Take Your Turn First

Surviving A Tormenting Work Environment
3  TAKE YOUR TURN FIRST

8  Surviving A Tormenting Work Environment: Three Principles for Maintaining Sanity
You have unique skills and special talents. You’re a good team player and you work hard. Why does your work life include challenges from people whose behaviour affects you like the sound of fingernails screeching on a chalkboard?

You’ve often heard that you can’t change anyone else. That’s only part of the story. You’re about to explore a secret that most people never uncover. You will discover how to use a simple truth that can immediately make your work much more fulfilling and fun.

The person who is getting under your skin can’t stop pushing your buttons until you graduate yourself from a particular situation.

Assume for a few minutes that you and the person who annoys you signed a formal contract. The other party is required to repeat the same irritating role until you modify your behaviour. However, as soon as you change, a magnificent metamorphosis will occur. They will either stop playing their current role, or their behaviours will no longer irritate you.

With this understanding, you’re free because you alone control your behaviour. There is something to be learned from your current interactions with the other person. Just as soon as you discover the wisdom you need to gain from the experience, you’ll take a giant step forward in the game of life. The following true story illustrates this point.

EVERYONE’S ON HOLD

At 6:30 p.m., Brenda hung up the phone after calling her twelve-year-old son, Sean, to tell him she was working late again. “I’m sorry, Sean, but I need for you to fix your own dinner and put your younger brother to bed.”

As Brenda walked back from getting
her “dinner” of stale chips and coffee from a vending machine, she recalled the frustration in her young son’s voice, “But, Mom, you know I have a big test tomorrow. Besides, this is the second time this week!”

Brenda felt like she was being attacked from both sides. At 4:45 that afternoon, Rodney, the department head, had tossed a sheaf of incomplete travel and supply request forms on her desk. It was Brenda’s responsibility to complete and polish them by 8:00 a.m. tomorrow morning.

As Brenda muttered, “I’ve been asking you for these all week long!,” Rodney dashed out of the office early to attend his son’s soccer game. He reappeared long enough to reprimand Brenda, “You know I’ve been busy. Now, be a good team player!” Then Rodney vanished for the rest of the evening.

This was a very old drama between the two, and Brenda was quite sure it would continue to rerun. After gnawing on her pencil and staring at Rodney’s illegible, coffee-stained entries, she called Karen, an executive in the department. Brenda knew Karen also despised Rodney’s inconsiderate behaviour, and Brenda needed a listening ear.

“Karen, I’ve begged and pleaded. I’ve even threatened to quit. Rodney still won’t get my work to me in time so I can have a life of my own. I’m so sick of sitting at work at night eating greasy chips when my kids need me. Why won’t Rodney clean up his act?”

Karen’s response shocked Brenda, “We’ve had this conversation before. You have to clean up your act. Rodney can’t change until you change.”

“But, Karen, I always get my own reports done on time. And, I’ve been standing up to him—more and more all the time—just like you told me to.”

“You’ve made great progress, but you’re still dancing the same dance. Every time you stay late at night instead of missing a deadline, you’re waiting for him to change. As long as you agree to raise children at the office, there will be a swarm of adults around you who act like kids.”

“But, I’m not in command. Plus, Rodney always tries to make me feel guilty by accusing me of not being a good team player if I don’t meet his last-minute needs.”

“Brenda, you’re encouraging him to continue to be irresponsible by covering for him. You’re enabling his inexcusable behaviour because you’re afraid you’ll get slammed.”

“Karen, of course, I’m afraid of him. He holds the cards. You think management will believe me instead of him?”

“Brenda, I went through that stage with my boss, so I understand. I was really scared, too, but I finally decided to stop bracing a shaky office built on a foundation of sand. I decided that part of his job description read, ‘Test employee boundaries,’ and I deleted my name from his list. You called me because you know I’m now treated with respect. If someone doesn’t like me, I don’t care. I’d much rather be respected than have someone act like they like me just because I meet their needs.”

“Hmmm…”

“Brenda, what’s your biggest fear?”

“Getting canned.”

“Are you open to a suggestion?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll have more self-respect. Although I don’t need to be liked. I don’t need kids at the office. I don’t think you’ll have to. Are you okay with my idea?” Brenda murmured “Yeah,” hung up, and began to scribble her fears on a pad. The results, in the order in which she reached them, are listed below.

What am I afraid of?

• I’ll be fired.
• Rodney’s boss will believe him instead of me.
• I’ll feel like a failure.
• I’ll feel like I betrayed Rodney or the team because I’ve always covered for him.
• I’ll be accused of not being a team player.
• The rest of the team won’t like me anymore.
• People will gossip about me, and I’ll be humiliated.

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How will I feel about myself if I stop protecting Rodney?

When Brenda realised the factors underneath her fear that were keeping her stuck, she created the additional lists illustrated below.

How will I feel about myself if I stop protecting Rodney?

• I’ll have more self-respect.
• What will I do if I’m fired?
• I’ll have more time with my kids.
• I’ll get another job.
• I’ll miss my friends from work, but I can still see them.
• I’ll take better care of myself.
• What else is true?
• I’m already raising kids at home. I don’t need kids at the office.
• I accepted Rodney’s bait that I wasn’t being a team player if I didn’t cover for him. He’s accusing me of not being a good team player because he isn’t. He’s projecting his feelings about himself onto me, and I’ve allowed him to do this.
• No one else will respect me until I stop being Rodney’s doormat. I won’t respect myself until then!
• I don’t need to be liked. Although that’s my preference, if someone
only likes me because I’m at their beck and call, they don’t respect me. Respect is much more important than being liked because I’m a good doormat.

• I’ve been feeling valuable because I keep saving the day for people who don’t even appreciate it. They’ll never change until I change my behaviour. I’ve been people pleasing to fill a gap in my life. I wanted to be appreciated but my needs aren’t being met.
• I’m still afraid, but I don’t want to stay stuck, so I’m going to do something different.

What am I willing to change about myself?

• I am willing to CONSISTENTLY stand up to Rodney, even when I’m afraid he’s more powerful.
• I am willing to be reprimanded, if necessary, for missing a deadline.
• I’m going to document Rodney’s irresponsible behavior.

Brenda concluded her page by writing, in very large letters, one of the most important notes she had ever written to herself.

I know I deserve to be treated better.

I can be employed somewhere else and treated better.

I could even start my own business!

Remembering how her aunt had complained for years about the devastating effects of her uncle’s alcoholism on their children while she stood by her man, Brenda reached in her desk drawer and grabbed a rubber stamp. She firmly labeled and dated the documents Rodney had thrown on her desk that afternoon, “Received at 4:45 p.m. on January 21, 2002.” She then wrote, “Mr. Thomas was informed on January 18, 19, and 20 that I needed the documents at least by 8:00 a.m. on January 21. This has been a recurring problem, and I can’t do my work on time unless I receive his information in a timely manner. If you have any questions, please contact me.”

Instead of feeling afraid when she signed her name, for the first time in months, Brenda felt hopeful that her life was improving. When she called Sean to tell him the good news, he confirmed her feelings, “Gee, Mom, you sound like a different person!”

Within a year, Brenda was promoted to Karen’s level because she leaped forward in spite of her fears. She stopped trying to change Rodney and changed herself.

Things do not change, we do.  Henry David Thoreau

As Brenda discovered, you can’t reform other people because they can’t change until you respond differently to their behaviours. In fact, when you wait for someone else to change so you can move forward in your life, you give away your power. You deplete your precious energy by focusing on them, rather than on your next step toward happiness at work. Now that you understand that the other party is stuck in freeze frame and the ball is in your court, you can totally disengage from feeling that you’ve been victimised.

When I consulted with Brenda’s company, Rodney’s flimsy house of cards fell apart as one after another of his team members refused to continue to prop him up. The following tips can be helpful if you face a situation in which you’re waiting for someone else to change so you can become happier at work.

• Transform yourself instead of attempting to reinvent other people. Focus on your role and your behavior rather than on what you think the other party has done wrong. You are powerless to alter someone else’s behavior, but you are totally in control of your own actions. Once you determine how you can act differently in the future, you will avoid re-creating a frustrating situation.
• When you’re tempted to make statements such as, “How dare he do that to me!”, ask yourself thought-provoking questions. Begin with “I wonder why I need this experience?” and “What can I learn from this situation that I wouldn’t learn otherwise?” Ask yourself, “How did I contribute to this problem?”
• Be willing to accept whatever you discover beneath your fears of modifying your patterns. View conflict as the tip of an iceberg and probe beneath the surface. If you feel judgmental about your motivations or behaviors, just notice any self-judgment. You’ll feel a surge of freedom when you discover that you don’t have to get rid of self-judgments and insecurities. They don’t linger unless you deny or repress them.
• Don’t compromise yourself. Make sure you understand that approval of others is conditional if it depends on your behaving in a way that isn’t your choice. If you really want to be happy at work, you must be true to yourself.
• At first, other people may be puzzled when you play a new role, so be consistent. Set clear restrictions concerning inappropriate behaviors and stick to them. Provide reasonable consequences for any violation of your boundaries and follow-through with the repercussions you’ve established. You have every right to set limits and maintain your own space. Other people may not initially respect this because of your old patterns. However, when you consistently demonstrate that “No” means “No” instead of “Maybe,” they’ll catch on.
• If you feel uncomfortable reinforcing your boundaries or implementing consequences, you may wish to access the assistance of a supportive individual or group. If your company doesn’t offer an Employee Assistance Program, consult a mental health professional or a self-help group in the Yellow Pages or in your local community resources.
newspaper.

• Be proactive if you’re faced with a situation like Brenda’s. Prevent “management shock” when you stand up for yourself by routinely documenting when agreements between you and another person are broken for invalid reasons.

• Identify problems and understand who is responsible for them so you do not own problems that aren’t yours. Too often, we think the difficulties of others are partly our fault. We think we have to fix them. Guilt stops us from understanding problem ownership. We become defensive and everyone loses.

• Separate yourself from the problem. Don’t own it unless you’re part of it. Of course, it takes two to have an argument and sometimes we are the problem. We all have expectations. When they’re unrealistic, they pave the road to pain.

• Consistently let go of what you can’t control. Once you vary your reactions to other people’s behaviours, they’ll stop pushing your buttons. They may even be forced to examine their own actions. Just remember—how they feel about your choice to change your life is not your problem! We’re all in charge of our own feelings and behaviours. Detach from the situation with compassion and empathy.

• Accept responsibility for any personal errors. Accept others just as they are by recognising their positive qualities. Challenge yourself to let go of the illusion of what could have been and accept the reality of what exists.

Every day, each one of us experiences unpleasant individuals and situations. Sometimes we’re swept into disagreements that shouldn’t concern us. We can relish an opportunity to become angry and stressed, or we can close the door to stress by carefully selecting how we allocate our energy. If you notice that you’re addicted to the drama of conflict, take back your power. To put this in perspective, in most cities, traffic court convenes five days a week.

However, you never participate unless you commit an action that compels your involvement. Use the same wisdom with controversies at work.

Take the time to do the “Unthaw Your Frozen Frame” exercise. I promise you’ll receive remarkable insights that will empower you to achieve a much more fun and fulfilling work life.

POINT THE WAY

Instead of waiting for others to change and tiptoeing around as if you’re walking on eggshells, remember that broken eggs make wonderful omelets. Decide what you need and take a firm stand. Even if you’ve been afraid to champion your own cause in the past, your new level of self-respect will eventually be mirrored back to you during your interactions with others. Since one person with courage eventually becomes a majority, each positive internal change will contribute to a cascade of transformations in your external circumstances. Eventually, you will no longer be able to hide your strength and capabilities from yourself or others. The brightness of your spirit will chase away the last shadows of self-doubt and you’ll inspire others to follow your example.


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Surviving A Tormenting Work Environment:
Three Principles for Maintaining Sanity

By Sue Thompson
Have colleagues who used to support you suddenly stopped speaking to you? Has a project you thought was going to be easy turned into a disaster? Is management scrutinising your every move as though you might be engaging in criminal activity? You’re in a tormenting environment.

You can’t simply grit your teeth and make it through an experience like this without employing some strategies. It’s going to take developing some new muscles—essentials that provide strength to make it through battles that threaten to overwhelm you.

Here are three important principles with which to start your survival kit:

Know Your Destination. It might be the financial bonus you signed for. It might be the experience you know must have under your belt to move on to a job you really want. Whatever it is, know your destination. If necessary, make one up! Create a point in the future when you will decide whether or not to leave the job. Having a terminal point allows you to focus on the present while recognising that you will not be in this place forever. This testing period will come to an end, and your destination is where you must fix your mind so that in the hardest moments, you can continue to put one foot in front of the other. If you’re detoured by events beyond your control, you know where the road is and you can make your way back to it and keep walking. Know your destination and keep that light before you.

Stop Talking. Do not give your thoughts on every possible aspect of your situation to those who can do nothing for you. Keep your mouth shut! Saying the wrong thing to the wrong person can get you into some of the worst trouble of your career, and you can’t take back those words. Get a handle on your need to have someone pat you on the back and make you feel better. I’m not suggesting you shouldn’t have friends at work, but in the middle of a hostile environment you must have some strategies and one of them is to be self-contained. Relationships can change in a day. The person you thought you could trust could be sitting in the executive suite right now, trashing you to the president. In a tormenting work situation, you must keep your agony to yourself. Put on a face of calm and resist the temptation to whine.

Don’t Become Your Environment. In order to come out of this experience with some sense of purpose, you must not join yourself with the defeating behaviors of nastiness, hatefulness, rudeness, and disrespect. Decide right now that no matter how rotten the behavior around you, you will treat everyone with civility, respect, even deference to their opinions. Responding to unfair treatment with an attitude of submission gives you power.

Yes, you read that right: submission.

It’s become a dirty word in our society, but view submission as an attitude. It means that you approach every circumstance with the demeanor of a servant. A servant just does the job. A servant expects mistreatment and can roll with that punch, get back up, and keep working, because that’s what he was hired to do. Servants don’t expect to be treated like the master of the house; that’s not their role. They respond the same to those who are tyrannical or cruel as they do to those who are kind and empathetic. They are consistent in all situations because there really is no other choice than to simply apply themselves to the work. Submission is the attitude of a servant. It recognises and accepts hierarchies without judgment: right or wrong, the org chart is what it is. It’s not that there is never a time to stand up and speak the truth or expose stupidity. Submission is not the same as obedience. There may be times when we must stand up to authority because what is being demanded is morally wrong or will have an irreversible impact. Say what must be said and be willing to accept the consequences, but do it with respect and thoughtfulness. Submission is the way a thing is done. It acts professionally and with the best interests of the project or the company in mind.

Allow this to sink in: in order not to become the environment in which you’re working, you have to be radically, insanely different than those around you. You may rankle at the thought of allowing yourself to be treated as a servant, but you’ve got to have a strategy for survival. Do what is necessary to prevent yourself from being sucked into the madness. Don’t engage in battles that will waste your energy, destroy your concentration, and yield very little results. Put on some bullet-proof armor and refuse to become emotionally entangled in the surrounding battles. Throw everyone else off by being different!

Your goal is to maintain a perspective of strength in a climate that is antagonising, frustrating, lonely, even abusive. In such an environment the true test of character is made, and it’s the hardest work we will ever do. Set your face to the wind and start walking. You can survive a tormenting work environment!

Want to share your own tormenting experience? Sign up for Sue’s newsletter at http://www.SetFreeLifeSeminars.com and let her know the workplace behaviors you deal with!
Our “Day in the Life of ...” series has been very popular with DeskDemon’s users and we would like to extend it! So, we would like to hear about you and your job and as a thank you we will give you £25 Marks & Spencer vouchers, on publication.

We know from our forum boards at the Hub that networking and support is important to you all. Hearing about each other’s work and offering advice and a helping hand can be invaluable. But not only that, it’s interesting to hear about the experience of others. It puts things in to perspective and offers us the chance to see how others got to where they are, overcoming challenges and what they think of their role. And that’s why our “Day in the Life of...” series is so fascinating.

We are looking for PAs, secretaries and Administrators from a wide range of sectors and from the smallest to the largest organisations, so get in touch if you would like to share your thoughts with us all.

If you would like to be featured on DeskDemon’s “Day in the life of ...” series, please visit: www.deskdemond.com/pages/uk/career/dayinthelifeof2009