

How "reference anxiety" can cripple you at work

Many folks are "making a living" yet lack a sense of significance: a "meaning" in what they do. Rather than exploring the nature of their dissatisfaction by going "inside" and looking at the real reasons for their frustration with work, they prefer to find fault with externals: the education and training programs, the health and pension programs (albeit, today often quite justifiable), management, and environmental conditions. They are driving themselves to their own spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical poorhouse in new automobiles, eating at smart restaurants, watching plasma TVs, all the while bemoaning the reality of increased stress, overwork, and an environment polluted by industry. They allow themselves to be devoured by the corporation and spend relentless amounts of energy and time (a lifetime, for many) scratching and clawing their way up the corporate ladder to achieve corporate success; to be "somebody."

One the way, they set aside their dreams (once, real dreams) and tailor their lives and personalities to what the market demands. They practice the arts of "power dressing", power lunching, having or creating "winning personalities," all the while steeped in a state of emptiness, leading to unhappiness and dissatisfaction. In order to be "somebody", they burn out without ever having been on fire.

What is it about work that leads so many to be dissatisfied?

The January 17, 2005 special Issue of Time Magazine had an article about what is known as "reference anxiety" "keeping up with the Joneses" constantly comparing one's self and one's "stuff" with someone else's. Much of this takes place in work environments and is characteristic of many of today's workplace cultures.

This "reference anxiety" syndrome even accounts for the widening gap in income distribution. The Time article states:

Paradoxically, it is the very increase in money . . . that triggers dissatisfaction [. . .] clinical depression is 3 to 10 times as common today than two generations ago . . . money jangles in our wallets and purses, but we are no happier for it, and for many, more money leads to depression. [. . .] millions of us spend more time and energy pursuing the things money can buy than engaging in activities that create real fulfillment in life . . .

Perhaps the dissatisfaction element lies on a much deeper level of the psyche: it's about the inner person, not about the externals.

In other words, it's not the work that's at cause when it comes to worker dissatisfaction.

It's curious that of the thousands of business books that are published each year, there's hardly one chapter devoted to friendship in the workplace (real and true friendship, not the "good-old-boys-back-slapping stuff", that is a faux substitute).

Relationships rule the world, even the world of work. Finding meaning rules one's deeper sense of happiness, fulfillment, and well-being, even in the world of work. It's relationships first with yourself, then with others that must be examined to explore the true and real root causes of employee dissatisfaction.

The spirit of an organization begins and ends with the spirit of each individual. When we come to life with the right values, we are grounded on a foundation of truth, honesty, sincerity, and self-responsibility, and from this place, dissatisfaction can more easily morph into satisfaction.

So, really, really, why is worker satisfaction falling?

Perhaps it starts with "me," not with "it," "him/her" or even "them."

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Could I be contributing to my own dissatisfaction at work? If so, how? Honestly.
- Do I have an expectation that my company or manager is responsible for my happiness at work?
- What is it about work that excites me? If nothing or, "not much", then why do I choose to remain there? How might I proactively turn this around?
- What personal and professional goals have I set for myself at work next year? If I don't have any, could that contribute to my unhappiness?
- What lessons did I learn about myself at work last year? I did learn some lessons, didn't I? How can I leverage these lessons to increase my satisfaction at work in 2008?
- What mutually-supportive relationships do I want to develop at work?
- What self-defeating habits do I want to eliminate?
- Are there toxic people in my life at work (or at home) who contribute to my unhappiness at work?
- Who can I serve, support, coach or mentor that will bring me satisfaction or increase my happiness at work?
- How have I grown at work during the past year? I have grown in some positive way, haven't I? If not, why not?
- What one or two baby steps can I take this week or this month that can increase my satisfaction at work?

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