



I Have a Fancy Title, Steady Paycheck, and Good Benefits. Why Am I So Miserable?

At ten o'clock in the morning, my phone rang. It was my dad calling from his twenty-ninth-floor office in downtown San Francisco. It was 1994 and we worked about a city block apart. I worked for a large financial services company and my dad worked for a public utility.

"Can you come to the office?" my dad asked.

"I'll be right there," I said. I took the elevator down thirty floors and walked through the courtyard that adjoined our buildings.

I arrived in my dad's office and was slightly puzzled. The bustling, creative office where he worked was totally empty. Desks with plants and empty in-boxes sat where there were once eleven people. My dad peeked out from behind his cube wall.

"They laid off everyone in my department this morning. I am the only one left."

My stomach dropped.

This moment, more than a decade and a half ago, was my abrupt introduction to the shift in the corporate world where solid, stable jobs were

wiped off the map in a matter of minutes. Many of my dad's coworkers were career employees, who had started working for the company out of college. One woman had worked her entire career at the company, as had her father and grandfather until retirement. She came into work at 8:00 a.m., was given a cardboard box to pack her belongings, and was escorted to the exit door by 8:20.

That was the moment I stopped trusting the "stability" of corporate life.

You Aren't Crazy

I am sure that if you have worked in the corporate world for any length of time, you had your own moment when you realized that your job would never be secure, no matter how hard you worked or how long your tenure. Nevertheless, many people feel quite guilty for expressing dissatisfaction with their corporate job.

If it makes you feel better, I will sum up the advice I have given to hundreds of clients and thousands of blog readers over the years: *you aren't crazy*.

I understand your train of thought. How can you not feel a little crazy to complain about a stable job with great pay, benefits, smart coworkers, and social prestige? Isn't it selfish to want more when most people in the world would kill for the opportunity to work day in and day out in air-conditioned offices with no chance of getting calloused hands?

Logically, you are right. With all of these perks and a stable income to pay your bills, it would seem that you should be content to get up on Monday morning and go to work. So why do you feel so miserable?

The essence of the problem is two-fold:

- Large corporations have experienced tremendous change over the last twenty years, which have made them fundamentally difficult places to work, even for extremely smart and motivated employees in an "ideal" job situation.
- Some people are simply not cut out to work in large organizations. You may not have had a lot of direction when you finished school, and just followed the path put out for you by well-intentioned career counselors or managers. My former client said it well:

I realized when looking at my entire career since college that I had just fallen into jobs without thinking about them much. I had a vague interest in computer science, but never thought I would end up as a full-time programmer cranking out code in a gray cubicle. How in the world did I get here and how can I get out?

Given my entrepreneurial tendencies, you might think that I am one of those “conspiracy by the Man to keep me down” people and reject all corporate commerce. To the contrary, I loved the years that I worked as an employee. I wore my blue suit, nylons, and pearls proudly. I enjoyed the smell of freshly sharpened pencils and packs of multicolored Post-it notes more than is prudent to admit. I met tremendously smart, funny, and creative people whom I am friends with to this day.

However, since going out on my own a dozen years ago, I had the unique advantage of observing corporate culture without being part of it. That allowed me to see a number of patterns that, when put together, led me to believe that today’s corporate environment has some unique challenges that make it difficult for even the most motivated employees to overcome.

Let’s start with the first challenge: employees drowning in an alphabet soup of trends, programs, and processes.

Mission Statements, Outsourcing, Rightsizing, and Reengineering

Corporations today go through a tremendous amount of change and upheaval. This is necessary and by design, since market conditions continually shift, senior leadership turns over, management practices evolve, customer needs change, and competitors come out of nowhere.

I would add, somewhat cynically, that companies also go through change since management consultants need to justify their existence. If they don’t cook up fancy new programs riddled with acronyms, matrices, and bulging decks of PowerPoint slides, how can they afford to send their kids to college?

In an attempt to explain organization changes to their employees, companies send out communications. Unfortunately, this often makes people

more confused, as their explanations sound just like this one spun from the Dilbert Mission Statement generator:

Our mission is to interactively facilitate enterprise-wide products and collaboratively promote long-term high-impact technology to set us apart from the competition.¹

You could argue that in the last thirty years, a combination of market trends and corporate initiatives have improved the effectiveness and bottom line of many corporations. However, for employees who have lived in the middle of an ever-changing environment packed with all-hands meetings, whizzing acronyms, and enough binders to topple an elephant, the impact has been downright painful.

Here are some examples:

Well-intentioned trend or program	How it is supposed to work	How it often works
Offshoring	Take advantage of low labor costs and decreased regulation. Focus on “core competencies” while outsourcing the rest.	White-collar employees fear for their lives, looking over their shoulder to see if cheaper/more talented workers abroad will take their jobs.
Business process reengineering	Cut out all unnecessary steps in workflow to increase efficiency and productivity.	Increasing pressure to do more and more work with fewer and fewer resources. The stress feels like a vise slowly tightening its grip.
Mergers and acquisitions	Grow company through “buying rather than building.” Gain talent without the expense or hassle of recruiting.	A hotshot manager from your acquiring company walks in with a new set of underlings and discounts the reputation you have worked hard to build for the last twenty years. You are deemed “overlap” and are out on the street.

Well-intentioned trend or program	How it is supposed to work	How it often works
Globalization	Increase market share in industry by selling in global markets. Use local staff to serve local customers. Gain overall company stability across diverse economies.	Wake up at 5 a.m. to conference call with your customers in Europe, then stay at the office until 7 p.m. to talk with your marketing team in Japan. Choosing a good time to meet with your team is like running a goat rodeo.
Pervasive mobile technology	Be available for customers 24/7; instantly responsive. Provide flexibility to telecommute or work remotely.	Your boss calls you twelve times on your family vacation and you are expected to return customer e-mails at night. Frustrated, your wife runs off with the pool boy.
Centers of excellence	Model and standardize higher performance throughout the company.	Forced to use a “standardized” process, you spend more time learning/ incorporating “best practices” than doing your job or serving your customers.
Metrics-based bonuses (Individual Performance Multipliers)	Clear expectations and level of performance. Competition breeds excellence.	Your performance is measured against that of others in your “job family” who have fundamentally different jobs and by managers who hardly know you.

I want to hammer home a point here: the nature of large, global corporate organizations in today’s tumultuous markets is such that they *can* and *should* change frequently to stay alive. Strategies will change. Business plans will change. Organization structure will change. Your position is not secure, no matter how well you do your job.

As long as you know this and act accordingly, you will do fine, even inside a corporate job.

Leadership Flaws

Three years ago, I was taking my son for a walk around the block in his stroller. I was reflecting on all the years I spent inside large corporations and how hard it was to change ingrained leadership behavior.

Then, in an inspired daydream, I began fantasizing what I would say in a keynote speech to top-level executives around the world.

I could hardly steer the stroller fast enough back to the house. As soon as my son went down for a nap, I started pounding at my keyboard, calling the post an “Open Letter to CXOs Across the Corporate World.”

Later that evening, I sent the post to Guy Kawasaki, a prominent blogger and venture capitalist in Silicon Valley, because I thought he might find it entertaining.

He blogged about it the next morning.

I was not prepared for the response; tens of thousands of people flooded my blog within the first few days, and I got hundreds of passionate e-mails and comments.

The experience led me to believe that there are some fundamental things that are not being said by employees in corporations that need to be.

Here is the post, as it was originally written:

Open Letter to CXOs Across the Corporate World

I am writing to you as a newly minted rebel. My main purpose in life is to take your best, your brightest, most creative, hard-working and passionate employees and sneak them out the hallways of your large corporation so that they are free of the yoke of lethargy, oppression and resentment.

It hasn't always been this way. I tried for many years as a consultant to YOU to explain the importance of treating your employees with dignity and respect. I encouraged you to speak clearly and to the point, to avoid endless hours of PowerPoint, buzzwords and meaningless jargon like “our employees are our most valuable asset.” I was sincere in my efforts as I coached your managers and explained the importance of providing objective, developmental feedback to employees that was based on observable behavior,

not personal generalizations. I encouraged you to be open with your business strategy so that your employees could contribute ideas to grow your company.

After ten years, I give up. I was banging my head against the wall trying to find ethical, creative ways to train your employees on the merits of your forced ranking compensation plan. No amount of creativity could overcome the fact that it is a stupid idea and does nothing but create an environment of competition, politics and resentment. Whoever sold you on that idea was wrong.

So now I want to help your employees leave and start their own business. Regain control of their life. Feel blood pumping in their veins and excitement in their chest as they wake up each day. I honestly wish that it were possible for them to feel that inside your company. But things have gotten so convoluted that I honestly don't think it is possible unless you take some drastic steps:

- 1. Don't spend millions of dollars to try and change your culture.** Corporate culture is a natural thing that cannot be manufactured. No amount of posters, incentive programs, PowerPoint presentations or slogans on websites will affect the hearts and minds of your employees. If you want to see things change immediately, stop acting like an asshole. If you see one of your senior managers acting like an asshole, ask him to stop. If he doesn't stop, fire him. You will be amazed at how fast the culture shifts.
- 2. Stop running your company like the mafia.** By now, we are all aware that no job in any industry is secure. They can be re-scoped, eliminated or outsourced at any time. And that is the way it should be—no organization can be static in today's environment. But despite this common knowledge, many of your managers act betrayed when their employees tell them they want to leave the company. This is an absolute double standard and should be stopped immediately. If you help your employees grow and develop in their career even if they plan to leave the company, you will create an extremely loyal workforce. You never know where that employee who leaves

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will go next. They could become an incredibly valuable strategic partner. Their golfing buddy could turn out to be your next huge customer.

3. Spend a moment walking around the halls of your company and look at your employees.

I mean really look at them. Don't just pat them on the back and pump their hand while looking over their head at the exit door. Look directly in their eyes. Imagine what their life is like. Who is waiting at home for them? What are the real consequences to their health, marriages and children when they have to work yet another thirteen hour day? What kind of dreams do they have? What makes them really happy? What do their eyes tell you? Do they trust you? Resent you? Think you are full of it? I met precious few C-level executives in 10 years consulting that truly "saw" and cared about their employees. Those that did reaped gigantic mounds of good will and respect.

4. Teach people how to get rich like you.

I don't think there is anything inherently evil with money. It would be kind of fun to have my own jet and be able to pick up and fly to New York to watch the opening of a Broadway play or zip to Mexico for a long weekend. But the kind of disparity that exists right now between your employees who do the work and you and your senior team who reap the benefits is not only absurd, it is obscene. I know you work very hard and carry a lot of responsibility for your company. Instead of hoarding your wealth, teach your employees how to make money. Show them how you negotiate large deals. Explain investment vehicles. Explain how your business works and why it is so exciting for you to run. Make them into better businesspeople so that they can grow their opportunities and net worth. And for God's sake share the profits. It is insulting to tell your managers to look a hard-working employee in the eye and say they only get a 3% raise when you take home more in a quarterly bonus than they make in 10 years.

5. Don't ask for your employees' input if you are not going to listen to it.

I have facilitated offsite meetings that lasted for days where well-intentioned managers brainstormed and argued and edited and wrote flip charts until their hands turned blue. They sweated over creating

something that was relevant and for a brief period of time actually were proud of what they accomplished. Until a month later when I heard that you scrapped the whole thing in favor of a plan cooked up by an outside consulting firm. This does not only completely waste smart people's time, it guarantees that you will have hostility and resentment the next time you ask for creative input.

6. Don't train people until you know what problem you are solving. I

would be rich if I took up all the offers I got to "design and teach a 5-day course on people skills for all of our managers worldwide." Most often, I would get the call from a VP of Human Resources that received the request from their pissed off CEO. And what were the pressing business problems that caused the request? Often it was the threat of a lawsuit based on one manager's egregious behavior. Take the time to analyze what is causing the problems in your business such as high turnover, plunging sales or a huge increase in employee complaints. Usually it is something that will not be resolved by training everyone. Most often it involves firing a person or two who are causing havoc in a department. If you really want your managers to learn how to manage people, put them in tough situations with great mentors nearby. Keep an eye on them. Provide feedback and coaching exactly at the moment that they need it (like before they have to fire someone for the first time and are scared to death). There is a time and a place for training, but it should not be your first course of action.

7. Ditch the PowerPoint when you have town hall meetings. No one is

excited to see another boring graph or 20-part building slide that describes all the components of your new strategy. If they are interested, they can read the slides at their desk. Your employees want to hear your opinions on things that they think about all the time. Your PR team may have a heart attack, but invite tough questions about the things that you know are really on their mind. Are you going to take over another company? Outsource the Help Desk to the Philippines? Why did you get a huge bonus this quarter when the rest of the employees are on a salary freeze? Did the VP of Sales really get caught with his pants down at the

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sales meeting in Vegas? Just because people ask the questions doesn't mean you have to answer them all. Know what you can and can't talk about and be direct about that (no, you can't talk about the VP of Sales or you may get sued). You will do wonders for your credibility and I guarantee no one will be sleeping in the back of the room.

- 8. Focus on the work people do, not how or when they do it.** Some positions require people to be at their desk at an appointed hour to answer customer calls or to participate in live meetings. But others can do their work from home, early in the morning, late in the evening or dialing in from the local Starbucks. The turnover magnet you have for losing great employees is not the competitor down the street, it is the idea of freedom and flexibility for the self-employed. Your employees have different biorhythms and working styles and activities going on in their lives. If you provide flexible work options and don't make people sit unnecessarily at their desk, you will keep some great employees who would otherwise leave. A manager who is afraid to offer telecommuting to her employees because she thinks they will slack off is just showing her own weakness. Great managers build accountability into flexible work plans and manage performance aggressively.
- 9. Watch the burnout.** Many companies measure an employee's drive and dedication by the amount of hours they work each day. I have witnessed people playing video games at their desk until their manager leaves "just so they won't think that I am a slacker." Huh? It is not a badge of honor to work 18 hours a day, it is a sure path to a heart attack or divorce. There are times when employees have to work around the clock to get critical projects done and that is part of doing business. But if they are working long hours just because "everyone does," you are creating a culture of waste, inefficiency and ill health.
- 10. Forbid people to work while they are on vacation.** Of all the pet peeves that I have accumulated over the years, this is perhaps the biggest. Your employees work like pack mules all year long. They send messages via BlackBerry during dinner, take work calls during their kid's

basketball games and forgo rolling in the sheets with their spouse to finish a PowerPoint presentation on Saturday morning. When they go on vacation, let them relax. The only way to get the health and stress-relieving benefits of a vacation is to completely unplug from work. As long as they are checking e-mail each morning from the hotel lobby or fielding “urgent” calls in the evening, they might as well be in the office. The worst thing is seeing their kid’s eyes as they observe once more that Dad or Mom values work more than family, even on vacation. Shame on you for making this acceptable behavior.

I won’t entice anyone out your door that does not want to come willingly. Many people will choose to stay in the comfort of your oppressive predictability. But if you lose some smart, creative, entrepreneurial and positive minds, you can’t say I didn’t warn you.

Do any of these issues hit home for you? Based on the 100,000-plus people who read my post and vigorously agreed, you are not alone.

Many, perhaps most, corporate leaders are decent, ethical people. But some of you may have had the misfortune to work in a place so rampant with greed and devoid of ethics that it would fit what my college international studies professor Francisco Vazquez said about the “melting pot” of American culture: “Those on the bottom get burned and the scum floats to the top.”

You Aren’t Meant to Have a Boss

Noted software engineer and venture capitalist Paul Graham goes so far as to say human beings aren’t meant to work in large corporations. In his post “You Aren’t Meant to Have a Boss,” he makes this comparison:

I was in Africa last year and saw a lot of animals in the wild that I’d only seen in zoos before. It was remarkable how different they seemed. Particularly lions. Lions in the wild seem about ten times more alive. They’re like different animals. I suspect that working for oneself feels better to humans in much the same way that living in the wild must

feel better to a wide-ranging predator like a lion. Life in a zoo is easier, but it isn't the life they were designed for.²

The Ill-Fitting Shoe

Complex corporate trends, leadership flaws, and the fact that humans may not be meant to work in large groups might be enough reason to confirm your suspicion that you are not crazy for feeling unhappy in your corporate job. But there may be a simpler answer: *You may not be cut out for corporate life, and don't realize it.*

In the late nineties, I conducted career development classes inside network giant Cisco Systems, which at that point was experiencing the benefits of an insane stock price increase. As follow-up to the classes, I had one-on-one sessions with the participants to discuss their personal career aspirations and goals.

One meeting in particular stuck with me, as I talked with an extremely successful young woman who had been with the company for a long time. I had remembered in class that she was a little “numbed out,” meaning that it was hard to get a real reaction out of her besides superficial comments. In the individual session, it was very different. She started talking:

Before I took this class, I had a strange, nagging feeling that something was not right about my current situation, but I couldn't figure it out. . . . I had achieved all my personal career goals and had a situation that most people would envy. . . . But despite these things, I was still unhappy. When we did the exercise about defining personal values in the class, I had an intense reaction. I went home and compared this list to the list of values currently represented in my work environment.

Then she started crying.

And I found that not one of my top ten values was represented in my current work situation. Suddenly, I understood why I was not happy! It was a big relief.

What she described is a very common feeling among people inside corporate jobs. Each of us has natural, organic preferences for how we feel the most alive, relaxed, happy, and passionate at work. These can include things like:

- **Physical work environment:** type of building, color scheme, how desks are laid out, natural vs. artificial lights, etc.
- **Type of business:** for-profit, nonprofit, retail, established, start-up, your own business
- **Business culture:** how people treat each other, values displayed by actions of all employees (not just words), policies and procedures or lack thereof
- **Communication styles of managers, clients, and coworkers:** direct or indirect, confrontational vs. relaxed and open
- **Size of business:** number of employees
- **Type of work content:** what the company is in the business of selling, e.g. financial services, retail, consulting, consumer products, software, etc.
- **Skills and talents used in work:** which skills you are using in your day-to-day work activities

I liken it to wearing a shoe two sizes too small:

- Your ideal situation is like wearing a pair of size eight wide shoes of a stylish, comfortable brand that feels custom-made for your foot and looks sexy too.
- Your current situation is like wearing a pair of size six narrow shoes, in an unflattering material, with a heel that is both ungainly and unattractive.

So why in the world do we try to jam our foot into an unattractive, uncomfortable shoe, otherwise known as our day job?

Because our social self (shaped by family, educational institutions, the media, and religion) is so strong that we believe that our “great job at an investment bank where I have an outstanding reputation, many years’ experience, and an amazing salary” should make us happy. Even if we know that it is in direct contrast to the picture of our ideal life!

So, in a chilling similarity with many well-intentioned parents who steer

their kids to corporate jobs that don't match their true nature, Cinderella's stepmother instructs her daughters:

"Listen," said the mother secretly. "Take this knife, and if the slipper is too tight, just cut off part of your foot. It will hurt a little, but what harm is that? The pain will soon pass, and then one of you will be queen." Then the oldest one went to her bedroom and tried on the slipper. The front of her foot went in, but her heel was too large, so she took the knife and cut part of it off, so she could force her foot into the slipper. Then she went out to the prince, and when he saw that she was wearing the slipper, he said that she was to be his bride. He escorted her to his carriage and was going to drive away with her. When he arrived at the gate, the two pigeons were perched above, and they called. The prince bent over and looked at the slipper. Blood was streaming from it. He saw that he had been deceived, and he took the false bride back.³

As much as you want to make yourself feel good about a situation that is not right for you, it will feel awkward, uncomfortable, and downright painful after a while. The blood will drip from your ill-fitting shoe, and making it to the ball with Prince Charming will be the least of your worries.

Miles from Meaningful Work

One of the disconcerting parts of working in a large company is that you often get caught up in a frenzy of activity doing things that don't have a direct bearing on the real world.

The epitome of meaningless corporate work is the 1999 movie comedy *Office Space*. The main character Peter is increasingly frustrated, and eventually pushed to the brink of sanity, by the amount of time and management effort used to ensure he uses a certain cover sheet on his "TPS Report."

The larger organizations get, the greater their capacity for doing work that is not directly related to anything in the real world. Or, in an equally frustrating outcome, months of work are scrapped as a new company is acquired, or changes vendors, or gets a new CEO with a different vision from his predecessor.

One of my favorite examples of meaningless work comes from a blog reader, Laura:

My company had actually gotten so far away from their customers (calling them “names,” as in “we need more names”) that eventually management announced an ambitious program called “Customers First.” Over the next year, countless global manpower hours were spent as bulging binders were handed out, launch meetings were called, task forces were assembled, brainstormings were held (and copious notes typed up), progress was benchmarked, etc. It all resulted in the startling recommendation that “we should put our phone number on the order forms in case people want to call us,” which was quickly trumped by “no, that would make it easier for people to just cancel the service.” That was 8 years ago. This year, new management just announced an exciting new initiative called “Putting Customers First.” They are currently in the throes of a careful year-long test of what happens if you put the website address on the order form.

People who spend a lot of time on task forces, leading multiple-day offsite meetings and generating enormous binders and decks of PowerPoint slides, often have sober moments when they think, “What in heaven’s name does this have to do with the real world?”

That Gray Fabric Really May Cause Brain Damage

While “cubicle nation” could be considered as much a state of mind as a physical environment, there may be something about the physical design of cubicles that actually makes people sick.

Kathy Sierra, known for her interest in brain research and learning, wrote in her blog post “Brain Death by Dull Cubicle”:

You always knew that dull, boring cubicles could suck the joy out of work, but now there’s evidence that they can change your brain. Not mentally or emotionally, no, we’re talking physical structural changes. You could almost say, “Dull, lifeless work environments cause brain damage.”

I said “almost,” because it depends on your definition of brain damage. What the research suggests is that in unstimulating, unenriched, stressful environments, the brain STOPS producing new neurons. But it’s only been the last few years that scientists have finally realized that the human brain can build new neurons. For most of the previous century, it was believed that we were born with all the neurons we’d ever have.

Scientists who believed in and studied the idea of “neurogenesis” were dismissed, criticized, ignored. But Princeton’s Elizabeth Gould has picked up the neurogenesis ball and run with it. She is almost single-handedly changing the face of neuroscience and psychology.

From a fascinating article in an issue of *Seed Magazine* (my new favorite):

“Eight years after Gould defied the dogma of her field and proved that the primate brain creates new cells, she has gone on to demonstrate that the structure of the brain is incredibly influenced by one’s surroundings.”

One of the most interesting (and, in hindsight, “doh!”) discoveries was that one of the main reasons researchers kept finding NO evidence of new neuron development in their test primates is because they kept them in an environment which shut that process down. In other words, it was the caged-living that stopped the neurogenesis process. By giving her animals a rich, natural environment, Gould “flipped the switch” back on, allowing their brains to work normally, and sure enough—the happier, more stimulated animals showed a DRAMATIC increase in neurogenesis as well as dendrite density.⁴

Whether or not the design of cubicles actually makes you sick is up for scientific study. But ask just about anyone who has worked in a cubicle for a long time how it feels and they are likely to say something like this comment by a blog reader:

No fresh air, no windows, no exercise. I feel like life is coasting by while I sit and rot. My eyes are dry and my wrist aches. When I see announcements for retirement parties here (cheap sheet cake, sugary punch, some kind of tacky appreciation plaque) I’m pretty sure I’d rather jump off a bridge.

Blood from a Turnip

Since you have read this far, I hope you realize that there is a reason why you feel cranky in your corporate job. The icing on the cake for many corporate employees is an overwhelming amount of information to process within a limited time frame.

Meetings, useful when conducted the right way, turn into agonizing wastes of time as the same problems are hashed over and over by the same rambling people for months on end without any resolution or decisions. At times, they seem to mock Tim Ferriss's insight from *4-Hour Workweek*: "Slow down and remember this: Most things make no difference. Being busy is a form of laziness—lazy thinking and indiscriminate action."⁵

E-mail, originally intended to make us more productive and connected, has turned into a three-headed monster that grows back twice as big as soon as you slay it. Many employees spend up to six hours a day trying desperately to respond to hundreds of e-mails that clog their in-box.

There is nothing wrong with appreciating every paycheck, benefit, doughnut in the break room, fresh pencil, free copy, and paid vacation that comes with a corporate job. Seeing the good in what you have is one of the keys to living a happy life.

But if despite this you still don't feel great, you are really not an ungrateful curmudgeon. And you aren't crazy, as I alluded to at the beginning of the chapter.

Some of you feel much, much worse than "not great," like "ready to slam my head into the wall" or "so emotionally dead that I have no idea what I feel anymore" or "about to have a stroke from all the stress."

I found a lot of despair hidden behind smiling faces of smart people in cubicles over the years. Gut wrenching, tears, confusion, sadness, anger, you name it, I heard it. So why don't people just leave? Read on.