

## **The New York Times Versus Amazon: Is Jeff Bezos' head still in the clouds?**

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*This description-based case used secondary data to provide students with the controversy centered around Amazon's highly criticized culture. An article published by the New York Times illuminates current and former employees' disapproving perceptions of the culture Amazon has adopted which has ironically contributed to its overwhelming success. Although some have touted their allegiance to such cultural pragmatism, others, who define the culture as "modern-day Darwinism", have experienced consternation as cultural practices have created unpleasant work conditions thus causing dissatisfaction that lead to voluntary or involuntary exiting. In light of Amazon's purchase of Whole Foods, questions have resonated regarding the dichotomous collision of cultural disparities that could have either fortuitous or catastrophic implications. Founder and CEO, Jeff Bezos, has adamantly defended Amazon amidst such allegations of mistreatment of employees and refutes claims of rejecting underperforming employees and granting reprieves for those only conforming to its cultural model. Bezos strongly maintains that the company's cultures embodies the industry's standards and defines its hypercompetitive and aggressive nature as distinctive and incomparable to other companies.*

### **THE LETTER TO THE AMAZIANS**

Dear Amazonians,

If you haven't already, I encourage you to give this (very long) New York Times article a careful read. I also encourage you to read this very different take by a current Amazonian (Refer to Appendix A).

Here's why I'm writing you. The NYT article prominently features anecdotes describing shockingly callous management practices, including people being treated without empathy while enduring family tragedies and serious health problems. The article doesn't describe the Amazon I know or the caring Amazonians I work with every day. But if you know of any stories like those reported, I want you to

escalate to HR. You can also email me directly at [jeff@amazon.com](mailto:jeff@amazon.com). Even if it's rare or isolated, our tolerance for any such lack of empathy needs to be zero.

The article goes further than reporting isolated anecdotes. It claims that our intentional approach is to create a soulless, dystopian workplace where no fun is had and no laughter heard. Again, I don't recognize this Amazon and I very much hope you don't, either. More broadly, I don't think any company adopting the approach portrayed could survive, much less thrive, in today's highly competitive tech hiring market. The people we hire here are the best of the best. You are recruited every day by other world-class companies, and you can work anywhere you want.

I strongly believe that anyone working in a company that really is like the one described in the NYT would be crazy to stay. I know I would leave such a company.

But hopefully, you don't recognize the company described. Hopefully, you're having fun working with a bunch of brilliant teammates, helping invent the future, and laughing along the way.

Thank you,

*Jeff*

## **THE ARTICLE THAT SPARKED CONTROVERSY**

On August 15, 2015, a controversial front-page article in the New York Times shined a disturbing light on Amazon that caused speculation and concerns of its culture. The article, co-authored by reporters, Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld, harshly criticized the online retailer for its brutal and unrelenting work culture and attempted to illuminate its harsh, cultural realities and expose Amazon publicly. Their piercing emphasis of workplace brutality shined a light on the online retailer while concerns about employees with family tragedies and health issues paled in comparison to innovation and company performance. From the testimonies of former and current Amazonians, the lengthy article echoed horrid stories that painted a picture of Amazon that is less than reputable and quite deplorable. Based on the article, the retailer was known for prohibiting employees from having any communicative interaction with the media. Despite such restraints, the Times noted that more than 100 former and current employees had provided candid experiences anonymously. The article also contained sobering anecdotes ranging from supervisors maliciously probing employees with cold-called pop quizzes to employees suffering sleep deprivation from consecutive nights of frantically working to finish assignments. The overarching premise of the article targeted a quote by Bezos in a letter to shareholders saying, "You can work long, hard or smart, but at Amazon.com you can't choose two out of three".

According to the Times, employees who align themselves with Amazon's hypercompetitive and imaginative culture are a part of the "in group" and shielded from ostracism. Particularly, employees rigorously brainstorm peculiar and inventive ideas that may become viable products and services for the sake of profitability. In a recruiting video, one employee stated, "You either fit here or you don't. You love it or you don't. There is no middle ground." One employee even noted that "if you're a good Amazonian, you become an Amabot".

According to the article, employees who hardly contribute to Amazon's success are subject to termination as part of cyclical evaluation and ostracism of underachievers often referred to as "purposeful Darwinism" by a former Amazon human resources director and "The Hunger Games" by an HR expert on CNN. Amazon currently uses a controversial technique to isolate high performers from low performers. Notarized by former Chairman and CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch, the retailer historically used an evaluative technique referred to as "stack ranking" or "rank and yank" in which employees were encouraged to viciously compete against each other thus creating a contentious, dogmatic and cruel cultural environment. Consequently, the lowest ranked employees were eliminated which fashioned an environment comprised of only high achievers.

An internal phone directory, referred to as the Anytime Feedback Tool, was created for sabotaging others by allowing colleagues to send damaging feedback to another's superior. According to the New York Times, the need to compete for the top stratum created internal pressures that created tension among team members. Consequently, employees conspired to collectively give negative feedback on certain colleagues and positive feedback on each other. For example, a former Army captain, Elizabeth Willet, after having a baby and adjusting to parenthood, arranged her schedule to arrive to work at 7 a.m. and leave at 4 p.m. Subsequently, she recalled that her coworkers reported workforce deviance and poor job performance. She reportedly told the Times that her supervisor informed her that no managerial defense could refute the accusations of her peers. She quit after just over a year of employment.

Additionally, white-collar workers were perpetually placed under analytic, management and psychological scrutiny by which performance capabilities are measured using an algorithmic tool that reinforces "survival of the fittest." Blue-collar workers in warehouses find the working conditions to be grueling and intensely micromanaged to the extent of stark discomfort, including laborious toiling in 100-degree heat for hours. Former executive John Rossman says, "A lot of people who work there feel this tension: It's the greatest place I hate to work." Similarly, Eric Moore, the chief technical officer of cloud and automation at Hewlett-Packard Software Americas, stated, "Amazon was the most toxic work environment I have ever seen." Former Database Administer from Amazon Web Services, Angela Galper, stated, "I would start crying on Sunday nights and my husband devoted countless hours to listening to my stories about my work days."

The New York Times article recounted instances in which female employees were pressured to decide between work and family. One female employee, Molly Jay, whose job performance was above reproach, began facing pushback after traveling to care for her father stricken with cancer. Similarly, the article tells of Michelle Williamson, a 41-year-old mother of three children, said, in her own words, that she was emphatically told that "raising children would most likely prevent her from success at a higher level because of the long hours required." Another response from a female employee noted lack of remorse from the retailer when she gave birth and was diagnosed with cancer.

Other testimonies referenced occurrences where employees became emotionally distraught in response to compulsive debates and criticism expected of employees thus creating a hostile and volatile work environment. Employees recall strict requirements to relentlessly dismantle the ideas of others. A former book marketing employee, Bob Olson, stated "You walk out of a conference room and you'll see a grown man covering his face. Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk." Another testimony provided by Chris Brucia explained that he was berated extensively about his supposed poor job performance and given a punitive performance evaluation by his supervisor during a conversation where he was simultaneously being promoted.

The New York Times reported other stories denouncing Amazon's organizational norms of forcing employees to accept laborious tasks, answering emails past midnight, answering text messages even while on vacation and being reprimanded, if unreachable. A former marketing employee, Noelle Barnes, recounts that employees were mindful of the "unreasonably high" standards adopted when employment began. It was commonly known that "Amazon is where overachievers go to feel bad about themselves", he said.

## **AMAZON'S RESPONSE TO CRITICISM**

Jeff Bezos, Founder and CEO of Amazon, vehemently regarded the now infamous New York Times article as slanderous and responded the weekend following the release. He pinned a heartfelt note to Amazon's 180,000 employees and, in part, stating, "The article doesn't describe the Amazon I know or the caring Amazonians I work with every day". He also recommended that employees read a LinkedIn blog post written by Nick Ciubotariu, a senior Amazon employee, who candidly defended Amazon and criticized the Times for perceivably and inaccurately distorting its culture. Additionally, Bezos contended that adopting such a stringent, merciless culture would undoubtedly impede survival in today's competitive tech market. He agreed that such a relentless environment depicted in the article would not be

conducive for him nor others to work and that “anyone working in a company like the one described in the New York Times would be crazy to stay”.

Taking offense to the article penned by Kantor and Streitfeld, Jay Carney, Amazon’s Senior Vice President of Global Affairs, emphatically responded to the alleged cruelty saying that “the Times got attention for their story, but in the process, they did a disservice to readers, who deserve better”. Carney alleged that the Times misrepresented Amazon’s cultural climate and misconstrued its competitive temper as an unforgiving, punishing company with mean management tactics that undermines the integrity of its employees. Carney expressed his dissatisfaction of the miscomprehended story as Kantor was asked to recant her story after continual communication took place between February and mid-August to no avail. But, while Kantor is not inclined to modify the horrific depiction of Amazon’s brutal culture, Dean Baquet, the Times’ executive editor, supported the merit of the article and its authors calling it “an accurate portrait”.

Regarding the credibility of the article, he reported, “Virtually every person quoted in the story stated a view that multiple other workers had also told us...The story did not assert that every Amazon employee had a difficult time there”. In retort to Baquet’s response, Carney criticized the Times for its failure to accurately corroborate the information it congregated with factual records to report the exactitude of Amazon’s cultural climate. Also, just three days after its release, this resolve was buoyed by the Times’ public editor who stated that the article lacked substantive, irrefutable proof to truthfully convey the reality of Amazon’s culture rather relaying on generalizations and subjective anecdotes.

## **THE BIRTH OF AN ONLINE BOOKSTORE**

Born on January 12, 1964, Jeffery Preston Bezos is proclaimed by spectators and employees, alike, to be a boisterous, yet a brazen and blunt enforcer of contentious creativity. Bezos became acquainted with computers at an early age when a company based in Houston loaned mainframe computers to his elementary school. Because his teachers were unable to decode the instruction manual, Bezos and his fellow classmates spent time learning how to program the complex mainframes. In 1986, Bezos graduated summa cum laude from Princeton University with degrees in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

After working for the hedge fund, D. E. Shaw & Co., he became overly interested in the astronomical growth of Internet mail order services. Intrigued by this vast, untapped opportunity, Bezos embarked upon the journey of applying the mail order model to beginning one of the world’s first online bookstore. With an investment of \$300,000 given by his parents, Bezos and his wife traveled to Washington State to embark upon the start of the online business in a house with an enclosed garage and two computer programmers. After developing the site, Bezos tested his prototype using 300 friends before officially proceeding publicly. He aptly named the company, Amazon, after the longest meandering river in the world located in South America.

**FIGURE 1**



On July 16, 1995, Bezos publicly launched Amazon.com with virtually no advertising budget, sparse commentary for its online product, and very little word-of-mouth assistance. Despite no press releases or a residence in Silicon Valley, Amazon quickly rose from obscurity to dominance with a searchable database of over 1 million books and selling to customers in 50 states and 45 countries. Rightfully so, Bezos' mantra was "Get big fast". Moreover, the idea of capturing a predominant share of e-commerce became an emergent goal while finding ways to strategically establish the Amazon brand and growing revenue. As a result, by the end of 1996, book sales reached \$15.7 million, in part by offering online customer tax-free incentives. In 1997, Amazon continued its meteoric ascension when it raised a staggering \$54 million in stocks, or \$29.25 a share.

**FIGURE 2**



But, while Bezos and other "Amazonians" were celebrating its successful IPO performance, investors began doubting Amazon's capability of remaining profitable and questioned its viability. Hiring more than 7,000 employees, Amazon continued its frantic yet strategic expansion while exploring the possibility of increasing its product line and focusing on high volume sales. With the sale of CDs, videos, electronics, clothes, and other retail partnerships, Amazon's sales reached over \$17 billion by 2011. Along with Amazon.com, the launch of Amazon Prime and Amazon Studios, the purchase of the Washington Post, among other ventures, Amazon's market value has grown larger than Walmart's at \$250 billion.

### **LIFE AS AMAZON SEES IT**

"We Pioneer" are the prominent words seen on Amazon's website describing the tone of its fine-tuned culture. Bold bets, intense originality, and imagining blunt impossibilities makes Amazon a place where those who truly embody an inventive spirit can thrive. Founded in 1994, "Earth's most customer-centric company" touts its concentrated efforts to provide customers with the proposition of discovery and cost conservation. Amazon's cultural paradigm is governed by leadership principles that establishes parameters that create a mechanistic organizational structure yet prompts innovation with unyielding commitment. However, while millions have praised Amazon for its stellar marketplace dominance, life inside the retail giant may be largely secretive and believed to be grandiose in nature. Where confidentiality allows limited dialogue with organizational outsiders, Jeff Bezos and other top leaders are off limits.

Despite its unprecedented and undeniable success, the company has amassed a reputation for its stringent work conditions. While some applaud Amazon for their inventive way of getting the most out their employees, others view the retailer as an unrelenting, hypercompetitive and unforgiving place to work. This unrelenting, uncompromising attitude that governs intensified actions has assisted in catapulting the retail maven into an echelon all its own with market capitalization of approximately \$250 billion.

The development of Bezos' leadership style reflects a telling approach and is characterized by an eagerness to govern the behaviors of others, an unfiltered conveyance of criticism bordering hostility and

a supreme need for power. Amazon's unique method of innovation requires new employees to rid themselves of poor habits learned at preceding jobs. Bezos created the company's articles of faith for regulating employee behaviors by developing mechanisms to internalize leadership principles in a synchronized, perpetual manner.

Amazon's rules are integrated into its employees' daily rituals and jargon, exploited during the hiring process and expressively quoted in food lines at lunchtime. This cultural logic guides every action ranging from brainstorming inventive ideas and ascertaining an appropriate resolution to a problem to interviewing peculiar candidates and practicing frugality. This dogmatic, yet peripheral focus on customer centrality and entrepreneurial proficiency reflects the following statement by Bezos when he says, "Our passion for pioneering will drive us to explore narrow passages, and, unavoidably, many will turn out to be blind alleys. But, with a bit of good fortune, there will also be a few that open up into broad avenues".

Amazon's unique communication of its culture compels and pushes employees into a world that welcomes creative thought and is believed to be "an incredibly compelling place to work", as stated by Carney. However, while touted as "incredibly compelling", Bezos warns potential candidates that "it's not easy to work here" and that "this is a culture of working incredibly hard". Renowned for having unreasonably high standards and expectations, Amazon comfortably takes pride in being a tough culture. While Google and Microsoft offer fringe benefits (i.e., gym memberships, cash for new parents) to extrinsically satisfy their employees, Amazon lacks such invitational gestures and competition along with its monetary equivalence serves as recompense for intensified efforts and unwavering pursuits of achievement.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading the case study, how would you describe Amazon's organizational culture? Does the culture meet the definition of a cult?
2. What does this case study tell you about the employees that have adopted Amazon's organizational culture?
3. Would Amazon continue to maintain its competitive advantage and dominance in the marketplace if it adopted a high-context culture as opposed to a low-context culture? Discuss.
4. Considering its success, is this culture actually working for Amazon? Is this the right culture for the industries in which Amazon competes?
5. Based on Jeff Bezos' letter to his employees and the New York Times article, do you think Bezos is out of touch with the culture he created? How does Nick Ciubotariu's blog affect your opinion?

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## APPENDIX A

### NICK CIUBOTARIU'S BLOG

As I woke up ready to start the weekend (without the slightest inclination to work, I might add – much more on this later), I glanced at my iPhone to appease my Facebook addiction and see what my friends were up to. Much to my surprise, a New York Times article describing Amazon had polluted my feed.

Amazon is a big company, and gets referenced often. I've read many articles that describe us. Some are more accurate than others. Sadly, this isn't one of them. This particular article, has so many inaccuracies (some clearly deliberate), that, as an Amazonian, and a proud one at that, I feel compelled to respond.

To baseline, no one asked or expected me to do this. As I cracked open my laptop to write this article, people were already discussing its existence on certain email distribution lists, and the expressions were mostly of disbelief at how uninformed the article was. It's certainly not how I anticipated spending a good part of my Saturday. But I'm not going to stand idly by as a horribly misinformed piece of "journalism" slanders my company in public without merit. I don't have the data to discuss the past - so I won't. However, so much that is written here is deliberately painted to match current reality, and it does not, even by a stretch of the imagination. That is not responsible journalism - that's a hatchet piece. So let's correct that, starting now.

Getting some bonafides out of the way of what actually qualifies me to rebut this article:

- **I actually work here**, and can give you a data-driven perspective of what life at Amazon is really like, today. I'm not an anonymous source, and I'm not something a journalist made up to generate clicks. I am putting my name and reputation behind everything I write, and willing to stand by my words 100%.
- I've been at Amazon since March 24, 2014, which means I have 18 months of data to draw from – recent, on-the-ground experience. I have worked in two of our biggest product groups: Marketplace and currently, Search and Discovery, which means my experience covers a good swath of the Amazon populous.
- I'm an Engineering Leader. I manage other managers, as well as Engineers – which means I run an organization and have visibility into both Executive direction as well as everyday Engineering cadence. I sit on the floor, in a desk, not an office, by choice – because I like to be close to my folks – so I can relate to what it's like for individual contributors as well as managers.
- I'm a technical Bar Raiser, which means I'm part of a select group of people at Amazon who not only has visibility into our hiring standards and practices, but has the direct responsibility of ensuring they are always met.

More important, all those who know me know I'm a people-centric manager first and foremost: I live and breathe by the Golden Rule, and I believe in kindness, respect, integrity and transparency, and that being a good human being comes before anything else. **Those principles are not for sale, at any price – not to me. And they never will be.** I've never been afraid to speak my mind, publicly, about companies I've worked for where those principles get violated – scan my LinkedIn publisher feed and you'll find that counter-example quite quickly. And if Amazon was the type of place described in this article, I would publicly denounce Amazon, and leave.

Quoting from the article: "Data creates a lot of clarity around decision-making," said Sean Boyle, who runs the finance division of Amazon Web Services and was permitted by the company to speak. "Data is incredibly liberating." Yup, I 100% agree. So, in very Amazonian fashion, I'm going to do what Jodi and David did not. I'm going to use data, and provide you with actual facts, starting now.

#### **The headline itself, and subsequent "experiment" references**

There is no "little-known experiment". That's just silly. No one at Amazon has time for this, least of all Jeff Bezos. We've got our hands full with reinventing the world.



**“On Monday mornings, fresh recruits line up for an orientation intended to catapult them into Amazon’s singular way of working.”**

Yes – this is called “New Hire Orientation”, or NHO. At Microsoft (referencing my personal experience), this is called “New Employee Orientation, or NEO. Every company has one, and they call it something. Here’s what happens at ours, precisely:

- New employees get a good breakfast (fruits, pastries, cereal, that kind of thing)
- They immediately get a laptop and backpack
- They get a “Welcome to Amazon” introduction
- They fill out benefits paperwork
- They learn a bit about the company, including our leadership principles
- They hear a story about how important our customers are, as “Customer Obsession” is widely known to be our first and foremost leadership principle
- They hear from a guest speaker about their experience at Amazon
- They get their badge picture taken, and receive their badge
- At the end, the employee’s Manager is waiting for them to welcome them to Amazon, and the new employees get taken out to lunch

This happens from 8 AM – 12:15 PM, or 9 AM – 1:15 PM. Anyone else know of any other company that has a somewhat similar process for new employees?

**“They are told to forget the “poor habits” they learned at previous jobs, one employee recalled.”**

This is completely false, and also, well, quite impossible. Amazon shares tons of “habits” with many other companies, and we hire the best people from those companies because we want to learn from their experience. No one in New Hire Orientation says this. New Amazonians are encouraged to “come up with better ways”, a recurring theme of how we encourage innovation, and something you hear often at Amazon. “Unless you know better ways” is something we live by. The world doesn’t stand still. If you don’t evolve, you perish. And as things get better, we are not only open about incorporating them, we foster the practice of doing so.

**“To be the best Amazonians they can be, they should be guided by the leadership principles, 14 rules inscribed on handy laminated cards.”**

In an article, a prominent business magazine called our Leadership Principles “Amazon’s secret weapon”. They were absolutely right (no irony here – they help make this company great). They are also so secret that we proudly display them for everyone to see. Most, if not all, are things people readily agree with, and are repeated in one form or another by other companies that call them “Core Values”, “Core Principles”, and so on. I’m certain that at the time of their writing, they were drawn from past experience not only within Amazon, but other companies.

**“When quizzed days later, those with perfect scores earn a virtual award proclaiming, “I’m Peculiar” — the company’s proud phrase for overturning workplace conventions.”**

**This is complete and utter reader bait.** No one is "quizzed" - the quiz is **totally, 100%** voluntary – for that matter, no one will mention it again, aside from New Hire Orientation - and you’re told during orientation that it’s an easy way to get your first phone tool icon (some people go as far as collecting these icons). For some, it’s a fun practice. I didn’t take the quiz for 3 weeks, and I admit it’s because I was new and I wanted a phone tool icon. From the quiz itself:

*To help you understand our Peculiar Ways, we’ve created a quiz. If you answer 100% of the questions correctly, you’ll earn the phone-tool award. **If you get an answer wrong because you disagree with the principle itself, then maybe we need to reconsider our way of thinking.***

**Wait. What!?!?** But the article is telling me that people get “catapulted” into a “singular way of working”. Perhaps if Jodi and David had bothered to actually fact-check most of what they wrote with,

you know, current Amazonians, this “article” would have never made it to print. Alas, here we are. But let’s continue.

What are some of these evil quiz questions, you might ask? They mostly explain why we do things like obsess about our customers. Here’s a sample: one asks why we show customers reminders that they’ve already purchased an item if they’re about to accidentally re-purchase it. The correct answer?

*Reminding customers that they’ve already bought an item is the right thing to do. It helps them from accidentally ordering the same thing twice, building trust that we’re a helpful partner.* That’s awful, right? I mean, what customers would want that?

I’ll give you a big hint about this quiz: all 10 or so questions are about how well we treat our customers, and why we do that. It’s because it’s the right thing to do, and it’s why our customers continue to love us. Our customer obsession is what earned us first place in USA Today’s Customer Service Hall of Fame for the sixth year in a row. As long as Amazon is around, and I’m here, we’ll continue to be customer-obsessed, because that’s a good thing.

**“At Amazon, workers are encouraged to tear apart one another’s ideas in meetings, toil long and late (emails arrive past midnight, followed by text messages asking why they were not answered), and held to standards that the company boasts are “unreasonably high.”**

No. No one encourages this. In fact, we get immediate growth feedback for this kind of nonsense. We go into meetings and discuss stuff, just like any other company does. If we quickly come to consensus - awesome. We save time and get out early, and that’s a great outcome. If we don’t, we debate – but we debate politely and respectfully, and you are given constructive feedback to course-correct if you are rude or disrespectful. No one, I repeat, no one is encouraged to “toil long and late.” As a matter of fact, I’ll take a bit of time to expand on this:

When I interviewed at Amazon, I heard all the horror stories from the past. They’re actually pretty well known in Seattle. I was told they were true, that the company continues to take steps to make things better, and that work-life balance was taken seriously. I wasn’t convinced, but I took a bet, because I wanted to work on Computational Theory problems and Distributed Systems at scale that can only be found at Amazon. Here’s my experience:

During my 18 months at Amazon, I’ve never worked a single weekend when I didn’t want to. No one tells me to work nights. No one makes me answer emails at night. No one texts me to ask me why emails aren’t answered. I don’t have these expectations of the managers that work for me, and if they were to do this to their Engineers, I would rectify that myself, immediately. And if these expectations were in place, and enforced upon me, I would leave.

If Amazon used to be this way (and it most likely was, as you’ll see in the quote below), from my 18 month experience working in two of its biggest product groups, that Amazon no longer exists. Last year, during all-hands, a very high ranking Executive said, verbatim:

*Amazon used to burn a lot of people into the ground. This isn’t how we do things anymore, and it isn’t how I run my business. I want this to be a place where people solve problems that cannot be solved, anywhere in the world, but they feel good about working for a great company at the same time. And if you’re burning people into the ground with overwork, you’re not doing it right, and you need to course-correct, or you don’t need to be here.*

**The internal phone directory instructs colleagues on how to send secret feedback to one another’s bosses. Employees say it is frequently used to sabotage others. (The tool offers sample texts, including this: “I felt concerned about his inflexibility and openly complaining about minor tasks.”)**

We refer to this as “Anytime Feedback”, and no one “instructs” you to do anything. It’s simply there to use if you need it. And right at the top, there is a “Strengths” section, and below, an “Areas for Improvement” section. I receive anytime feedback, both positive and constructive, for the folks that work for me. I’m given feedback via the tool, mostly positive, some that addresses my growth areas, that my boss discusses with me. I can always provide it to anyone in the company, at any level. Some people

never use it, and just, you know, talk to each other. Some write emails. Certainly, it is not used to sabotage others in the company, and here's why:

One of the few things the authors got right is that Amazon is a very data-driven company. If the feedback does not have very specific data, as a manager, you are trained to dig deeper before accepting it (whether it's positive or negative), and the tool allows you to do just that: reject the feedback by sending it back for clarification. Managers are also coached on diving deep into feedback to ensure that what Jodi and David state to happen – employee sabotage – actually does not.

The sample text bit is just comical: that's there to help you in case you don't know what to write. Conveniently, Jodi and David left out the sample text in the Strengths section, which, again, is the first thing you see on the Anytime Feedback page. Don't worry, I'll take care of that: "I immediately felt confident about his abilities to organize the project! He quickly mobilized the team to meet a key project milestone!"

### **The next 3 paragraphs**

There is no "culling of the staff" annually. That's just not true. No one would be here if that actually took place and it was a thing.

**"The company, founded and still run by Jeff Bezos, rejects many of the popular management bromides that other corporations at least pay lip service to and has instead designed what many workers call an intricate machine propelling them to achieve Mr. Bezos' ever-expanding ambitions."**

I don't know what the hell this even is, or where to start. What are the popular management bromides that we reject? There is no intricate machine, and I have no idea what Jeff's ambitions are, other than to continue to grow Amazon. Most of us work here because we want to solve the world's most challenging technology problems. We come to work, do our best, have fun, and go home. While what the authors write sounds evil-scary-bad, it lacks, you know, facts and substance.

**"This is a company that strives to do really big, innovative, groundbreaking things, and those things aren't easy," said Susan Harker, Amazon's top recruiter. "When you're shooting for the moon, the nature of the work is really challenging. For some people it doesn't work."**

Yes. Amazon is, without question, the most innovative technology company in the world. The hardest problems in technology, bar none, are solved at Amazon. This is why I'm here. My mentor, an Executive at one of the biggest software companies in the world, told me in our monthly 1:1, as recently as 3 days ago: "There isn't another company with the size, complexity, and Engineering strength of Amazon. It is the undisputed world leader." And it is true. Our sheer size and complexity dwarfs everyone else, and not everyone is qualified to work here, or will rise to the challenge. But that doesn't mean we're Draconian or evil. Not everyone gets into Harvard, either, or graduates from there. Same principles apply.

**"Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk."**

I don't know Ben Olson, and I don't know when he left the company. If his story is true, his manager, whoever they were, should be ashamed. I've been here 18 months, and I've never seen anyone cry. And if that was truly the environment in books marketing, Ben should have said something immediately. That's just wrong, and certainly not something we encourage. In today's Amazon, management and HR would take care of that in an instant.

I can, however, tell you what happens in my group. We work hard, and have fun. We have Nerf wars, almost daily, that often get a bit out of hand. We go out after work. We have "Fun Fridays". We banter, argue, play video games and Foosball. And we're vocal about our employee happiness. And that's encouraged from the Corporate Vice-President I skip to, and the Director I report to. Aside from our yearly survey, which asks very precise questions hitting at the core of employee happiness, our organization conducts our own polls, which get actioned by my group's Leadership Team, of which I am a part of. We listen to what our folks are telling us.

**Because hiring the very best of the very best is incredibly difficult, especially at Amazon. And it's just stupid to create and, heaven forbid, foster an environment that encourages people to leave just as you've worked so hard to find and hire them in the first place.**

Next paragraph deals with growth. Yay – we're growing!! Then secrecy: we're required to sign confidentiality agreements. Yes, just like just about every other technology company out there. They're referred to as NDA's, or Non-Disclosure Agreements. **They've been standard in industry for decades.** Then there's this:

**“..life inside its corporate offices is largely a mystery”.**

It's such a mystery that Glassdoor, CareerCup, Quora.. - well, “the Internets” as a whole know all about Amazon, just like this article pretends to. I meet with people every day who ask what life at Amazon is like, and I tell them. I do this formally at least twice a week, for any interview I Bar Raise, because candidates ask. I'm doing it right now, for everyone that's gotten this far into the article and still cares.

The next several paragraphs deal with why people want to work at Amazon, and most is accurate. They come here because innovation in technology happens here more than anywhere else. What I take issue with is below:

**“Amazon is in the vanguard of where technology wants to take the modern office: more nimble and more productive, but harsher and less forgiving.”**

Why, on Earth, would we want to be harsher and less forgiving? There is a virtual arms-race for the world's top talent. Hiring in technology is incredibly difficult, more so in giant technology hubs like Seattle, where competition is fierce. If anything, we do our best to foster and grow the talent we hire through continuous improvement, leadership and mentoring, not by being “harsh and less forgiving”. That leads to a revolving door of talent, and no one wants that.

### **On Hire and Develop the Best and Elitism**

I cannot speak about Jeff Bezos's early life – I don't have that data. I can tell you that our Leadership Principles are taken very seriously, and they play a large part in Amazon's success. I do take issue with the fact that Jodi and David have no idea how to interpret the Leadership Principles. Hire and Develop the Best isn't there to “conjure an empire of elite workers”. We are a very selective company in who we hire – as are Microsoft, Facebook, Google, and many of the other top companies in technology. Most would say we're the most selective, and the data would say they are correct. But that doesn't mean we're “elitist”. Elitist implies snobby, aristocratic, blue-blood. Anyone who knows anything about Amazon would tell you that hardly describes us. Being “most selective” is not the same thing by any means. As a matter of fact, here is the “Hire and Develop the Best” leadership principle, verbatim:

*Leaders raise the performance bar with every hire and promotion. They recognize exceptional talent, and willingly move them throughout the organization. Leaders develop leaders and take seriously their role in coaching others. We work on behalf of our people to invent mechanisms for development like Career Choice.*

**Is any of this bad?** Would you not want to work for a company that recognizes talent based on merit, not politics and bureaucracy? Would you not want to work for leaders that help you develop to become your best? Would you not want to be a part of a company where movement is encouraged, rather than restricted?

Other erroneous or unsubstantiated parts of the article. “Within Amazon, ideal employees are often described as “athletes” with endurance, speed”. That's just not true, and I've never heard anyone say that. I also think teaching Amazon's Leadership Principles to one's children is kind of funny (my opinion only, if there are indeed Amazonians that do this). I'm too busy teaching my child Judo, reading and chess. She's also busy teaching me about Disney Jr.

The authors are right when comparing the food perks. They don't exist, like they do at Google and Facebook. Some people wish they did, others do not care. Our cafeterias are subsidized, and there are no free drinks at the offices in Seattle, though this policy is not company-wide. And then, there's this:

**“...from the bare-bones desks to the cellphones and travel expenses that they often pay themselves.”**

The desks are a tradition from the old Amazon “door desks” and, looking at how nice they are compared to the sterile, hospital white, pressed-wood cubicle desks at other companies, they probably cost a lot more to make. Our cell phone expenses are reimbursed, and the fact that people “often” pay for their own travel expenses is wrong – and, to be frank, just plain stupid – who would work at such a company?!? You're actually encouraged to get an Amazon corporate card by some of the posters found on the company walls and in the elevators just to make travel reimbursement easier for you. My business travel has averaged twice monthly, and no one has ever told me I had to fund my own travel expenses. I also approve travel expenses for those working for me quite frequently via a, you know, "Travel Tool" – I've heard companies have those. In what happens to be a recurring theme throughout this article, simple fact-checking would have really helped.

**“Of all of his management notions, perhaps the most distinctive is his belief that harmony is often overvalued in the workplace — that it can stifle honest critique and encourage polite praise for flawed ideas. Instead, Amazonians are instructed to “disagree and commit” (No. 13) — to rip into colleagues' ideas, with feedback that can be blunt to the point of painful, before lining up behind a decision.”**

Again, no. Absolutely, unequivocally, no. Have Backbone/Disagree and Commit states:

*Leaders are obligated to **respectfully** challenge decisions when they disagree, even when doing so is uncomfortable or exhausting. Leaders have conviction and are tenacious. They do not compromise for the sake of social cohesion. Once a decision is determined, they commit wholly.*

I bolded respectfully for a reason. We don't rip into each other. If this happened at Amazon before, it doesn't happen now, not where I work and worked. What this does encourage is something that I have not found in any other company, and something that has been reinforced throughout my career at Amazon, including, in writing, in one of my training documents, citing verbatim:

*“Executive mandates don't fly around here”*

I have worked in companies where the highest paid person in the room would make a decision, and that was that. Right, wrong or indifferent, you were either the wolf or part of the flock of sheep. At Amazon, people are encouraged and expected to call out bad/suboptimal projects, ideas, patterns, etc., no matter the level. I have done this myself many times, twice to Senior Vice-Presidents that report to Jeff. I did it in a respectful manner, and simply pointed out that “the data did not justify the project” and/or “the data did not support their assertion.” I'm almost positive that at most other companies, this would have been equivalent to career crucifixion. Instead, I got polite praise in both instances, with no further argument.

Everyone here is empowered to “push the big red button”, so to speak, when the train is about to go off rails, no matter their level and role. And that's one of the things that makes this place so great. There is an expectation that you do this in a data-driven and respectful manner, without negative emotion, or you get coached very quickly to do it the right way. That's the “Have Backbone” part of the leadership principle. The “Disagree and Commit” portion is just as simple: If you've exhausted your side of the debate, and the votes go against you, you commit to the direction that your peers have decided to pursue.

**A bunch of stuff that's also wrong or inaccurate**

I have never been called an “Amabot”, nor have I heard anyone utter this term. I've never been called an Amhole, and I'm completely certain this is made up, as I've never heard anyone say this, and as an insult, it wouldn't make a very good one, in my opinion. I have never been criticized for not having an Internet connection, not answering emails at night, or otherwise not having a life outside Amazon. If that

happened, I would leave. If it is happening in other parts of the company, despite my personal experience and that of thousands of others in the two product groups I've worked in, it needs to stop – immediately. I have never seen a 50-60 page document – that is not Frugal in terms of time spent, and certainly would not be encouraged. In a sad and continued pattern of setting the record straight with this article, most Amazonians and especially Executives insist that written material adhere to at “6 pages or less” rule. I have never been “pop-quizzed”. I have never been called “stupid”, and if anyone called me, or anyone that worked for me, that, the next conversation they would have would be with an HR Business Partner in the room.

### **My personal favorite**

I'm kind of flattered that Jodi and David think of me as a “star employee” by way of being a Bar Raiser – being invited into the Bar Raiser program, and graduating, was one of the toughest and most rewarding things I have ever accomplished. Thanks guys!!

I've already covered the Anytime Feedback tool, and completely agree with below:

**“Craig Berman, an Amazon spokesman, said the tool was just another way to provide feedback, like sending an email or walking into a manager's office. Most comments, he said, are positive.”**

Hey, guess what - Craig was right! And he works for Amazon! But, to just to make sure, I even looked through for the folks that report to me, including Managers and their subordinates. On average, the ratio of positive feedback to negative feedback was over 5:1. What I find fascinating is how Jodi and David over-index on this tool as if it were the most nefarious devices known to man. It is no different than what is found at tons of other companies – it's really just another way of providing feedback. I don't want to be dismissive of the examples provided, but singling out several outliers to vilify an entire company does not represent truth in journalism.

### **Organizational Level Ranking**

I won't discuss Organizational Level Ranking, or OLR. Some companies, such as Microsoft and Accenture, no longer use it. Others, such as Amazon, Google, Facebook, Apple and others still use it. Yahoo instituted it two years ago. I will dispute – vehemently so – the assertion that “You learn how to diplomatically throw people under the bus”. To assert otherwise without a single shred of data is irresponsible and just plain wrong. We don't have time to do that here, or to teach people that. Also, it's bad. Also, HR participates in OLR, and makes sure that we don't do that, because it's bad.

### **On the gender gap**

Science is gender-neutral. I have seen Amazon do more to encourage diversity than any other company I've worked for. My Bar Raiser mentor is one of the most capable leaders I have ever met – she is a stellar professional and Amazon is lucky to have her. As a Bar Raiser, one of my responsibilities is to ensure that we “Hire and Develop” without a single shred of prejudice. Quite frequently, I interface with Directors and CVPs that are women, who have earned my trust and respect, and I quite frankly have no idea what to make of the following:

**“Several former high-level female executives, and other women participating in a recent internal Amazon online discussion that was shared with The New York Times, said they believed that some of the leadership principles worked to their disadvantage. They said they could lose out in promotions because of intangible criteria like “earn trust” (principle No. 10) or the emphasis on disagreeing with colleagues. Being too forceful, they said, can be particularly hazardous for women in the workplace.”**

I honestly don't understand this. One “Earns Trust” through actions, not through gender. Here's the Earns Trust of Others leadership principle:

*Leaders listen attentively, speak candidly, and treat others respectfully. They are vocally self-critical, even when doing so is awkward or embarrassing. Leaders do not believe*

*their or their team's body odor smells of perfume. They benchmark themselves and their teams against the best.*

How would adhering to this work against a specific gender? How could being an attentive, respectful leader, who is vocally self-critical and candid be a bad thing?? Even if this could logically happen based on gender, of all things (and I can't for the life of me rationalize how) HR is in the room for promotion and review discussions to ensure that what Jodi and David refer to doesn't happen. As a father to a single child (a daughter), who I hope one day will be the best at whatever she chooses to be, this part of the article angers me the most. I want to state that I am not disputing Michelle Williamson's account of what she was told by her boss – what I am disputing is that it's a widespread practice, as the article makes it out to be. As an Amazonian, this is not something I've ever encountered, and as a Manager and owner, I would flag comments such as the one her former boss made immediately.

The next part of the article devotes itself to one-off examples (which sound absolutely horrible). Quoting from the article:

“Mr. Berman, the spokesman, said such responses to employees' crises were “not our policy or practice.” He added, “If we were to become aware of anything like that, we would take swift action to correct it.”

Craig, you're now aware. If these examples are indeed accurate, we need to verify what happened and ensure nothing like this ever happens again. On a positive note, I can relate to the lady whose leadership team was supportive when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. When I first went to work for Amazon, I left the Seattle area for the opportunity to help run a very successful and fast-growing Engineering office in Tempe, Arizona. Family health reasons in adjusting to the extreme temperatures of a desert climate forced us to move back. I moved back during review time, and moved to another product group. And my review, as well as my yearly results, didn't suffer one iota. Amazon was extremely supportive of my move, worked with me when I needed time off to be with my family, and ensured my performance review fairly reflected my contributions to the company. I have done the same, multiple times, for folks that work in my organization with similar circumstances. We are all encouraged to do this because it's the right thing to do.

### **A stream of departures**

This part of the article deals with attrition. I don't know what the numbers are. I have some idea of how many people want to work here, and that number is staggering. In every interview I participate, as part of the introduction and as an ice-breaker, I ask a very simple question: “What brings you to Amazon?” The answers vary, but thematically, most candidates provide a version of this:

*I want to work on the most complex problems in the world, with the best and brightest people in the world.*

This is, in effect, what Amazon is all about. And reading the article, it's patently clear that Jodi and David don't comprehend this. It's not about “the cause of delivering swim goggles and rolls of Scotch tape to customers just a little quicker.” **In 1997, Amazon revolutionized the way the world shops. Today, we're the world's most innovative technology company that just happens to sell books, among other things.** We are a multi-faceted business that spans the breadth of technology innovation, from cloud computing to devices to search to advanced robotics, and countless other spaces. It's not an easy place to work. We thrive on challenge, innovation, and winning. We believe that every day is still Day One. And alongside that, we're a human company that cares about its employees. Perhaps we weren't before - but even if we didn't want to be, today, **we have to be.** Because we are not the only ones in the race for talent, and everyone wants the very top people we work so hard to hire. And the very best of the very best always have choices, and exercise them quickly if they need to.

The Amazon described in this article may have existed, in the past. Certainly, I've heard others refer to “how things used to be” but it is definitely not the Amazon of today. And it's really a shame Jodi and David didn't take the time to write a fact-based article. I've done my best to rectify that, on their behalf, as well as the New York Times. All three of you are quite welcome.