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Morrie Shechtman

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Morrie Shechtman

Welcome! – To what I hope is the first of many issues of my newsletter. Initially, I plan to get it out monthly. If I get really ambitious, it'll come out twice a month. And if I get wild and crazy, it'll be weekly – then I can call it *Mondays with Morrie*.

Each newsletter will have three sections: **Business Tips**, **Political and Cultural Observations** (my spin on PC), and **Personal Notes**. My intention is to provide useful and usable information about the workplace; to put our personal and work lives in a broad societal context (“the big picture”); and finally, to share the emotional, gut-level impact of these times on myself, in hopes that they will resonate for and be of help to others, particularly in understanding and making sense of your own experience. I promise to be direct, honest, open and often provocative, and I very much welcome your feedback.

Business Tips

Fear and Loathing at the Water Cooler: 5 Ways to Counter the Recession Related Employee Underground of Anxiety, Aggression, and Shame

If you've noticed employees behaving oddly these days, it's probably not your imagination. Two things are happening with the workforce that are undeniable and that demand different strategies and reactions from business leaders at all levels.

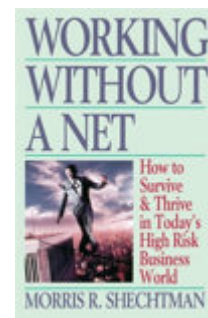
Employees are scared. They're afraid of their companies failing, of losing their jobs, their homes, and everything they've worked long and hard for.

In addition to feeling scared, huge numbers are feeling like failures. With few exceptions, nobody's hitting their targets (even after multiple re-settings in a downward direction) and they're constantly reminded of it in meeting after meeting where they're confronted with embarrassing numbers or given patronizing and hollow pep talks.

How do we know they're scared? One of two types of behaviors is sweeping through the workplace. Workers are quietly withdrawing to wherever they can hide out – their offices, break rooms, behind computers – seeking safety from any kind of interaction or inquiry. They're placating, obsequious, almost



[Fifth Wave Leadership: The Internal Frontier](#)



[Working Without a Net](#)

painfully polite.

On the other hand, the amount of childish squabbling and pointless conflict has escalated to baffling proportions. In many companies, the culture has all the feel of a middle-school lunchroom instead of a dynamic place of business. Pettiness predominates, rumor-mongering is epidemic, and triangulation is the rule of the day.

You don't need to be a psychotherapist to figure out what's going on. Our earliest responses to fear are two-fold. First, we go quiet and hope no one notices us. Second, we lash out and try to hurt others. Both are in the service of trying to stay safe.

So what can we do to counter this unacknowledged underground movement? The following strategies have worked for us and many of our colleagues:

1. Stop using thinking and brain-storming to talk people out of their feelings. Nobody's going to think their way through this floundering economy and workers are not going to be logically disabused of their fears or their feelings of failure.
2. Start openly talking about reality, from the top of the organization, down to the bottom. The economy stinks; it isn't going to get better soon; it will exact a price from everybody; and it compromises many aspects of our lives. This reduces anxiety and allows people to refocus on productive work.
3. Start talking (especially with your key people) about what it means to them to be a failure. Does it mean they're worthless and of no value? Does it wipe out everything one does well? Or does it signify a missed opportunity and a lesson (albeit painful) learned? It is crucial, in this discussion, to get on the table the feelings of having disappointed others and of being disappointed in others. This clears a lot of air.
4. Encourage and reward people acting in counter-intuitive ways. For example, what we're seeing, in numerous sales forces, is a plethora of low-risk sales behaviors. Salespeople are doing everything short of pleading and begging and end up completely emotionally disengaged. Their fears of rejection have reached their zenith and they're desperate and frozen. The only way out of this is to challenge the prospect like never before. Tight money doesn't move without emotion.
5. Lastly, focus on the skills of your key leaders and ask them (and yourself) the following question: "Of the skills that have made you successful thus far, which fit the current economic climate, and which do not?"
Example: An extremely successful sales manager we have worked with has hit the wall in the last six months (along with the salespeople who work for him). His results have been mediocre and getting worse. A portion of this is clearly the economy; but he is well



[Love in the Present Tense](#)



[This Ain't Your Parents' Marriage](#)

aware that a big chunk is him. He is very smart, very articulate, very "professional" and an astute tactician and problem solver. All of this has produced great results until now. He is also emotionally distant, hard to read, and deflects any attempt to really engage him, with humor.

What he has had to develop is a new skill base involving self-disclosure, transparency, and vulnerability. There's nothing inherently wrong with his historical skill base – it's simply not enough anymore.

Having been through a number of recessions, what we've learned is that good times and high profits not only hide many sins, but also disguise a profound and damaging lack of personal and professional growth. It sometimes takes a challenging economy to show us that 80-90 percent of what has made us successful is also the cap on our future growth.

Political and Cultural Observations

Obama's Election – A New Social Contract

When I put on my cultural historian hat (my original training and work), I clearly see Obama's election as the beginning of a new social contract for America, or at least the latest major revision. Our original social contract – minimizing government and maximizing individual independence – has been altered a number of times. The Federal Income Tax, The New Deal, The Civil Rights Movement, have all moved us away from a frontier ethic and toward greater and greater social engineering. From a politically neutral perspective, all these revisions of the social contract have created *both* more opportunity and more constriction. The farther away, as a culture, that we get from survival, the more inclusive we become and the more self-destructive we become. We have opened the tent to literally millions of people and have created a standard of living and quality of life, for the masses of people, unmatched in human history. We have also created a gargantuan sense of entitlement and caretaking that could literally bankrupt us and devolve us into a second-rate country and a third-world culture. Obama's election signals the possibility for the expansion of both options – increased inclusiveness and opportunity, and increased entitlement and self-destruction.

I have two major concerns about Obama and an Obama administration. First and foremost, I believe that he may very well be too bright, smart, and intellectually slick, to be an effective president. As a recovering intellectual (and one-time academic) nothing scares me more than all the adulation and praise for Obama's intelligence and the intelligence of the people he has thus far picked to surround him. I shudder when I hear how "smart" all these folks are. I learned, long ago, through my years of formal education and college teaching, that there is nothing quite so dangerous and damaging as an intellectual with power. Intellectuals got us the schizophrenic conflict in Vietnam, a hopelessly convoluted tax code, a corporate and public welfare system that disincentivizes initiative and success, and a mass media and educational dinosaur that discourages dissent and creativity. I do not want a brilliant president. I want a president who is the master of the obvious and can get done what anyone with an average IQ knows is necessary to do.

Second, I am afraid that historical significance and practical realities have become so fused together, in the minds of so many, that expectations for Obama have become so exaggerated as to insure massive disappointment, bitterness, and ultimately, heightened cynicism.

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to lecture in South Africa, a few months after Nelson Mandela's release from prison. The group I was a part of met with Mandela and heard him deliver one of his first public speeches. What he said was not what most people expected. He almost immediately lowered expectations, dismissed the possibilities of dramatic change, and strongly dissuaded his followers from looking for handouts and guarantees from a new government. It was a galvanizing talk and surprised everyone – black and white.

I know that Obama has said that the change he is promising will not come easily. He needs to say a lot more. He needs to say that his mandate is not about evening the score and righting past wrongs. If he fails to make this clear, his administration will simply usher in an orgy of investigations, litigation, and overbearing legislation. If he does, his tenure could begin a process of genuinely moving us toward new and productive solutions to our profound and challenging problems.

I believe that Obama is committed to putting the interests of the middle class at the top of his socio-economic pyramid. Whether this means the significant expansion of the nanny state or a true partnership of government and individual responsibility remains to be seen.

Personal Notes

There have been very few times in my life when I've been bombarded with such strong and conflicting emotions. I've felt a paralyzing anxiety, a gut-wrenching fear, and a deep and profound sense of hopelessness and futility. On the other hand, I feel a confidence and optimism about my (and our) ability to get through this. I also feel gentleness toward almost everyone I meet and interact with these days and in particular, a warmth and sense of gratefulness for the loving and caring relationship with Arleah and our boys.

Three things in particular have been helpful to me. First, I fight like crazy to keep perspective. Our connection to nature, always important, is now paramount. The unswerving affection and unflappability of our dogs is touching and reassuring, and the almost daily encounters with the deer and elk are calming. After all these years, I still find them beautiful and spiritual.

One "ah-ha" moment about perspective. Arleah and I were out shopping the other day and ran into the wife and mother of a family of loggers who've done a lot of work for us. They have no work now, and are surviving by doing odd jobs and selling firewood. She was out shopping for food for some of her neighbors who are not doing as well as her family.

Second, I try very, very hard to stay in the present (as unpleasant and scary as it is, at times). I was raised by survivors of brutal persecution and the Great Depression. I was immersed, on a regular basis, in talk and implication of the inevitability of doomsday. It was in the very fiber

of our everyday life. No matter how hard you work, how smart you are, and how many credentials you amass, you will eventually lose it all – to capricious, unfeeling forces, completely out of your control. Keeping those messages separate from current realities is a constant challenge.

Lastly, I talk regularly and often incessantly, about how I feel – the good, the bad, and the ugly. I talk about how life feels very surreal now – like living next to a war zone, hearing about and seeing the casualties, but not yet being hit. Our daily lives are fundamentally unchanged, but they could change; quickly and dramatically.

Talking about how I feel keeps me from withdrawing into a dark and isolated place. Isolation is now the enemy; much more than the economy. As long as I know that I'm not alone these days, I know that I'll make it through these times.

To borrow a topical metaphor, keeping connected to those we care about is job number 1.

Morrie

Tell us what you think – [click here](#) to send us an e-mail with your feedback.

We've had a number of requests for materials about our work. Here's the link to our online store: <http://www.fifthwaveleadership.com/store.cfm>

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