Work Daze: a cold-hearted course in Revenge 101

by Bob_Goldman

Revenge is a dish best served cold, or so the philosophers say. If you ask me, revenge is also pretty darn tasty when served hot, warm, frozen, or stuffed into the microwave and nuked.

Let's face it, when you're mad as hell at work, and you're not going to take it anymore, there are only a few options open to you. You can stifle yourself, or you can complain to management, or you can right the wrong by doing something intelligent and heroic, like pouring a can of Campbell's Chicken Mushroom Soup into your manager's computer.

If you thought you were the only person who spends their days plotting elegant, elaborate fantasies of revenge, think again. Workplace revenge is so common that two professors, Thomas M. Tripp and Robert J. Bies, have written a book on the subject, "Getting Even: The Truth about Workplace Revenge â€" And How to Stop It."

Don't buy this book if you think it's a good source of really devilish and totally untraceable ways to get the revenge you so totally deserve. Strangely, the authors seem intent in decreasing the amount of revenge that gets expressed in our daily work lives. Managers, too, will learn how to nip workplace revenge in the bud, though it seems unlikely that many will take Tripp and Bies' advice. If our bosses were even slightly capable of being sensitive and fair-minded, they never would have been promoted.

Still, "Getting Even" does have some interesting information to impart. Like the fascinating fact that the idea of workplace revenge even exists in the highest levels of government service. Or have you forgotten that when the Clintons left office in 2001, administrative staffers removed the "W" keys from computer keyboards so that incoming staffers could not type the nickname "W"?

Too bad they didn't leave the computer keys, and simply remove the new president.

The more popular forms of revenge are less poetic, and include such classics as bad-mouthing the boss, spreading rumors, instigating lawsuits, and sabotaging performance.

While most examples of workplace revenge are destructive in nature, the authors do cite employees who are so enraged about managers who unfairly berate them for poor performance that they "vow to work harder and longer hours to "get even" by proving the boss wrong." Somehow, this seems to defeat the whole idea of getting even, and could actually result in the offending manager being promoted. Still, it could be the only option open to you because you will definitely have to forget about the adopting the classic "slowdown" as a form of workplace revenge. If you worked any slower, you'd be dead.

For anyone who believes that the desire for revenge is the product of a twisted mind, it is illuminating to discover that the real motivation being expressed in your overpowering urge to fill your boss's Gucci briefcase with peanut butter is "righteous anger, a set of emotions that have a moral foundation, reflecting a sense of violation." If true, this means that rather than being ashamed of your obsessive desire to wreak havoc on your boss's leather accessories, you should embrace your truly admirable desire to readdress a moral order that is plainly out of whack.

Of course, the form of revenge you choose does reflect your own individual â€” and, may I say, quite charming â€” character disorders. If you have a strong self-image, for example, you could choose the "Private Confrontation," in which you go toe-to-toe with the offender, expressing your feelings honestly and openly. This could be psychologically healthy, but it tends to create a culture of candor and truthfulness, and that could lead to mass firings. Better to take to the high road, utilizing your industrial-strength insincerity to pretend to really like the people you loathe, and spread spurious rumors about them when their backs are turned. Now that's maturity.

For workers who do not wish to carry grudges or nurse revenge fantasies, the book provides a checklist of "Ten Fateful Questions for the Would-Be Avenger." I never got past No. 1, "Are you sure the offender deserves the retaliation?" The authors' point is that what you perceive as a brilliant plot cleverly crafted to humiliate and antagonize could simply be stupidity. It's hard to argue with this reasoning, but I don't embrace it. If we didn't wreak revenge on the stupid, management would get a free pass.

Besides, you already know the best revenge on any company dumb enough to hire you â€” just keep working there.

Bob Goldman has been an advertising executive at a Fortune 500 company in the San Francisco Bay Area. He offers a virtual shoulder to cry on at bob@funnybusiness.com.

Copyright 2009 Creators Syndicate Inc.

Work Daze: a cold-hearted course in Revenge 101 by Bob_Goldman