

Worker misery: The diagnosis and prescription

Patrick Lencioni recently published a book called “The Three Signs of a Miserable Job” – which is an incredibly relevant topic to 75 million workers in the U.S. who are self-professed “unhappy” in their work. And, while I agree with elements of Patrick’s conclusions (he identifies three key culprits: Measurement, Irrelevance, and Anonymity) my own research, and school of hard knocks experience arrives at a somewhat different diagnosis for this pervasive illness.

First, recognize that a manager plays a key role in creating the work environment that fosters the attributes/dimensions outlined below. They are the ones who communicate effectively (or not), who care about their people (or not), who develop their skills (you get the point), who are trustworthy and honest, and who affirm their people. Given the importance of this role, here are the key causes and, therefore, the key ways to overcome the misery ailment:

- “Fit” – the job and core responsibilities are a good fit with the employee’s core skills and capabilities. It doesn’t mean everything is easy for the employee but it suits their nature – acumen, competence, personality, dexterity, etc. Doesn’t matter how hard you kick the cat, they can’t carry a piano up the stairs!
- Relevance/Purpose – a worker wants to understand why their work matters – how does it contribute to serving/helping others (other employees, executives, customers, etc.) or how it serves a broader purpose – developing my skills, showing others the love of Christ, teaching me patience or perseverance, etc. I am part of a bigger story in this work – at work or in life and what I do is relevant to that missional purpose.
- Expectations – many workers have very high expectations about what they deserve or are entitled to get – and they’re often disappointed. Those that are happy in their work have managed their expectations about entitlements – they are grateful for what they have and content with what is provided. It’s more about attitude than it is about environment
- Hope – for the future specifically. The average worker needs a large dose of hope – and this hope may come from a person’s work or it may be derived from an avocation outside of work. Regardless of the source, the fact remains that we humans need to know that there is a future and a hope – that we’re not sentenced to an endless treadmill and where there is nothing more to look forward to – either in work or eternally. Allowing someone to see a path to a brighter future and enabling them to get there becomes the antidote.
- Affirmations – to know that the individual is accomplishing what they set out to accomplish (which much be measured) and/or to know that others appreciate their contribution – and give them the real sense of such.
- Respect – a physical, cultural, and people environment that makes employees feel respected – it is safe and not demeaning. It treats all employees in a way

that even though their pay may be modest and the work environment challenging, they feel a sense of respect and of being cared for.

It should be noted that compensation is missing – which is not an oversight! Most would agree that while compensation can clearly attract talent to your organization or cause them to leave, it's usually a far less important component of determining a worker's satisfaction (or not).

I welcome your comments and reactions!