

## The Three Signs of a Miserable Job

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Jossey-Bass, 2007

Original – 259 Pages

Summary – 4 pages

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### The Miserable Job

A miserable job is not the same as a bad one. Bad jobs are about circumstances...dirty, long, hard, etc. But a miserable job is the one you dread going to and then can't wait to leave. It's the one that saps your energy even when you are not busy. It's the one that makes you go home at the end of the day with less enthusiasm and more cynicism than you had when you left in the morning. It's important to understand that being miserable has nothing to do with the actual work a job involves. A pro basketball player can be miserable while the janitor in the locker room finds fulfillment in his work. That's the thing about misery at work. It makes little sense and has no bounds. No one is immune. And the cost of this, in both economic and human terms is staggering. Economically, productivity suffers greatly when employers are unfulfilled. But, it's the social cost of misery at work that seems particularly overwhelming, because it has such a broad ripple effect. Even the most emotionally mature, self-aware people cannot help but let work misery leak into the rest of their lives.

### The Three Signs

Three underlying factors will make a job miserable, and they can apply to virtually all jobs. They seem obvious and easy to resolve. Yet, they are largely unaddressed in most organizations.

- *Anonymity* – all human beings need to be understood and appreciated for their unique qualities by someone in a position of authority.
- *Irrelevance* – everyone needs to know that his or her job matters to someone. Anyone. Even the most cynical employees need to know their work matters...even if it's just the boss.
- *Immeasurement* – they cannot be fulfilled in work if their success depends on the opinions or whims of another person, no matter how benevolent that person may be. Without a tangible means for assessing success or failure, motivation eventually deteriorates as people see themselves as unable to control their own fate.



Simple? Absolutely. Obvious? Perhaps. But, if so, why do most managers fail to provide these basics of a meaningful job?

## **The Benefits and Obstacles of Managing for Job Fulfillment**

### **Benefits**

*Increased Productivity – Employees who find fulfillment in their jobs are going to work with more enthusiasm, passion, and attention to quality because they develop a sense of ownership and pride in what they are doing.*

*Greater Retention and Lower Costs – Employees hang onto fulfilling jobs as long as they can, because they know that their chances of finding another are relatively slim. Fulfilled employees tend to attract other good employees to an organization. The result for an organization is lower costs related to recruiting, hiring, retraining, and termination.*

*Sustainable Cultural Differentiation – The opportunity for differentiation from competitors by building a culture of job fulfillment cannot be overstated. In a world of ubiquitous technology and rapid dissemination of information, it is harder and harder to establish sustainable competitive advantage through strategic and tactical decision-making. Cultural differentiation, however, is more valuable than it's ever been; it requires courage and discipline more than creativity or intelligence.*

### **Obstacles**

*Employee Obstacles – Employees often fail to find fulfillment in their work because they place too much emphasis on maximizing compensation or choosing the right career. Are these irrelevant? Of course not. Even if you love what you do, if you can't feed your family, you have a problem on your hands. However, even people who are relatively well paid for doing what they love can be miserable if they feel anonymous, their job feels irrelevant to others, or their work is not objectively measurable.*

*Organizational Obstacles – Many companies only come to terms with the fact that they have a problem when employees start to leave. Many perform exit interviews to try to determine what the problem is, but of course, many departing employees don't tell the whole story. By the time people have decided to leave they have little incentive to tell their soon-to-be-former-employee the truth – that they are leaving because they were not managed well...and without a good manager, their jobs eventually became somewhat miserable. Even in those instances when executives can discern that poor management is a source of employee dissatisfaction, their responses, although well intentioned, are rarely effective. More management training, mandatory classes on goal setting, performance evaluations, and feedback are all certainly topics worthy of attention but their impact is usually never immediate, and all too often negligible. What managers need is something that is both less mechanical and more emotionally, fundamentally, and immediately tied to job satisfaction. And that is where the elimination of anonymity, irrelevance, and immeasurability come in.*

*The Emotional Obstacle – In order to be the kind of leader who demonstrates genuine interest in employees, and who can help people discover the relevance of their work, a person must have a level of personal confidence and emotional vulnerability. Without it, they will feel like kindergarten teachers or little league sports coaches delivering simple pep-talks, even though employees, at all levels, are yearning for a deeper conversation.*

## **The Causes of Job Misery**

*Anonymity – It is immensely more difficult to decide to leave an organization or a team when you feel that others on the team know and understand you as an individual. And the person who can have the greatest influence by taking a personal interest in anyone on the job is the manager. What does it mean to take personal interest in someone? Get to know them. Take time to sit and talk with each of them and ask them about their lives. Some managers reflexively avoid this because they have been taught it is illegal to ask personal questions during job interviews. Somehow they forget that what is illegal when selecting an employee is actually a basic form of human kindness once you have hired them. But...it can't be fake! I'm talking about genuine interest. And it's not a one-time thing either. You can't 'check it off the list'.*

*Irrelevance – This has to do with being needed. Having an impact on the lives of others. Human beings need to be needed and we need to be reminded of this pretty much every day. We need to know that we are helping others, not just serving ourselves. God didn't create us for that. We want to help others and when we cannot, misery ensues. All employees, whether they are rock stars engineers, or teachers, must answer 2 questions in order to establish relevance in their jobs. And it is the managers responsibility to help them answer these 2 questions:*

1) *WHO?* – This first question is 'who am I helping?' The most obvious place to start looking is among customers. For some people this is easy, but for those who do not have direct contact with customers it can be harder. For those people, the answer is often "internal customers", other employees or departments within the organization. And for many – brace yourself – the answer will be 'their boss'. This is a hard concept to swallow because it conjures up images of self-serving supervisors sending employees on personal errands. It seems to go against all we've learned about servant leadership. And so, managers often downplay the very real impact that the work their employees do has on their own satisfaction and career. And this is its own tragedy because unless they already believe their manager is a cretin, employees get a great deal of satisfaction and energy when their supervisor thanks them for what they've done and explains to them what a difference they've made for them personally. Think about this again. It is our fear of coming across as self-serving that prevents us from giving our employees the satisfaction of knowing that they've helped us. Ironically, the result is that they feel we are taking them for granted. When managers pretend that they don't appreciate the impact of their people's work – even when they do it out of an attempt to appear humble – they deprive people of the feeling that they've made a difference.

2) *HOW?* – The next question we need to help them answer is "how am I helping?" The answer is not always obvious. When a room service attendant at a nice hotel brings breakfast to a guest he is not delivering food. He's helping a weary traveler feel better about being on the road, which can have a significant impact on life that day. Some managers will say, "Come on! He's just bringing breakfast." Which leads us to the central point. If managers cannot see beyond what employees are doing and help them understand how they can make a difference, the jobs are bound to be miserable. Keep in mind that employees at Southwest Airlines are doing the same job as employees at other airlines, yet people are a lot happier there. And high-school kids at In-N-Out and Chick-Fil-A are doing the same job as other fast food employees but they are a lot happier. The difference is not the job, but the management. And managers must help them see why their work matters to someone. Even if it sounds too touch-feely to some, it is a fundamental part of human nature.

*Immeasurement – Immeasurement essentially is an employee's lack of a clear means of assessing his or her progress or success on the job. The problem is that great employees don't want their*

success to depend on the subjective views or opinions of others. This forces them to engage in distasteful politics and posturing and creates a real loss of control over one's destiny. Employees who can measure their own progress or contribution are going to develop more personal responsibility and satisfaction than those who cannot. The key lies in identifying those areas they can directly influence, and then ensuring that the specific measurements are connection to the people or the person they are meant to serve. Too often, a manager will try to rally employees by giving them a macro objecting (hitting a corporate revenue goal, or driving up the stock price). The problem is that employees can have no direct impact on those things, at least not daily. Ironically, a measurement need not be tied to compensation to be effective. In fact, research indicates that connecting pay to it can actually decrease incentive. Whether or not that is true in a given situation or not, the point is that people want measurable goals so that they can get an intrinsic sense of accomplishment. Great athletes don't get excited about scoring goals because they know it will impact their contracts – though they are not going to turn the money down – they do it because they love to compete and they love to win.

## **Taking Action**

*If you are a manager...*

Anonymity – ask yourself, do I really know my people? Their interests? How they spend time away from work and things that are significant in their lives.

Irrelevance – do they know whom their work impacts and how it impacts them?

Immeasurement – Do they know how to assess their own progress or success?

This info might be best gathering in simple one-on-one meetings, or in a team session, depending on the dynamics of your group. Rather than being vague about your purpose, which can make people suspicious when you start asking questions, it's a good idea to just explain the three signs and what you are trying to do.

*If you are an employee or a job hunter...*

Some of these ideas can be implemented by employees in the team that they themselves serve in. But, the best way to avoid a miserable job is to look for the signs even before accepting one. Ask questions of the interviewer to help determine if they are a company that takes interest in employees and how they do that. Ask how the job you are interviewing for has an impact on people inside and outside the company. And, ask about how you would be measured. The answers will teach you a lot.

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