

SHUNDRAWN A. THOMAS

—
DISCOVER

JOY

in

WORK

—
TRANSFORMING YOUR
OCCUPATION INTO
YOUR VOCATION

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CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDE

*Work is not man's punishment. It is his reward
and his strength and his pleasure.*

GEORGE SAND

Do you remember your first day of work? I distinctly remember the day I started my first “real” job. I was hired as a financial analyst for an investment banking firm headquartered in New York City. Though I had completed an internship with the firm the prior summer, I had a lot to learn about the business and culture. I looked forward to meeting my new coworkers and was excited to begin my career. I’d carefully read all of the literature about the company’s vision and mission. I was proud to join the company and determined to make a good first impression. While I naturally had some anxiety, I don’t recall any negative sentiments about work or the workplace. I couldn’t wait to begin the workday.

When I arrived at the office, I made every effort to look and act my very best. My business unit focused on trading securities such as stocks and bonds, so I dutifully read the market sections of the leading daily newspapers. This wasn’t about career ambition or office politics. (Selfish motivations would reveal themselves soon enough.) My mindset on the first day was naive, but my motivation

was pure. I was grateful for the opportunity to engage in meaningful work. Though it was fleeting, I experienced joy in the workplace.

Was your first day similar? Do you recall similar emotions and thoughts about work and the workplace? Now let me ask you a different question. Reflect on your last day at work, or any recent day for that matter. Is your joy waning or gone? Let me pose the question a different way. As you prepared for work, were you eager to get to the office—or just late? Were you looking forward to spending time with your colleagues? All of them? When was the last time you reviewed the vision statement of your employer or reflected on the mission with pride? Do you actively seek opportunities to encourage or mentor others, or are you primarily engaged in office gossip and politics? Do you feel grateful for the opportunities and resources provided by your employer, and how—if at all—do you express your gratitude?

If your current answers differ from your first day responses, I offer two pieces of advice: Don't be discouraged. And please keep reading. The practical reality is that each day in the workplace can't and won't be like the first day. However, each of us has the power to make all our days in the workplace productive and fulfilling.

IT'S ALL ABOUT ATTITUDE

What accounts for the difference between that first day at work and your more recent days? I have heard people offer many answers to this question. In times past, I've offered many answers myself. The first and most common refrain ascribes our initial perspective to naiveté. In other words, our current emotions, thoughts, and actions reflect reality—specifically, the sometimes-harsh realities of the workplace. Isn't that why people dream about retirement? The second common refrain is that things in our workplace have changed. Invariably, we have a negative or adverse reaction to the changes. From our viewpoint, things are not as good as they used to be, and thus we are less satisfied or even

dissatisfied. The final refrain is often some version of “woe is me.” Whether through promotion, compensation, or choice assignments, I don’t perceive that my contributions have been adequately rewarded. My career plan is not turning out how I’d envisioned, and it adversely impacts my views about the workplace. While these are all plausible responses, they ultimately fall short in a very important dimension. None of them address the first step on the road to joy in work, which is being content in the workplace.

It is certainly the case that our coworkers and work environment differ from what we initially perceive and even hope about them. This dissonance between what we expect and what unfolds isn’t inherently good or bad, although we tend to place value judgments on outcomes that differ from our expectations. We fail to realize it is often our own unrealistic expectations that adversely impact our view of the workplace. It is also true that our workplaces and, more specifically, the cultures of our organizations are constantly changing. While the pace may vary, organizations evolve over time. Ignoring or resisting change is counterproductive. It is far better to anticipate, embrace, and wherever possible impact the changes of your organization. A proactive approach to change has profound positive effects on our workplace experience.

Finally, it is a safe bet your career plan will not unfold the way you’ve envisioned. You can look no further than your own résumé as proof. Career accomplishments unquestionably bring you temporal happiness. Unfortunately, they don’t provide long-term satisfaction and they don’t give you joy. We all would do well to distinguish career accomplishment from career fulfillment. It turns out each of our common refrains, though true in part, lead to discontentment if unchallenged.

So what accounts for the difference between that first day in the workplace and your most recent day? Recall the four factors that shape our work experience: *attitude*, *approach*, *aptitude*, and *achievement*. *Attitude*, the first of the four, accounts for all the

difference. While the people and the company are constantly evolving, in most instances they haven't changed dramatically. Granting some exceptions, an organizational mission likely hasn't changed significantly since we joined the enterprise. The things we observed on our first day and every day after have most likely evolved in modest, predictable ways. As far as change, the only thing that undoubtedly has changed is our attitude.

By *attitude* I am referring to the way we think about our work and our workplace. With little time spent on reflection, we often fail to perceive the changes in our own disposition. We imperceptibly change our view of our coworkers, career opportunities, and even the mission of the organization. Our experience in the workplace is shaped by how we choose to see it. In many respects, it is our attitude that makes all the difference.

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

“Teachers Quit Jobs at the Highest Rate on Record.” This *Wall Street Journal* article recently caught my attention.¹ The article reported public educators voluntarily leaving their jobs at the highest rate in nearly two decades. Concerns over pay, poor working conditions, and increased opportunities given the tight labor market were cited as drivers for the trend. I hold educators in high regard given the important role they have played in my vocational journey.

I decided to contact Lisa, a long-time friend who teaches elementary school in Florida. Lisa is one of the most cheerful people I know. She has a gift of discernment and her optimism is contagious. I asked her, “Why did you become a teacher?”

Lisa quickly replied, “I never gave serious thought to becoming a teacher until I was in college. I was walking through a room with shelves filled with books and for a moment I was completely transfixed. I heard a quiet voice from within say ‘You are supposed to be a teacher.’ The next day I went to my advisor and changed my major.”

Lisa explained that she believed teaching was her calling. As an educator, she doesn't simply instruct. She believes she is called to love, serve, and inspire her students. Lisa acknowledged that teachers face some formidable challenges. In her case, she finds it difficult to deal with the bureaucracy that is common in public education. I asked, "What causes you to continue given the challenges?"

"I focus on the students. The most rewarding part of teaching is when one of my students accomplishes something he once felt was impossible. This attitude shift can create a ripple effect of success in his life." Her response is apropos to the consideration of our workplace experience. Her disposition not only impacts the attitudes and achievements of her students, it leads to an abiding sense of calling and fulfillment in her work.

Lisa's example raises an essential question. Does your workplace need to change, or can you change the way you see it? I am not suggesting your experience in the workplace will always be peaches and cream. Far from it. We each bring our strengths, weaknesses, passions, and problems to the workplace daily. Each of our proverbial houses has rooms that need improvement and those developmental opportunities are generally more evident to others than to us. As the Scripture goes, we see in a mirror, dimly (1 Cor 13:12). Some might ask, What happened to paradise in the workplace? *People* happened to paradise in the workplace. However, if you view it through the right lens, you realize that the essential link between humanity and the workplace is a good thing. It's one of life's most precious gifts. The opportunity to unite with a shared vision and engage in meaningful work is uniquely human. Yet the common enterprise is not without challenges. The workplace, not surprisingly, reveals our humanness in all its facets. However, the potential of the enterprise is infinitely greater than the individual. How we choose to see the workplace establishes our foundation for working in community and discovering joy in our work. We must learn to develop the proper attitude toward the workplace.

Let's focus more intently on our attitude. *Attitude* refers to our mindset or manner of thinking. It is the first of four factors that shape our experience in the workplace. As the first of the four factors, it is foundational. We will explore three attributes of attitude to better understand how it impacts our experience in the workplace. First, attitude is an inherent quality of our minds. Attitude emanates from the inside and is a portrait of one's inner self. Second, our attitude determines our perception. Specifically, it determines how we view other people, our circumstances, and ourselves. Like the way an optical lens affects our physical eyesight, attitude affects the perception of the mind's eye. Third, attitude influences our emotions, behavior, and decisions. In fact, our emotional welfare, conduct, and choices on any given day are principally a reflection of our attitude.

Because our attitude is an innate quality, our experience in the workplace has more to do with our disposition than what happens to us on any given Monday. Attitude is not merely about wishful thinking, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach for developing a healthy attitude. Developing a healthy attitude is, however, an essential component of experiencing fulfillment in the workplace.

IT'S AN INSIDE JOB

The first attribute of our attitude is that it emanates from the inside and is nurtured by our inner self or thought life. I have come to the stark realization regarding my attitude and the workplace that many of my perceived bad days in the workplace begin before I ever arrive at the office. Similarly, many of my most fulfilling days also begin before my commute to the office. The instigator in either case—as you may have guessed—is my attitude.

Let me share an example. I returned from a business trip after enduring two extended flight delays. I missed what I'd hoped would be quality time with my family, who were all fast asleep when I arrived home. After getting just four hours of sleep, a scan

of my calendar revealed my first meeting of the day was with Jack, a colleague who has a working style I personally find challenging. As I prepared for work, my mind was busy choreographing a play that ran several times in my head before I boarded my commuter train. I concluded Jack was not particularly collaborative and thus our pending meeting would be an unproductive use of time. In fact, we simply have too little productivity in the company, I surmised. How do you think that day turned out? You probably have a good sense of how my workday unfolded without knowing a solitary detail because you've identified the real culprit: my attitude!

That day did not produce my best work. The meeting with Jack was predictably challenging. Did Jack's approach contribute to the challenging interaction? Quite possibly. However, my view of the meeting was somewhat predetermined. What's more, it may be the case Jack had a very different view of the same meeting, work styles notwithstanding.

I've also noticed there is a bit of a momentum factor as it pertains to our attitude in the workplace. It's sort of like Newton's first law of motion. Once an object is in motion, it continues in motion at the same speed and same direction unless acted on by an outside force. When we begin the day with a negative attitude or disposition, it tends to chart the course for that day. This is in large part because our attitude is driving us from the inside. We are less affected by the events occurring around us than we believe. It turned out my engagement in other meetings that day was notably subdued and the number of nagging items in my inbox seemed to multiply exponentially.

By highlighting the essential role our attitude plays in our workplace experience, I do not seek to diminish the very real challenges regularly encountered in the workplace. Interpersonal conflicts, discrimination, and harassment are common and potentially systemic challenges individuals face in the workplace. These types of situations often require mediation and corrective action. In fact,

if you find yourself in the midst of a toxic or abusive situation in the workplace, seek counsel and intervention immediately. Yet even in the midst of situations that cause real pain, the right attitude equips us to respond in proactive and constructive ways. The understanding that our attitude emanates from the inside is very empowering. It means we can start each workday with positive momentum if we so choose. If we set our day in motion with a healthy attitude, it's likely to stay on track. It also means when we encounter injustice or related problems that require addressing, an intentional disposition will frame and guide our response.

Newton's law of motion has one more helpful insight I believe can be applied to our attitude—the concept of the unbalanced force. An unbalanced force is synonymous with a greater force. An equal and opposite force will bring an object to a standstill. However, an unbalanced force can change the momentum and direction of an object. This suggests if we start our day with a negative disposition, it takes an outsized effort to turn it around. To be clear, you *can* turn a bad day around. Don't throw in the towel if you get off to a rough start. However, it is wise to observe this: a healthy attitude provides positive momentum that is relatively easy to maintain during the day. This has clear implications for how we approach our physical health. I believe, however, there are even greater implications for how we approach our mental and spiritual health, understanding they are all inextricably connected.

Starting the day with a healthy attitude toward work is not about positive thinking per se. Instead, it is about having an affirmative plan for tackling the triumph and challenge to be expected with each day. It is also trusting that whatever the new day brings, the opportunity to do meaningful work is an instance of grace.

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

Our attitude determines our perception of people and circumstances. Throughout each day, we are constantly interpreting the

actions, words, and even facial expressions of the people we interact with. This begins from the time we are born and is an essential aspect of human interaction. We also must discern how to respond to the dynamic circumstances that unfold daily. How we respond to people and how we react to ever-changing circumstances depends on how we perceive or view them. Moreover, this interpretive work is principally happening at the subconscious level of our mind. If attitude is the filter for the mind's eye, we must accept that our attitude may at times deceive us. At the very least, we must be aware that our attitude may mislead us. By that, I mean all we see is not always all there is. Additionally, our preconceptions and biases can lead to misperception.

The quality of our interactions and ultimately our relationships with the people we work with arguably has the greatest impact on our experience in the workplace. If you don't believe this straight away, consider how a single interaction or even an offhand comment from a coworker affects you mentally or emotionally. We are, after all, human and by our very nature highly relational. Our attitude impacts our relationships with others in a two-fold manner. It is the filter by which we interpret their actions and words. It also depicts the image we project to others. Our attitude often introduces us or precedes us.

How we perceive our work environment also has a significant impact on our experience in the workplace. To maintain the proper motivation and remain productive we must perceive we are in a healthy work environment. It is impossible to find joy in our work if we do not have a constructive view of our coworkers and our work environment. Since we spend many of our waking hours at our workplace or on activities related to work, this has carryover implications for our quality of life.

A particular experience from several years ago sheds light on how my attitude affected my relationship with a coworker. My business unit head asked me to update our executive team on an

important initiative I was leading. The project involved working with professionals across multiple business units in the company, and most of them were not in my reporting line. I articulated our progress to date, which included some notable successes and milestones, as well as some identified challenges. In the middle of the overview, my colleague John chimed in with an unexpected and curt critique. I honestly felt blindsided because John had not directly been involved with the initiative and hadn't previously shared his perspective with me. As I listened to John, I could feel myself tensing up. What was his motivation for what I perceived as an ill-informed assessment? Why surprise me in front of my manager and peers when he had ample opportunities to speak to me beforehand? Even though I did my best to provide a balanced response, my response was defensive. While the exchange was short, the effect lingered with me for the rest of the workday. That evening my wife asked me why I seemed somber during dinner. It was then the change in my attitude was most apparent.

Later during the week, I decided to speak with John about his perspective on the initiative. I made sure to prepare myself mentally to remain open-minded. I've found attempts to presume the motives of others are wasted mental energy. It is far better to have candid and direct engagement. I learned several things from our dialogue. The first thing I learned was there were opportunities for me to involve John in the initiative I hadn't previously considered. This would not only gain his support but provide him with a firsthand perspective. John acknowledged in retrospect his comments were precipitous. He was newer to the team and felt pressure to contribute to the dialogue. I hadn't considered the pressures John was under as a new member of the team. John apologized for his brusqueness without me specifically raising the issue. This was a surprising turn of events. We can never fully know what is in the heart of another individual. In many ways, it doesn't matter. We must simply do the work of examining our own heart and our own

attitude. Maintaining an open mind and a positive disposition helps us better understand the people and situations we encounter. This is an important contributor to maintaining good relationships and a positive workplace experience.

IN THE BACKGROUND

Our attitude influences our emotions, behaviors, and decisions. Our parents are often the first to impart this pearl of wisdom to us. Whether when I was throwing a tantrum as a child, being naughty as an adolescent, or acting obnoxious as a teenager, I can remember a common refrain from my parents: “You need to change your attitude!” Depending on the nature of the infraction, the statement was more demonstrative. Interestingly, while they observed erratic emotions, uncharacteristic behavior, or poor decisions, they intuitively addressed the root of the issue, which was my attitude. Though we make several thousand decisions in a typical day, most of them are automatic. Even when we put our cognitive skills to work and thoughtfully consider our choices, our attitude is influencing us in the background. This is similarly the case as it pertains to emotions and behaviors. Our attitude predisposes certain emotions and certain behaviors. I am much more likely to become angry or respond abruptly to a coworker if I begin the day with a negative attitude. I’d like to tell you those early pearls of wisdom from my parents made for smooth sailing in adulthood. As it turns out, I had a lot to learn about this thing called attitude. In fact, I’m still learning.

Have you ever been a recipient of an email reproof? That’s when you open your inbox and discover an accusatory email from a coworker. It usually involves an implicit or explicit expression of blame. There may not necessarily be actual proof of an infraction. But in the internet age, people often hit send and ask questions later. Sandy was a senior research analyst with my former employer who collaborated with our sales team on a client

initiative. Sandy determined a significant client relationship was at risk because we had fallen behind schedule on the project. Sandy's email—directed to me—highlighted an apparent missed deliverable by a member of my sales team as a notable failure. To add injury to the accusation, a host of individuals were copied on the email, including several members of upper management. It's interesting to observe how such a passive form of communication can get the adrenaline flowing. I was a new sales manager and felt a strong sense of accountability for the actions and welfare of my team members. I perceived Sandy's action as more political than constructive. Finally, I was concerned about the reputation of the accused and our overall team. I responded by email immediately using "reply all." (This is never a good idea.) In retrospect, it was one of the worst communications I've ever sent. All the points I made were accurate. But my communication was verbose and defensive. It was an emotional retort rather than a thoughtful response.

There is a proverb that admonishes us not to answer people according to their folly, lest we become like them (Prov 26:4). This was unquestionably true as it applied to my situation. Sending the accusatory email was imprudent, especially so given the accusation was unfounded. It was equally imprudent for me to respond so hastily. It didn't help matters that I also copied the group. I suspect I am not the only person who has made this mistake. This experience initially taught me a lesson about restraint. Over time it has revealed deeper truths about attitude. When we maintain a healthy attitude and properly manage our egos, we are not easily offended. We can't control the behavior of others, but we are accountable for our own actions. Our emotional and behavioral responses are most effectively managed when we adopt and maintain a positive attitude toward our coworkers. This is a function of personal development that must take place long before the inevitable surprises and challenges that arise. Just like when we were children, we need to "change our attitude" to ensure emotional stability, constructive behavior, and wise choices.

BEING CONTENT

In the search to discover joy in work, a healthy attitude toward our coworkers, workplace, and our work itself makes a huge difference. Work is not a burden but a blessing. It builds strength of character and gives us pleasure that cannot be found in leisure activity.

I conclude with one final lesson about our attitude in the workplace, also imparted by a wise woman. Early in my career I was promoted to a prominent role with a leading investment banking firm. My work revolved around the financial markets, and it was customary for my days to start before daybreak. The first individuals I met daily when I arrived in the office were our security staff. In fact, the lobby of the building was often empty save those dedicated professionals. There was one woman who made a significant impression on me. Debra was an older African American woman who was distinguished by her warm, broad smile. I don't recall a single day where she didn't project a joyful attitude. Unlike her fellow security officers, she would kindly greet everyone as they arrived. Whether you responded cordially, smugly, or not at all, she'd always wish you a blessed day. One morning, shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, I arrived at the office in a somber mood. There was Debra to greet me, just as pleasant as the first day I encountered her.

I'm not sure what prompted it, but I felt compelled to ask Debra about the source of her apparent joy. I came right out and asked her, "Debra, you're always so joyful. Most of the people I see are gloomy early in the morning, especially after the recent terrorist attacks. But you never seem to have a bad day. What's your secret?"

She pondered my comment for a moment and then replied. "I'm blessed to be able to work and I am thankful for this job. I've had many jobs over the years. All of the jobs have challenges. I just don't dwell on them. As I have matured, I've learned to be content whatever my circumstances."

I recognized the scriptural reference (Phil 4:11) and saw her faith helped shape her attitude. Therein lied Debra's secret to fulfillment in the workplace: contentment! To be content means we are pleased with our situation and do not feel as though we need it to be better. In our constant quest for more, we often miss the simple pleasure experiencing the present day provides. I reflect from time to time on my conversation with Debra. Her simple wisdom and living example taught me so much. Our best days in the workplace occur when we learn to be content with our circumstances. Adopting this attitude toward the workplace is an important first step to discovering joy in your work.

CHAPTER 1 REFLECTIONS

Change Your Attitude

KEY INSIGHTS

- True joy is an attitude of the heart that informs your way of thinking and feeling. Your perception of the workplace informs your overall work experience.
- Unrealistic expectations adversely impact your view of the workplace. Contentment leads to discovering joy in work.
- Attitude emanates from the inside and is a portrait of your inner self. Transformation begins with examining your perspective of the workplace and not the workplace itself.
- Attitude determines your perception—how you view your circumstances, other people, and yourself. Presumptions and biases lead to misperceptions.
- Attitude influences your emotions, behavior, and decisions. A healthy attitude and properly managed ego ward off offenses.
- A constructive attitude generates momentum that propels you through your workday mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Work is not a burden but a blessing. It builds strength of character and gives you pleasure that cannot be found in leisure activity.

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