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More On (Moron?) Fish! Philosophy

Kevin Carson

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I finally bit the bullet and ordered a \$3 used copy of the Fish! Philosophy book from Amazon. I'm about as infuriated as I expected to be.

The reason for burnout in most workplaces is that management has deliberately and systematically downsized staffing levels, trying to get more and more work out of fewer and fewer people. The management of the average corporation manufactures burned out employees like Carter manufactures liver pills. Through Fish! Philosophy, management attempts to deal with burnout entirely through cheerleading and slogans—Stakhanovism—without having to increase staffing levels or pay, or otherwise alter its own contribution to the problem. Fish! Philosophy, at its core, is an attempt to get something for nothing.

The management sense of entitlement comes through loud and clear in Fish! Philosophy. Management is *entitled* to a workforce that's enthusiastic and dedicated and constantly goes the extra mile, regardless of how it gets screwed. Management is *entitled* to a workforce that greets every new steaming

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pile with a joyous cry of “Oh, boy! Shit again!” Management is *entitled to something for nothing*.

Burnout is the natural reaction to prolonged stress: a survival mechanism that involves shutting down, withdrawing, and breaking connections to the sources of stressful stimuli. It’s what happens when people are doing their own work plus that of the downsized, often with no time for meal breaks, with less and less control over the structure and pacing of their jobs. Fish! Philosophy reminds me a lot of the military’s attempts at creating pharmacologically engineered super-soldiers, robocops who can go 72 hours without sleep and never feel guilt or develop PTSD. In both cases, it’s an artificial attempt to squeeze more out of people who’ve been pushed to the breaking point, rather than doing anything about the stresses they’re subjected to.

Here’s the thing: management doesn’t care about what they’ve done to people, or whether it’s right or wrong. And they don’t care about internal or external customers, or their mission statements (and vision and values statements, either). What they care about is management featherbedding—more and more quality and process improvement committees—and the value of their stock options. All their smarmy Hallmark Cards rhetoric notwithstanding, both the production worker and the customer are means to an end for them. They’re riding the gravy train, and they want to keep right on riding it. To keep the things that matter to them, they have to keep us running on the treadmill. And when they notice we’re not putting out like we used to, they need to figure out what buttons to push to get their human resources back to producing value-added. Fish! Philosophy is a way of pushing those buttons.

Fish! Philosophy also seems to reflect a growing sense of management hostility to what Elizabeth Anderson called “separation of work from home” in her post coining the term “contract feudalism.” Ken Blanchard, in the Preface, laments what

he calls the TGIF mentality, the tendency to view work as a means to an end. How ‘bout that? For the majority of self-employed farmers, tradesmen, and small businesspeople in this country a little over a century ago, the transition to an economy centered on wage labor was a huge culture shock. One of the main functions of the publik skool system was to reeducate a society of independent cusses on the habits of obedience and docility necessary for working in a factory under a boss. The skills of bureaucratic toadyism taught in the publik skools today, of sucking up to authority for a gold star or another item on the resume, are just the same function updated for a white collar world. It takes a lot of effort to get people’s minds right and stamp out those last vestiges of ownlife. And surprise, surprise, surprise: there’s an entire Motivational Mafia out there focused on getting people to love Big Brother and think of their jobs as the center of their life. I don’t think it’s gonna happen, though. People will always wake up, like Winston Smith, with that instinctive groan at the prospect of dragging themselves into that shithole again.

And speaking of Ken Blanchard... He also wrote the Preface to *Who Moved My Cheese?*. And one of the Fish! Philosophy coauthors of is a vice president in the Blanchard organization. So apparently there’s an interlocking directorate in the Motivational Mafia.