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- National
- International
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Don't let your fear rule the workplace

It underlies how many of us behave on the job, author ART HORN writes. Here's how to face, embrace and erase it

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By ART HORN
 Friday, August 6, 2004 - Page B19

Business Poll
 Does fear affect the way you behave at work?

- Yes, it makes me overly critic and bossy
- Yes, it makes me feel very insecure
- Yes, it makes me procrastinate
- Yes, it makes me try too hard socially
- No, I ignore it and whistle a happy tune

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Fear is the unacknowledged legislator of our work lives.

It's often present in our relationships with problem bosses, competitive co-workers and demanding customers. It can be triggered by larger trends, such as mergers, downsizings, governance changes, the introduction of new technologies and outsourcing.

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We're afraid of fear.

Its existence belies the positive attitude we're supposed to pack in our lunch boxes or briefcases before we head out for our jobs.

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Once at work, we whistle a happy tune so no one will know we're afraid.

Some of us are relieved just to cross the finish line of each workday with our sanity intact.

It doesn't have to be this way, however.

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We have the ability to transcend our fear and manage it so that we can function at our highest level, both at home and at work. But it's not easy.

Fear can do some crazy things to us.

People have come to me for coaching over the past dozen years with various troublesome behaviours and attributes, such as being overly critical of themselves and others, not delegating when they should, struggling with responsibility, feeling awkward socially, worrying about their abilities, and procrastinating all the time.

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These workplace problems probably sound familiar. Their underlying causes often can be traced to deep hurts at the hands of parents, siblings, friends, leaders or teachers.

But almost always these problem behaviours can be traced more directly, and helpfully, to fear.

Fear can cause people to act out in ways that bother their colleagues or hinder their own ability to function successfully on the job.

Over time, these behavioural patterns turn into identifiable roles that are played out in the drama of the workplace.

Here are what I take to be the six main roles that those around us -- and we ourselves -- play.

In each case, fear is what's motivating the behaviour:

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[Books](#)

[Births & Deaths](#)

[Careers](#)

[Cars](#)

[Cartoon](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Crosswords](#)

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Worriers

Worriers are obsessed with thoughts about what needs to be avoided. They may constantly fear that they will be unable to complete their work or that it will not be up to snuff.

Different people worry about different things, and one person may worry about different things on different occasions.

But the rumination that underlies worry is always driven by fear itself. At the core of worry is a dreaded feeling of insecurity, that the thing being worried about will bring the ultimate vulnerability.

Controllers

Controllers are obsessed with maintaining a state of security. They may be prone to micromanage because of a fear that no one else will be able to do the job correctly.

It's not usually self-evident to controllers that fear underlies this tendency.

But a little exploration of the feelings of insecurity that ensue from things being out of control makes it perfectly clear: Controllers are motivated by the fear of whatever being out of control means to them.

Fakes

Fakes are hiding from insecurity. When what they project for others to see is inconsistent with what they suspect to be true of themselves or their circumstances, they fear being found out. The fear motivates self-protection and an effort to sustain their image.

Examples of fakery abound. There are customer service people who know service is bad yet must put on a happy face.

There's the boss who knows he has a problem with an employee but fears confrontation and somewhat hypocritically ignores the matter.

Or the leader who privately suspects he's not really up to his job yet irritatingly spouts off the company's grand mission at every opportunity.

All of these people feel a dissonance between the role they adopt on the outside and what they know on the inside.

Attention seekers

Attention seekers are compensating for insecurity. From a feeling of emptiness, and an unspoken fear of that emptiness, comes the natural desire to fill the gap.

This is what is behind the inappropriate jokes at meetings, the highlighting of personal strengths, the frequent requests for time.

It can only be hoped that the void created in attention seekers by feeling unappreciated or unloved will be filled for them by being valued or even just acknowledged by others.

Victims

Victims are busy defending against the insecurity implied by culpability. Many business environments have devolved from the noble mission of isolating problems so that they can be eradicated to invalidating workers as humans because of the role they played in the problems.

Rather than "doing this caused this," we hear "you did this so you are bad." Out of the fear of being so labelled comes the practice of deflecting blame.

Prisoners

Prisoners are wrestling with the insecurity that has invaded their consciousness.

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In those many circumstances when they feel anxious and don't know exactly why, or even when they know a particular thing is on their minds, they become prisoners of a subtle but albatross-like fear.

Their fear locks them up. It may cause them to procrastinate or keep their heads down during an important meeting. Their view of things is obstructed.

In my coaching practice, the resolution of these problems usually involves helping clients trace a troublesome behaviour to its underlying fear. This central motivator is what must be tamed.

When we effectively separate the thing that's bothering us from insecurity or fear itself, we are in a position to experience an instant release from fear's hold. The external circumstances may not change but the clarity with which we approach them can be improved substantially.

"We have nothing to fear but fear itself" is not just an inspiring comment. It points to the possibility of making peace with the insecurity that comes with life itself and thereby approach the slings and arrows of our day-to-day world clear-eyed and confident.

The idea of making peace with life's fears is critical to overcoming most of the pernicious on the job behaviour around us. Insecurity, after all, may be woven right into the fabric of life.

For example, we all prefer pleasure to pain. Accordingly, we attempt to maximize our pleasure and minimize our pain. We are programmed to be wary of anything that carries the tincture of negativity. Most of us spend our lives trying to avoid the negative: criticism, bad news, big challenges, invalidation, the possibility of failure, ridicule -- death itself.

But when we acknowledge, embrace, and "own" the shakiness of life, we relieve ourselves of the desperate motivation to be loved, be right, be okay, be in control at all costs. Fear is no longer the driving force behind our behaviour.

The acceptance of fear does not come easily, however. Simply knowing how our fear works on us does not make our problems disappear. It is not a matter of merely learning how it all works and no longer having the problem as a result. Just because we can see what the pieces of the puzzle look like doesn't mean we know how to put it together.

There is a key experiential element as well. We have to participate. Resolving fear involves, to some extent, experiencing the emotion, and then, while sustaining the experience, seeing it in a new light.

This reorientation allows us to "dis-identify" from the fear and instead identify with the person -- that would be we ourselves -- who "has" fear.

If we can do this, we will be able to transcend our fearful behaviour.

While experiencing the fear, we in some sense see ourselves as fear itself. We even use the verb "to be" to express such a fear. We say, "I am afraid" or "I am fearful."

The goal is to become an observer of our fear so that we can report, "I have fear but I am not that fear itself. It is a part of who I am. I welcome it into my family of personality parts."

With fear embraced, processed and resolved, we are left with the opportunity for authenticity, willpower, commitment, passion and even empathy for others.

There's a strong practical payoff for businesses in all of this. Individuals and teams tend to be so much more successful when they operate with minimal impact from fear.

How to help

Worrier

1. Validate the worrier. Don't say, "Don't worry about it."

2. Ask, "What if that does happen?" When you get an answer, ask again until you get to the root fear. Then validate the fear (not the thing being worried about). Say, for example, "Yes, that feeling is daunting."

3. Give a pep talk, reminding the person of your confidence in his or her capabilities.
4. Get the worrier moving. Don't let worriers be idle. Be sure the person has a plan to address the thing being feared.

Controller

1. Let the controller know how his or her behaviour makes you feel.
2. Aim to get the person to trust you more. Communicate more often in order to clarify. Ask more questions, manage expectations and report in more often.
3. In a non-stressful time, get the person to admit a desire to be less controlling. Get his or her permission to point out examples of controlling behaviour. Focus attention on what they seem fearful of when they become controlling and help them understand that there is the thing being feared and the fear itself. They must own the fear itself.

Fake

1. Don't tell someone you've diagnosed him or her as a "fake." Nobody likes labels.
2. Be as non-judgmental as you can. In fact, look in the mirror -- we all have a certain amount of fraudulence in us.
3. Make the implicit explicit. For example, say, "You know, you complain about how John is always late, but you never call him on it."

Attention seeker

1. If someone admits to being an attention seeker, validate the motivation. There is nothing inherently wrong with the desire to be seen. You just want the person to turn down the volume.
2. If someone does not admit to being an attention seeker, then don't discuss motives. Instead, stay focused on behaviour. Say, for example, "When you introduced humour at the meeting, it slowed down the momentum."

Victim

1. Be a role model for taking accountability. Don't be a victim of other people's victim thinking.
2. When the person is attributing blame, ask, "What could you do to avoid a recurrence of the problem?" Or, "I realize there are other players involved here, but what could you have done to avoid this problem?"
3. Suggest that when things aren't going to go as planned, they need to let you know before any deadlines are breached. And when they let you know, you want to hear a plan for what they're doing about the problem.

Prisoner

1. When the prisoner seems anxious, help isolate the thing that's bothering him or her.
2. Help them stick with the facts. Get them to acknowledge that they are importing extra meaning to the situation.
3. Help the person see the difference between the thing that's bothering him or her and insecurity itself. This introduces the possibility of embracing raw insecurity and accepting it -- maybe even welcoming it -- as part of life.

Art Horn

Art Horn is an executive coach and author of the recently released book Face It: Recognizing and Conquering the Hidden Fear That Drives All Conflict at Work.

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