

Start the Soloist Journey

Become the Hero in the Face of the Ten Least Wanted

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The hero's journey has always been the cornerstone of great literature and hit movies. We all know the winning dramatic premise: a beaten-down protagonist battles everyone—from evil characters to wild beasts—in a dangerous passage of self-discovery.

Strangely, the main frictions of modern man's largest battlefield have often been ignored in the books designed to steel you for that daily 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. grind.

Except for a few notable exceptions, the hostile territory otherwise known as the workplace has been treated with kid's gloves. We've been advised that the key to success is to "be nice," to develop "lifelong mentors," and a host of other absurd fantasies that no ten-year-old would ever swallow as remotely realistic or helpful.

The last scandalous year in business has taught us that there's ample darkness in even the best of companies. That co-workers, and colleagues and bosses don't always have your best interests at heart. But why must that be your status quo? Managers, executives and the countless millions toiling in the corporate cubes deserve the same chance for victory as Luke Skywalker, the Baudelaire orphans from *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and Harry Potter.

Dueling with The Ten Least Wanted

Recognize them in a glance. Develop strategies to reduce their interruptions and negativity. They are all around us. If you're not careful they may even be you.



Stop Sign

*"The world is flat."
"I think you've had enough fun."
"You'll put an eye out with that thing."*



Flimflam

*"Could you work on this project?
It's a really small, quick thing.
No big deal."*



Bulldozer

*"What the hell's wrong with you?"
"You're an idiot."
"You're lucky I don't fire you."*

Smiley Face



*"Would you like a donut?"
"Were you invited to
the company picnic?"
"How was your performance review?"*

Liar Liar



*"I never got that e-mail."
"My hard drive crashed."
"You didn't get my voice mail?"*

That's why, in *I Hate People!*, we offer the Soloist. You are born alone into this world and you will leave this world alone, no matter how much "teaming" you do, no matter how many committees you join or boards you sit on. In the end, whether you survive and thrive will depend on whether you boldly rise against the greatest threat to your success—those entrenched, productivity depleting characters we call the Ten Least Wanted.

The Soloist beats back those men and women stealing his time, concentration and ideas. Instead of being frustrated by the various stumbling blocks that stand in his way—Stop Signs that close off new paths, Minute Men who distract your focus with annoying questions, and Switchblades who steal your ideas—you see these men and women as they truly are: antagonists, obstacles standing in the way of your success.

The Soloist knows the well-trodden path of teams are a fast track to mediocrity. Ensembles are his bread and butter: anti-teams of 2 to 4 people with diverse talents who get stuff done fast. Teams just don't cut it. A century ago, Maximilien Ringelmann, a French agricultural engineer, proved that bigger isn't better. He had people pull on a rope attached to a strain gauge. Up to three pulled nearly as hard as one. But once five pulled together they all turned into slackers. Incredibly eight didn't pull as hard as four. Recent studies have demonstrated the same forces of "social loafing" and "coordination" losses apply in the office when a handful or more people tackle a project.

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Switchblade

*“Hey, that’s a great idea.
Glad I thought of it!”*
“I’ll smooth it out with the boss.”
*“You just go home – everything
will be alright in the morning.”*



Minute Man

“I just have one more question.”
“This will only take a second.”
“We’re almost done.”



Know-It-None

“I saw it on the Internet.”
“I saw it on TV.”
“I looked it up on Wikipedia.”



Spreadsheet

“That’s not in the budget.”
“But you didn’t do a focus group.”
“Your dreams conflict with the data.”



Sheeple

“I’m not qualified to make decisions.”
“I only perform approved work tasks.”
“I love meetings!”

So how does the Soloist succeed? He identifies and hurdles the Ten Least Wanted. You know that Stop Signing colleague who always blasts a hole in your new ideas in a meeting? Enlist one of your Ensemble before the meeting to be on call to counter his criticism. Or suggest that the purpose of all good brainstorms is to cultivate concepts: “What could we do to build on this idea, to turn it into a reality?” Of course, the worst Stop Signs are really just versions of Cornelius Fudge from Harry Potter, naysaying bureaucrats who must ultimately be toppled from their false podiums. That’s why you may eventually need to out Stop Sign after he shreds your promising idea. Consider pointedly asking, “What’s your idea, Bob?” He won’t have any, and the sooner you stand up for yourself, the sooner he’ll stop coming to brainstorms, because it will become abundantly clear that all he contributes is fog.

During your hero’s journey you will be constantly fighting Minute Man. Like C3PO, the babbling droid from Star Wars, cube-mates and colleagues will interrupt you with annoying questions throughout the day. Bosses and lieutenants will regularly want updates, spouses will just call to say hello. Closing your door, keeping your head down, and appearing busy work exceedingly well. As does voicemail and clicking on your e-mail Vacation Notice, especially when you’re sitting at your desk. Generosity works too. Tell Minute Man you’ve got two minutes, but then you’ve got a hard stop—and gotta get back to work. You’ll find yourself saving hours a week.

Minute Man and his close cousin Know-It-None help to pile onto the greatest threat to your productivity and opportunities for excellence. Interruptions shoot holes in your calendar and fritter away your time. Studies show that you are interrupted 73 times a day. And that doesn’t count the minutes and hours lost trying to regain your lost concentration. There’s even a mirroring effect. Our bodies and minds are unconsciously drawn to imitate what they see and hear in our immediate surroundings: yes, that cheery open office plan that recent studies have conclusively demonstrated to be a disaster for business.

Humans are behind these daily assaults, and we advocate identifying those most likely to waste your time. Smart executives train Minute Men to group all their questions at one time in the day in a single e-mail. Know-It-Nones who bloat meetings with irrelevant stories are greeted with silence or “What do we need to accomplish now?” Yes, some in your company will require an attitude adjustment. The Soloist’s journey is about cutting out the fat, and some will cling to the comfort of old routines as an excuse for not getting down to solving problems.

If you are successful, there will be more than Stop Signs, Know-It-Nones and Minute Men in your path. The antagonist we call Switchblade (think of Peter Pettigrew, AKA “Wormtail” in Harry Potter) is rife in Corporate America. The bigger your company, the more likely Switchblades are festering in the bowels of your organization. Under the cover of team leaders and committee heads they lie in wait, ready to steal credit for your innovations or backstab you for making some minor error. They also will resent the clarity of your Soloist’s Journey, the idea that you and your nimble Ensembles can tackle projects with enthusiasm and efficiency.

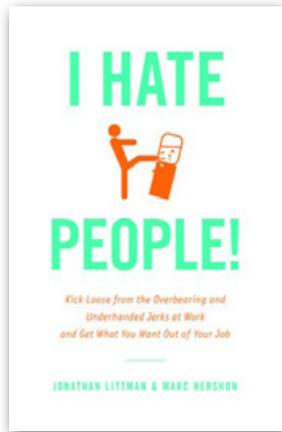
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Man is a carnivore, and predatory instincts don't disappear when you wrap colored silk around your neck and tap small keys with your digits all day.

Remember this: You are Big Game. The Age of Nice is over. Assuming that people will be on their best behavior and that everything will turn out all right for you in the end is the stuff of fairy tales.

Talented Soloists are always in the crosshairs of double-dealing Switchblades. What are the warning signs? Switchblades appear to be your ally when something tells you they aren't. Their public face doesn't match the situation. Instinct says they're talking behind your back in nasty e-mails and whispered hallway conversations. Stand your ground. Keep a record of all your encounters: digital, voice and in person. Build your ensembles. Be ready for the fight of your career.

The Soloist is ready for whatever the Ten Least Wanted throws in his path. 🗨



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Get more details or buy a copy of Littman & Hershon's [I Hate People.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

A Contributing Editor for Playboy, Jonathan Littman is the co-author of *The Ten Faces of Innovation*, (Doubleday,) with Tom Kelley of IDEO, and also co-authored the bestselling business classic, *The Art of Innovation*, with more than 110,000 copies sold in hardback. Marc Hershon, a branding expert who dreams up names for countless hit products, was a longtime associate with the prestigious Lexicon Branding, Inc. (where he helped to create great names such as BlackBerry, Dasani and Swiffer.) He recently teamed with Jonathan to start their own firm, Simmer Creative Studio.

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