

In Search of Harmony: Becoming Your Own Hero at Work

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Chapter 3

Refusing the Call: The Victim Response

When a nation's diversity breaks into factions, demagogues rush in, false issues cloud debate, and everybody has a grievance.

—Robert Hughes

People feel impotent. To me, that's the curse of modern society, the impotence, the ennui that people feel, the alienation of people from the world order around them. Maybe we need some hero who will give voice to our deeper longing.

—Bill Moyers

The serious error . . . is to think that the word is a gentle breeze which plays over the surface of things, which grazes them without altering them, and that the speaker is a pure witness who sums up with a word his harmless contemplation. To speak is to act; anything which one names is no longer the same; it has lost its innocence.

—Sartre

Challenging things happen on the way to heroism. The stepping stones along our path are uneven; jagged edges trip us and cut us, leaving wounds that are hard to heal. Some stepping stones are totally hidden; in our search for them we stop in bewilderment or wander aimlessly through the dim forest of inexperience. Some look like steep barriers, stopping us dead in our tracks. Like the goats in *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, we tramp, tramp, tramp along, trying to avoid conflict, too terrified or hurt to confront our personal trolls who prey upon our ignorance and fears. Even big gruff goats get yanked off the bridge time and again, sinking into the quagmire of discontent. And when they get up the courage to take a stand, they often confront their trolls in inappropriate ways.

When confronted with acts of hurt or betrayal, the temptation is to respond by assuming the role of “helpless and hopeless victim” wanting to be saved. We give in to our sense of powerlessness. Instead of tapping our inner strength, we wimp out, sell out, or numb out, allowing our spirits to be broken. Or, we may take on the role of false hero, attacking the unpleasant challenges by lashing out, taking our frustrations out on others. We use force, scape goating, or frivolous litigation to get our needs met. False victims and false heroes alike invoke a variety of destructive responses. The list is long: real and vicarious revenge, denial and avoidance, fantasy, self-justification, blaming, self-pity, indifference, and cynicism. Avoiding the rites of passage to adult responsibility at work, we deny the reality of our higher, nobler selves.

Yet, all these responses to hurtful situations at work by the now self-deluded victim or false hero only delay the inevitable. Eventually, these painful feelings surface and the law of the harvest prevails. Buried, unresolved feelings never die. They just come back in more harmful ways, often as a neurosis. Curing a neurosis is so much more difficult than facing the truth that the neurosis was designed to avoid! In the words of psychiatrist Carl Jung, “Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering.” More simply put by Benjamin Franklin, “Those things that hurt, instruct.”

In the past when mistreated at work, most employees made one of two choices: to either take their lumps or leave. But with mutual loyalty declining, many angry employees are secretly getting even. They resort to guerrilla tactics by destroying company records, flushing computer chips down toilets, “accidentally” destroying costly machinery, ruining reputations through vicious lies and gossip, stealing company property, or giving poor service to customers. Within minutes, a victim of a mishandled layoff deleted computer data that had taken more than seven years to develop. In another company, responding to his boss’s subjecting employees to unsafe work practices, one employee rubbed poison ivy on his boss’s toilet seat. An executive in a West Coast firm became so furious with board members who were rolling ahead with corporate changes he disagreed with, that he rose from the table, turned, and bared his backside!



What goes around comes around.

The story of an irate businessman verbally abusing a skycap at an airport confirms that “what goes around comes around.” Practically jumping up and down with rage because the skycap was not going fast enough to please him, the man berated the attendant unmercifully. Yet, the skycap calmly continued to check the traveler’s bags. When finished (and as the customer rushed off into the

terminal), an observer of the event asked the skycap, “How do you take that kind of abuse every day and keep your cool?” The skycap replied with a big grin, “I don’t get mad, I get even. You see, that gentleman who was just here, he’s going to Chicago. His bags—they’re going to Japan.”



*Myth # 4: You can control people
through intimidation and fear.*

There is almost always a huge price to mistreatment. Giving advice about getting even is becoming a cottage industry. The internet now has many “worker-friendly” web sites devoted exclusively to giving tactical advice about vengeance and retribution. Magazines and movies promote ideas about improving revenge skills such as spitting in the boss’s food, putting Exlax in brownies, and calling spouses to imply an extramarital affair. Kerry Patterson of the Praxis Group tells a powerful story illustrating the power of the payback:

The Law of the Hog

Researchers arriving to study a leadership program at a plywood plant were surprised to see an ambulance parked out front. Wondering why it was there (envisioning an industrial accident), they asked the plant manager about it. He explained that a supervisor had beat up an employee!

Later that day when the researchers asked an hourly employee what happens when they get upset with their bosses, they replied, “The Hog!”

The employee was referring to a terribly powerful and frightening machine that grinds up scrap wood unsuitable for making veneer. At first, the researchers envisioned a gruesome scene of bodies being hurled into the giant vat, being ground up along with the scrap wood!

Noticing the horror on their faces, the employee quickly explained they didn’t throw *bodies* into the machine, but instead threw perfectly good veneer into the machine when the supervisors weren’t looking. To get even, they destroyed the supervisors’ reputations as managers by making their productivity and yield figures (for which the supervisors were held accountable) decrease. Employees were striking back at their bosses by using the Hog as a giant pencil sharpener—grinding the wood into almost worthless chips. Profits dropped accordingly.

What are the Hogs where you work? Every organization has them. The worse the abuse, the fatter the Hog.

For many people, the courtroom is the revenge of choice. In the past, lawsuits were considered necessary evils—the last line of defense in correcting injustice. Today, legislation such as the Civil Rights Acts, the Older Workers Benefit Protection Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is often used as a club to demand special treatment. The courts are used to hold employers hostage and to punish instead of providing a level playing field on which to compete. Corporations must pay exorbitant sums of money for absurd and minor “abuse,” yet legitimate claims are often denied. The rights revolution and its ensuing litigious climate have created a new class of victims—employees unfairly denied opportunity because of the never-ending fear of a lawsuit. The backlash of incessant suffering from false victims is that *real* victims are often denied relief through the courts. When everyone is a victim, no one is a victim. Consider the legal and cultural climate that encouraged men and women to engage in the following frivolous lawsuits identified by Charles Sykes in *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of American Character*:

- The San Francisco Giants are sued for giving away Father’s Day gifts to men only.
- A psychology professor complains that he has been victimized by the presence of mistletoe at a Christmas party.
- A Miami woman was paid \$40,000 in workers compensation benefits after complaining that she was so afraid of blacks she couldn’t work in an integrated office.
- A left-handed postal clerk charged bias in favor of right-handed filing clerks.
- The Salvation Army was sued for violating an employee’s right to freedom of religion after it dismissed her for using agency equipment to copy Satanic rituals.
- A former employee was awarded workers’ compensation benefits because he became an alcoholic while working for Stroh’s Brewery Company.¹

The issue at hand is not to criticize the real victims in our society (and there are many) but to point out the absurd lengths to which we have come—all in the name of justice. Fear of reprisal from people in protected categories is the motivation for organizational decision-making by scores of

wimpy managers. “CYA” decisions are destroying employee trust, the basis of which should be managerial character, competency, and sound judgment, not avoiding a lawsuit for discrimination.²

This new class of *real* victims (created by *false* victims who exist by virtue of fear of reprisal) has no recourse in a system where fairness is often a joke. Consider this example:

John’s Betrayal

John was a loyal and committed federal employee working in a technical support group for more than thirty years. Because he had progressed to the top of his pay grade, the only room for advancement was in another facility in the same city. After securing a transfer to the new facility, John spent the next six years preparing for his dream job, which meant a promotion and expanded responsibilities. For two consecutive years, he spent six months of each year at the organization’s training facility in a distant city recertifying on the new equipment. He also attended several weeks of school as a part of his “individual development plan” approved by his supervisor. His performance reviews were good, he was well liked by his co-workers, and he was considered to be one of the most technically qualified employees on the unit.

The criteria established for the hiring decision for the new position were *technical proficiency, interview results, interpersonal skills*, and the nebulous qualities of *involvement* and *professionalism*. Applicants were assured that other considerations such as gender and race would not affect decisions. Because of his seniority, technical competence, interpersonal skills, and apparent ease in the interview process, John was confident that he would be selected for one of the new positions at the facility

John waited for the good news. The news was bad. He was beat out by a woman with five years’ experience. She was *born* the same year he started his career! John was devastated. Thirty-three years of devotion, six years of preparation, with not a single word of complaint about anything which would have prevented his selection. He was invited to come in to discuss “performance improvement” but was prohibited from discussing or comparing his qualifications to those selected.

According to management feedback, his performance that needed improving related to being “more involved in extracurricular activities” at work. In other words his political correctness skills were lacking. He was also the wrong sex.

Now, five years later, John continues to work in the same job on a crew reduced by “re-inventing government” from 12 to 5 employees.

The principle of nondiscrimination embedded in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is often twisted to the point that its original intent is clouded beyond recognition. In his book *Excuse Factory*, Walter Olsen documents hundreds of cases of madness created by antidiscrimination and labor laws:

- When a police officer swore on an employment application he was never hospitalized, he was later fired when officials discovered he had been admitted five times for psychiatric treatment. The court ruled the police officer had a “right” to lie, saying the city had no business taking past hospitalization into account.
- A UCLA heart surgeon infected 18 patients with hepatitis B. Hospital officials knew about the doctor’s condition but kept him on staff to comply with federal regulations.
- A Michigan court awarded \$610,000 to another surgeon with *narcolepsy* who sued on grounds of discrimination.

Another outrageous story of the EEOC overstepping its boundaries involved Joe’s Stone Crab restaurant in Miami, one of the 10 biggest grossing restaurants in America. Its owner, Joan Bass, was one of the first to mentor women and to hire blacks. Yet, the government felt there were not enough women employed at the restaurant. In reality, not many women *wanted* to work there because carrying the heavy trays was not very appealing; the restaurant was also located in a less than desirable neighborhood. The EEOC imposed what Ms. Bass called “legalized extortion.” Whenever Joe’s hired new waiters, the EEOC required the restaurant to notify the National Organization for Women, pay for government approved advertising in government approved papers, and have an industrial psychologist and an EEOC attorney present. Did it bring in any more women applicants? Ten percent *fewer* applied than the year before. Then, the government wanted Ms. Bass to hire actors to produce a videotape demonstrating sensitive hiring practices, all of this at a cost to the restaurant of nearly a million dollars.

Moreover, for older Americans, relief from the courts is almost nonexistent despite growing age bias. In a study by the American Association of Retired Persons, older applicants received less favorable responses from employers than younger applicants with equal credentials 41 percent of the time. Three-quarters of the responses occurred before the older applicants were even granted interviews. However, recent court decisions made age bias harder to prove than any other time in the past 31 years.³

Although the disabled need protection from discrimination, consider the fallout in the workplace from the adoption of the ADA. The ambiguities in the act create nightmares for the courts and corporations, as well as for the disabled. The intent of the law is to provide “reasonable

accommodation” for disabled workers, but there is an avalanche of confusion about what is “reasonable” or “essential.”

The bottom line:



Getting reasonable relief from the courts is a crap shoot.

The no-fault trademark of the '90s that made litigation and retribution national pastimes now leaves us with a victimist culture whereby bogus victims drive out genuine ones. In *A Nations of Victims: the Decay of the American Character*, Charles Sykes writes, “As compassion itself has diminished, society has degenerated into a community of insistent sufferers. What was once conferred compassionately is now demanded by self-proclaimed victims in tones that seem increasingly shrill and mean-spirited.”⁴ Ironically, an increase in the *status* of victims is often defined by how “dysfunctional” they are. Victims become more *powerful* by becoming more *powerless!*

How did we get to the place where morality is no longer the barometer by which human conduct is evaluated? A contributing factor to victimism is a growing attitude of entitlement: it is my *right* to be happy and to have whatever it is that I want—even if it means I must take the rights of others.

The impact of the rights revolution, an attitude of entitlement, and the explosion of counterfeit intimacy in the media and on the internet, makes for a very disturbing and disturbed victimist culture. In addition to turning to the government or the therapeutic community for help, on any given day the opportunities to gain support from other victims is astonishing: Survivors of Incest, Al-anon, Alcoholics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Cocaine Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and scores of others who serve a very useful purpose when used short-term. Yet, for many, needing support becomes a way of life. Hence, the message continues to be: “there is something wrong with me that I am powerless to overcome for the rest of my life.” Appropriately used, support groups help to move people *through* their crisis or dependency to higher ground where, eventually, constant support is no longer needed. Continuing to rehash accounts of victimization and personal weaknesses often *undercuts* the development of self-confidence and personal power, *reinforcing* the very thing we are desperately trying to overcome. Continuing to focus on weaknesses entraps us in self-betrayal and the denial of our more elegant, powerful selves waiting to be expressed.

Clearly, what we pay attention to tends to expand. The same applies to problems of discrimination. The obstacles are real; people of color, women, the elderly, and the disabled need compassionate attention to their problems. But it is only *harder* to achieve what they want in life—it is not *impossible*. Lacking sufficient hope and faith gets misinterpreted as ways to let ourselves and others off the hook in the pursuit of courageous action. This is one way of becoming a false victim.

A growing number of people question the wisdom of continuing public policy and private attitudes that go too far in labeling classes of people as victims. Hugh Price, National Urban League president, said, “We must not fall into the paranoid trap of thinking that racism accounts for all that plagues us.” Errol Smith, black author and entrepreneur, echoes this point:

We appreciate the training wheels but you can take them off now It continues to make us dependent. It doesn't foster self-reliance. As opposed to individuals and communities recognizing what they can do, it leaves us thinking that we're poor and powerless There is a difference between a safety net and a system that becomes a narcotic, a crutch, to people who are perfectly capable, productive members of society.⁵

Everyone is Struggling with a Hard Battle of Some Kind

The problems in society are our problems at work. Despite a range of political policies and philosophies, neither political party made significant progress in the social health over the past 25 years. In a report by Fordham University on social health, 12 out of 17 social factors worsened by 51 percent during the past 20 years, ironically, at a time when the nation's economic health has grown steadily. Acts of violence, addiction, compulsive disorders, and emotional distress are increasing at alarming rates:

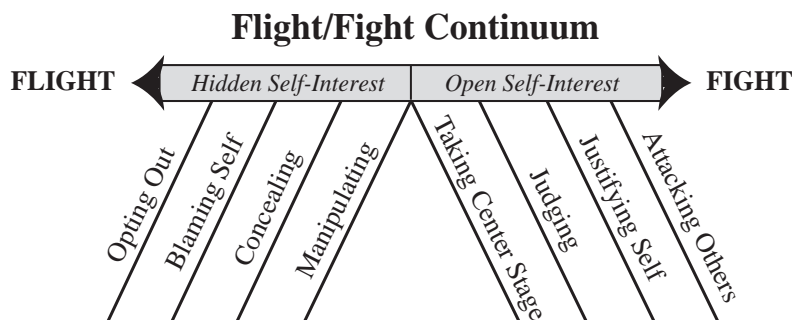
- 60 million people are victims of sexual abuse.
- 34 million women are victims of incest.
- 15.3 million people are alcohol dependent.
- 14 to 17 million people are “adult children of alcoholics.”

- 10 million employees use illicit drugs at least once per month (8.2 percent of full-time employees.)
- 60 percent of women and 50 percent of men have eating disorders.⁶
- 27 percent of Americans have substance abuse problems.
- 25 percent suffer from anxiety disorders.
- 20 percent suffer from affective disorders of depression or manic/depression.⁷
- The FBI estimates that an American woman is abused by her husband every 18 seconds, 5,000 women per day or 6 million each year. In these homes, 50 percent of the children are battered as well.⁸

We are more likely to be the victim of a violent crime than of an automobile accident.⁹ By age 18, children witness 200,000 episodes of violence.¹⁰ According to one study, nearly 40 percent of the violent incidents on television are initiated by “good” characters likely viewed as attractive role models. These patterns teach children that violence is desirable, necessary, and painless.

These are our colleagues, friends, bosses, and workers of tomorrow. Try as though we may, people do not leave these behaviors at home each day!

The response to extremism in society is “flight or fight” reactions. Our fear compels us to either withdraw more or fight more. Self-protection, not growth drives our choices. Self-interest, not mutual concern, motivates what we do. Consequently, people are either more *guarded and closed* or more *hostile and aggressive*:



To control the perceived threat, we adopt a coping style from a continuum of behaviors, using increasingly excessive measures we believe will *rescue* us, but instead, these measures only *polarize* or divide us more. The flight response manifests itself in our failing to speak out; we try to hide our hurt and anger. To protect ourselves, our interpersonal behaviors are covert; we manipulate, blame ourselves, or opt out in some way. Martyrdom and self-pity shape our responses. On the other hand, the fight response manifests itself in our becoming more aggressive, using power (position, verbal ability, intelligence) to force our own agenda or self-interest. We monologue, judge, criticize, and attack others, using our anger to control them. Self-righteousness shapes our responses.

Both of these two extreme responses perpetuate an atmosphere in which people do not feel safe; people need to feel *reasonably* safe to work together efficiently and effectively. When we are constantly bombarded by threats to our well-being, is it any wonder that employees feel their power slipping away?



The hero understands and accepts his personal vulnerabilities and tendencies but labors to do the hard and good things that he or she cannot yet do.

The hero at work exercises focus and determination, laying claim to divine or spiritual powers that eliminate the popular copouts of extremism. The hero develops the courage and self-discipline to face the challenges head-on in responsible ways.

Flight Responses	Hero Response	Fight Response
Escape the unpleasant Avoid challenges if possible	The only way out is through Challenges bring growth	Attack the unpleasant Challenges are threats
Withdraw / avoid/ hide Passive aggressive pretending Deny responsibility Undiscussables “Politically Correct” action Smooth over conflict Paranoid fear Apathy / hopelessness Bias to avoid friction Malicious compliance	Talk it through / work it out Constructive confrontation Accountability / commitment Openness / candor Fair treatment Negotiation / compromise Mutual trust and respect Organizational citizenship Diversity brings strength Ethical champion	Take out frustrations / act out Sabotage / revenge tactics Blaming / scapegoating Office politics / power games Opportunism Force / coercion / dominance Paranoid mistrust Egotism / pride Bias to play favorites Frivolous litigation

In an ideal world, we would always respond heroically. However, since human beings are works in progress, we make mistakes. The hero understands that most of his or her extreme behaviors are human and expected to be short term; they are functional, *temporary* survival tactics. But when fight or flight responses become routine patterns of behavior, they become destructive to ourselves and others. The hero understands these coping methods may be used with either positive or negative intent resulting in similar consequences:

Tactic	Positive Intent	Negative Intent
Withdraw/avoid/ hide	Before I can be fair, I need more information. My response is emotional, and I need to calm down.	I do not care and do not want to know. I would rather avoid dealing with these feelings.
Attack/act out	They are hurting me and do not realize it. I need to express my feelings in a powerful way so they realize how important this issue is.	I am having a bad day and it is partially their fault so I am going to dump on them and vent all my frustrations.

The hero is aware that our intentions influence every thought, action, and feeling. He knows that cause and effect are connected and controlled by the choices we make.



*You create your own future.
What you see and feel is what you get.*

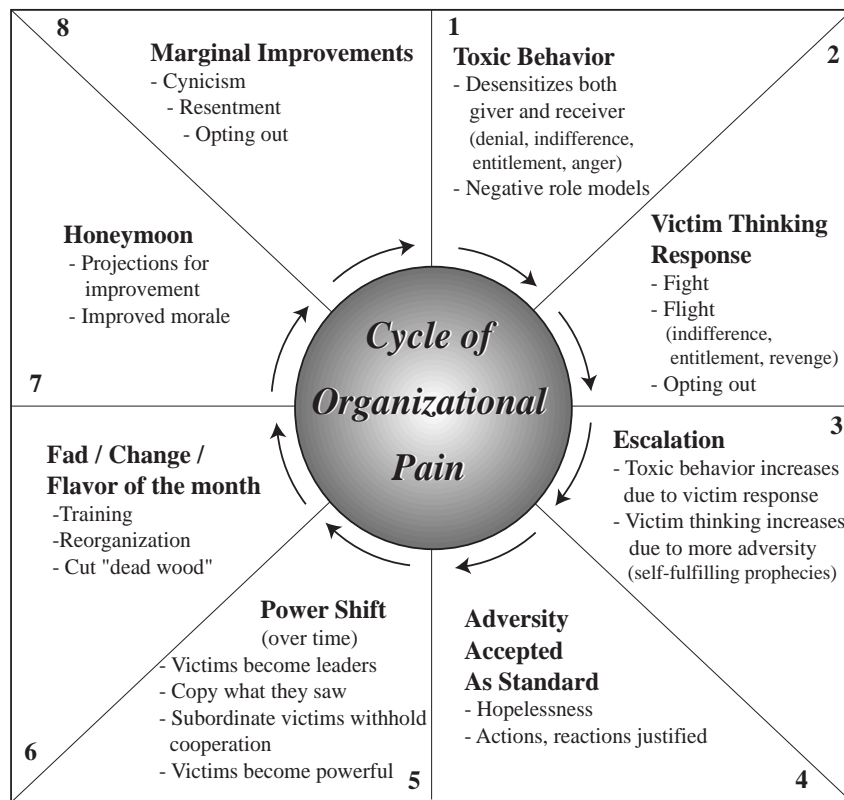
Since we *choose* our intentions (based upon our assumptions and beliefs), we also choose the outcomes because we decide how we will *react* to an event. If our purpose or the way we find meaning in life is an attachment to a higher law, we always have liberty because we choose how we will react to adversity. Hence, we are responsible for what happens to us in the *big picture* of life.

Claiming this personal power by making responsible choices is an important goal of the hero's journey. Yet, many of our misconceptions about the dynamics of abuse and adversity hold us back from embracing this power. Our victim attitudes hold us hostage to a life of helplessness and hopelessness.



Understanding the dynamics of abuse helps us change it.

The dynamics of increasing violence is complex and troublesome from social, political, and spiritual perspectives too complex and troublesome to deal with here in great detail. There are no simple answers to this growing problem. However, the following model and a simple overview creates a framework from which to understand the self-betraying and prophetic self-fulfilling nature of the passive violence we see at work.



Self-Perpetuating/Self-defeating Cycle of Organizational Pain

Simply put,

1. People abuse because they *can* abuse. Others allow it because of fear, low self-esteem, a previous history of abuse, distorted religious understanding about turning the other cheek, scarcity of opportunity, imbalances in power, inadequate organizational safeguards, or simply because abuse is more tolerated in today's society.

2. People abuse because it *feels good*. It feels good to be in control, to have it your way. Abuse is about misuse of power and authority, getting what you want at all costs, despite the evidence that a self-correction is needed.
3. People abuse others to *survive*. Self-serving agendas increase commensurately with the presence of fear in organizations.
4. People abuse because they are being or have been abused *themselves*. Retaliation is almost a knee-jerk response to abuse. Survivors of abuse have a four-times greater probability of becoming abusers themselves. Also, survival roles adopted in the family carry over into adult life and into the workplace long after they have lost their usefulness.
5. People abuse because very often they are *unaware* of individual participation (collusion) in the process which becomes self-perpetuating. We create our own futures first in our heads and hearts. We often generate the very thing we do not want by our view of the world and what we expect to happen. The quickest invitation to victimhood is to perceive ourselves as victims. If we view ourselves as victims, others will treat us accordingly. The very thought produces the condition. We frequently lie to ourselves about our role in the adversity because we want to protect ourselves. To do otherwise invokes a responsibility to do something about it. When we view ourselves as having the power to overcome adversity in positive ways, that belief alone changes the way people experience and respond to us. We feel better, more powerful because we do not let the actions of others define who and what we are.
6. Our responses either escalate or decrease the level of abuse. Habitual fight and flight responses create a culture of abuse. Over time, the power shifts—victims become powerful because of covert activity, frivolous lawsuits, and a lack of cooperation. As people are promoted to positions of authority, they act the way they were treated because abuse is what they learned.
7. Corporations respond with reorganization, restructuring, and “flavor-of-the-month” training programs. After a short honeymoon period, the passive violence escalates from both sides because nothing really changes. The hearts of the people are still the same.
8. The cycle of organizational pain continues because the cycle of passive violence is kept *secret*. Telling the truth is difficult and costly. Though many people understand the great farce being

played out, the consequences of disclosing adversity and abuse at work prevent many people from stepping forward. Whistleblowing represents one of the most threatening forms of organizational dissent, prompting considerable hostility and retaliation. In a survey of 233 whistleblowers, government psychologist Donald Soekin reported that 90 percent of whistleblowers lost their jobs or were demoted, 26 percent sought psychiatric and medical care, 15 percent divorced in the aftermath, 10 percent attempted suicide, and 8 percent went bankrupt; *all but one reported retaliation*. Eighty-two percent were harassed by superiors, 53 percent were harassed by peers, and 26 percent were referred for psychiatric or medical evaluation.

Soekin reports that whistleblowers are not oddballs, “loose cannons,” or disgruntled employees, but are “people who act out of conscience.” Despite the obvious costs for their actions, only 16 percent say they would *not* do it again. Even though only 20 percent indicated changes were made because of their disclosure, almost all respondents mentioned some positive outcome from the experience for them personally; thirty-four percent mentioned an increased sense of self-respect for having done what was right. Respondents of the survey were united in their advice to be aware of the consequences beforehand.¹¹

Ed Friel’s Story

For Ed Friel, telling the truth about workplace abuses was social suicide. The 36-year-old jet refueler lost not only his job, his house and his friends, but he also separated from his wife because he was afraid it might not be safe for her to live with him anymore. He feared retribution from his former employer, whom he accused of covering up huge fuel spills when refueling but charged the Navy for the fuel spilled. Friel was ordered by his company to falsify the fuel records, claiming more fuel than was actually put in the F-14 fighter planes to make up for the amounts spilled during refueling. When Friel refused to play along, he was forced to clean up the spilled fuel without adequate safety protection and was poisoned as a result. He said he was given a raincoat, a respirator mask, a tin dustpan, and a five-gallon bucket and told to clean up the fuel. Friel said, “It was ridiculous. I was sitting on a million or more gallons of jet fuel. Had I been overcome by the fumes and dropped the dustpan on any of the metal pipes, they would have been looking for the training facility somewhere in Iowa.”¹²

For many people who are actually awarded damages through litigation, they felt that the money awarded to them by the courts is not worth the price paid for blowing the whistle. In her second sexual harassment lawsuit against Texaco, the courts awarded Janella Martin \$2.7 million in compensatory damages and \$15 million in punitive damages. Martin said the personal costs of the six-year case were enormous. She suffered a clinical depression, her blood pressure shot up 70

points, and she gained 30 pounds. Martin literally became a prisoner in her own home when curious accidents, vandalism, and burglaries became common events.¹³

It is not surprising that more people do not take a stand or report mistreatment in the workplace. It is not surprising that passive violence is accepted as standard operating procedure. The consequences for confronting adversity and abuse can be devastating. But as the maxim says



*The only thing necessary for abuse to triumph
is for good people to do nothing.*

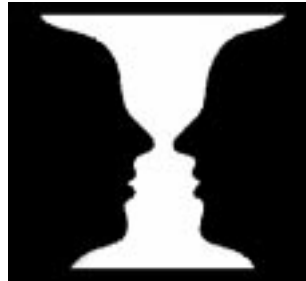
Many of us never confront such dire circumstances, but all of us face situations that call us to take unpopular stands. Gandhi said, “Submission, therefore, to a state wholly or largely unjust is an immoral barter for liberty.”¹⁴

We refuse the call to heroic adventure at work in many ways for many reasons. Denial, rationalizing, and indifference are three prevalent/typical ways of avoiding personal responsibility. What they all have in common is that they all reinforce our victimization. Often, personal behavior we use to help us actually hurts us. While the number of formal complaints about discrimination has risen dramatically, most people still suffer in silence, finding “relief” in caring less when faced with adversity and abuse at work. A cardinal rule in dysfunctional organizations is the “Don’t feel, don’t talk” rule. Don’t tell even yourself how bad it is, how it hurts. Living in malaise, employees passively long for the good life, continuing to do what they’re told, doing what other people do, watching when they really need to act. The mantras of the baby-boomer generation —“Whatever” and “Who am I to judge?” pervert our moral agency to affect a better world in which to live by failing to react to the misdeeds of others morally and intellectually.

The abdication and erosion of moral conviction as evidenced by pervasive cynicism and tentativeness is what William Bennett calls “soft relativism”—the norm of “nonjudgment” now disguised as a virtue. Denying the reality and responsibility for abuse and adversity appears on the surface to be easier than confronting it. Modern psychological spin would have us believe we just can’t help the way we feel about things anyway. Stimulus/response. We are programmed to behave the way we do by the environment, often by inter-generational customs. We respond much like a

computer, garbage in, garbage out; we are victims of our history. It is true that our perceptions strongly affect our behavior.

To illustrate this point, try this test:



When you look at the picture, something you are unfamiliar with, there is a perception, but within a fraction of a second you formed an opinion about it. Yet, upon closer examination, we see more than one way to view the picture—two faces looking at each other or a picture of a vase. The test shows we perceive the world around us differently through our own “glasses”; these glasses affect our behavior, attitudes, and beliefs, causing us to believe that what we see is “reality.” True, allowing for the differences in our own and other’s perceptions creates tolerance. Tolerance is a good thing.

Yet, tolerance taken to extremes becomes *apathy*, circumventing the discovery of truth and the power of choice. For example, in situations where people “see” themselves as victims, too much tolerance or apathy reinforces *powerlessness*. Accepting (sometimes glorifying) self-limiting points of view, *reinforces* the negative attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs while providing a more correct positive mirror for self-assessment could provide the impetus for needed change. When the freedom, responsibility, and power of moral choices are minimized because of how another person “sees” something (whether the picture is accurate or not), hope and progress diminish, and personal growth is limited or stops altogether.

This popular practice of accepting motives and intentions outside the boundaries of moral veracity leads us to the false and destructive notion that since any and everything is *relative*, anything goes. But it does not, *cannot* in a sane society. Anything that does not enhance our personal power—anything that limits our progress—is not truth. For example, the popular view that our history determines our future—that we *can’t* help ourselves because of our past—is just plain false. Yet, advocating anything different is often interpreted as unenlightened, self-righteous,

punitive bigotry. “Judge not” is confused with the need to “judge *righteously*.” We judge righteously when we do no harm to ourselves or others. We do ourselves harm by rationalizing and justifying our victimism because we let ourselves off the hook of personal responsibility and accountability.

In a television interview, “The Blame Game: Are We a Country of Victims?”¹⁵ correspondent John Stossel challenged the widely held belief that people are trapped in poverty and misery. In an interview with African-American activist, Rev. Al Sharpton, speaking from Ellis Island where 16 million immigrants came and waited anxiously for opportunity, Stossel gave many examples in which impoverished Americans of all nationalities, including African-Americans, pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to a better life. Rev. Sharpton replied, “Well, if one keeps saying something *is* [America is a land of opportunity], when apparently it *is not*, then you are only insulting those that are victimized by it. You haven’t solved the problem by saying, ‘Get up and pull yourself up by your bootstrap. Tighten your belt.’ When we’ve been left standing in our underwear, there’s no belt to tighten.” And no way to get more pants or a belt? This very belief robs us of our power to go the extra mile needed to overcome the real obstacles to getting more pants and a belt.

As you can see, it is out of our conscious memories, imagination, hopes, and dreams that we organize our world. A person (P) is said to behave (B) based upon what he or she expects to be the outcome (O) of said behavior. $P > B > O$ If the outcome is seen to have a positive value (V+), then the person is more likely to try the behavior. $P > B > O (V+)$ If the outcome is seen to have a negative value (V-) then the person is less likely to try the behavior. $P > B > O (V-)$. Of course, this is far too simplistic. Any behavior is likely to result in *several* outcomes—not just one—some negative, some positive. Our world view is *incomplete*; we take a snapshot at a point in time, viewing something more often than not from only *one* vantage point. If we take that vantage point to be absolute or final, in spite of changing circumstances, we are either forced to ignore the new facts or to force the facts to fit the new situation. Either way creates a great deal of disharmony and misery. It is deadly when we focus on the negative aspects of what has happened in the past as a predictor of what will happen in the future.

It is this disharmony that physicist David Bohm calls *fragmentation*, a fictional way of thinking which makes us all a little bit crazy. As Bohm points out, the fragmentation comes from our lack of awareness about thought itself; our perceptions and thoughts actually create our own environment. In other words, *what we see is what we get*. We believe that thoughts, once they’ve happened, are gone, but they are still ever-present, continually impacting our future attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Thoughts still active in our memory continue to have powerful influence on our behavior

as if they had a life of their own. If we are to change our behavior, thoughts, and feelings, we will first change our consciousness about thought itself.

Bohm tells the old Sufi story of a man who lost the key to his house. It illustrates how we rarely get to the root of the problem of thought:

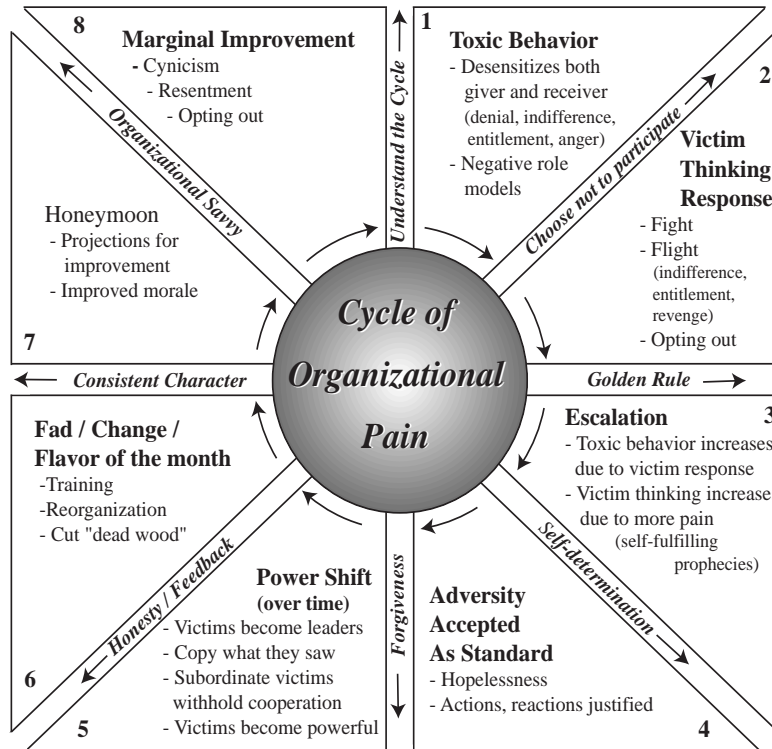
He was found to be looking for it under a light. He looked and looked and couldn't find it. Finally someone asked where he had lost the key. He answered, "Well, I did in fact lose it over there." And when asked why he didn't look for it over there, he said, "Well, it's dark over there, but there is light here for me to look."¹⁶

Bohm says that the most fundamental characteristic of the word *thought* is that it is in the past tense. We falsely believe that when we're finished with thought, it is gone. But it is still there, as if it were on a computer disk, not only containing all kinds of facts, but also operating the computer in a certain way. Thought creates an "emotion or action and then (generally tacitly) attributes this to a reality *independent* of thought. It then tries incoherently to correct this situation while its automatic reflexive reaction is constantly recreating it."¹⁷ Most of us aren't accustomed to watching our thoughts and are unaware of the misinterpretations that continue to spiral out of control.

Hence, our rationality is limited, and we all pay a high price for victimized, hopeless, cynical thinking. It polarizes us into camps of the haves and have nots, the good guys and the bad guys. One dynamic of abuse and victimism is that it tends to escalate if left unchecked. The inability or unwillingness to face reality serves as a means of justifying personal behavior, and it precludes any real correction in course.

As tragic and ironic as this may seem, all is not lost. When we see *hope*, or help others see hope, our hope grows, too. Though the task of unraveling our unconscious and conscious thoughts and actions is difficult, it is not impossible. As human beings, we have incredible power to liberate ourselves from our own and others' self-limiting emotions. The keys to surviving well at work are in everyone's possession. Though we may feel trapped with no way out, the doorknob is just on the inside, not the outside. The self-defeating traps—the denial, self-doubts, indifference, guilt, self-pity, resentment, justification, and arrogance—are only frail fragments of a work in progress. The dreaded dross of precious ore slowly drops away when the heat is turned up. The most distressing circumstance can be worth it somehow if we look at it as a path to wisdom and a new source of power to quicken our compassion toward others. For example, focus instead on the power to choose a different path that stops the self-perpetuating cycle of organizational pain. We understand

the cycle, choose not to participate, practice mutuality or the Golden Rule, increase self-determination, forgive, give honest feedback, build consistent character, and enhance organizational savvy:



Pathways of Escaping the Cycle of Organizational Pain

It is difficult to face our own culpability in what happens to us. It is human nature to deny what is painful, what we do not understand, or what seems hopeless to fix:

- When people are conditioned to mistreatment, it seems normal. They become immune to it. Also, there is no other reference point by which to judge the morality of a given situation when mistreatment is the norm.
- Admitting the behavior to be immoral, unethical, or illegal pushes the recipient to take potentially threatening risks to stop it.

- Employees are often uneducated about and unaware of the connection between the abusive work practices, morality, and ethics.

Being able to recognize the traps of denial, rationalizing, and indifference leverages us to opportunities for action—to extricate ourselves from self-defeating behavior.



*Listening to the language of victims and false heroes
gives us new awareness, the first step of change.*

Victimspeak

What does the victim language of denial, rationalizing and indifference sound like? For example, in the fairy tale of the princess and the frog in the introduction, consider the conversation that could have occurred: when the princess broke her promise to befriend the frog, she perhaps rationalized her actions by saying, *“What did you expect me to do?! I couldn’t take a FROG home to play with! Can’t you just see me walking into the palace and announcing, ‘I’d like you to meet my new friend and companion, Mr. Frog!’ Good grief, I’m a princess, not an imbecile! Gimme a break. I had no choice.”*

The frog may have said: *“Oh, well, what can you expect? It’s no big deal. After all, I am a frog and you can’t expect a princess to take a frog home! Really, you can’t! Besides, I really didn’t want to play with her anyway.”*

Or, to avoid responsibility to behave well, the princess may have said, *“It’s for his own good. It hurts me more than it hurts him to leave him behind. It just wasn’t a good fit. He’ll be happier elsewhere.”*

And, the frog may have responded, *“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it, Princess. I’m here just to be of service to you. I really appreciate your thinking of me. Maybe another time. . . .”*

Rationalizing can also take the form of fantasizing horrible consequences that will surely befall us if we behave with more virtue. The princess may have responded, *“No one would ever speak to me again if I brought that frog home. I’d be the laughing stock of the whole kingdom!”* Or the frog’s

lament, *“I’m doomed. I’ll never have another opportunity like this again. Might as well hang it up.”*

Closely related to denial is ignorance and avoidance. For example, *“I’ll get back with you on that”* (but never does). Bosses and colleagues frequently give employees dual and conflicting directives so that whatever they do is partly wrong. Other employees cope with the difficulty by simply withdrawing. They *pretend* to work, but in reality they have “retired” while still on the job. They decide to care less and work accordingly. In many organizations more than a third of the day is wasted socializing, gossiping, daydreaming, making personal phone calls, staying home sick, and doing personal work.¹⁸ Many workers stop listening to themselves or listen too much to someone else to know what they ought to be doing in life and what values they should be living for. Convinced there are no other alternatives to our predicaments, we placate ourselves with another falsehood:



*Myth # 5 : I have to stay here;
I have no other place to go.*

Others adopt the Hostage Syndrome otherwise known as *“There is so much potential here, if only...”*



The Blame Game reinforces our victimization.

Blame is an expression of anger, a response to hurt or betrayal. It often happens like this: Hurt= anger=blame. It’s normal and natural for a season as we try to sort out or judge the situation. When someone impinges upon our beliefs or self-respect (or we perceive they are) our anger center fires off sometimes appropriately and sometimes inappropriately. We sometimes blame upward, otherwise known as *“The Boss made me do it.”* For example, the princess may have said,

“It’s not my fault I broke my promise to that silly old plopper! I had to trick the frog into getting it for me. My dad said if I lost that golden ball he’d kill me! Do you have any idea how much that

ball cost? A fortune, that's what. If my dad weren't such a jerk, I wouldn't have tricked that poor stupid frog even if the golden ball was my favorite toy."

Blaming goes downward:

"It's not my fault. That stupid frog should have known better than to think he could actually come home and live with me. He should never have suggested such a dumb idea in the first place. You can't blame me for his deluded ideas."

Organizational "culture"—the environment of unwritten and written rules at work—is also available for blaming when things go awry at work. Consider the following example, "What Can You Expect in a Western Culture?"

I first became aware of this phenomenon in my job as a manager in a high growth firm where many of the executives had moved from the Northeast. There were wide differences between the eastern and western lifestyle as well as wide differences in the way the groups solved problems. One of the eastern executives said, *"I have never seen so many people who won't stand up and fight! Everywhere else I've ever worked in my life, people slug it out and then they go out and drink beer together. But it's not like that here. People go home to their families, brood about it all night and for two weeks after. What can you expect from people who only like to go hunting on the weekends? They just don't understand the real business world. They're so used to obedience to authority, they just don't think for themselves."*

The criticized western employees were equally quick to blame: *"That's just the (company name) Way—disrespect for the individual! To survive here, you just have to go with the flow, not make waves. What else can you expect from a bunch of Yankees?"*

The princess and the frog version is: *"Frogs and princesses just don't play together. That's the way it is around here. Frogs are all right in their place; I really don't have anything against them."*

Employees also blame the industry (*"What can you expect from a bunch of steel workers!"*) and the rules (*"I have to support my manager, no matter how I really feel"*).

But perhaps the most popular target of blame is ourselves. The frog perhaps said, *"I'll never learn; I keep repeating the same mistakes over and over. Why couldn't I just keep my mouth shut and let*

that little brat cry. No, I have to be mister nice guy and wind up looking like a fool! After all I did for her, look what I got.” Or, “No matter how much you do around here to get accepted, it’s not good enough. I guess you have to be born in the right circles. If I were a prince (or a man, or white, or had money, etc.) this wouldn’t have happened.” Or, “I should have flattened that little twerp. I hate myself for being such a wimp.”



*Myth # 6: There must be something wrong
with me to feel the way I feel.*

There *may* be something that needs personal assessment and correction. But to automatically assume total responsibility is not helpful in solving the problem. It’s easy to lose our ability to trust our own feelings during adversity at work. Abusive people in crazy organizations create situations where people feel a little crazy! In the same way we make the mistake of blaming others for what is going on, we can’t turn the situation inward and take total blame either.

Chances are if you are feeling profoundly miserable, perhaps it is because you are in a miserable situation. Perhaps what you’re feeling is *sorrow* about a profound loss of some kind, the natural response for which is *grief*. Unfortunately, this profound sadness is most often diagnosed as *depression*, which most often means there really *is* something wrong with us! Soon we start validating the depression by dredging up all the rotten things in our lives to prove that there really *is* something wrong with us instead of calling up things that have gone really well that might help us change course. How we frame what we are feeling can keep us entrapped in situations long past the time we ought to leave. It can keep us from knowing when to walk away when the game is done.

Closely related to the myth that “there must be something wrong with me” is the problem of assuming too much responsibility for what happens at work:



Myth# 7: I am responsible for all the consequences

of my behavior at work.

At first glance, not assuming responsibility for the consequences of our behavior seems irresponsible and slothful. However, when we look more closely, we realize that in all organizations, there are simply too many variables that cannot be controlled, all of which impact the consequences of any decision or action. The distorted view that employees must make “right” decisions all of the time, to have the power to account for all the variables (many of which are outside one’s personal responsibility), is the basis for much unwarranted guilt, disillusionment, and despair in the workplace. The emphasis upon the *consequences* of the action instead of the *decision process* perpetuates criticism and defensiveness, both of which destroy the ability to work together effectively. Yet, by recognizing the *limits* upon rationality, we are more able to accept our own humanity and the frailty of the human condition in others. The burden upon each employee is

- to *define situations carefully, thoughtfully, and deliberately;*
- to *communicate effectively;*
- to *make the best decision possible within the time frame and resources available.*

By emphasizing the value of the *decision process* instead of the *decision consequences*, we create an environment of trust and safety in which we can learn. Realizing that we cannot understand many things is equal to forgiving in advance the adversity that is inevitable. A colleague shared the following story:

A few years ago I was a consultant to a major automobile manufacturer. The executives and I met for many hours in intense meetings where I confronted them about some of their management practices which were causing tremendous problems in their company. For some of the executives, it was extremely difficult information to hear, especially for one executive. He was visibly distressed. Later that night, he committed suicide in his room. The executives were outraged at me for “being too hard” on the group, causing such a terrible and unfortunate consequence.

Was I responsible for his death? All of the executives thought so. But I didn’t feel responsible. Many things brought this man to the point of desperation where he couldn’t bear to live anymore. Did I have anything to do with a lifetime of events which shaped his ability to cope? No. Many variables impacted his decision. Was I careful, thoughtful, and deliberate in my preparations to help the company improve its management and organizational processes? Yes. Did I have any way of knowing of his anguish or instability? No. While I had a deep sense of sadness that he could see no other options than to end his life, I had no guilt for his choice. I

didn't feel responsible then nor now for the consequences of my giving unpleasant feedback to him and the other executives.

As hard as many of us try, it is impossible for human beings to be God. What we *can* do is approach each situation with reverence and dedication—reacting to each new situation presented to us as heroically as possible, letting go when things turn out poorly. Let the grace of God cover the distance between our good intentions and best efforts and any unintended consequences.

Wallowing in the valley of “It’s not my fault”; “it’s all my fault”; “it’s management’s fault”; or “it’s the employees’s fault ” is a trap. The bedlam of blame muffles the grace-giving plea of the hero within.

It is never easy to assign blame to one specific thing. More often than not, it’s a little bit of everything, several missteps colliding at the same time that require careful, thoughtful, deliberate, prayerful consideration, and appropriate (not global) responses. Sometimes we must say, “I’m being supersensitive and immature. Get a grip.” At other times, “Hey, there’s something we need to work out.” Or sometimes, “They did behave badly but they didn’t mean to. It’s no big deal.”



Be aware of other detours on the path.

What do you do to avoid facing your trolls lurking under the bridge? One of the gifts of tragedy is that it invokes the best or worst in us. We choose which it will be. Instead of choosing authentic heroism, many people resort to the vicarious pleasures of celebrity-hero worship, living for the weekends to escape to the movies or sports to watch someone else do the dirty or seemingly impossible work. We manufacture heroes because they provide the passion and power our own lives lack. Yet, celebrities want to be popular; heroes walk alone. Celebrities are as concrete as their contracts; heroes as solid as their inner values. The successes and happy endings of celebrities give us an emotional fix; heroes provide emotional stability when confronted with change. Celebrities give us a false fix; heroes, authentic correction. Celebrity heroes are concerned with physical deeds—reactive emotions and brute force are prized. Real heroes are concerned with principles—reflective choice and truth are treasured. Celebrity heroes lust for power and control; real heroes, freedom and accountability.

Now since no ordinary person can *really* do those superhuman physical feats of the celebrity hero in real life and this “slay-the-dragon” mentality offers no real solutions to life’s problems, the net result from our celebrity-hero worship is increased feelings of impotency and alienation. Down deep, our “victim” identity is reinforced. Synthetic, popular “quick-fix” solutions ultimately reinforce an unauthentic life. (Yet, we may glean much from the valuable ancient heroic themes and the powerful contemporary images of such movies as the *Star Wars* trilogy as good examples of the battle to rise to the “hero within.”)

Equally disturbing is our fascination with victim-heroes. As a nation of voyeurs, “lewdly lusting after the crude, the rude, the violent, and its aftermath,”¹⁹ its seductive pull keeps our attention focused outward, not inward, where the real work of heroes is done. This inordinate preoccupation with synthetic fare—being observers rather than participants—appeals to the basest cravings for more and more of things which do not satisfy. Counterfeit participation is an artificial appetite. To quote an unknown author, “You can never get enough of what you do not need, because what you do not need will never satisfy you.” What we need is an acceptance of reality: the only way *out* is *through*. Challenges bring growth. “Or do ye think that ye shall enter the Garden of Bliss without such trials as came to those who passed away before you?”²⁰

Vicarious living at work also takes the form of fantasizing what we *wish* for, instead of what is actually happening. For example, the princess may have said, “*If only the frog were a person, what a relationship we could have eating, sleeping, playing together. If he could just be human, then we could be best of friends. . . .*”

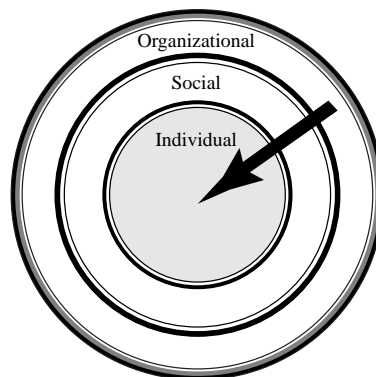
Or the frog could have fantasized, “*She’ll come back! I know she will. She wouldn’t hurt me like this. I’ll just be patient and do the right thing. I know she’ll come back for me. If I do the right thing, everything will turn out fine.*”

To help change these attitudes, in the past decade we saw unparalleled growth in employee and management training programs in U.S. corporations spending \$210 billion annually in both formal and informal training.²¹ In 1999 \$62.5 billion were spent in formal training programs alone.²² Many of these programs are carried out by sincere and dedicated human resource and organization development professionals. But many programs are little more than modern-day “snake oil” for the masses. In many organizations, a history of ill-fated change attempts cause employees to balk at attending the training program of the month.

Corporate training programs employ a variety of change strategies that either focus on the individual at the exclusion of social and organizational aspects of our work life or vice versa. Most training programs are of the former, a one-size-fits-all personal improvement plan. New skills are overlaid upon deeply ingrained attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that very often subvert or undermine personal efforts to improve. These training efforts more often than not just “pour new wine into old bottles.”

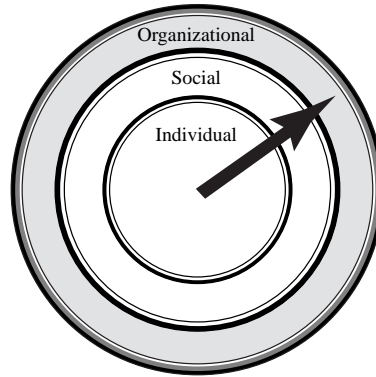
Organizations aren’t accustomed to doing the hard work necessary to address the deep personal feelings that more accurately define the quality of our work life. The truth is that many of these feelings relate to the pain caused by the organization itself, yet, the corporate ethic to pretend these feelings do not exist precludes any open dialogue about them. Also, it is taboo to disclose personal problems that may be impacting our effectiveness. We should leave our problems at home or locked inside where no one can see them. We wear our masks, pretending that we are fine regardless of our personal reality. Business life and personal life are separate entities and are in large part expected to be kept that way.

Personal experience is the most influential teacher, yet, verbal persuasion is the most used method in the corporate classroom. Just tell the people what they are supposed to do better and expect them to just go and do it. Also troublesome is that most of the training programs focus on changing individual behavior without taking into account a host of system-wide interventions needed to carry out their newly learned “skills .” This “outside in” approach often gives us a little boost in the short term, but the issues that are still undercover or avoided derail the best personal and organizational intentions.



Not only must change efforts address our own individual core beliefs and personal experiences, they must also address the social and organizational factors as well. To continually tweak the

human resource systems without addressing the social and organizational factors of our work life becomes an exercise in futility—especially so considering the impact of societal norms of fear and aggression.



Sadly, often with the best intentions and strategies, our hearts have not changed nor has the “heart of the company.” After a few weeks, it’s business as usual. Our interconnectedness demands a collective pondering about what is real, what is relevant, what is reverent, and what is repentant in relationship to what is reasonable to expect about changing our behavior at work.

In *Bonds of Anguish, Bonds of Love*, Terry Warner reinforces what we all sense about this on a spiritual level:

The only change that matters is a change of heart. Every other change alters us cosmetically but not fundamentally, modifies how we appear or what we do, but not who we are. Our hearts change when resentment, anxiety, and self-worry give way to openness, sensitivity and love of life.

The subject defies understanding. Our troubled emotions are so foolish and self-destructive that it is hard to see why we would ever allow ourselves to indulge in them. But equally they are so entrapping that it is hard to see how anyone could escape them. Indeed, most who teach and write about them offer techniques for changing behavior, not feelings. They assume the unlikelihood of a change of heart.

But in the end, if we do not make that change it won’t matter much what other changes we have chosen.²³



Myth # 8: The enemy is out there.

Changing the heart makes heroes of us all. It moves us from the futile trap of trying to change others, just coping with intolerable situations that need intervention, piously going through the motions of “doing the right thing,” martyred attitudes that put others off, or trying the newest psychological fad to change ourselves. Changing the heart moves us out of the world of synthetic easy answers into “the dark forest, into the world of fire, of original experience.”²⁴ We enter a new world of superhuman potential.

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