

In Search of Harmony: Becoming Your Own Hero at Work

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Chapter 8

Ropes to Skip and Ropes to Know

No man should travel until he has learned the language of the country he visits. Otherwise he voluntarily makes himself a great baby—so helpless and so ridiculous.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

At that moment, in a stroke of insight born of terror, I concluded that I was dangerous—that despite my best dreams and well-thought-out plans, if I continued to try to create a haven in the midst of the terror, I could get somebody killed.

—Kerry Patterson

Learning to fit in is the price of “membership” at work. The world of work, for the most part, assumes that people ought to be molded, manipulated, shaped, trained, or taught—that we are the “raw material” for someone else’s intentions. An organization likes to put its “brand” on people, requiring workers to adjust individual values, needs, and desires to those of the company. Regardless of where we work, the process whereby we learn the values, norms, and required behaviors involves personal chastening and adjustment. In exchange for this conformity, we receive the benefits of sense of purpose, self-esteem, financial security, and social acceptance—if we are lucky, and if we can stay clear about what is real and who we really are.

Staying clear about what is real, what is relevant, and who we really are can be difficult in the work world where appearance often masquerades as reality. In today’s workplaces, this socialization process is not only based largely in pretense, but the expectations about how we are to “bond” with the company are changing dramatically. The ties that bind employees to their companies and companies to their employees are frayed and continue to unravel. Corporate restructuring and the “dejobbing” of America have created not just an economic shift; they have created a social revolution in how people view their jobs.

In the past, most people were hard-wired to be permanent employees, including being permanent victims if the situation were unsatisfactory. Work was supposed to be just that—work, pleasant or unpleasant. Organizations defined our missions and our destiny. Commitment was to the company over the long haul. The ideology of the company exercised enormous control over our lives and loyalty was expected in return. Today, savvy employees are reevaluating that commitment, still working hard— but for themselves and not the company. They are learning to manage their present job to support their careers, which in all likelihood will change an average of five times.

Learning to fit into this new paradigm of fluctuating work that uses contingent, contractual, and/or temporary employment goes against the grain of what all human beings long for: a sense of purpose, safety, security, and belonging. When human beings are treated as commodities, such drastic changes in the way people view themselves take away the core of many people’s identity and, often, their hope. Not only is job security threatened, “who I am as a person of *value*” is constantly drawn into question. It’s a tough row to hoe when you’ve been socialized to believe



Myth # 17: I am my job

Putting one’s core purpose in the hands of the corporation is a set-up for disillusionment and failure. The forty-something manager who joined an organization right out of college was conditioned to expect the company would meet his or her needs; he or she now faces a new challenge to let go of the old paradigm of relevance and purpose and to connect to a new core purpose more “loosely coupled” to his or her worklife. This is also true for the new college graduate.

I believe this redefinition is the brightest spot in the whole landscape which on first glance looks like hell to many people.



Adjust to a Jobless Society.

Even though much has been written about a growing interest in the “flow of meaning” or desire to rediscover our capacity to talk with each other, we have come to a virtual standoff in openly discussing this new social revolution now taking place at work. Organizations continue to want and need flexibility but are often reluctant to reciprocate that same flexibility to their employees. Employers continue to scale back or change their skill mix, but employees emotionally hang on, feeling trapped by health insurance and pension plans that can not be easily duplicated. In the disposable world of work, employees are working tired (rich and poor alike), working cynical, and working scared.

How are you going to talk if there is so little trust? Employees want and need to talk about what is happening to them at work, but they don't trust their employers to do so. Employers need their employees' trust in order to continue to grow their business but they are hampered in doing so because there isn't enough trust to talk honestly and openly about their problems. Recent studies show that trust has declined in three out of four workplaces. As indicated in earlier chapters, the reasons for discontent among workers are multifaceted: turmoil created from restructuring and layoffs, overall crush of work from cost-cutting measures, unethical work practices, paltry wage gains even when corporate profits are setting all-time records, and employees feeling disassociated from the larger corporation through a failure to communicate. In a survey of 3000 employees nationwide, employees indicated they are skeptical that the company would own up to their end of the bargain in the “New Deal” in the workplace.

What then? *Savvy* employees adjust their attitudes and behaviors to prosper in a workplace that has fewer and changing jobs and new rules.

In *Job Shift*, veteran business consultant William Bridges creates a new paradigm for viewing employment realities and opportunities. He describes the trend of a “jobless” society, whereby the emphasis is upon the *work that needs to be done*—which is constantly in a state of flux—rather than the more static and stagnant organizational structure built on fixed duties, fixed hours, and fixed salaries. With the rapid state of change in organizations brought about by new technological and economic realities, the boxes on the organization chart can't be moved fast enough to keep up.

More and more people are working under new arrangements whereby the boundaries of where one job begins and another ends are very hard to determine. Work is often organized around projects (work that needs to be done) instead of carrying out duties as predetermined by a job description in a central location. Delocalized and “reengineered” work, lap-tops, e-mail, faxes, and modems have created the demise of the office as the exclusive place where work gets done. Since more than a

third of all employees work with data rather than things, people work anywhere, anytime and all the time, with no one keeping track of their hours, but everyone keeping track of the output or results. Everyone is accountable to everyone and often to no one for extended periods. Flexible job profiles change frequently, focussing on distinctive competencies instead of a job function or certain kind of work. The kiss of death in most workplaces today is the attitude of “that isn’t my job.” The financial relationship between employees and the organization is also rapidly changing. As much as 40 percent or more of the average American’s pay . . . will vary drastically from month to month.¹

Workers need to develop a new approach to their work, a new way to manage their careers which reestablishes control of their worth and value independent of the organization. Employees must learn to think about their careers like entrepreneurs in business for themselves—in the business of recognizing and capitalizing on opportunity inside and outside the company. Savvy workers of the future establish a “me and company” attitude and thereby turn their trials into triumphs. These are some of the ropes to skip and ropes to know:



Take self-responsibility to develop your career on your own.

Feel the fear of a more uncertain future but go ahead anyway. To define a career strategy, you as a worker need to fully understand why and how the job market is changing; how to assess your desires, attitudes, temperament, and assets; and how to conduct an effective job search.² Move from a reactive to a proactive attitude; do what entrepreneurs have always done better than any one else: understand the implications of changes that have already taken place.



Redefine job security.

Employment security resides in the *person*, not the *position*. Employability comes from (1) anticipating change before it happens, (2) adapting and exploiting individual abilities and attitudes as assets to meet the employer’s new need, and (3) maintaining the resiliency to bounce back from disappointment—to live with a high degree of uncertainty as workers repeat the same process over again.



Understand your individual value and strengths.

Continually magnify your personal gifts in every job you do at work, at home, or in your community. Armed with the knowledge of what makes you distinctive, focus your talents on your circle of *influence*, those things in life you can do something about— not your circle of *concern* most of which you can do nothing about.

According to Peter Elbow, “ Most of us try to sing the note we like best or the note we’ve been told to sing, but the sound is usually muffled because it’s not our note.” Singing our own note creates internal harmony that spreads out to all those with whom we interact. This harmony creates synchrony—simultaneous intuitive appreciation of authenticity and congruency that makes trust flourish. Nothing undermines trust more thoroughly or rapidly than an awareness that a co-worker is not what he or she pretends to be.

Shakespeare’s admonition “To thine own self be true” has broad ramifications in the workplace today when employees have to continually justify their existence to their employers. They must provide proof of *added value* to their company and/or work group. Savvy employees know how to leverage their distinctive competencies to impact the bottom line and to meet the needs of the customer. Savvy employees know the company or work unit’s needs and are able to *sell themselves* without seeming arrogant or self-serving. This is no easy task. Remember the art of proposal making in Chapter 7? The emphasis should be upon identifying a problem to be solved and offering your ideas that can solve the problem—coupled with asking questions about what others also think. Balancing advocacy and inquiry—not just *selling* your own position, but *inviting* others’ contributions as well—helps others feel comfortable. And comfort is a good thing, especially when so many people feel *uncomfortable*.

The value of having a good fit between personal temperament and the work environment cannot be overemphasized. We can only *will* ourselves against the stream of our true nature for just so long. The older we get, the harder it becomes to pat down what we really feel inside. For example, though it seems the whole world reeks of stress, it is not a bad thing to be unable to manage a high stress job. And you shouldn’t persist in doing so past a *reasonable* effort. The latest research shows that low thresholds to stress are established very early in life, creating circuitry in the brain that goes on automatic wig-out whether you like it or not! (More about this in the next chapter.) “To thine own self be true” means knowing and accepting our *limitations* (as well as our gifts), thereby *preventing* problems instead of constantly enduring situations which make you and others miserable.

When the journey to becoming your own hero at work (and at home) is guided by a mission of becoming the best person that you are meant to be, the hardships along the way are viewed as stepping stones to higher ground. In the metaphor of the organization as a garden, we are green, hard, underripe fruit that is ripening, maturing, and developing. Instead of wasting our time trying to mimic somebody else or even waiting for a protector to make it all better, we trust the continuous thread of revelation about who we really are and what we are meant to be. When the journey goes in a direction we do not intend, remember that the detour sign only means the roadwork is still in process. Your life stream, the sum total of your life experience—the blessings and the trials (especially the trials)—has prepared you for your present journey. You are prepared to *seize the day*, for tomorrow will surely be different. The focus is upon the intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards.



Focus on the work to be accomplished, not the long-term relationship with the organization.

Savvy workers look at everything as a *market* for what they have to offer. Pay attention to the myriad contacts and relationships to be cultivated both inside and outside the company. For example, when there are changes within a company, these changes also impact vendors. Could your skills be used with a vendor? When one opportunity goes away, another is waiting to be discovered. Purpose and satisfaction is found in doing excellent work for whatever time frame is specified.



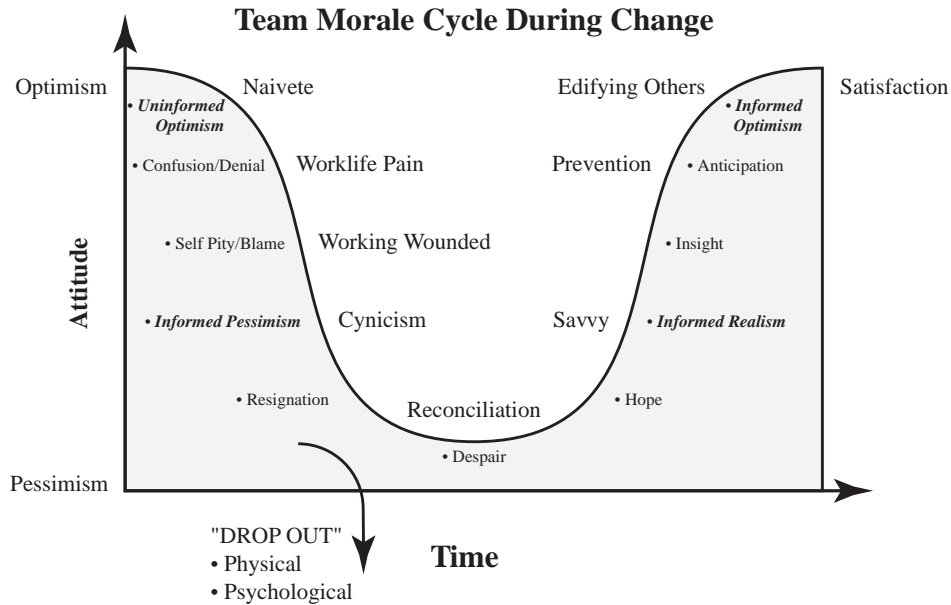
Stay a step ahead of rapidly changing technology.

Savvy workers anticipate the needs of the future; they constantly “retool” their skills to stay on the cutting edge of applying knowledge to practical ends. Self-directed education must also include *process* skills that help employees understand how to manage the ongoing change and the inevitable personal transitions for him or herself and also co-workers.



Move in and out of new work situations with ease.

In the past, the socialization process had a long time frame, often deliberately extended to make sure employees were indeed committed to the company and its values. Employees were brought along slowly, making sure they were well prepared before being turned loose on their own. Now, workers must get up to speed quickly, often working in teams of great diversity in ethnicity, gender, roles, and responsibilities. The project team environment is often high stress, leaving little opportunity to get your legs under you before being asked to contribute. In the workplace today, the learning curve in groups is steep, moving quickly through the normal stages of group formation of forming, storming, norming, and performing. The pressure is more intense to speed up the cycle of adjustment:



Under *normal* circumstances, workers tend to lose their equilibrium and effectiveness as they adjust to new bosses, new teams, and new customer demands. By switching jobs frequently, this discomfort is intensified, affecting personal competence, coordination, and commitment even more. Graduates right out of college especially have a difficult time adjusting. The distress of socialization is magnified because of the shorter learning curve and more ambiguous work roles. In college, students were socialized around their profession, but organizations are more interested in shaping their new members to be effective members. The new graduate must quickly learn:

1. The basic (stated and unstated) goals of the organization and work group.
2. The preferred means to accomplish these goals.
3. The responsibilities (which are often in flux) for which he or she has been hired and also of others in the work group.
4. The behavior patterns expected to carry out his or her role.
5. A set of principles which maintain the integrity of the group.

The entrepreneurial attitude or “creative individualism” required today is particularly challenging because with each new change of work assignment, *resocialization* begins all over again—along with the potential for new conflict. It is hard to know what the pivotal values, attitudes, and behaviors are because they change with each new work group. Finding the proper balance between group conformity and individualism is a constant battle with each new change. Creative individualism can often be mistaken for being too self-serving, not working as a team member. Savvy employees learn to frame their contributions within the context of what is best for the client, customer, or market. Another wrinkle to avoid is stepping on the toes of old-timers by usurping their positions of power and influence. Typically their political skills are well honed and their turf is well protected. To move in and out of new group situations with ease, the best teacher is *experience*. But at least you know where some of the land mines are.



Embrace diversity.

Rigid bias towards one’s own culture and lifestyle stops employees dead in their tracks in today’s workplaces. This doesn’t mean you need to give up your own traditions, values, or viewpoints. You just have to be accepting of those that are *different* from your own and to also know when *prejudice* and *stereotyping* are dictating your assumptions, motives, and strategies. A shift from homogeneity will only become more true in the future. The Hispanic and Asian-American population has grown nearly 50 percent; the African-American population by 28 percent, and the white population by only 5.6 percent.³

Growing up in the South, the first time I remember actually seeing racial prejudice was at the age of eight, shortly after my father died. My dad sold insurance in what was then called “Colored Town,” collecting small weekly payments door to door. He often took me to work with him, something I enjoyed so much I “refused” to go to kindergarten when I turned five. I loved sitting proudly beside him in his 1938 Pontiac as he worked his way door to door, hearing over and over, “Pay ya Sad’dey, Mr. Monroe.” We often stopped at the jot’em down store, where his customers spoiled me with goodies.

When my dad died as a young man of 43, some of his customers came to our home to offer condolences, bearing gifts of collard greens and other vegetables. I noticed how timidly they walked to the back door of our home, standing off at a distance until invited to approach. Though I can’t recall the specifics of the conversation, I remember asking my mother about it and the sick, unsatisfactory feeling I had inside concerning her response. Over the years, the explanation of “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t have anything against these people as long as they stay in their place” made me feel ashamed and sad. All I knew was that they loved my dad and me.

During the ’60s, the city of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, like many cities, experienced tremendous racial strife. Businesses and homes were burned. Wanting to help heal the racial strife, I joined a dialogue group of blacks and whites sponsored by the Y.W.C.A. After several sessions of arguing vehemently about our differences, I suggested that until we could talk about what we had in common, nothing would be accomplished. There was a hush in the room and everyone looked at me as if I had two heads, then continued to argue about who had suffered the most injustice. Once again, I felt ashamed and sad. Where was the freedom and respect I remembered as a child? Lacking confidence as a young woman in my twenties, not knowing what else to do, I withdrew.

When I was 37 and on a minority scholarship entered Winston-Salem State University, a predominately black college, the situation forced me once again to face my deficiencies. The experience of being the minority—white, single-parent female—in a black male-dominated majority, was a powerful, sobering, gratifying opportunity for me to confront my own personal dragons regarding racism. As one of 400 white students on a campus of 2,500 blacks, I had my assumptions, values, attitudes, and behavior put to the test. The shoe was on the other foot now. I felt the pain of feeling personally blemished because of the color of my skin, a situation I had never before encountered. I was an object, exploited for the sole purpose of releasing someone’s revenge—not because of something I did, but because of faceless perpetrators of racial

discrimination for a hundred years before me. Clearly, I was a threat to the security eked out over generations by black people at this university who had “climbed out of the pot” against all odds.

Not only did I enjoy the opportunity and trial of being the minority, I worked part time for the school on the work-study program to integrate the university. My job was to recruit other white students to attend the school. Smug in my self-righteous belief that I was not prejudiced, now placed in the same circumstances black people had dealt with all of their lives, I was unprepared for the depth and strength of the animosity and resistance to me and my efforts. My response was also surprising. It’s one thing to talk the talk and quite another to walk the walk.

I can tell you, racism hurts. Many of the black faculty did not want their school integrated in the same way some white people still resist integration. Naively, I went on one wild goose chase after another resulting from deliberate attempts to obstruct my work to attract white students to the school. When I tried to register for my own classes, my registration card was conveniently “misplaced,” sending me to several different places on campus where I had been told I could find my card. Only when I wound up back at the registrar’s office and threatened to stay put until they registered me did my card mysteriously reappear.

Numerous other incidents challenged my value of treating all people equal. By the time I graduated, I was more intolerant than when I began. I found myself believing many of the stereotypes. Time and again, with each blow, I became more keenly aware of the pain of discrimination and racism suffered by black people for generations. I understood in my gut the enormous challenge of ending racial prejudice and valuing diversity. Even in our finer moments when we *think* we understand the diminishing nature of our judgments of each other, we really don’t *know* what it feels like unless we’ve been on the receiving end.

To be viewed as less whittles away at our sense of goodness until we shrivel up in shame. In a hostile environment, the goal changes from one of *growth* to one of *endurance*. As said earlier, what we need to do to *survive* is very different from what we need to do to *grow*. To survive, our point of view is scarcity; we become hypervigilant opportunists, cocked and ready for the first chance to “bloom” regardless of who gets hurt. In a safe environment, growth is more a way of life; we accept the opposition in all things, the waxing and waning, the ebb and flow, the polar aspects of life unfolding. The challenge for me was to use my own suffering as a catalyst to more realistic insight and compassion for what it means to be black in a white society—or, for that matter, to be any minority, or any person who lives and works in a hostile environment.

While most people never have the opportunity afforded me, we all can retrace our personal histories as a way to shine new light on the significant emotional events that shaped our values and attitudes about diversity. We can resist the temptation to “walk on eggshells,” being up front about our desire to learn more about another’s culture, values, and concerns. Be careful not to say or think, “I’m not prejudiced,” because we all are to a lesser or greater degree. We may not *intend* to be (though some people do), but we all have biases. So we might as well admit it right up front. In some situations, you could say something like, “One of my goals is to understand my own personal racial (gender, religious, etc.) biases and to develop meaningful relationships with people of different cultures (or whatever your goal is). I hope you’ll be patient with me while I explore new territory which is for me pretty scary.” However, some people would be offended with such an honest comment. As with most things, do the best you can.



Have a good life independent of work.

If you are no longer your job, what are you? Where will you find value and purpose to replace this void? What can you do that will provide meaning and purpose so that the buffeting of the workplace will not set you on your ear? What can you do to strengthen your moral compass? Is this an opportunity to focus on the family, to maintain and strengthen relationships too often neglected? Is this an opportunity to extend yourself in love and service to someone in greater need? Is this a time to explore a long-dreamed-of hobby or pastime? What better way to influence a greater acceptance for the intolerable than to refocus our energy and abilities away from ourselves? In addition to the joy and satisfaction of extending ourselves in love and kindness to someone else, we enjoy the added bonus of taking that feeling with us to work each day.



Have a comfortable nest egg to provide for the transitions.

Equally important to a job in your back pocket is enough money in the bank so that you can deal from strength not vulnerability. Preparation gives you the option to select the best move instead of hanging on to a paycheck to provide the basic necessities. I know that for many people this seems too much like dreaming. But the reality is that everything in the workplace is accelerated. There is much less warning—sometimes no warning at all—when employees find themselves in unexpected situations, or even without a job. There is a great deal of injustice in the workplace today. The global market economy provides continuing pressure for companies to stay competitive, which translates to expected leaner companies. Expectations of high returns on investments from stockholders continue to climb. Remember, *nobody's* employment is safe and plan accordingly.



Develop methods to mediate conflicting demands.

Never before have people been pulled in so many directions at once. Finding ways to balance the many role demands continues to be one of our biggest challenges. Boundaries at work and at home are constantly collapsing or changing; priorities are continually shifting as workers struggle to keep multiple balls in the air at once. While men are picking up more of the child care responsibilities, women are still responsible for most of their children's needs in addition to their own jobs. The nuclear family struggles alone often without the benefit of help from extended family. Employers still deny true flexibility for most women and men. For men and women who are able to integrate their work with family, they grapple with the difficulty of truly focusing on one or the other. While going from one thing to another, it's hard to set limits between work and home or to establish priorities.

To manage a life of constant change at work, savvy employees find stability by establishing "islands of order" in other parts of their lives. They take the time to clarify and solidify their individual and family values and priorities. Holding family nights each week that focus on the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual development of family members brings harmony and unity. In these meetings, family members look at the week ahead and set goals and priorities within the various roles of the family members. In addition to planning, they devote a portion of the family night to family fun; they may teach a lesson on a specific need of the family, get physical exercise, or do a service project for the community.

With a road map for the week ahead, savvy family members learn to nimbly focus and refocus, immersing themselves in one pursuit after another. Putting first things first, they have *synergy* as a family, working on high leverage activities throughout the week.⁴



Know the vision, values, and strategy of the company.

In addition to having solid core values in one's personal life, today's worker also needs to understand the mission, values, and strategy of their companies. In the past, only executives concerned themselves with the planning sequence of objectives, tactics, and projects to remain competitive. Today, the savvy worker views him or herself as *owners* or *shareholders* of the enterprise, even though their tenure may be short lived. Savvy workers embrace the problems, weaknesses, and challenges of the organization as a means to *leverage* their own contributions to achieve the organization's vision and values. Today's rank-and-file workers often make decisions once reserved for managers.

More and more, companies are tying compensation to profitability. The days of getting automatic raises are over for many companies. It is important to know how to read company financials, to stay knowledgeable about problems and constraints, to be aware of those "moments of truth" for the customer when they opt the company in or out of their consumer decisions. **Think customer!**



Accept politics as a reality.

Using influence is an important part of organizational life. Research in this area is clear—effective employees invest a good deal of time and effort into developing good working relationships with

their colleagues. These personal networks help improve the flow of information, the openness of communication, the closeness of collaboration, and often mean the difference between success and failure in complex tasks. These networks offer real benefits for everyone involved and form a foundation for mutual trust and respect.

Unfortunately, the positive potentials and benefits of such networks of relationships depend upon the ethics and character of the employees in them. When ethical standards are replaced by opportunism, people stop talking about “networking” and start talking about “dirty politics.” Office politics carry negative connotations, like something you step in and need to scrape off the bottom of your shoe.

Why do politics get such a bad rap? Because politics often involve manipulating others in the pursuit of self-interest and have nothing to do with mutual benefit. Political tactics involve ethically suspect strategies such as selective communication, misinformation, taking advantage, and, at extremes, open deception and deceit. These power games create an atmosphere of mistrust and competition— “use or be used”—which tend to consume and break the lives and careers of the employees involved in them. Employees tend to accept these behaviors as necessary evils they must engage in to survive. “Spinning” to gain unfair advantage of others in all aspects of our society is so commonplace that being *politically correct* is considered more important than being *spiritually correct*. Satisfying the internal dialogue of the ego with the driving question of “What’s in it for me?” entraps workers to devise manipulative strategies of deceit and control that make co-workers feel violated. For example, in *Insight to Impact*, Bill Dyer identifies several types of manipulative routines:

- the “illusionary democratic leader” who pretends to give responsibility to work associates but in most cases has already made up his or her mind or even implemented his or own decision. This person is much like the “phony proposer” who goes through the motion of participatory management or employee involvement.
- the “benevolent autocrat” who adopts the paternalistic stance “protecting” the children employees from harming themselves or others.
- work associates who feel out positions and achieve commitment from interested parties prior to a meeting, presenting a “unified” front so strong that no one dares to dissent.

- work associates who offer public praise about results that come through a “team effort,” when in reality it was anything but. However, since the public “facts” feel good, who dares challenge them?
- the leader who delegates work to a committee, then pulls control back because the “committee” isn’t completing its work in a timely manner.⁵

Also consider the responsible employee who is ostracized or driven out because of standards that are too high for the comfort zone of other less committed employees who just want to do the minimum. Or, the brave employee who naively finds himself at odds with the system because he dares to point out the flaws or inconsistencies in workplace practices. How many messengers have you seen shot (or have shot yourself!)? These and other manipulative routines characterize the unauthentic counterfeit behaviors used to achieve personal and organizational goals.

In Ken Shelton’s book *Beyond Counterfeit Leadership*, people who use these manipulative routines are characterized by ten traits:

1. ***They do much of their work in the dark.*** The cloak of secrecy reduces visibility, takes advantage of confusion, defrauds the innocent, and perfects a climate of false pretense.
2. ***They believe themselves to be above the law, laughing at the very idea of judgment.*** Answering to someone else is ridiculous.
3. ***They breed false emotion (sentimentality).*** Speech and mannerisms become affected; they become masters of ambiguity. Political correctness is their hallmark (though they appear to abhor politics).
4. ***They create uniformity and conformity.*** While they may propose to appreciate creativity, they seek to control anything that moves: they view dissent as a personal threat and a threat to the whole system.
5. ***They waste resources.*** They exploit people and things in extravagant ways. They lack a real understanding of the worth of things.
6. ***They are addicted to the artificial.*** Bogus emotions and political motions entrap naive co-workers to get them what they want.

7. ***They exploit people and opportunities.*** In the confusion set in play, they build coalitions that serve their purposes and ego.
8. ***They are cool actors and hot reactors.*** Appearance is everything to the imitator who soon forgets how to play it straight.
9. ***They harbor deep hates, biases, and prejudices.*** In spite of lip service to the contrary, they view themselves as elitists, concentrating on protecting their turf and egos.
10. ***They succumb to vanity and pride.*** They love flattery and become possessive and exclusive.⁶

Because of the covert nature of the behavior, it is very difficult to deal with “dirty politics.” Attempts to address deceitful, cunning and abusive situations in the workplace often leave the *confronter* looking like the bad guy—one who is frequently discredited further through additional concocted defensive strategies (still secretly developed). If personal responsibility, truth, and mutuality are not valued, the situation often continues to spiral out of control. The trap we often get caught up in is the temptation to *regain control* of the situation by using the *same* manipulative strategies that are being used on us. In doing so, the hero within is denied her or his destiny. Workers often get entrapped in survival tactics such as those described by the following employee of state government for more than 30 years. When asked what he had learned about management during his career, he responded:

Never assume that good ideas will survive without good office politics. You need to plan months, even years in advance to get approval when the right people are attending and the wrong people are on vacation. You need to beg, borrow or steal for the resources you need. Above all, you need to come to work every day expecting that someone you consider a close, personal friend will launch a viciously personal, unprovoked, unjustified attack against you, trying to destroy you. You need to have the resources and connections ready to head that attack off or you will not last long, much less be effective.

Many people see no options other than this approach. To offer any pat formula for dealing with these tough political situations is an exercise in futility. There are too many variables to predict what will or will not happen. What you shoot for is to *increase the probability* of a favorable outcome as much as possible—to survive with your honor and dignity intact. What I can tell you is that there are profound dilemmas to consider. On the one hand, in conditions where there is widespread and arbitrary abuse of power, dissenting can get you in deep trouble. On the other hand, remaining passive supports the violence to human freedom and dignity. Hiding behind bureaucracy and the

legal remedy insulates and isolates us from the truth and seduces us into becoming servants of the organization instead of the other way around.

The process of making the agonizing choice to pursue the path of truth through dissent and the path of security by maintaining the status quo is the stuff of heroes.

In making these choices, one of the most difficult issues to sort out involves the choice between spiritual integrity and economic survival. (Or at least that is what we tell ourselves.) Do you remember the story in Chapter 2 about the senior vice president who broke his hand by pounding the table in rage? I worked in that company. After the incident, I asked the chief financial officer of the company (who was present in the board room when the eruption occurred) why he continued to work in this kind of environment. He replied, “Because I like to buy my children shoes.” On the one hand I was touched by his remark, feeling compassion and admiration for a man who was standing tall for his family through hard times. Since then, I have wondered how he dealt with these dehumanizing assaults—both political and otherwise—that he encountered almost daily. Was he indignant, scared, helpless, or angry? Did he toss and turn every night, trying to sort out his moral responsibility? Did he stand up, speak out, or say nothing then and later? Did he have his resume out (like I did) searching for something better?

My hunch is he sucked it up like many of the managers in the company who told themselves they had no choice. Maybe he *didn't* have any other choice. But, maybe he *did*. Or, maybe he chose the high road of recognizing the abusive behavior for what it was: an intense desire on the part of the senior vice president to meet some unmet need through intimidation and oppression and just let it go at that.

Abuse of power and authority is a complex web of a number of factors: acceptance and recognition, financial security or greed, ignorance, or perhaps even revenge. But, primarily, it is the inordinate need to control or to have dominion over others. Give a man or woman a little authority and it can quickly get out of hand. Savvy employees invoke an internal dialogue of the spirit by changing the focus from *him* or *her* to *me*— not from the primary standpoint of *defending* oneself (though some thought should be given to sensible prevention and protection) but of *changing* our hearts about how to respond to brutish behavior.

Rarely is a situation harder to respond to with love than a situation where a co-worker or boss deliberately sets out to win at our expense. When we reframe our motivation from defending ourselves to helping the offending person achieve his or her goals through legitimate, authentic

means, extraordinary things begin to happen. By our asking, “What can I do to help this person?” the powers of heaven are opened, casting light upon darkness, invoking the best circumstances possible for *conscience to change its mind*. The other person may choose not to act upon the prick of his or her conscience, but at least you have done all that you can do. There is great comfort in knowing that.

The first few encounters with dirty politics can be devastating. In one of my first experiences, I fell particularly hard because I believed the company not only embodied the same values I held about ethics and integrity, we *taught* these principles and skills to others throughout the country. Naively, I believed this provided a benevolent protection from many of the unethical business practices I saw in other companies. Indeed, many of the examples we used in our training were about the very values that were violated in my situation.

One of my co-workers wanted to help his former business partner get a job with our firm. At every staff meeting, he extolled the talents of his friend to bring in new business, which we desperately needed. He also frequently mentioned the expertise of his friend in many of the areas of responsibility already assigned to me. Thinking that he was unaware of my job duties, I responded in a lighthearted manner that these were things I was working on. But, my co-worker continued to lobby for his friend to be hired. I silently predicted his friend would be hired within two months. Little did I know he would have my job.

To my total amazement, I was unexpectedly “laid off” due to financial difficulties. Since my job was to provide customer support after the sale and wasn’t contributing directly to the bottom line, they just couldn’t afford to keep me. Ironically, we had used the promise of long-term implementation support as a marketing strategy with our clients. Innocently, I felt terrible about the financial difficulties of the company and also felt a deep sense of obligation to our clients. Foolishly, I suggested several less-costly alternatives to continue helping our customers to implement our programs, all to no avail. I was out of there, clear and simple.

Almost immediately after leaving the company, my co-worker’s former business partner was hired. I was even more devastated. When I asked one of my good friends and co-workers whether or not this new employee was given my job, he replied, “I hoped you wouldn’t ask me that. But, yes.” The position was also “expanded” to include revenue-generating activities. Another friend said there was also some discussion about my not being a “good fit.” As the only professional female in the company, my first reaction was “Yeah, right!”

The “dirty politics” routinely used in the company went beyond my personal betrayal. While the company *was* in terrible financial straits, as financial conditions worsened, the president of the company requested I use my relationship with existing clients to sell other programs. In other words, he wanted me to go in the back door with what could be viewed as a bait and switch. Dismayed at what I feared would be perceived as hypocrisy and manipulation, I pointed out that doing this violated the basic tenets of the program! I was afraid if we pursued this *tactic* (something we taught we should not “use” on people), we would lose our credibility. The president was not happy to hear my reminder of our moral obligation to practice what we preached.

One more time, even the best of people often act unlike themselves. Through this experience I learned not to put *anyone* on a pedestal. We are all woefully inadequate in certain circumstances. I also learned that God has a way of opting us out of situations not good for us, even when we don’t have the insight or ability to do so for ourselves.

Over the years, I felt validated by the stories from other people who left the company under similar circumstances. It was here that I really *understood* what my mentor taught: organizations are basically unsafe, regardless of the principles they espouse. Bad things happen to good people. Good people sometimes do bad things. I felt somewhat vindicated when I ran into the employee who replaced me with his own head in his hands. When he told me bitterly that he was no longer with the company, the look between us spoke volumes; his hurt and sense of betrayal were painfully obvious.

My point is that at the heart of much of what happened was behavior politically motivated by several of the players, and I was completely ignorant about it. Yet, apparently I didn’t finish learning the lesson I needed to learn in this work situation. Within the same year I was given an even greater “opportunity for personal growth.”

Shortly after this catastrophe, I assumed a position as director of a crisis center. (By this point in my life, who’s better qualified to run a crisis center? Don’t you love irony?) The founding director of the program was a very charismatic, dynamic woman who had very strong personal ties with some of the staff and continued to be involved in similar new age healing practices outside the office after I was hired. Even though she was no longer the director, she was ever present in the background, making the transition very difficult for some of the employees. From the start, I knew my work was cut out for me.

Three or four of the employees of the center functioned somewhat like the dysfunctional families they served, backbiting, bickering, and working pretty much when and where they wanted to. (More irony.) One employee, a therapist fresh out of college, worked two other jobs, often coming to work too tired to carry out her responsibilities. Her former mentor was president of the board of directors at the center. Another employee “worked at home” for almost half of her hours, even though her responsibilities were exclusively focused on meeting clients’ needs in the center or who called in on the crisis line. We were so short-staffed, it was very difficult to keep up with the demands.

As a way to cope with her burgeoning workload, the therapist started selecting clients out (especially the difficult ones), deeming them “inappropriate” referrals for our services. I was convinced it was unethical and immoral to turn these women and children away from our agency and started picking up some of the slack to find other community resources to provide the additional support and services these clients needed. The therapist’s provincial attitudes were consistent with her inexperience in the real world. I continued to try to win her loyalty and support and also that of the two or three other recalcitrant employees.

In my entire career, I had never been in a work situation where employees just refused outright to come to work or to accept the authority or counsel of their superiors. I anguished night and day about what to do. Failing to respond to my coaching and direction about what was required and needed, I started documenting the situation which continued to worsen. If their performance didn’t change soon, corrective action would have to be taken.

Stressed out by working long hours in what was under normal circumstances a very intense, volatile work environment, I made two huge mistakes that provided the ammunition for two of the employees to commit organizational homicide upon me. After repeated pleas to the employees about the situation, I lost my patience and composure once, making an unwise and unsavory statement to the therapist about where her head was and why she couldn’t see the sun come up! I also adamantly insisted that the employee who was “working” at home come to work at the center because we desperately needed her. She refused to come in.

Angry and upset, and without my knowledge, the two employees went to the president of the board of directors with complaints of such egregious behavior (though she refused to tell me what it was) that I was stripped of my responsibility to admit clients to the shelter. The therapist was named “medical director.” Obviously, this was unacceptable and I said so, believing that if I used my organizational behavior skills, the “board” (which was really the president) would come to its senses. The day the official letter was delivered to me stripping me of a large part of my duties, just

before it arrived, the “abused” therapist brought me roses, kissed me on the cheek, and told me how much she loved me! I’m not kidding.

This was all happening just a few days shy of completing a mandatory probationary period required of all new employees (a condition I never gave a second thought to.) A few of the board members met hurriedly behind closed doors, giving me no opportunity to present my side of the story. They asked for my resignation, refusing to give me a cause or explanation, which by law was within their legal (though not human) rights. I refused on principle, saying since I had done nothing to resign for, they would have to fire me, which they promptly did.

I was sure my career was ruined forever. I was quite the folk hero in the newspaper for a short while. Just prior to my termination, the newspaper ran a large feature story and picture of me. One reader wrote in and asked, “Is this the same Vivian Zabriskie that (quoting the accolades from the paper). Former clients wrote letters to the editor supporting my character and devotion to their plight. But the most important thing that happened to help me make even the smallest amount of sense out of the horror in which I found myself occurred when a friend called to inquire about what in the world was going on. My good friend, a state legislator well schooled in politics, told me, “You must not take this personally. You are a victim of politics, pure and simple.” The thought never occurred to me in this way.



*Myth # 18: If I have an honest open relationship with someone,
I can express my true feelings.*

This time I learned my lesson: *Not when respect is missing*, sometimes even for a brief moment. And not when you’re the new kid on the block that’s challenging the system. And not when the deck is secretly stacked against you and people are willing to go to any lengths to cover themselves.

These two employees continued to undermine several directors who followed me. Finally, after five years and three directors who either quit or were forced to resign, they tried their manipulative strategies once too often and were both fired.

I also learned another lesson: Sometimes a positive mental attitude makes things worse not better.



Myth # 19: Positive mental attitude causes people to change their negative/destructive behavior.

Trying to create a haven in the midst of terror is like handing a loaded gun to a four-year-old having a temper tantrum. My failure to confront the situation head on with my board made me a sitting duck ready to be blown out of the water. I truly believed if I was nice, they would be nice; if I was open and honest, they would be also. Confronted with the absurd directive to not admit any more clients to the shelter, I continued to work under the assumption that if I presented my analysis of the situation in a professional manner, justice would prevail. I worked feverishly preparing an organizational analysis, wrote an employee policy and procedure manual to safeguard all employees, and stood on principle for what I knew to be right for the clients whom we served. I believed if I stayed focused on using my skills and didn't buy into the garbage, when the truth came out, everything would work out.

After the decision was secretly made to fire me, and before they informed me of their decision, I was given a brief few minutes to address the board. Naively, I shared my analysis of the organization, outlining the positive improvements during my tenure with the organization. When I tried to discuss the challenges ahead, the stony silence totally shut me down. The betrayal was complete, the rejection final.

Nothing could have turned this nightmare around: not the letters of support from the other employees asking the board to reconsider their decision, or the resignation in protest by the board's most influential board member. The current was too strong primarily because of the cloak of secrecy during the whole ordeal. The president of the board kept saying, "What if this gets out in the community?" The goal was *secrecy*, not truth. The concern about her personal risk of tarnished reputation was too great to care about what the real truth was. The idea of employees of a crisis center being battered by their director *is* a pretty horrendous thing! The whole event was so absurd to me, I could not imagine such an awful outcome.

It took quite a while to get myself all cleaned up from this one. My victim status was complete for what seemed like an eternity. I made progress toward integrating the lessons to be learned when my administrative assistant at the center, who in my opinion qualifies for sainthood because of her compassion for all of humankind, was later forced to resign under duress because of the same dirty

politics from the same employees. While I still had grave doubts about myself and the degree to which I was responsible for what happened, I had none about her. Her experiences validated my own. It helped to see her move on and upward, almost single-handedly raising the funds to start a new shelter for battered women in another city where she was named the director. She later received the highest award from the governor of the state for outstanding service to battered women. There seemed to be a higher purpose for both of us than either of us realized. On the road to becoming our own heroes at work, our experiences at the crisis center gave new meaning to the term battered but *savvy* women.

Endnotes

1. J. H. Boyett and H. P. Cohn, *Workforce 2000: The Revolution Reshaping American Business* (New York: Penquin Books, 1991), 117.
2. I recommend Bridge's books, *Jobshift* and *You and Company* ; also the latest edition of *What Color Is Your Parachute*, by Bolles.
3. S. K. Kogood, *A Workshop for Managing Diversity in the Workplace* (San Diego: Pfeiffer & Company, 1991). (These statistics were also reported in *Working Scared*, by Wesley and Silverman, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).
- 4 . "Put first things first", and "Begin with the end in mind" are concepts learned as instructor of Stephen Covey's *7-Habits of Highly Effective People*.
5. William G. Dyer, *Insight to Impact: Strategies for Interpersonal and Organizational Change* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press), 130–133.
6. Ken Shelton, *Beyond Counterfeit Leadership* (Provo, Utah: Executive Excellence Publishing, 1997), 74–80.