



Volume 25 • Number 4 • Winter 2018



**Humanistic
Management:
an alternative way of
organising**

Journal of the Association for
Management Education and
Development





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Menstruation and humanistic management at work: the development and implementation of a menstrual workplace policy

Lara Owen



This article explores menstruation in the workplace in the context of a humanistic management approach which highlights the values of respect, dignity, and wellbeing at work. Increased public conversation on menstruation in recent years, supported by research showing the detrimental effects of menstrual stigma on women's physical and mental health, point to a shift in consideration for women's menstrual wellbeing.

This paper is based on my research on the development and implementation of a 'period policy' at Coexist, a social enterprise in Bristol, UK, which I undertook between October 2016 and December 2017.

The policy was co-designed by management and staff, and uses flexible working arrangements and contingency planning to allow women greater support when menstruating. I discuss the effects of the policy and suggest avenues for future research.

Keywords

menstruation; menstrual leave; period policy; flexible working; contingency planning; Coexist

Introduction

This paper explores menstruation in the workplace in the context of a humanistic management approach which highlights the values of *respect*, *dignity* and *wellbeing* at work. In recent years there has been an increased level of interest in menstruation as a marginalised yet important aspect of women's lives. Research has shown the detrimental effects of menstrual stigma on women's physical and mental health (e.g. O'Flynn, 2006; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013b) and the impact of menstrual prejudice on attitudes to women in the workplace (Roberts, 2002). Social media conversations, media articles, the new 'menstrual activism' (Bobel, 2010) and calls for 'menstrual equity' (Weiss-Wolf, 2017) point to a shift in consideration for women's menstrual wellbeing. Correspondingly, as a management and organisation studies scholar with a special interest in women's rights and wellbeing at work, I undertook an ethnographically-informed research study on the development and implementation of a 'period policy' at Coexist, a social enterprise in Bristol, UK, between October 2016 and December 2017. This paper describes the process of developing a new kind of humanistic management policy from scratch.

Background

In March 2016, [Coexist](#), a social enterprise running a large community building and associated initiatives in Bristol, announced it was bringing in a 'Period Policy' for its menstruating employees. This public announcement was met with a remarkable amount of [media attention](#), and for a while the organisation was overwhelmed with requests for print interviews and media appearances. The story went viral and attracted [international interest](#). I was living in Australia at the time, and was contacted by a national newspaper for my perspective on what this meant for Australian organisations. I have a long-term interest in menstruation, and particularly in menstruation at work, so I followed these developments closely. I was also about to start a PhD in a Department of Management, and wondered if this policy might be a suitable subject for my research. As I was on the other side of the world, I wasn't sure this would be the best way forward for Coexist or for me, so I watched and waited to see how matters developed, but everything seemed to go quiet. So I contacted a colleague who put me in touch with [Rebecca \(Bex\) Baxter](#), the Coexist People Development Director and initiator of the policy idea. I was going to the UK the following week to visit my family, and Bex and I arranged to meet at a café on the Gloucester Road in Bristol.



Bex Baxter with staff in the Coexist offices, March 2016. Taken from the Daily Mail 2/3/2016

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3471011/Company-reveals-plans-offer-period-leave-women-month-create-happier-work-environment.html>

Why the need? An ethic of care

By this time, three months after the public launch of the idea, the media attention had begun to die down, and the organisation was faced with the nitty-gritty task of actually writing the policy. A lot of words had been spoken and there was a great deal of goodwill and excitement, but deciding how to actually go about it was daunting. Bex told me that since the public consultation and media frenzy she had felt rather stuck, and just did not know where to begin. So we started to talk. She said that as a basic premise, her organisation wanted to challenge the norm of women feeling like they had to work when they were in menstrual pain; that the initiating moment of the policy had occurred when she saw a staff member white in the face and bent double with period pain while working on the information desk in the front lobby, and who said (with the learned stoicism of menstruating women everywhere), “Oh, I’m fine, it’s just my period”.

There was widespread recognition within Coexist that expecting women to ‘grin and bear it’ as per cultural norms, and thus to work while in pain or having other menstrual symptoms, went against the organisation’s primary ethic of care. For example, as with pretty much every workplace, along with those women who experienced ‘normal’ menstrual pain, at Coexist there were women with [endometriosis](#) (an estimated 10% of the menstruating population have this condition) which made menstruation extremely painful, and profoundly affected their experience of the workplace and at times, of their ability to work an eight (or more) hour day on every working day of the month (Seear, 2009). In addition, the progressive ethos of the organisation, committed to humanistic and broader ecological values, meant that there was a desire to encourage and support women to honour the menstrual cycle rather than to feel they had to suppress, deny, or minimise it.

Issues in enacting a menstrual policy

But how should the organisation enact this period policy? Should they have mandatory menstrual leave? Or one or two days paid leave a month for every woman if she wanted it? How would that sit with non-menstruating employees? How would it impact the smooth-running of the organisation? It sounded like such a great idea, to factor women’s cyclicity into the structure of working life, to legitimise women’s right to wellbeing at work, and to respect the fertile female body and its needs – but what would that look like in the contemporary world? Bex and her colleagues were well aware that they were engaging with this possibility in a wider context long predicated on the male body as the norm in the workplace (Acker, 1990; Tretheway, 1999), and still infected by longstanding menstrual stigma (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013a & 2013b; Roberts, 2002; Young, 2005).

I had previously done research into menstrual leave internationally, which indicated that blanket leave (such as every menstruating woman getting two days off when bleeding, paid or unpaid depending on the situation), was only workable in specific situations where there was a cultural history of resting on the first two days of menses, (such as in parts of Asia), and where women were not competing with men for jobs. In practice this meant menstrual leave was a culturally related, traditional ‘bonus’ for women in very low-paid jobs with no career path. In Taiwan, the Gender Equal Employment Act (2002) gave women the right to

apply for menstrual leave, yet this benefit has not been taken up because of the inconvenience of having to get medical certificates, and because women fear losing status and jobs and being seen as less useful than men (Chang et al, 2011).

In developed countries, whenever the subject of menstrual leave has thus far arisen in the media, it has attracted a furore of contesting responses, exposing women to sexist and demeaning commentary (Sayers & Jones, 2015). Bex had recently experienced this phenomenon as the organisation's primary spokesperson for the policy, so she was well aware of the complexity of doing something apparently helpful for women at work, and how it could backfire. I knew of a few small businesses and non-profits in the Global North which acknowledged that menstruating women might need to adjust their work patterns to their cycles, but these menstrual 'policies' were mostly unwritten agreements that women could go home or take a bit of time off if they needed to, rather than anything formalised. Bex and her Board felt it was important to formalise the policy to legitimise and think through women's needs at work, and perhaps also to act as a model and inspiration for other organisations to do the same.

Making a start

In this first conversation, I offered to give my help pro bono, aware that this would simplify matters ethically if I went on to do research on the initiative. (I discussed my potential research with Bex at the time as a future possibility, pending my supervisors' acceptance of my research plans and approval from my institution's ethics committee.) In my consultant role, I suggested letting go of the term 'menstrual leave' as it was so contentious, and instead considering 'menstrual flexibility'. With this reframe of the concept, we worked through several iterations of the policy, and after several months settled on the most conservative version as a starting place. This allowed women paid time off when menstruating, in consultation with their line management, but this was time that would be 'paid back' at other times of the month. We knew this was potentially problematic, but that at least it was a start and a place from which to elicit feedback. It is much harder to get busy people to contribute to a blank slate than to something already partly formed, and we were aware that, given the potential difficulties and the lack of previous successful models, it was most likely we would end up with a policy that worked if the people using the policy were able to shape it. So we were not worried about putting something out there that was probably going to need a lot more change. From the start, I had recommended and modelled a process-oriented view of the policy, seeing it as something malleable and in flux at this stage. Bex was in agreement. This was also her personal philosophy, and with a shared perspective we worked together in considerable harmony. If this was to be a useful policy, with patient attention it would settle into something that worked, at which point I hoped it would become part of the background furniture of the organisation's life rather than a flashy thing to get excited about. If that could happen, then acknowledgment of women's needs surrounding menstruating at work would be on the way to being normalised, which I felt would be a positive development.

Reconciling my consultancy and research roles

Three months after I began consulting on the policy, I started formal research on it for my PhD, now with university ethics and supervisory approval. The existing role I had as a pro bono consultant thus became entangled with doing qualitative research into the development and implementation of the policy. Having foreseen this situation, from the start I had dealt with the potential tensions in this dual role by adopting a participant observer position informed by a feminist ethnographic ethos, which included factoring self-awareness into my analysis, understanding process, and reciprocating knowledge (Skeggs, 2001). As much as I could, I asked questions rather than leaping in to give solutions. I focused on attentive listening, waiting, eliciting, and then offering advice or suggestions when requested. When I was asked direct questions based on my knowledge of the field, I did not adopt either an authoritative role or deny my expertise by hiding behind a need for researcher 'objectivity'. Instead I used a friendship style in which I collaborated on solutions.

The evolution of the policy

It took six months to develop the pilot policy through an iterative process, during which time there were Skype calls and emails back and forth between Bex, myself and the new staff member taking over Bex's operational role, and occasional consultations with other staff. I took as light an approach as I could, primarily acting as a sounding board and not as an initiator. When they felt it was ready, the policy was presented to the Board, where it was ratified and implemented as formal organisational policy, with the recognition that this was a preliminary version open to feedback. It then took another six months for everyone to see how it operated in practice, and to turn the policy into something that worked. While by some standards this rate of progress was slow, once staff had a policy to work from, experimentation elicited clarity. We all met up again in person six months after the initial written policy had been ratified, at which point staff came back with their varying experiences and ideas about what they needed.

First, it became clear that the notion of everyone paying back time was too complicated and burdensome for people who already felt overly busy, with many staff members combining multiple life roles as workers, parents and partners, and often also volunteers and activists. As we reworked the policy based on this feedback, flexible working involving paying back time was taken out as a requisite for using the policy. However staff asked for and were given the option to work more hours at other times if they wanted to, in the acknowledgement that at times this might be a preference for some women.

Second, there was the issue of how much time people might need to take off from work. This varied from person to person, but it was agreed that the majority of women wanted the option of taking a day off and being paid for it. So the policy developed to allow all menstruating women one paid day off if needed; if they required more than one day off related to menstruation, this time would come out of their sick leave.

Third, women in some positions felt they really needed time away from the workplace, whereas for others it was less important. It became clear that the burden of working while menstruating was most keenly felt by women in front-facing roles who needed to be ever-present and ever-engaged. Some employees expressed a desire to rest and retreat when menstruating, especially if bleeding heavily. In front-facing roles, this inward pull conflicted with the emotional labour involved in being helpful to the public all day long. On the other hand, women in less extroverted roles, (such as in the back office), felt less need to take time out, also in the knowledge that they could often adjust their workload to their energy level without upsetting workplace needs and expectations. Working from home was included in the policy as an option to be discussed with line management.

Contingency planning

Importantly, it became apparent from the six-month feedback that women were much less likely to use the policy unless there was someone to temporarily take over their role. Accordingly, contingency planning was introduced for front-facing staff, with a list of people who could take over when needed, either by previous planning, a phone call the night before, or during the working day. If anyone felt physically uncomfortable at work, but not as if they needed to go home for the rest of the day, they could also make use of the contingency plan for an hour or two, and go and lie down in a wellbeing room.

The current policy

The policy that developed through this process appears to have enough flexibility to be effective for most employees. There remains one area of the workplace where two women work and where it has so far been impossible to provide a solution, due to the specificity and demands of the jobs involved and difficulties providing contingency support in their specialised area of work. However, these women have expressed that they find benefit in being able to be open about the situation, even when it is not yet ideal. Additional supportive elements of the policy include induction materials, regular check-ins, and support for management in listening to the needs of menstruating staff and destigmatising menstruation at work. The policy stresses good communication as key to the smooth working of the initiative, along with planning and awareness of the cycle. Women in front-facing roles share information about their cycles with each other through a menstrual app, to aid in planning.

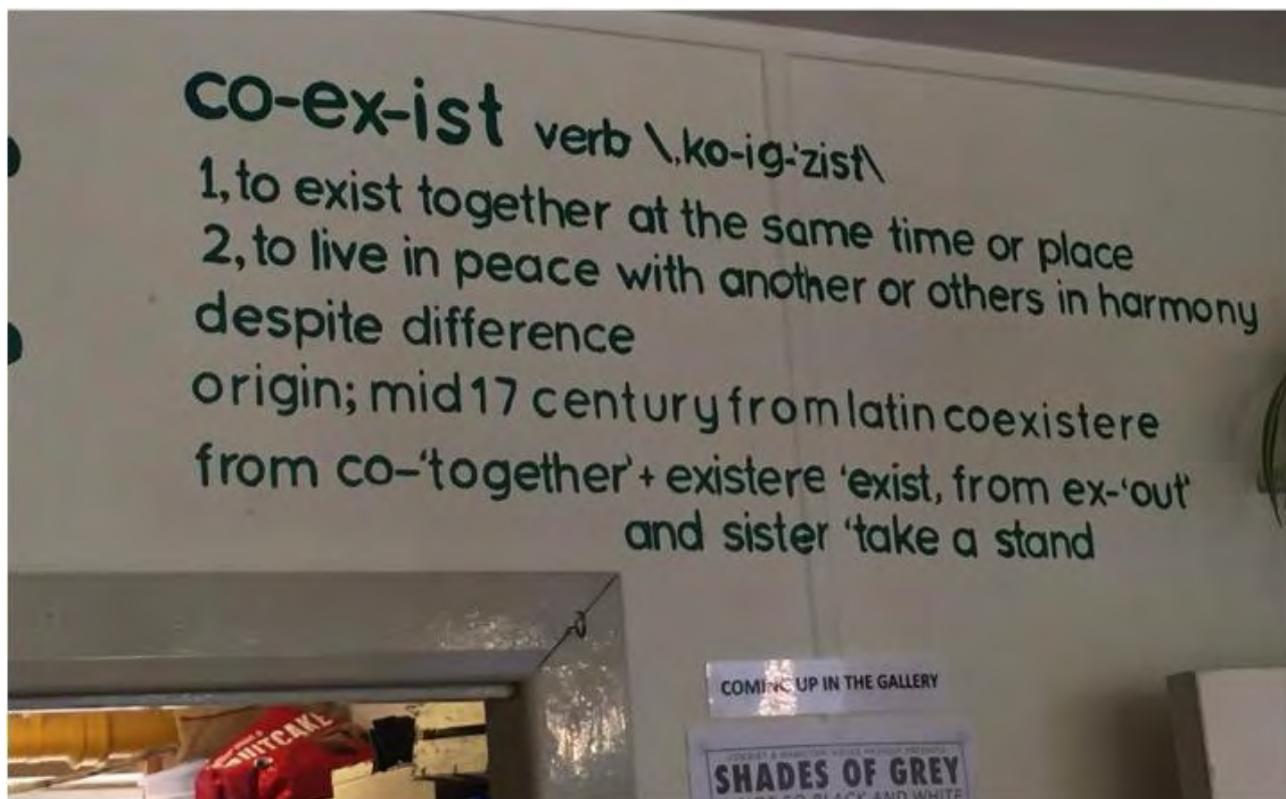
The wider effect of the policy on the organisation

In terms of the wider organisation, men expressed no resentment, and instead said they liked the fact that menstruation was addressed openly, and felt it gave them permission to also adjust their working day to their bodies when needed. The notion of 'permission' came up repeatedly, and extended to a radical change in the customary opening roundtable of organisational meetings, at which women began to volunteer their cyclical status as a factor in their current state of mind and bodily wellbeing. Rather than being essentialist, or shaming in any way, and/or reifying the menstruating body in some compensatory fashion, this development appeared to simply normalise a previously stigmatised part of embodiment, which has profound implications for women's sense of embodied 'rightness' in the workplace. Over time, men also spoke more in

such public settings about how they were feeling. I have sat in and participated in many organisational meetings in my working life, but rarely in ones which felt as relaxed, friendly, accepting and free, even when people were in disagreement about other matters.

The positive influence of progressive organisational values

It is no accident that this early example of a formal menstrual policy was instigated at an organisation based on progressive values. Coexist articulates its commitment to a trust policy tied into a commitment to wellbeing: no one is tracking hours or demanding people work no matter what. The staff are passionate about wellbeing and social justice, and work for relatively low pay. Thus, the possibility of staff exploiting the policy was minimised by the organisational culture and the people attracted to it. In addition, a majority of the staff are menstruating-age women. So there were specific elements that allowed the policy to be developed and implemented without discord.



Photograph taken by Lara Owen 20/6/2017 of the front desk area at Hamilton House, the community hub in Stokes Croft, Bristol that Coexist has run since 2008.

Conclusion

Social trends indicate that menstruation is in the process of losing its historic stigmatised status, and that menstrual equity and cyclical awareness are significant growing matters of attention (Weiss-Wolf, 2017). So we can expect to see continued interest in menstrual workplace policies of various kinds. (There is also growing interest in implementation of best practice recommendations for menopause at work.) The

experience at Coexist indicates that organisations need to listen to women employees when creating a menstrual policy, otherwise accommodations to menstruation at work could become lip service PR strategies. Clearly there is no point introducing such policies just to look good: they have to be practicable within the organisational context, and serve the real needs of menstruating workers. We learned that simply offering say, a day off a month, without contingency planning and acknowledgment of different needs in different roles, will not result in a policy that works for all roles or that women will feel they can take up without causing disruption, potentially endangering their jobs and promotion prospects in the long-term.

Future research on this topic is needed in a variety of organisations, and also longitudinally to find out how such policies are perceived to influence menstruating workers and organisational cultures over time and in specific circumstances. For example, research has shown that women with endometriosis tend to have shorter or interrupted careers, falling into unemployment or ‘choosing’ to be self-employed, whether or not they have the temperament and support necessary for entrepreneurship (e.g. Gilmour, 2008). While we might reasonably surmise that sympathetic policies could keep women with endometriosis in the jobs for which they have trained, are suited, and where they may have significant value to the organisation, we need research to confirm and understand the extent of this employment trend.

The pioneering policy at Coexist is an early example of a humane initiative to recognise and accommodate to the varying needs of menstruating women, and to relieve the unnecessary suffering endured by some women working within traditional organisational norms. The policy offers some new possibilities for reimagining workplace conventions surrounding women’s biology. It will be interesting to see if and how these findings can be translated into organisations with different kinds of workplace cultures.

As for myself, it was an enormous privilege to be able to study a new kind of policy so close up, and I learned a great deal. Terminology is still a work-in-progress, with ‘menstrual leave’ clearly an inflammatory and insufficient term. At the moment I am using phrases like: ‘best practice menstrual workplace policies’, ‘menstrual cycle recognition at work’ or ‘menstrual accommodation in the workplace.’ So far the [media](#) (and my inbox) indicates there is growing interest in companies exploring supportive measures for menstruating and menopausal employees, certainly in the UK and Australia. In today’s rapid global communication landscape, and considering the increased focus on menstrual and menopausal health and wellbeing more broadly, we can anticipate an openness to these topics in workplaces internationally.

In terms of humanistic management, the development of Coexist’s ‘period policy’ offers several takeaways. First, that it is vital to involve the eventual users of a new and ground-breaking policy in its creation, to ensure successful uptake. Second, that humanistic policies can have (unanticipated) knock-on benefits to other workers. Third, that the workplace can be the locus for reconceptualising historically stigmatised matters whose marginalisation causes unnecessary suffering. In such ways we can integrate the values of *respect*, *dignity* and *wellbeing* into the lived experience of everyday working environments, and have a positive influence on the broader culture.

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Further resources

Bex Baxter's TED talk on the Coexist menstrual policy: *Ending a Workplace Taboo. Period.*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wWUAX_1JDw

Coexist's page on the period policy: <https://www.hamiltonhouse.org/coexist-pioneering-period-policy/>

Recent examples of articles on menstrual leave in the media:

(1) <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20170908-can-period-leave-ever-work>

(2) <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/03/health/period-leave-australia-explainer-intl/index.html>

About Lara

Lara Owen works internationally as a consultant on women's wellbeing at work, with a specialisation in menstruation and menopause. She is in the final year of her PhD on menstruation at work at Monash University in Melbourne. For more information and to get in touch, please visit her website, <http://laraowen.com>. She welcomes correspondence on this topic to: lara@laraowen.com.

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The Humanistic Management Network (HMN) is an international group of practitioners and academics who share a concern that organisations exist to benefit society. Humanistic management is based on three principles; 1) respect for the dignity of each person, 2) ethical organizational decisions and processes and 3) on-going dialogue with multiple stakeholders. Humanistic management (HM) can be a driver for sustained business success and can reduce the cost of conflict, high levels of [Contents](#) stress-related absence, and the costs of raising capital. But HM principles are not shared by everyone and are increasingly under threat. As the newly-established [Humanistic Management Network](#) UK Chapter, we are very open to your suggestions and ideas about how we can develop and grow.

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