

“Choose Your Attitude”

Kevin Carson

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Too bad the Nazis didn't post that over the gates at Auschwitz. Everybody would have been so much more *positive* on the way to the gas chambers, without all those “change resisters” complaining and bringing everybody else down. You may not be able to do anything about that jackboot stamping on your face, but you can stop being such a Gloomy Gus about it. Keep an eye out for the next touchy-feely motivational book: *You Will Be Assimilated. Resistance is Futile.*

Remember when the catchphrase was “I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna take it anymore”? Seems like a lifetime ago, doesn't it? Now there's an entire behavioral-engineering industry geared toward seeing how much more we can be “motivated” to take, without going postal.

In the comments to my earlier post on *Who Moved My Cheese?*, an anonymous commenter asked for my opinion on “Fish Philosophy.” I'd never heard of it before. But what I gleaned just from a web search was absolutely appalling. The book (*Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results*) is definitely on my to-read list now, if only for the same reason that we're compelled to gawk at a really bad car wreck.

Anyway, FWIW, here's my take on it, based only on looking at their website and reading favorable references to it by the Motivational Mafia. Like *Who Moved My Cheese?*, the underlying message of *Fish!* is that ordinary people have absolutely no say in what happens to them; the only thing they can control is whether they have a good attitude about it. Or, as one Amazon reviewer put it,

After reading this book, I have only one idea from this book. Since you are being raped, why not close your eyes and try to enjoy it instead of complaining about it.

Here's another good one:

We have three authors with interesting and challenging jobs telling everyone else with bad jobs, bad bosses, and great big obligations to face the facts that there is nothing you can do about it so be happy instead of miserably depressed. It's not even “make the best of it” it's “be happy in spite of it all”! I'm sure every business in this country wants all of their employees to change their attitudes rather than the business change the way they treat their employees, the way they structure jobs, and the way they compensate the people who work for them.

I got such a kick out of some of the Amazon reader reviews of *Fish!*, I decided to check out those for *WMMC?*, as well. Here are some excerpts from the best:

This book is wrong. It teaches that you must accept change without regard to whether it is appropriate it not. It teaches that you must not struggle, you must not fight. You must simply accept whatever change happens. This is the perfect book to distribute when a company is going through reorganization...

...The only way you might find value in this book is if you have no sense of self.

If you don't "swallow" this inane, paternalistic, Orwellian crap, you must be resistant to change. In other words, "Are you still beating your wife?"

The message of this book is meant to squelch personal ambition and encourage its readers to resign themselves to corporate slavery. The central metaphor that the author uses is inherently dehumanizing. In his world-view, all of the people who work beneath the summit of the corporate pyramid structure are akin to mere lab mice, trapped inside an inescapable maze not of their own making. They are being cruelly manipulated by their all-powerful corporate overlords, represented by the scientists running the experiment, who keep moving the metaphorical cheese (representing sources of income in the workplace/marketplace) to new locations. The mice must constantly adapt to the ever-changing cheese movement patterns devised by their overlords, or else they will starve. In this scenario, the only power the mice have is over their own basic survival. If they persistently, tirelessly pursue the cheese hunt, constantly adapting their strategies to the new conditions, they can live to hunt another day. The changing cheese locations may represent for the readers, variously: (a) changing market forces, such as new trends in consumer demands, or; (b) changes in the demands of their employers (such as requiring more previous experience for applicants, longer hours, smaller pay, fewer benefits, drug tests, intrusive personality assessments, credit checks, etc.) The key to being able to adapt to these changes is to maintain a positive attitude about it, and to accept the changes without complaint.

Apart from the infantile, patronising tone that the author adopts, he does something insidious. He makes it seem like it's YOUR FAULT that you've been downsized, demoted, or unsuccessful. In this day and age, that's simply a lie.

I find little to redeem a book that portrays the average working stiff as a lazy rodent who mindlessly resists any changes sent down by the beneficent philosopher-kings who only have the employee's best interests in mind. Perhaps employees prefer to have some say in the changes that are thrust upon them, perhaps they believe that the powers-that-be are not as all knowing or well-intentioned as the authors portray them. Personally, I'd recommend a good Dilbert book instead.

If you are a manager who wants to be excused for his/her bad decisions by disguising them as “change” that “just happens,” this is the book you should make mandatory reading for your employees.

That’s how a lot of corporate America works, after all: companies do not make mistakes, it’s the employees who cannot adapt to “change.”

I’m surprised Johnson didn’t name his “littlepeople” Spit and Swallow, since those seem to be the only possible responses to “change.”

Here’s a similar acute observation about Fish Philosophy from a discussion forum of people who’d experienced the uplift program first-hand:

Morale is often low because workers trust management. They trust that — Management doesn’t give a damn about people, just the pretty charts and reports they make at the end of the year. — Management will screw the workers every chance they get, sometimes even when it’s counterproductive. — No matter how good they do the job, management might still toss them out on their ear. — People who give 110% just make management expect it as the minimum. — Management has no clue how things are done in the real world because they’ve never gotten their hands dirty doing actual work.

I’d be insulted to have this fish crap shoved at me — it’d be management’s attempt to get contented cattle.

I was especially amused that so many employees have come to recognize their employer’s distribution, promotion, and forced reading of *Who Moved My Cheese?* as the prelude to layoffs. One of the pro-change slogans that Haw jots on the walls as he runs through the maze is “Noticing Small Changes Early Helps You Adapt to the Bigger Changes That Are to Come.” How true! For example, if you notice your boss is making you read this shitty book, you can lay in a supply of K-Y for the royal ass-fucking that lies in your near future. You’ll either be laid off, or doing the work of somebody else who was laid off in addition to your own.

There was a lot of restructuring going on and the “grunts” were nervous and anticipated things getting worse and worse. Suddenly this magical book appeared, everyone was forced to read it & later watch the movie.

I recently survived 2 ‘reorganizations’ in my company within the last 8 months. I just had a department meeting where people in my department complained about the many more tasks that we are responsible for and increased workload because of layoffs. To add to this insult, the Director said, ‘change happens, deal with it’ and doled us this book.

There’s one obvious reason why this worthless book is on the “nonfiction” bestseller list, year after year. It’s purchased in mass quantity by corporations, then doled out with each layoff...

Amusingly, a copy of this book was given to everyone in our company just prior to a massive downsizing, outsourcing, and layoff program.

Anyway, back to *Fish!*

What's really pathetic is comments by thoroughly processed human resources, chiding negative reviewers for their "bad attitudes." It's a bit like a house slave rebuking the shiftless, lazy field slaves for ingratitude toward Good Ole Massa. For instance:

The first principle we learn in *Fish!* is Choose Your Attitude. How appropriate, since what you get from this book completely depends on the attitude you choose when reading it.

I was given this book by the company I work part-time for. They decided to use this *Fish!* story and other material to make our work place a better place to work. I personally don't think the company pulled it off very well since most people didn't read the book or take part of any activities that they created for us.

Imagine that—what ingrates! And this:

I feel sorry for those who find it mundance [sic] and making them more cynical.

There's one way in which *Fish!* is far worse than *Who Moved My Cheese?* The latter work is thoroughly Protestant in leaving it to the individual reader to work on his own attitude. *Fish!*, on the other hand, involves all sorts of ritual in the workplace as an "outward and visible sign" of all the minds that are getting right. The whole point of *Fish!* Philosophy is to increase comraderie, morale, and cohesion in the workplace, through enforced socialization and bonhomie.

It was implemented using a team of 4 volunteer "Fish Mongers" who were assigned to plan something for a quarter of the year, iow 4 teams per year. One team setup the "You Made Someone's Day" award which put a huge hanging sign over a staff's cube for 3-months, the next team placed white boards up and periodically switched out topics on the white board. They started out like "what is your favorite X" and we had everyone putting their answer (along with their name) on the board. Every week or so the topic changes... this has been a huge success and is still going strong. We did a traveling award, whereas you could take the big stuff fish and place it on the desk of someone who did something good for you, they then passed it along to the next awardee. Our meeting room has glass walls and when we put up cling-on fish to initially promote the program the conference room was nicknamed the aquarium and many agreed with the posters in this thread that this is an extremely juvenile program and it made us look like a pre-school...

Some of the things we've done:

Every member of management within the department has made 1 FISH related goal that he/she has to meet on a weekly/monthly basis. One manager made the goal that he would get out of his office and chat with staff about nothing work related just to get to know folks better.

We get together on Fridays for lunch as a department. Sometimes we order in, sometimes we go out, but we always try and have lunch together.

We put up a bulletin board with funny pictures, a quote of the week, recipes and a daily trivia question. We found that asking trivia questions about folks in the department worked REALLY well, better than asking Trivial Pursuit questions.

We bought foam balls that we throw over cube walls at each other.

We have candy baskets everywhere.

We always celebrate someone's birthday with a cake and at least a card and everyone in the department makes a point of coming.

Occasionally, we throw on some music and have a 10-minute dance party to loosen up.

People constantly bring good stuff into the department to munch on during the day.

We had a staff-organized pot-luck lunch where everyone brought in a dish and we took a break to eat and visit with one another.

Those are just some of the things we've done and they've really worked well.

Yeah, I can see how that would really work well—if your goal is to provoke a workplace shooting. Haven't these idiots ever seen *Office Space*? Like a lot of "motivational" programs of this ilk, *Fish!* assumes that everyone is naturally an extrovert, and that anyone who isn't should be forcibly reeducated. The kind of crap described above seems to be calculated to push all my buttons. You work in an understaffed shithole, trying to do the work of two people, dealing with constant interruptions and stress, with somebody in your face about something every minute of the day. So what's the best way to build morale? Why, of course, take away your lunch break—the one opportunity you have for peace and quiet, to be left the fuck alone and recuperate from dealing non-stop with people—and use it instead for mandatory, company-supervised socializing! And waste time you already don't have enough of for getting all your actual work done, to participate in some touchy-feely circle jerk of an encounter group! As another commenter said, every minute he wasted in the bullshit meetings, all he could think of was that he'd just have to spend that much more of his personal time to get his real work done.

Look: I work because I need the money to pay my bills, period. The 1500 or so cubic centimeters in my skull belongs to me. "It's not enough to do your work, Winston. You have to love Big Brother."

I expect any day now to turn on the six o'clock news and see a disgruntled worker on top of his office building with an AK-47, and a sign that says "I'm choosing my attitude *right now*, motherfucker!" The fact that a popular video game is called *Blow Away Your Boss* (just upload a digital photo of his face) tells us all we need to know about the state of morale in Corporate America.

But how's this for wild and crazy?

We started to implement the FISH! idea and one of the big hits was the ‘graffiti wall.’ We hung old green bar on one wall and let people write/draw what they wanted, within professional limits.

“Within professional limits”?!? Whoa, hold me back! What a bunch of maniacs! Woo-hoo, I don’t think my heart could stand that much fun!

An Amazon reviewer cuts to the heart of the problem:

See, here’s the problem — if you’re a manager who forced this nonsense on your employees you probably didn’t bother to ask them if they wanted a toy fish. If they wanted a “sand box.” It probably never even occurred to you to step up to one of your employees and ask “how would you like to be humiliated and treated like a small child? How would you like to be forced to go home after 9 awful hours and bake cookies for everyone in the office to avoid being labeled ‘not a team player?’” Because that’s what “living the fish! philosophy” really means.

None of it even occurred to you, and that’s the problem. From some particularly cruel act of fate you, who think that handing out children’s toys to adults is treating them with respect, have somehow become a cog in the ever-turning wheels of power in this country. Somehow, people with the emotional awareness of 2 year olds and the intellectual depth of sand crabs have taken control, and the rest of us are being forced to suffer for it.

One thing I’ve noticed, in surfing the Web for commentary on these two books: a huge portion of the people who read either of them did so because their boss recommended it to them, either informally or through some sort of mandatory reeducation camp (er, seminar). Now, I can’t for the life of me imagine taking a positive attitude toward any book an employer required me to read, let alone actually believing anything my mortal enemy wanted me to believe. If any boss I ever had gave me a book on why the sun came up in the east, the next morning I’d be up looking for it in the west.

But the publik skools in this country have been geared, for over a century, to teaching human resources to be receptive—to have a positive attitude—toward whatever line of bullshit people in authority are trying to sell them. How else could you explain the success of public service announcements like “Doing Drugs Isn’t Cool”? “Gosh, I really enjoyed doing drugs. But if that authority figure in a multi-million dollar ad created on Madison Avenue says it’s a bad idea, maybe I ought to reconsider.” Personally, I think preventing anyone that stupid from OD-ing is about the worst thing we could possibly do to the gene pool.

The lesson we ought to be learning is just the opposite: to instinctively doubt anything anybody in authority tells you. Twenty years ago, I remember my mom telling me about a union decertification vote at the Tyson plant where she worked. The bosses just about wore themselves out talking about how much better things would be for everybody when the union was gone. Now me, I would have figured the fact that the bosses wanted me to vote the union out was enough reason, alone, to vote for keeping it. And guess what? Six months after the union was voted out, the bosses sped up the lines by 50%. My mom, now retired, has crippling arthritis in her hands from handling a knife on the eviscerator line. A lot of people voted out the union local out of spite, because it was such a do-nothing, lap dog union. And it really was—but the bosses

must have been afraid it would grow some teeth, balls, and a backbone, because as it turned out they were sure eager to get rid of it before implementing the speedup. You can damn well figure that anything your bosses want is against your interest.

Look, it's this simple: You don't need to develop a more "positive attitude" about the people who are screwing you. You need to be mad as hell. Having a good attitude toward people who do bad things to you may anesthetize you enough to make it bearable, but it just makes it easier for them to keep dicking you around. When people do bad things to you, you shouldn't feel good about it—you should be fighting back. They are the ones who need to change. I am goddamned sick and tired of victims empowering their victimizers. You're fucking-A right I "choose my attitude." I *choose* not to enable those who are screwing me by having a good attitude about it.

One of the commenters in my earlier post summed it all up beautifully:

Clue: Whenever a company wants to give you a book, BURN IT.

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