

Corporate Zombie Voodoo

The rantings of a middle aged male against the corporate culture of America

by Hugh Barlow

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I can see them coming

The Corporate Zombie Cowboys

I am an older American worker. I was born at the tail end of the Baby Boomer generation, so I have a few good years left in me, but I have seen some pavement. The years and the miles have not been kind to me, and I am a bit busted up, but for the most part I am still able to function in a limited way. I am no longer a work horse, or mule, but I have experience and drive that more than makes up for my physical frailties. Up until about a year ago, I had been working very part time as a handyman. My wife is a medical professional and makes enough money to support the family all by herself. God bless her. My experiences throughout the years in working for "the man" have left me mostly disabled (although you would be hard pressed to get the GOVERNMENT to admit that a middle aged white male CAN

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be physically disabled). I have fibro myalgia, suffer from severe migraines, have a herniated disk at L-5, S-1 (the last vertebrae of the spine), suffer from severe allergies and asthma, and have had surgery for bi-lateral carpal tunnel (for those who do not understand that medical lingo, I have had surgery on BOTH my hands to relieve pain from carpal tunnel syndrome). Still, I was able, occasionally, on my good days, to put in half a day's hard work or a full day's easy work once or twice a month doing odd jobs. Mostly for people who got my name from friends and other people I had done work for in the past. I would not take a job where I could not bring my two boys since I was also a stay at home dad.

That changed about a year ago when my youngest son got brave enough to take the training wheels off his bicycle. My wife sent me out to teach the boys how to ride. I used to be an avid cyclist in college when we met, and she wanted me to teach the boys how to ride safely (and to get all of us out of her hair). We live in a little southern town in DEEP South Texas (near the border of Mexico), and the streets in town are not quite safe to ride on. I was showing the boys how to jump curbs on the bikes because no-one in our town actually USES the sidewalks (where there are any) and they were the safest place for them to ride. Not that the sidewalks are much better than the streets. Most of the sidewalks in town were poured back in the '60s. This was back when the Americans with Disabilities Act was a mere twinkle in some Democratic Congressman's eye, and had not yet given birth to sidewalks with access for wheelchairs. All of the sidewalks in MY neighborhood have curbs, so I was showing my boys how to jump them. After twenty times of hearing, "Papa, how do you do that?" I said those famous last words, "Watch this!"

My bike back in college was a 27 inch Raleigh touring bike (built for a tall man) that I had converted into a cross-trainer. For those who are unfamiliar with bicycles, Raleigh is famous for making fast, lightweight racing bikes. I had one of those--the type with the old "Ram's Horn" handlebars and with skinny tires. The average person

could easily carry this bike with one hand. I converted it from a road-racing bike to an off-road bike. It still had tall skinny tires, but the tires had KNOBS on the sides. I took the "Ram's Horn" handlebars off and put mountain bike handlebars on it. I put a nice wide seat on the bike for my nice wide seat. I replaced the flimsy aluminum rims that would collapse at the mere mention of a bump in the road and put on the sturdiest steel rims that Schwinn made. I used rims from the Schwinn Varsity. You could not dent those rims with a HAMMER. The bike had a solid frame. No fancy full suspension for ME--I could not afford it. I was still kicking backside with my home-built cross-trainer. My NEW bike? It is an aluminum frame, full suspension, 26 inch, 18 speed, mountain bike made in China. It was the first bike I had owned with a suspension of any kind, and my wife had bought it for me after someone had STOLEN my old homemade bike.

As I said before, I was showing the boys how to jump curbs when I said those fateful last words, "Watch this." I had the boys sit on the sidewalk with their bikes as I took my bike into a little parking area on the side of the street. I got out, away from the curb, and then exaggerated slightly. I pulled up just a little too hard on the handlebars and pushed down just a little too hard on the pedals for effect. I had planned on taking the bike right up to the edge of a wheelie, but NOT go over. That was the plan. Leave it to Steinbeck to phrase it properly, "The best laid plans of mice and men...." Well, you know the rest. The plan failed, catastrophically. I had NOT planned for the full suspension on my new bike. I went up as planned. I reached the top of the wheelie AS planned, and once I got there, the suspension bounced; NOT as planned. I went over, tail over tea-kettle. I ended up with the bike riding me. At that point I was in trouble. When I got up, I was unable to properly use my right arm. It took months for the specialist in my town to even LOOK at the shoulder with an MRI machine. I do not fault her for this. My wife is a medical professional. I know all about how restrictive insurance companies are. I hear about it from her, and I have lived it

with my own medical issues. There was no way that the specialist would get paid for the MRI if she had not followed the insurance company's procedures. It took her six months to get the permission to get the MRI. In the meantime, I was no longer able to work as a handyman. What little income I had outside of the home was severely curtailed. I did the next best thing and applied for a job at a nationally known parts store. I am still dealing with the damaged rotator cuff.

I had some issues working against me when I applied at "National Auto Parts" (again, not the real company name). First, I was already disabled. My knee was busted up from falling off a ladder years before, so I could not move quickly. I had one arm that I could only lift up to about shoulder height, I had a bad back, I still suffer occasionally from the carpal tunnel, and I have fibro myalgia, so I generally hurt ALL the time. Add to that the migraines and I could be a bit cranky. A second issue was that I was STILL a stay at home dad. My wife and I both home-school our boys. I stay home with them until my wife comes home. After five in the evening, I am available for work. I can work to close. I cannot come in any earlier. The third issue is that I am a Sabbath keeping Christian. This means that I am not available for work from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. That is my holy day. I am and WAS available all day on Sunday. I pestered the manager of the local store into hiring me anyway. I know cars. I have had more cars than some new car lots. Until I got married, I did not spend more than \$350 on a car (or motorcycle) EVER. Most of the cars I got were purchased for about \$50. I could not afford to buy a new one (or nearly new used car). I had to fix my own. I have also worked in a number of junk yards and service stations over the years. In all of them, if the certified mechanic had a problem with a car, he came to me for advice. I was usually right. Most mechanics today are only parts changers. They plug the car into a computer, and do what the computer tells them to do. When that doesn't work, they are lost. I never had that. I had to use my head and the tools at hand. So, after 8 hours of the certified

mechanic changing parts, I come in and show him that the gas tank is empty using a can of starting fluid, a wrench, and a screwdriver. It takes ME about 15 minutes to figure THAT out. It takes longer for the mechanic to figure out how to justify doing all the work on the customer's car when all it really needed was a few gallons of gasoline.

Up to now, there are several types of corporate zombies in my story. You've got the insurance companies that are FILLED with Corporate Zombies. They often seem more than willing to suck your brains out through a straw if they thought it would save them a bit of money. You also have the mechanics at the corporate service stations who are only trained to plug the car in and not use their brains to figure out what is wrong. They are not quite as bad as the insurance zombies, but they do get in the way of the living. The worst though, are the "Corporate Troubleshooters." THESE are the guys in the cowboy hats and boots that walk into a store or location that has "problems" as identified by the corporation. Now, these problems are often self induced by micromanaging from higher up on the corporate ladder, but those at the top will never admit that some of the people under them may actually have more experience on the ground (and occasionally more intelligence) than they do. The higher-up head muckety mucks are gods in the corporate world, and you do as you are told and not as the circumstances would seem to require where you live. These are the Zombie Voodoo Kings. The "Yes Men," the corporate zombie cowboys, come in with their six shooters and prove that they have no brains by doing nearly everything as the corporation wants it regardless of whether it makes sense or not. They wave the dead chickens, cant their incantations, make it all better, and go home. Meanwhile, the living real folks have to deal with the mess that these Zombie Cowboys leave behind .

I will have to admit that the man who hired me for my current job is not the smartest man in the universe. HE will readily admit that,

himself. What he was good at is recognizing talent and putting it to work. If you had a strong back and could speak Spanish and English but did not know cars, he would find a place for you. if you could not speak Spanish, but knew CARS, he would couple you with the strong back so that you could work together to help the customer. Most people do not have the patience to do the type of work I am good at. I pay attention to the little details. I may not be fast, but when my job is done, no-one has to come back to fix it. In the long run, it takes less time to do things MY way because less people have to do the job. My former boss appreciated that. He was fired recently. The district manager brought in one of the Corporate Zombie Cowboys to "clean things up." The new boss is a "Yes Man." He has no idea when to say "no" to the corporate gods. I worked for one of these types before. It was actually in manufacturing, and not in the automotive industry, but the story makes for a good object lesson.

I had to work second shift for "CreditCorp" (and, no--this is not Citi or any other banking company that folks would likely know). My job was to build and repair the machines that make credit cards. I was called a "Customer Engineer," but basically, I was a plant electrician. My job was secure, since the type of work that I did was technically demanding, and the corporation did not want to lose me, but there were several times when I had witnessed plant closures, or work slow-downs where the non-skilled labor was booted without so much as a, "By your leave, madame." Rumors would circulate for months that a culling was coming, and inevitably, some talking head from somewhere in Human Resources would be called upon to quell the rumors. A few weeks after the speech from the talking head, I would come to work to find that certain of the sheeple were being herded to a conference room while the rest of us were allowed to continue on to work. We never saw the other sheeple again. It is understandable that CreditCorp would do this kind of thing, since it's employees handle MILLIONS of dollars in credit cards a day, and just ONE disgruntled employee could make a killing stealing blank

credit cards, but the point is that the company often used the "bald faced lie" to get it's way.

The second shift manager in the building I worked at in CreditCorp did not seem to get this. He was a corporate yes man who eventually got his backside handed to him by the gods he tried to appease. One day, the rumor mill was working overtime (and the employees were not). I got called over at shift change by the first shift manager of my building.

"Have you noticed that you never get an excellent review by Howard?" (that wasn't my manager's name, but for the sake of privacy, we will call him that).

"Actually, I HAVE noticed that." I replied. Howard had this great habit of praising you at the beginning and end of the day, but the praise almost never made it into his performance reviews. I had one review that was so bad that I met with his superior while I was shaking with rage to demand that he give me a more realistic review. Howard's manager agreed that it certainly looked like an unfair review, and changed THAT one, but I had never gotten the glowing reports that should have come with all the AWARDS for EXCELLENCE that I had been getting on the job.

"There is a standing policy at CreditCorp to have the managers 'play down' the employee achievements so that the raises are not so high. Howard does this. The third shift manager and I do NOT. You need to come and work for ME."

"Um, thanks. I really do appreciate that, but my wife works first shift and we have just had a baby. I need to be home with him during the day. I cannot work third shift because it would conflict with my wife's schedule. I can ONLY work second. Besides, I need the shift differential."

It wasn't long after this conversation that the next culling occurred. The employees that stayed were all transferred to first shift. Those who could NOT work first shift were transferred to other locations. I was transferred to a new location. Howard lost his position because HE had the lowest ranked staff in the company. All because he could not say "no" to the gods above him. This seems to be what happens to the Corporate Zombie Cowboys. They get eaten by their own Zombie Kings.

The hardest part is I can see them coming, I am on the menu, and I cannot avoid them.

