

The Three Signs of a Miserable Job - Q&A with Patrick Lencioni

Question: Why did you decide to write this book?

Lencioni: As a kid, I watched my dad trudge off to work each day and became somewhat obsessed with the notion of job misery. Somewhere along the line, I came to the frightening realization that people spend so much time at work yet so many of them were unfulfilled and frustrated in their jobs. As I got older, I came to another realization - that job misery was having a devastating impact on individuals, and on society at large. It seemed to me that understanding the cause of the problem, and finding a solution for it, was a worthy focus for my career.

Question: What exactly is a miserable job?

Lencioni: A miserable job is not the same as a bad one. A bad job lies in the eye of the beholder. One person's dream job might be another person's nightmare.

But a miserable job is universal. It is one that makes a person cynical and frustrated and demoralized when they go home at night. It drains them of their energy, their enthusiasm and their self-esteem. Miserable jobs can be found in every industry and at every level. Professional athletes, CEOs and actors can be - and often are - as miserable as ditch diggers, janitors and fast food workers.

Question: How prevalent is job misery?

Lencioni: Attend any kind of social gathering, anywhere in the country, and talk about work. The stories and anecdotal evidence confirming job misery are overwhelming. Misery spans all income levels, ages and geography. Some studies cite as many as 77% of people dislike their jobs. Gallup also contends that this ailing workforce is costing employers more than \$350 billion dollars in lost productivity.

Question: What is the root cause of job misery?

Lencioni: The primary source of job misery and the potential cure for that misery resides in the hands of one individual - the direct manager. There are countless studies confirming this statement, including both Gallup and The Blanchard Companies. Both organizations have found that an employee's relationship with their direct manager is the most important determinant to employee satisfaction (over pay, benefits, perks, work-life balance etc).

Even employees who are well paid, do interesting work and have great autonomy, cannot feel fulfilled in a job if their managers are not providing them with what they need on a daily or weekly basis.

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Question: What are the three signs?

Lencioni: The first is anonymity, which is the feeling that employees get when they realize that their manager has little interest in them a human being and that they know little about their lives, their aspirations and their interests.

The second sign is irrelevance, which takes root when employees cannot see how their job makes a difference in the lives of others. Every employee needs to know that the work they do impacts someone's life - a customer, a co-worker, even a supervisor - in one way or another.

The third sign is something I call immeasurement, which is the inability of employees to assess for themselves their contribution or success. Employees who have no means of measuring how well they are doing on a given day or in a given week, must rely on the subjective opinions of others, usually their managers', to gauge their progress or contribution.

Question: Why don't managers do these things?

Lencioni: As simple as the three signs are, the fact remains that few managers take a genuine interest in their people, remind them of the impact that their work has on others, and help them establish creative ways to measure and assess their performance.

There are a number of reasons.

First, many managers think they are too busy. Of course, the real problem is that most of those managers see themselves primarily as individual contributors who happen to have direct reports. They fail to realize that the most important part of their jobs is providing their people with what they need to be productive and fulfilled (a.k.a. not miserable) in their jobs.

The second reason that managers don't provide their employees with the three things they need is that they simply forget what it was like when they were a little lower on the food chain. They somehow forget how important it was to them when a supervisor took an interest in them, talked to them about why their work really mattered and gave them a means for evaluating their progress. Finally, many managers don't do this because they are embarrassed or afraid to try. They fear that their employees will see them as being disingenuous or manipulative, or that by taking an interest in their personal lives they will be stepping into inappropriate territory. It's almost as though they fail to understand the difference between the interview process (no personal questions allowed!) and the actual work experience (treat people like a full human being).

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Question: What can a miserable employee do to improve his or her situation?

Lencioni: The first thing they can do is assess whether their manager is interested in and capable of addressing the three things that are required. And they have to realize that most managers really do want to improve, in spite of the fact that they may seem disinterested.

The second thing miserable employees need to do is help their managers understand what it is they need. If they have a strong relationship with their manager, they can come right out and say it ("You know, it would mean a lot to me if you knew more about who I am and what makes me tick." or, "Can you sit down and help me understand why this work I'm doing makes a difference to someone?").

Finally, employees would do well for themselves if they turned the tables and started doing for their managers what they want for themselves. For instance, employees who take a greater interest in the life of their managers are bound to infect them with the same kind of human interest. Similarly, employees who take the time to tell their managers (in a non suck-up kind of way) about the impact they have on their job satisfaction, will likely inspire them to respond in kind.

However, if an employee comes to the conclusion that his or her manager is indeed completely disinterested in helping them find fulfillment in their work, it may well be time to start looking for a new job.

Question: Why do so many professional athletes and entertainers seem miserable in their jobs?

Lencioni: In spite of the money they make and the attention they receive from fans and the media, many athletes and entertainers experience one or all of the three signs of a miserable job.

Most professional athletes feel anonymous in their jobs because their coaches and managers dedicate little, if any, time or energy getting to know them personally. I've had coaches tell me "Hey, these guys are professionals and this is a business. They don't need anything special from me." Keep in mind that they are referring to young men in their early twenties who are living on their own for the first time and feel surprisingly alone — even with all the fan attention.

Entertainers are in similar situations, but for them, it is often relevance that suffers. Many actors cannot reconcile their celebrity and wealth with the fact that they see their work as being somewhat unimportant, in terms of impacting the lives of others. Perhaps that's why so many of them get involved in charitable causes or politics- it gives them a sense of purpose.