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COMMENTARY

Yes, and . . . : Taming the wicked problem and navigating the empathy–efficiency paradox

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There is a rule-of-thumb that has been largely used in improvisational comedy whereby participants are encouraged to add to and expand on a line of thinking (with 'yes, and' statements) rather than shutting down the conversation or blatantly changing the topic (as occurs with 'no' or 'yes, but' statements). In doing so, a more meaningful dialogue can ensue. This method of idea generation has been applied to business settings and is a fruitful means of brainstorming. With that in mind, we preface this commentary with 'yes, and' to build on the focal authors' dialogue, with the hope of shedding light on a broader issue that requires attention.

To provide some context, we (the authors of this commentary) are two female academics, both with caregiving responsibilities—one for school-aged children and the other for an aging parent. As such, we applaud Gabriel et al. (2023) efforts to ensure we can meet our caregiving demands without undue stress. As caregivers, we have both experienced situations in which we needed special accommodations to successfully meet our obligations. We needed compassion from colleagues, empathy from supervisors, and more hours in any given day. And, knowing the last point is impossible, we embrace the words of Meatloaf: "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad."

With this 'yes', we now add the 'and' statement. In addition to our caregiving duties, we each have experienced demands unrelated to pregnancy, postpartum, and caregiving that have created considerable hardship, to include the death of a spouse, death of parents, divorce, chronic illness, extreme trauma, and injuries to name just a few. In some cases, these were (or have been) far more difficult than our caregiving duties (and far less rewarding). The common bond of these stressors is that they involve a transition, whether going from "life without to life with" (such as with the birth of a child or a new marriage) or moving from "life with to life without" (as with the death of a loved one, loss of an income source, or the loss of abilities accompanying an injury or illness). Not surprisingly, Holmes and Rayes (1967) social readjustment scale lists the first six stressors as being related to transitioning to "life without," (i.e., death of a spouse, divorce, marital separation, detention in jail, death of close family member, major personal injury) compared to marriage (#7), pregnancy (#12) and gaining a family member (#14).

Our point is that Gabriel et al. (2022) provide valid arguments regarding the need for support and allyship for women caregivers within academia. Our response is, "yes, and . . . " in that, in addition to these points, there are many more individuals, circumstances, and domains in which support and allyship are needed. Yes, women in academia would benefit from additional resources—both tangible and intangible—to manage their caregiving demands. So, too, would the women in industry needing to manage such demands. Similarly, so too would employees (regardless of where they work) who are undergoing cancer treatments, navigating grief from the loss of a spouse, going through a divorce, or any number of personal matters

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that demand attention and drain one's personal resources. This is not to say that the points Gabriel et al. (2022) raise are not important. Rather, they *are* important, *and* so too are the needs of other employees—inside and outside of academia and regardless of any specific demography – that are facing hardship and require additional empathy and support. We argue that we must take a step back and assess what is occurring. Only then can we take that much-needed step forward.

The wicked problem

Gabriel et al. (2022) effectively elucidate the problem as it relates to female academics with caregiving duties. Of course, the problem expands beyond this group and their specific circumstances. As an example, in their description of an academic mother's realistic experience, they described how a faculty member said, "that the performance expectations are the same for everyone and having a child makes no difference to him." Yes, and . . . it might be the case that for that same faculty member "having a child" could be replaced by "experiencing depression," "losing a parent", or any other stressful life transition. Moreover, the focal article authors' example of trying to make a supervisor less uncomfortable about the discussion of a miscarriage is excellent, and (unfortunately) "miscarriage" could be replaced with experiences such as "death," "depression," and/or "divorce." Thus, the problem is bigger. In fact, it's wicked.

Almost 50 years ago, the concept of "wicked" problems was penned to reflect particularly "malignant, vicious, tricky, or aggressive" problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160). According to Rittel and Webber (1973), these problems are not wicked in the "ethically deplorable" sense but rather because they can be are malignant, vicious, tricky, or aggressive (p. 160). Wicked problems can also be understood via three dimensions: complexity (the degree to which sub-systems and interdependencies exist), uncertainty (the degree to which risks, consequences, and patterns are known), and divergence (the degree to which viewpoints and intentions are disconnected). It is not enough to be high on any one of these dimensions to classify as wicked. Rather, it is "when serious disagreements are combined with complexity and uncertainty [that] we have crossed a threshold" (Head, 2008, p. 103).

The points raised by Gabriel et al. (2022) and expanded upon by us are quite wicked indeed. Certainly, the situation is complex. Although both the transition from "life without to life with" and from "life with to life without" can cause substantial hardship, responses to such transitions are not always met with the same level of compassion or understanding. For example, whereas the norm in western society is to celebrate the birth of a child, we are a death-denying society (Becker, 1973). As a result, individuals may be uncertain about how to respond to certain news being shared. Unfortunately, organizational representatives can unwittingly instigate "disenfranchised grief" (Doka, 1987), which describes grief in which a person tries to avoid/hide grief reactions because it is considered inappropriate for the workplace. Finally, viewpoints, values, and intentions can be disconnected in terms of managing responses and offering support.

A useful lens to examine the wickedness of offering support through life transitions (both moving from "life without to life with" and from "life with to life without") is the *empathy-efficiency paradox*, a term coined by Bergerson (2022) in a recent discussion of bereavement in the workplace. Bergeron highlighted the incongruity that exists between an organization's need to be efficient and productive and a grieving employee's need for empathy and support. The individual needs of the employee are not aligned with the goals of the organization and are therefore seen as a disruption. This inherent conflict—or the complexity, uncertainty, and value divergence of the situation—creates the empathy-efficiency paradox, which can "constrain managers and organizations in how they respond to bereaved employees and can set unrealistic expectations that butt up against the reality of grief for bereaved employees and may unintentionally serve to prolong it" (p. 3).

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Taming the wicked problem and addressing the empathy–efficiency paradox

Although Bergeron's (2022) focus was on bereaved employees, we believe that the empathy-efficiency paradox has greater applicability beyond bereaved employees and can help pinpoint ways in which such wicked workplace problems may be addressed. Specifically, first and foremost, we need to elevate the importance of compassion in the workplace. In addition to the moral and financial motivations, behaving with compassion has specific benefits within the workplace (Dutton et al., 2014). For example, the compassion recipient is likely to experience reduced anxiety, increased organizational commitment, and an increase in positive emotions (e.g., gratitude). Similarly, the individual behaving compassionately is apt to see themselves more positively (i.e., higher compassion satisfaction and a stronger prosocial identity) and are likely to be viewed by others as intelligent and as leaders. Finally, compassion can breed compassion, with bystanders and witnesses of compassionate acts feeling pride about their workplace and behaving similarly compassionate to others with whom they interact.

Compassion aside, there are practical suggestions as well. One solution would be to offer longer leaves with flexibility in when and how the leave is taken (Bergeron, 2022). Research has consistently demonstrated that flexibility in work arrangements is positively related to employee physical health and negatively related to absenteeism (Shifrin & Michel, 2022). As Bergeron (2022) notes, "shorter-term flexibility may result in longer-term loyalty" (para. 2).

With this need for flexibility in mind, we agree with the idea that leaders have the "discretion to help support women outside of formal policies that may be in place (e.g., flexibility in scheduling meetings during times when childcare is more likely available; creating virtual meetings to foster inclusion of all work–family arrangements; advocating for women on their faculty and their caregiving needs)," and as leaders ourselves we hope we use this discretion responsibly. Admittedly, we struggle with being too narrow in implementation of such flexibility, though, because we also need to support faculty—regardless of their rank or gender—who are, for example, going through a divorce, dealing with cancer treatment, or are experiencing depression. It becomes dangerous when we are supportive of a single group (e.g., mothers), just as it is dangerous to ignore or discount them. We must deal with the empathy–efficiency balancing act for *all* employees.

Closing thoughts

In closing, we agree with the need for a "call to action for academia to build structures that support women professors as they navigate the complexities of pregnancy, the postpartum period, and the caregiving demands of their children" (Gabriel et al., 2022). Yet we believe it is critical to go beyond this. Certainly, those who are moving from "life without to life with" need support, as do those transitioning from "life with to life without". We have argued we can make improvements in managing this wicked issue by giving more attention to the empathy-efficiency paradox, both by scholars and practitioners, and for compassion to be the 'go to' response when interacting with others, as we all are—or will be at some point—faced with difficult circumstances.

We began this commentary with a truism from the improvisational comedy arena—that of "yes, and . . . " when responding to ideas. We finish our response by turning to another notion with origins from improv. Namely, Sheldon Patinkin, a former artistic consultant for The Second City (an improvisational comedy group), is purported as having said a team is only as good as its ability to compensate for its weakest link (The Columbia Chronicle, 2014). This variation of the oft-mentioned quote, "a team is only as good as its weakest link" has important implications such that, at any given moment, we are all the weakest link. Rather than tear people down by highlighting their deficits or seeing struggles as problems that hinder our productivity, we should aim to help if and when necessary. In so doing, we can compensate for struggles and overcome the challenges together.

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