

Sheer strain of life at the top

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The dramatic death of Michael Jackson - which might be described as shocking, yet not surprising - demonstrates, in a way, a failure of stress management.

It illustrates the extraordinary pressures on celebrities where their every move is watched and recorded. But it also reflects, in an exaggerated form, familiar stressors that are recognisable from the workplace. In particular, it demonstrates a combination of two separate effects that are seldom found in the same person or the same group.

One of these is the sheer strain of life at the top, where you are never really off-duty. Millions of dollars for a performance may sound like easy money, but as I have often pointed out in this column, you cannot get something for nothing.

The exhausting rehearsals and the relentless pressures of life on the road are only the start. It is the year-round schedule of business - administrating the whole great bandwagon, having to cope with teams of lawyers, accountants and agents, some of them on your side, some of them trying to exploit you - that sets up far more stress than the stage performances themselves.

And then, when millions are offered, there is that huge temptation to take on more than you can handle, setting you off on a steep, downward spiral of less sleep, less energy and artificial aids to keep you going.

No doubt parts of Jackson's story will touch a nerve with many top managers, as though viewing their own problems in macrocosm, and thankful that they are experiencing only a mild dose of the stress that afflicted him and eventually led to his tragic death.

But Jackson's problems also reflect another familiar workplace stressor which belongs at the opposite end of the scale - the dissatisfied low-ranking employees who work off their resentment by going absent.

For Jackson's partially self-induced death on the eve of a pre-sold overseas tour that had already broken box-office records for a solo performer, might be interpreted as the supreme act of absenteeism.

It was obvious to anyone that Jackson was no longer his own master. Close colleagues agreed that he often didn't know what was in the contracts he was signing. And that weird obsession with revisiting childhood times could also be identified as some form of absenteeism from real life.

All the signs pointed to a deep and lasting dissatisfaction with himself, his colour and the elaborate world of isolation that he had built around himself.

Perhaps the biggest irony was that the death of Michael Jackson, King of Pop, and object of admiration for many generations, could be seen as that of a disaffected employee, wanting to score points off a hostile management by slipping away and relishing the freedom of that enchanted world on the other side of the factory-gate.

Key points: Celebrity stress

- Life at the top can set up extreme mental and emotional pressures
- The star can be in danger of being manipulated by colleagues
- Ironically, great fame can make you want to escape that life