Man*; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society, Boston, Beacon Press, 1964, It. translation: *L'uomo a una dimensione*, Turin, Einaudi, 1967.

⁴ See, on this point, the recent article in the Economist, "Corporate Summer Camps," May 27-June 2 2023.

⁵ See G. Lipovetsky, *La fiera dell'autenticità*, Venice, Marsilio, 2022.

⁶ See, on this point, A.O. Hirschman, *Shifting involvements: Private interest and public action*, Princeton University Press, 2002, It. translation: *Felicità privata e felicità pubblica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003.