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Salaried Workers – Realities and Possibilities

Work is so important. For the great majority of us, it takes up the best hours of the majority of our days. And, everything else gets organized around it.

When it comes to Radical Decency – being habitually decent to our selves, others, and the world – this is a big problem. Why? Because, at work, the culture's predominant values – competition, dominance, and control – are typically rehearsed with unrestrained virulence. There it sits, at the center of our lives, a constant impediment to our ability to give ourselves over to a more decent way of living.

So where do most of us end up? By squeezing the most profound expressions of our humanity – relationship and community, leisure and private passions, social justice and service – into the relative corners of our lives. Time with our spouse and children is consigned to nights and weekends. With so much of our spare time filled with chores, social events tend to be isolated and episodic: Dinner with friends here, a wedding or party there, the occasional movie or ball game. And who has any time at all to tend to injustice and the suffering of others – even those within our immediate social and religious communities?

While no one is exempt from this unforgiving equation, it is, without question, much tougher on people with salaried or hourly jobs. In this Reflection, I address the special challenges these people face at work, and certain strategies for dealing with them.

The problem begins with the most basic notions of freedom. While we seldom think of it in this way, the lives of salaried people are, effectively, indentured servants. They work from 9 to 5 – or longer if the boss demands it, an hour for lunch, 2 vacation weeks, and “x” number of sick days. That's it. No choice in the matter. And in contrast to 200 hundreds years ago – at least for white people – most have no extended family or stable geographic homestead and community to fall back on. So they have to work – at jobs that effectively deprive them of any meaningful control over their time.

In addition, they are subordinates in highly authoritarian organizations. Supervisors control what they work on, who they work with, and their physical and emotional environment at work. They also control the ultimate sanctions – promotion, demotion, and termination. And, so long as they're making money for the company, and are not causing problems for their bosses, these powers are virtually unchecked.

Compounding the problem is the steady erosion, over the last few decades, of laws that protect workers and their ability to organize. Most unions and human resource departments – if they exist at all – are paper tigers; with little or no power to enforce

effective solutions. Too often, the net effect of raising a grievance is this: No relief plus the animus of your boss. The result? Most workers suffer in silence.

Note that, since all that really matters in business is profitability, companies do actually support good bosses – so long, that is, as they are making money. The problem, however, is that they will eventually move on, or change their ways when shrinking profits lead to demands – by lenders, investors, or more senior management – for a more bottom line oriented approach. And because decency is never a high priority, the next boss is unlikely to be similarly enlightened.

It makes sense to look for a job with a good boss, and to enjoy it while it lasts. But be very cautious in assuming that “this department” or “that company” is a permanent exception to the rule. Bad bosses are not bad luck. They are the expectable result of an authoritarian business culture, dominated by the ethos of competition, dominance, and control.

What follows is a discussion of key initiatives that individual workers can take, based on the principles of Radical Decency, to deal with these realities. Note, importantly, that these interpersonal approaches are only one piece of the puzzle. A true transformation of the workplace will also require new initiatives that allow workers to more effectively assert their rights, collectively. On the other hand, the strategies discussed below are not pallid substitutes, to be pursued only in the absence of a revitalized union movement. To the contrary, lasting change can never occur – in the workplace or in any other area of living – unless we also tend to the vital business of challenging the authoritarian ways of operating that are so pervasive in our culture.

As Philip Lichtenberg explains, the characteristic dynamic in an authoritarian relationship is for the dominant party to project his anxiety, frustrations, etc. onto the subordinate. So the boss, getting ready for the meeting, barks at his assistant, “where’s the file,” and the subordinate, internalizing the boss’s anxiety, scurries to find it.

The key to creating a different and better environment at work is to consistently act in ways that subvert this dynamic. This is no easy task. Authoritarian interactions are deeply intertwined with our fight or flight brain, and fight or flight is highly infectious. An initial attack is likely to provoke a counter-attack or withdrawal (flight), which in turn provokes a further attack from the original aggressor, and so on. Thus, the uncomfortable truth is that we are biologically wired to respond to a bullying boss with anger or sullen silence; behaviors that only encourage a further round of bullying by the boss. Just as it is exquisitely difficult for a spouse to remain calm and composed in the face of his partner’s attack, so too at work.

Disengaging this system requires the patient and persistent application of principles described by Lichtenberg in Encountering Bigotry. Fight or flight is our brain’s automatic system for dealing with perceived danger and the antithesis of that state of

mind is mutual and authentic contact. The goal, therefore, is cultivate this very different relational approach; short circuiting, in the process, the workplace's authoritarianism and engrained flight or flight tendencies.

The starting place is with your reaction to the boss' provocations. The goal: To disengage your instinctual fight/flight reaction and, instead, to deal with the substance of his "request," calmly and with curiosity and respect. Doing so will interrupt the biologically engrained rhythm of reaction/counter-reaction that fight/flight sets up.

In taking this step, do not expect a magical transformation. As Stephen Stosny points out, a nonreactive response reduces the likelihood of further attack but only from 98% to 70%. Still, it is the best available option and, consistently applied, offers the best hope for turning you into that person in the office who, inexplicably, is spared the boss' most unpleasant excesses.

Note further that this step – challenging as it is – it is only one step in the process Lichtenberg describes. Fully transforming the relationship into one based on trust, ease and shared respect also requires full mutuality. In other words, you need to work toward an environment where you can express your legitimate needs and desires as well.

The worker initiated interpersonal strategies – discussed in this Reflection – are not going to change a company's bottom line, "what have you done for me lately" mindset. Thus, meaningful progress toward this second goal is only possible if you have established, in the company's mind, that you are competent and valued employee, whose needs matter. It will be also greatly facilitated by success in implementing step one: By your boss' growing perception of you as an empowered listener.

Even with all of this in place, however, the only way to get reciprocal respect is to clearly and forthrightly ask for it. At some point, you need to say to the boss: I need "x" to do my job more effectively – or, I am not getting the support I need from your executive assistance – or, I need to take Thursday afternoon off to attend to a personal matter. You also need to be clear and assertive. If you need to be home by 6, the implicit message the boss can't be: I need to do this – unless it really bothers you. If your request is equivocal, the boss, steeped in authoritarian entitlement, is likely to ignore it. In addition, having established a ground rule, act on it. If you continually make exceptions – to please the boss or out of fear irritating him – you can be sure that his commitment to it will recede as well.

A final note in closing: These strategies operate in a deeply authoritarian environment. Even if they are employed with impeccable discretion and judgment, nothing may change. But that does not mean the effort shouldn't be made. Because we are dealing with deeply engrained habits of indecency, any change initiative will be partial and incomplete. Hopefully, however, as complementary change initiatives also take hold, a deeper shift will occur. And, without regard to their effect in the workplace – or the world – always remember always that more decent choices grow the best part of our humanity.