



The Three Signs of a Miserable Job

About the Author

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The Summary

Introduction

Even when I was a youngster I was fascinated by work. In particular, I was unable to comprehend why so many people spent so much time away from loved ones doing things they didn't like. As I got older and had jobs myself, I concluded that most people really didn't enjoy their work. And that really bothered me.

After college I landed my first full-time job, and also experienced something called the Sunday Blues. The Sunday Blues are those awful feelings people get towards the end of the weekend as they think about going to work the next day. They were bad enough, but what made it worse was I had this idea that I should enjoy what I was doing. I had a good job in a good company doing work that interested me...but I still had the Blues. That's when I decided that the Blues didn't make any sense.

Until then I had a theory that satisfying work was all about finding the right job. A bad job was low pay, boring work, and a negative environment. A fulfilling job was interesting work that paid well. So I changed careers—and was no happier than before. That put a big dent in my theory.

My theory dissolved completely when I met people with much less attractive jobs who seemed to find fulfillment in their work—people like gardeners and housekeepers. Obviously there must be more to job fulfillment than I thought. I wanted to figure it out so I could help put an end to the tragedy of job misery for so many.

And it is a tragedy. Scores of people suffer every day as they work at jobs that make them unhappy and frustrated, and undercut their confidence and passion. It can lead to depression, addictions, and even violence at work and home. Beyond the human misery, there is a huge impact on organizations, since there is a direct impact on productivity, morale, and turnover—which all affect the bottom line.

Note: My remedy is going to seem ridiculously simple and obvious. However, so many managers fail to do these things that maybe simple and obvious is what's needed. I am actually convinced of this. Samuel Johnson once wrote, "People need to be reminded more than they need to be instructed." This book, hopefully, is a reminder.

The Fable

This is the story of Brian Bailey, CEO of a small manufacturing firm. The firm was quite successful, and most analysts credited that to its strategy and products. Brian, however, believed it had more to do with the culture of the company than anything else.

Brian retired when the firm was sold, and watched the buyers change the culture...and drag down the company. He ended up buying part ownership in a small local pizza joint, and worked at developing and testing his theory that culture was highly important in building a successful business. Brian identified three key factors that, when implemented, changed the culture of the company. He succeeded in turning the pizza joint around, increasing both profitability and employee satisfaction.

Brian went on to other CEO positions in different industries, and proved again the power of culture and the three key factors on the bottom line. In a nutshell, Brian worked hard to eliminate the three signs of a miserable job throughout the companies he led. As he did that, the companies turned around.

The Model

A miserable job is not the same as a bad one. The definition of a bad job can vary from person to person, depending on what they value and enjoy. But everyone knows what a miserable job is.

That's the one you dread going to and can't wait to leave. It saps your energy even when you aren't busy. A miserable job has nothing to do with the actual work; a professional athlete can be miserable in his job while the janitor finds fulfillment. It can be found in any job, any industry, and any time. No one is immune.

There is a huge cost to this misery. It affects a company's bottom line, for sure. But the social cost may be even worse. The miserable employee goes home frustrated and cynical, and spreads those germs to those around them—spouses, children, friends, etc. And as it spreads, stress and tension increase, and people's emotional and psychological health is profoundly affected.

The first step to addressing those costs lies in understanding the root causes.

The Three Signs

The three signs of a miserable job are anonymity, irrelevance, and immeasurement.

People can't be fulfilled in their work if they aren't known. Everyone needs to be understood and appreciated by someone in authority. People who see themselves as invisible or generic will not love their jobs.

Second, everyone needs to know that their job matters to someone. Without seeing a sense of connection between the work and satisfaction of another person or group of people, an employee will simply not find lasting fulfillment.

Finally, workers need to be able to gauge for themselves their progress and level of contribution. They won't be fulfilled in their work if success depends on the whims or opinions of someone else. Without a tangible means for assessing success or failure, motivation eventually deteriorates as people see themselves as unable to control their own fate.

The Benefits and Obstacles of Managing for Job Fulfillment

There are significant benefits to any organization that can build a culture of job fulfillment.

Employees who find their jobs fulfilling are going to work with more enthusiasm, passion, and commitment to quality than those who do not. They will develop a sense of ownership and pride in what they are doing, and will just plain work harder.

A second benefit is lower turnover: employees will hang onto fulfilling jobs as long as they can, because they know that there aren't that many out there. (And fulfilled employees tend to attract other good employees, ultimately resulting in lower recruiting, hiring, and training costs).

Finally, a culture of job fulfillment will differentiate one company from another. In a day when technology is so pervasive, it can be hard to "stand out." Being known as a satisfying place to work is one way to do that. Interestingly, when managers work to reduce these three signs in their organizations, they often discover that their employees begin to take a greater interest in their colleagues, help them find meaning and relevance in their work, and find better ways to gauge success. In other words, the employees themselves become reinforcers of the culture: the employees begin taking responsibility for keeping the three signs at bay, giving the company an even greater cultural advantage.

While the benefits are significant, there are also obstacles that prevent many employees, managers, and whole companies from tapping into this opportunity.

Sometimes employees fail to find fulfillment in their work because they put too much emphasis on maximizing compensation or choosing the right career. These aren't irrelevant (even if you love what you do, if you can't feed your family, you have a problem) but they aren't the final arbiter of satisfaction.

Even people who are paid well for doing something they love are often miserable if they feel anonymous, or that their job is irrelevant, or they don't know if they are succeeding or not.

Sometimes the obstacle is in the organization. Too often managers or companies are slow to recognize they have an employee satisfaction issue, and when they do they focus on the wrong thing. Often, the first sign comes when employees begin to leave. During exit interviews, those leaving will regularly say it is for more money, causing firms to focus on raising salaries and compensation.

However, employees commonly don't reveal the whole picture during those interviews. A better question to ask them, long before an exit interview arises, is "*What is making you even consider leaving in the first place?*" This question will often bring other issues related to anonymity, irrelevance, and immeasurability to the surface.

Finally, there is frequently an emotional obstacle for managers to overcome. In order to be the kind of leader who demonstrates genuine interest in employees and who can help them discover the relevance of their work, he or she must have a degree of emotional maturity. Without it, managers will often feel uncomfortable or even embarrassed about having such simple behavioral conversations with their employees. They will minimize the value of these discussions, feeling more like kindergarten teachers, even though their employees are yearning for just such a conversation.

Exploring and Addressing 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, is the manager.

What does it mean to take a personal interest in someone? It doesn't necessarily mean that you start watching the same TV shows they do or listening to their music. (Employees can smell a false attempt at "employee bonding" from a mile away).

A better way to remove a sense of anonymity among employees is simply to *get to know them*. Take time to sit down with them and ask them about their lives. However, it can't be fake. When I talk about taking an interest, I mean taking a genuine interest. And that isn't a one-time thing, like something you can check off your to-do list. It needs to be demonstrated over and over again. It's one thing to know that an employee's daughter likes dancing. It's quite another to ask how Friday's dance recital went.

If this sounds hokey, consider whether you have appreciated it when your manager took an interest, a real one, in you and your life. Remember: no one gets out of bed in the morning to program software or assemble furniture. They get out of bed to live their lives, and work is only a part of it. People want to be managed as people, not as mere workers.

Irrelevance. People wonder why so many athletes, rock stars, and actors live such erratic, unsatisfied lives. I think the root, underneath the drugs, alcohol and materialism, is a subtle fear of irrelevance. I say this because it's hard to understand how someone who earns tons of money doing something they love, and who gets constant attention from their fans, can be unhappy. Or, how a nurse in a home for the elderly, or a church receptionist, can be happy. I think the answer has everything to do with being needed, with having an impact on the lives of others.

Human beings need to be needed. They need to know that they are helping others, not merely serving themselves. When people lose sight of this, or even worse, come to the realization that they have no impact at all, they begin to die emotionally.

All employees, whether they are rock stars or teachers, must answer two questions in order to establish relevance in their jobs. And it is the manager's responsibility to help them do this.

First question: Who? Who am I helping? The most obvious group is among the customers. But many people are in jobs where they don't have direct contact with customers. For those people, it's often other employees or departments within the organization.

For many the answer will be their own boss. Sometimes managers must help employees understand that their work has a meaningful impact directly on the leader. It can seem self-serving, so managers often downplay it. That's a huge loss because most employees actually get a great deal of satisfaction when their supervisor thanks them for what they've done or explains how it has affected him or her personally.

The second question is: How? How am I helping? The answer to that question isn't always obvious. When a room attendant at a hotel brings breakfast to a guest, he isn't just delivering food. He's helping a weary traveler feel a little better about having to be on the road, which can have a significant impact on their outlook on life that day.

Note: employees at Southwest Airlines and Chick-Fil-A are doing largely the same jobs as employees at their competitors, yet there are a lot fewer miserable jobs at Southwest and Chick. The difference is not the job itself. It is the management. And, one of the most important things that managers must do is help employees see why their work matters to someone.

Immeasurement. I know—immeasurement is not in the dictionary. I've created it because there is no real synonym for it. Immeasurement is essentially an employee's lack of a clear means of assessing his or her progress or success on the job. This creates ambiguity and a feeling of dependence on a manager's subjective judgment.

Great employees don't want to be in that kind of situation. It forces them to play politics or engage in posturing, which is distasteful.

The key to establishing effective measures for a job lies in identifying those areas that an employee can directly influence, and ensuring that the specific measurements are connected to the person or people they are serving. For example, a waitress can measure their tips, or the number of compliments they get from customers. The most effective measurements are often behavioral in nature and might simply call for an informal survey of customers, or merely an observation of behavior that indicates satisfaction.

Too often, an executive will give employees some macro objective like increasing earnings or cutting expenses. The problem is that most employees have no direct impact on those things, certainly not on a daily basis. And when they realize that there is no clear link between their daily responsibilities and the metric they are being measured against, they lose interest, feeling unable to control their own destiny.

That's why so many salespeople enjoy their jobs. They don't depend on others to tell them whether they've succeeded or failed—at the end of the day (or quarter) a salesperson knows the score and feels responsible for it.

Taking Action

So how can you go about putting all this into action? The answer depends on who you are.

If you're a manager...

Take an honest self-assessment related to the three signs—

Anonymity: Do I really know my people? Their interests? How they spend their spare time?

Irrelevance: Do they know who their work impacts, and how?

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

Then try doing employee assessments, allowing people to confirm or deny the accuracy of your answers. Finally, develop a plan to shore up any inadequacies around the three signs. That could be a series of 1:1 meetings or a team session. And rather than be vague, which will make them suspect an ulterior motive, just explain the three signs and what you are trying to do.

If you're an employee or job hunter...

You can do some things to increase the odds that your job will be fulfilling. First, talk to your boss (or prospective boss) about the three signs and your desire to avoid them. Most people want to be good managers, and if it makes sense will often be willing to change their behavior. But, you can't be afraid to talk to them about it.

If you're looking for a job, ask the interviewer if they typically take an interest in employees, how the job you're discussing has an impact on people, and how you will be measured. If you are hearing answers that indicate anonymity, irrelevance, or immeasurement, know that the chances of job fulfillment are probably low.

The Ministry of Management

I have a deep admiration for those who go into the “giving” professions, like clergy or social workers, and have even thought of doing that someday. However, I now believe that all managers can—and really should—view their work as a ministry. A service to others.

By helping people find fulfillment in their work, and helping them succeed in whatever they are doing, a manager can have a profound impact on the emotional, financial, physical, and spiritual health of workers and their families. They can also create an environment where employees do the same for their peers, giving them a sort of ministry of their own. All of which is nothing short of a gift from God.



From the Pastor's Perspective

So how does this apply to churches? In many cases I think it could have a profound impact. Lencioni identifies three signs of a miserable job as anonymity (not really being known, just a cog in the wheel), irrelevance (no importance or impact to the work you are doing) and immeasurement (no way of knowing if you are succeeding or not).

I think this can be applied to how we relate to the volunteers in our churches. Too often, volunteers end up leaving churches feeling used, devalued, or burned-out; none of that is necessary.

I suspect most of us are strongest on avoiding anonymity—knowing and caring for the people who are serving, especially if we are in a smaller church. It gets harder as the church grows larger, but is still the most natural one for us to give attention to.

I think more of us miss it on the relevance issue. It can be embarrassing, or feel patronizing, to talk to people to make sure they understand why what they are doing matters. We assume it is obvious, and don't want to insult people by going over it. However, I think our people often settle for a surface understanding.

We need, first of all, to not assume that people know why their service matters, or to not assume that they know the *full extent* of their impact. For example, the person who makes and serves the coffee. Their service often sets the tone for the morning and helps people make the transition to worship. Having something to drink often makes talking to other people easier (it's just easier to talk with a cup in your hand!), which contributes to the relational networks, and also makes it easier for first-timers to feel comfortable. They have a pretty big impact! But chances are, they don't know the full extent of it.

How do you have that conversation without sounding patronizing? Start with a question: "Why do you do this job?" or "Do you know why this job is so important?" And after they answer, you can probably expand on their answer: "Yes, *and also...*" End with: "And I want you to know, I really appreciate it." Will their job feel more fulfilling after that? I suspect so.

I think the hardest area for most pastors is the area of immeasurement, for a couple reasons. First, much of what people do, especially if they aren't leaders, is hard to measure. How does the coffee server "measure" if they are being successful? (The number of smiles they get? Conversations started? It is possible).

The second reason is deeper—measuring something makes it feel like a job, not a gift of service they are giving. For many of us, measuring and volunteerism seem almost contradictory. But...if enabling people to measure if they are being successful at what they do will increase their satisfaction and sense of fulfillment, shouldn't we provide that for them? Don't we owe it to them?

In thinking about it, I believe the key is to include the volunteer in identifying the measurement. If it is something imposed from the top, it probably won't engage their heart. If it comes out of a conversation: "How will you know if you are being successful?" I think they will be engaged on a much deeper level. I usually think of this in terms of staff or leaders; I'm going to be giving some thought to what it might mean for volunteers. I'll be starting with volunteer *leaders*, and then thinking about how to expand to others.

Food for thought: Do the leaders and workers in your church find their work fulfilling, or are they just filling a slot? Do they qualify as having a "miserable job" or are they satisfied and excited about what they get to give? And...what are you going to do about it?