

Three good reasons for being



Lucy Kellaway
ON WORK

Every unhappy family is unhappy in a different way. Every unhappy worker is unhappy in much the same way.

The first is a dubious generalisation made by the greatest of novelists, Leo Tolstoy. The second is a slightly less dubious one made by a novelist who isn't great at all. Indeed Patrick Lencioni is a management consultant who has just written a business parable, *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job*, which, though of no literary merit, is outselling *Anna Karenina* on Amazon by about 100 to one.

According to this book, we are miserable at work for three reasons. The first is anonymity – we feel no one cares that we are there. The second is immeasurability – we don't know if we are doing a good job or not, and the third is irrelevance – we feel that our work doesn't matter much one way or another.

Mr Lencioni argues that all three causes are on the rampage and that we are in the middle of a "misery epidemic" in which three-quarters of all workers hate their jobs. All is not lost, however. Misery, he says, is largely the fault of line managers, and if only they could remember what it felt like to be miserable as a worker they could fix it.

For a start, I don't accept that we are facing misery on this scale. As a business agony aunt I actively go out touting for misery and so the people who come to me are a skewed sample. But even of these only about half seem genuinely miserable at work.

Even if he were right about the extent of the misery he isn't quite right about the causes. Last week I had supper with an old friend of mine and we spent a nice hour or two discussing misery. He has done all sorts of jobs and has been miserable in quite a few. I have also had various spells at work where I have felt less happy than Pollyanna, say. We both agreed that our own agony levels peaked long before we ever set foot in an office.

For pure misery, being a first-year undergraduate takes some beating. All three of Mr Lencioni's conditions were writ large

in Oxford in 1978. We were miserable because we were anonymous – nobody cared where we were. We were miserable because we had no way of knowing if we were doing well: we read out our essays to bored dons who would yawn while fellow students fidgeted. And we were miserable because, freed from the compulsion of

The real causes are more basic than the author says – they are the work, the people and the general environment

school, we looked for purpose in our studies and found none. (I think I was also miserable because I had split up with my boyfriend but that was another matter.)

But then we grew up. We no longer really expected meaning and measurement, or at least made do with them in very small doses. We found, when we got our first office jobs, that they had a lot to be said for them. For a start you get paid. This is not only nice in itself, but it does give work a purpose, and one not to be sneezed at.

utterly miserable at work

To search for a deeper meaning beyond this is a dangerous thing. The harder one looks for meaning at work the less likely one is to find it. Is there meaning in writing columns? No, of course there isn't. But if people quite like reading them and I quite like writing them, that seems reason enough to do it.

As for anonymity, the simple fact of getting paid shows that someone does care you are there. If they didn't, they wouldn't pay you to show up. And, as for not knowing how you are doing, this isn't a problem in most offices. Thanks to endless assessments people are told how they are doing rather too often if anything.

Instead I think the three things that make workers miserable are rather more basic. They are the work, the people and the general environment. The work can be misery-inducing by being too much or too little, too boring, too difficult or too easy.

The people can be wrong in an assortment of ways: lazy, spiteful, bullying or just dull and too depressed themselves to spread much cheer. The environment can be stultifying, unhealthy, too political and so on.

Mr Lencioni reckons one reason managers are bad at making their workers feel better

is that they have forgotten what it felt like to be starting out.

I think there is a better reason. Management is one of the most intrinsically miserable jobs there is. Managers find it hard to make the lives of their underlings any better because they are too miserable themselves.

Management is all about getting people to do things that they don't want to do. So it is difficult, if not well nigh impossible. It is about coming in early and leaving late. The work of a manager is never done. It is one thing after another and another. Being a manager means not minding about being disliked. It means being lonely and having no one inside the company to moan to.

Only on the broadest thesis is Mr Lencioni right: the answer to misery may well be better management. Stated thus it is pretty obvious. The hard bit is how to make managers better at managing. If I knew the answer to that I wouldn't be writing columns like this. I would be out there with my sleeves rolled up making the world happy for office workers.

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