



DECLARE YOURSELF FOR *CHANGE*
IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

FLOW, FLEE, OR FIGHT

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THE CHALLENGE

If you are in an organization (two or more people collaborating for a common outcome), there is a set of conventions, or system that has been established for how you work together. This system is the dogma, culture, processes and policy that an organization establishes so that it is easier and more efficient to collaborate. A certain amount of system is necessary so that you can focus on getting the work done, not just talk about how you're going to work.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the options you have for participating in that system. I submit this challenge: Will you flow with it, flee from it or fight it?

THE DELIBERATION

There's a calculation we do to determine if the system we're in is good enough for us to be engaged. This is a deeply personal, typically private and often subconscious evaluation we do. Our radar is constantly on, sensing the cues that we'll synthesize to decide if we're actually going to be engaged at work. We're constantly receiving messages and deciphering each policy, process, bureaucratic barrier and supervisor directive for its meaning and importance. The end result of our synthesis is a feeling, a feeling of whether we're content within the system. Are you accepting the status quo? If not, what are your alternatives?

THE FLOW OPTION

If you're in an organization that has an optimally designed system of working, or even a pretty good system of working, you might say, "I like this. I like what it allows me to contribute. I'm going to work in this system because I believe in the results it can produce." The system goes through your complex calculus and it measures up. You're content and engaged. All too often, we're in an organization where the system is not optimally designed. To put more of a point on it, the system may be stifling, oppressive, backward or just plain disorganized. Are you flowing anyway?

My fear is that we say, "This doesn't work for me. It doesn't feel right and I think I could produce better results, however, the pay is good, the benefits are excellent, my boss has way more experience than me, I'm lucky to have gotten this job, my kids are about to start university, I've still got a student loan to pay off, this is a prestigious position, there's nothing better out there, this system has been in place longer than I've been alive, I've never been taught any other way, work isn't where I find my fulfillment, so the right thing for me to do right now is flow." I think we all know how this ends, or more appropriately, doesn't end. There will never be a right time to act. That's because the simple, available excuses are always going to be easier than the alternatives, fighting or fleeing. If we're not completely satisfied with the conventions within our organization, the decision to flow with the system shorts us of the opportunity to live a rich, meaningful existence in our work. This manifesto argues that we should make the deliberate and courageous choice to NOT flow. You owe it to yourself to find true meaning in your effort. Flee if you must, but consider what it looks like if you choose to fight. It may be a watershed event that defines your career.

THE FLEE OPTION

Today's labor environment makes the choice to flee all the more practical and accessible. By flee, I generally mean choosing to leave the system, ostensibly to go to another system more suited to your needs. Some challenges exist with this approach:

- 1.** Your ability to identify a good system from your outsider position isn't very trustworthy. Systems always look better from a distance. If you jump to another, better-looking system, you may be doomed to a cycle of honeymoons and seven-year itches.
- 2.** Seeking better systems reinforces a mindset that someone else is responsible for the system. When you consider yourself a free agent or a customer with your capabilities for sale, you're leaving responsibility for the design and change of the system to others.
- 3.** If you do decide your newly-chosen system calls for you to fight, you may need to build your credibility with your new organization's members before you can begin in earnest.
- 4.** If you are in your current organization because you believe in the outcome it is pursuing, your departure may distance you from something you are passionate about achieving. An unrequited passion won't lead to contentment.

But of course:

- 1.** A change is as good as a rest.
- 2.** If you're skilled, free agency is usually profitable.

I write this in the middle of an economic meltdown, so I'm not sure the flexibility of the free agent market will remain. If you test the market in anticipation of a possible flee strategy, it may not be as lustrous an option as it used to be.

Fleeing also makes a statement. It says you're unwilling to accept the organization and the system that doesn't value/engage/celebrate/enable your capabilities. However, this statement goes largely unheard.

When someone leaves, their message goes with them. You've seen it. You've experienced how much credibility people have once they're not there to defend their point of view. It's more likely your departure starts a transition to you as a scapegoat. Your departure will do more to solidify opinions than turn them. Think Snowball from Animal Farm. Once he's banished, he's blamed for all failures, past and future.

Conceivably, fleeing could be the best option multiple times in your career I think it becomes the best option when you know the system is too entrenched to change. It will require too much energy from you to see meaningful progress. Shifting your energy to a new system can be valuable for you, the organization you leave and the organization you go to. Besides, once Snowball was at a greener pasture, did he really care if he was the scapegoat?

If I have a concern here, it's that we often choose to flee too early. What you shouldn't do is decide the system is immovable before you give it a good shove.

When someone leaves, their message goes with them.

THE FIGHT OPTION

Fighting is a pretty strong word. Please forgive the alliteration. By fight, I mean that you can work to change the system. If you're in the system and disagree with it but are passionate about the outcome the organization is pursuing, this may be more of an obligation than a choice.

The variables I see in fighting the status quo:

Loud or Quiet? Are you going to state your intentions and go on the offensive? Alternatively, are you going to disagree with the system and choose simply to not participate? If you choose to be quiet, I believe you make a personal stand against a system you don't agree with and you can change your own behavior, but you're not going to change the system. It's kind of like fleeing while keeping the benefits. In fact, you're in danger of being seen as simply a lazy non-performer. You risk getting fired. Colleagues might not see your behavior as a moral or deliberate stand. They may see it through their own lens. They'll say "I'm pulling my weight while you just tag along," or worse yet, "You're not part of the team." More likely, though, they're saying it behind you, not to you. Being open and clarifying your intentions allows other members to see your motives, not just behaviors. You'll essentially be saying, "Don't get me wrong. I believe in the cause and I will work for results. I don't, however, believe in our current methods."

Fearless or Pragmatic? If you choose to fight, it really boils down to deciding how much you're willing to challenge the system. This choice is best envisioned as a continuum. At one end, you fearlessly behave the way you believe you should, even though the system may have consequences, either expressed or implied, for those who behave that way. At the other end, you gingerly select the safe route, expressing your displeasure at the system when you're not stepping on toes, or perhaps toes of people who can't hurt you. There can be a feeling of accomplishment if you lean towards the pragmatic option. You see that you are not flowing and you have not fled, ergo, you must be fighting. You feel that your criticisms and verbal deconstructions of the status quo help

change the system. Well, perhaps. I will agree that complaining about the status quo is better than positively supporting a status quo you don't believe in. In my experience, however, you get so good at being negative that you end up criticizing change attempts as viciously as you attack the status quo. You end up just plain bitter. Nothing pleases you, not even the people that heed you. A pragmatic change agent is not a change agent at all. They are a discontent individual who is flowing and looks outward rather than inward. Fighting is about changing your behavior, not just your words. As I said, it's a continuum. You can also take fearless too far. You have to balance your desire for change with the relationships you have with those around you. The name of the game is to challenge the status quo, not alienate people. If you cross the you've gone too far threshold, you'll lose your ability to influence. You shouldn't stage a sit-in outside the President's office unless the results are well considered. Your behavior could be perceived as selfish or as an effort to harm the organization. Whether you've acted in their best interests or not will be a moot point.

It's a delicate balance, but I believe a thoughtful blend of compassionate articulation, well-founded arguments and insightful behavior can be seen as an effort for a greater good. You can stir a change movement that affects the system and creates positive results for the organization.

**Fighting is about changing your behavior,
not just your words.**

CONCLUSION

Numerous studies show that employees are disengaged and don't like their jobs. In a Towers Perrin 2007 Global Workforce Study, only 21% of employees were fully engaged and 8% were fully disengaged. The vast majority of employees sit on the fence. They're not completely gone, but they're not completely there, either. I think this is a dismal story of how our businesses and our economy exists. According to these numbers, you can only count on one in five employees to choose to undertake the discretionary effort required to resolve a new challenge. On the bright side, this means there's significant untapped capacity for innovation and effectiveness.

It's time for a shake-up. This one won't happen because your boss decides it's time. It will happen because you and your peers decide it's time. Rather than relying on organizations to see what's in their long-term best interest, individuals are in a better position to instigate change. It will feel uncomfortable. You'll be labeled a heretic. As solace, you'll have the knowledge that you're right. Individuals that choose to fight join a movement with others committed to deliberate, reasoned and civil disobedience. My hope is to see a groundswell the keepers of the status quo can't deny. If you share a vision of better, more engaging organizations, I ask you to take up the cause.

Do you want to see change in your organization? Is the current balance negatively affecting the quality of your life? Please, make a deliberate choice. **Declare yourself. Flow, flee or fight.** 

info

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