

## Overcome Job Misery

When I was in high school, my mother gave me a copy of the book "What Color Is Your Parachute" so that I could start thinking about what kind of career would be best for me one day. About seven years later, I finally read that book and benefited from it immensely. In addition to helping me find a job that suited my talents, it provoked my interest in career counseling, a hobby that I dabble in today. Helping people discover passion in their work lives gives me great satisfaction.

However, in the past few years I've come to realize that the pursuit of the right career may be a little over-rated. Don't get me wrong. I continue to enjoy, and greatly value, helping people find careers that allow them to use their natural talents. It's just that we sometimes mislead ourselves into thinking that this alone is enough to make us satisfied in our work. Let me explain.

### **Bad Job Vs. Miserable Job**

It isn't uncommon to hear someone say that so- and-so has a good job. If you ask that someone what a good job is, you'll get a variety of answers depending on the person.

For some, a good job is about being paid well, for others it's about the prestige of working for a well-known company, and for others still it might be about having the freedom to avoid sitting behind a desk all day in an office. We also hear people say that so-and-so has a bad job, which can mean that they are underpaid, have to do manual labor, or sit in an office without ventilation or natural light. It is almost entirely subjective.

What is not subjective is the definition of a miserable job, because it's largely the same whether you are an executive, waiter, teacher or professional football player. People who are miserable in their jobs dread going to work and come home frustrated, defeated and weary.

### **Misery's Impact**

The cost of job misery is very real, both for individuals who are miserable and for the families and friends of the people who must live with them. Scores of people suffer everyday as they trudge off from their families and friends to jobs that make them more cynical, unhappy and frustrated than they were when they left. Over time, this dull pain can erode the self-confidence and passion of even the strongest people, which in turn affects their spouses, children and friends in subtle but profound ways.

Organizations are not immune to the effects of misery either. Some studies show as high as 77% of workers are dissatisfied with their work, and that the primary driver of job dissatisfaction is not pay or

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benefits, but rather the relationship that an employee has with his or her supervisor.

Such widespread dissatisfaction kills morale and productivity within companies, and drives up the cost of recruiting, hiring and retraining new employees, all of which takes a huge, if not easily measured, toll on the bottom line. Gallup estimates that the annual cost to the American economy due to lost productivity is somewhere in the vicinity of \$350 billion.

### The Three Signs

The causes of job misery, are as simple as they are common, and are the subject of my most recent book, *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job*. What I'd like to do here is explore just one of those causes, which is the most obvious and perhaps important of the three. I call it anonymity.

#### *Anonymity*

No employee, regardless of how much money he makes or how much she loves the nature of the work she does, can be fulfilled without a manager who knows and cares about them as a unique individual.

Yes, that seems ridiculously obvious, which makes the pervasiveness of anonymity so puzzling. Ask most employees whether their managers really understand them, whether they are genuinely interested in them as human beings, and most will say 'no'. Ask their managers the same question, 'why don't you get to know and understand your employees more?', and assuming that they'll admit the problem, here are some of the likely reasons:

- **Political correctness:** during interviews, managers are instructed by legislators and lawyers to avoid any personal questions that might be construed as discriminatory and/or irrelevant to the job. Unfortunately, when an employee actually starts working for them, many of those managers continue to deal with them at an arm's length, rather than treating them as a human being, one with a family and a history and aspirations and hobbies.
- **Amnesia:** so many managers seem to forget what it was like when they were more junior employees. They don't remember the impact that a manager can have on an employee's sense of self-esteem, enthusiasm and job fulfillment just by taking an interest in someone's life outside of work.
- **Fear of the "Touchy-Feely":** some managers downplay the impact of the human element on the productivity and fulfillment of their employees, often because they are embarrassed. This can stem from their discomfort with being emotionally open with people, from their fear of seeming disingenuous, or from the painful realization that they haven't generally taken an interest in the employees who work for them.

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- **Busy-ness:** some managers don't believe they have the time to take an interest in their people. They see themselves as individual contributors who happen to have direct reports. For them, any time taken away from "real work" is a waste and a threat to making progress. Obviously, they don't have a sense of the impact that a manager can have on an employee's productivity and morale.

Of course, no excuse is a good one for a manager to avoid treating employees like the three-dimensional human beings that they are- mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents and neighbors, all of whom have a need to be known by the person who oversees their work.

### Overcoming Anonymity

Managers who struggle with demonstrating a real interest in their employees need to do one or both of the following. First, they have to overcome their fear of being politically incorrect. Yes, our current legal climate makes it necessary for managers to be careful about the kinds of personal interview questions they ask. But that doesn't mean that they should continue in that same vain after an employee comes on board.

Of course, that doesn't mean all personal topics are suddenly fair game. It just means that managers should act like human beings, and not the automatons that our legal system requires them to be during the interview process.

Second, managers need to overcome their fear of coming across as insincere. That's not to say that they need to get comfortable being insincere. They just need to realize that it is okay if employees initially suspect that they are being manipulative. They have to have the courage and wisdom to realize that the truth about their intentions will eventually become clear after they demonstrate consistent, genuine interest in their employees as people.

### The Other Signs

Addressing anonymity is the first of the three areas that managers need to tackle. To transform our ailing workforce, there is more work to be done, in the areas of employee irrelevance and something I call 'immeasurement'.

However, more than anything, managers need to understand that job misery at work is costly, unnecessary and treatable. It is my sincerest hope that the advice and perspective in my book changes the way managers approach their jobs so that employees find true fulfillment in theirs.

### About Patrick Lencioni

Patrick Lencioni's best-selling business books have sold over 2 million copies. His new book, *The*

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*Three Signs of a Miserable Job*, was just released in August. After nearly five years in print, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* continues to be a fixture on national best-seller lists. Pat's firm, The Table Group, provides organizations with ideas, products and services that improve teamwork, clarity and effectiveness. [www.tablegroup.com](http://www.tablegroup.com)