

Sympathy, Morale, and the Importance of Being Organized

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

In every job I have ever had, I have been happy for the most part. When I was an attorney, for example, I liked many aspects of being an attorney. When I worked in the asphalt business, I loved many aspects of that business. Most people are able to find some level of enjoyment in every job that they do. What is interesting, though, is that in every job I ever had, there were always people around me who were more than happy to stop by my office and go out to lunch with me, just to give me the news that my job really sucked--regardless of what I might think of the job.

- "It is really unfortunate that they are giving you so much work. You should not have to work that hard."
- "I bet you are starting to see that this is a really bad place to work. There is not enough work to do. I would not be surprised if it went out of business."
- "There is no opportunity here. I heard that someone was fired so they did not have to give him a promotion."
- "People make more money at our competitors. There is no reason to stay around here when they are not paying the top of the market salary."
- "I am going to get out of here just as soon as the economy improves. They do not appreciate anything we are doing."

One after another, people would stop by my office, take me out to lunch, come up to me at parties and, in general, give me one news flash or another about how awful the place where I was working was. The fact was that when this first started occurring I actually really liked where I was working.

- I thought the work was fun.
- I liked the people I was working with.
- I was excited about the income I was earning.
- I liked working hard because I had enthusiasm for the work I did.
- If I was not working hard at a particular time, I enjoyed having a short respite.

However, regardless of how I felt, there were commentators around me who would always appear and find a tremendous amount of fault in my job for me. This is something that happened in every single job I ever had. I would also watch these "sympathizers" approach other new coworkers at the firms, and change them from happy, enthusiastic and bubbling puppies into dour faced, angry and resentful people--in a short period of time.

What kind of "sympathy" makes someone who was formerly happy become depressed?

What kind of "sympathy" makes someone resentful, or hate their job?

This sort of sympathy typically does not do anybody any good. The sympathizer is rarely a person who is effective in his own job, or in the world. If this person could do something about what he or she argues is a negative situation, the person would. You may notice that the sympathizer never helps you make the situation any better. Instead, the sympathizer makes you resent what you are doing and what you have. The only place the sympathizer is generally going to take you is to the unemployment line or, at best, another job--where you will undoubtedly encounter another sympathizer.

Since I started out as a young attorney I now know many people who are partners in major [law firms](#) who have had fantastic careers. These successful people never listened to the sympathizers when they stopped by their offices. They walked away, having other things to do, or they simply avoided the sympathizers completely. I now read the legal newspapers, *Wall Street Journal* and other publications, and I see these attorneys who "walked away" mentioned regularly.

The sympathizers that I knew have had careers that mostly border on tragic. Despite having gone to good law schools and having had experiences with good firms, many have done things such as:

- working in five [legal jobs](#) and then taking a year off, only to end up in a career teaching pre-algebra in a private school,
- working in the human resources department of a 15-person nonprofit company,
- calling themselves "writers" and sitting around at Starbucks all day doing and publishing nothing.
- becoming "legal consultants" and having no clients and trying to live on a couple of thousand of dollars a month (my personal favorite).

One attorney, after coming to the United States from Europe or Asia, burned through three jobs in three years and then ended up getting deported to his home country because no one would give him a job in the United States. Four years later I discovered on this person's Facebook page that he is a waiter in Shanghai, who also repairs BMWs for a sports car dealership.

There is nothing wrong with doing any of these things, of course. But these examples are all far different from making well over a million dollars a year as an attorney, working for the top performing companies in the world, and having a high profile career for which one is highly sought after, and is regularly mentioned in the media.

My point is this: *The sympathizers are generally lucky to be employed at all, whereas the people who "just walk away" from the sympathizers are by far the most sought out.* Since we all rely on others for jobs, income and a sense of contribution, I believe that the person who can "just walk away" is the person who ultimately has the better career, and makes the most of his or her skills and talents.

Sympathy with your coworkers and others is the surest way to create problems. You tell people their job is crap, that they are mistreated and that the conditions are bad--and what do they do? They get angry and no longer like their job. They go to

work each day feeling bad about their jobs and at themselves for having to be there.

Groups of workers may even try to "revolt" and "organize", due to their newfound beliefs that the job place is extremely unfair. This is the history of communism, for example. Our entire world and many events within it have been influenced by one "worker revolt" after another against "unfair" working conditions, or unfair this or that. The results of these revolts are not always good.

Case in point, is Russia better off for having been under communism? Did communism work for Russia? Moreover, is the American auto industry, which has been dying away, better off in the long run due to the incredible demands it experienced under unions? Is having no job available better than having many jobs available?

Genuine, unselfish sympathy and unmotivated empathy are obviously of value in personal relationships; however, I am unsure if the type of "sympathy" discussed above is ever a good thing. I have an assistant in Las Vegas that has a friend who will not get a job because he makes more money on unemployment than he would make if he were working. He has gone out and applied for jobs and has even gotten them, but ultimately it makes no sense for him to keep these jobs. This does not make a lot of sense to me. So this fellow continues sitting around doing nothing, not being a part of society's work force. Is this a good thing? I do not think it is. How much good does the "sympathy" of government unemployment payments do here?

When I used to live in the inner city of Detroit many women I knew of refused to get married because they would not be able to get welfare if they got married. Accordingly, many, many women decided they had no use for a man in the household. What did this do for the children? How do you think this made the local men feel? Did this mentality contribute to crime? How much good does the "sympathy" of government welfare payments do here?

Sympathy is something that can really hurt you. Society has rules and procedures, and if you follow these you will generally do very well and rise towards the top. If you sit around seeking sympathy and functioning on others' sympathy, the opposite will happen: You will fall to the bottom.

Sympathy is something that often destroys morale. The man on unemployment who does not get a job because he makes more on unemployment has low morale. The woman on welfare who refuses to get married and is raising four children by three different husbands probably has low morale. The person who likes his job and suddenly changes his tune due to the insincere "sympathy" of coworkers who plant negative ideas about the pay scale, working conditions and so forth--has poor morale. The person who jumps between jobs and never really gets anywhere because each new employer is "just as bad as the one before" has poor morale.

I am not saying that there is no injustice in the world. There is. However, the people that have real skill in the world are the ones who have the ability to bring order to a situation and fix things. Companies and groups that have the best organization are typically the ones with the highest morale. If a company has good organization then the problems of having extremely low morale and other issues are less likely to become a problem. You should seek out companies and organizations that have the best organization. If you work for a company that is incredibly well organized you are more likely to do better than if you work in one that is not.

When you drive down any decent-sized street in America you are likely to see a McDonald's, a Starbucks and a number of similar chain restaurants. What is the difference between these companies and your average company out there? Once a McDonald's is put up in any town in the United States you never hear about the place closing down due to low morale or an inability to attract and retain workers. You do not hear news stories about poor morale in the Midtown Manhattan McDonald's, or the Starbucks under the Golden Gate Bridge. These businesses just keep humming along, and very few of them fail. This is mostly because these companies and their staffs are incredibly well organized.

- Everyone knows what they are supposed to be doing.
- Everyone knows when they are supposed to be at work.
- Everyone knows exactly what is required of their job.
- Everyone knows when their next review is going to be.
- Everyone knows what their responsibilities will be if they are promoted.
- Everyone knows what they have to do (and not do) in order to get fired.

You know when you go into a Starbucks how the coffee is going to taste, how it is going to be served and so forth. The experience is predictable. The people working there also know how to do their jobs due to a myriad of training procedures they have undergone, and the feeling you get from the average Starbucks employees is not one of horrible morale or job-induced anger. Instead, it is generally a feeling of excitement and pleasure to be of service. The reason for this I believe is due to how well the company and its branches are organized.

Organizations that are well organized like your Starbucks, your McDonalds and your Wal-Marts, are usually also the most successful. They will be there with or without you. They keep going. The reason that poor morale is so difficult to infiltrate all the workers in these companies is because the processes and procedures of the companies are highly fine tuned and organized. If an employee is making trouble and not doing his job correctly, not showing up for work consistently, bad mouthing the boss, bad mouthing the company, not being productive with his time, taking unscheduled breaks and so forth, then the company will "eject" him very quickly, like a virus.

When I see a résumé of someone who has been at a variety of well organized employers in the space of a short period of time I generally know that this person is like a "virus", who tends to get expelled from the well organized system quickly. Your best hotel chains, your best restaurants and your best companies all use very good organization to keep morale high and to keep the company productive. Efficient organizations build good morale. Poor organization leads to poor morale.

If a McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Disneyland or Starbucks were not extremely well organized then they would have a variety of serious problems with internal morale.

When I speak with people inside of law firms and companies who are extremely dissatisfied with their jobs, the one complaint I hear over and over again is how poorly organized the employer is. When people are promoted, demoted, or fired who should not be, and when one person has to do too much work, while others are not doing enough, such issues can all be greatly improved by concrete organizational procedures, which let people know where they stand inside the organization. Discomfort, insecurity and other issues creep in when people do not know exactly where they stand in an organization.

In almost every instance where there is extremely poor morale in an organization, beneath this you will find a chaotic lack of

organization. People just do not understand how things work, where they fit in and what their responsibilities are. When people understand exactly what they are supposed to be doing and what is expected of them, morale increases.

In your career and life you have the following choices:

First, you can be the sort of person who goes around undermining organizations, people and so forth with "sympathy" about their lives and working conditions. You can tell people how sorry you are about whatever is expected of them and their lives. In this process you will hurt others and create problems.

Second, you can be the sort of person who is proactive and helps a company or group get organized and get procedures in place in order for morale to improve. You can be a champion for organization and in the process raise the morale of the company or organization you are part of. The better organized the company or group you are part of, the higher the morale will generally be. If you take this route, you will find that the people who resist your efforts are most likely the same people who like to find "sympathy" with everyone around them. People who go around giving sympathy are, most often, harmful people whose sense of power comes from grinding at the happiness and egos of those around them, and undermining organization.

You will generally be the happiest and most productive in the best organized groups. The best organized groups are also much harder for people to undermine. A group's strength is generally related to its ability to be organized.

Pretty soon many of these so-called sympathetic workers may be out of a job. The company will simply close or go elsewhere, where the staff is more friendly and appreciative of the work.

THE LESSON

Sympathy destroys morale, and those who can walk away from sympathy often have better careers and make better use of their skills. Good organization is the most effective means of upholding high morale and productivity. Well-organized groups and companies are much harder for people to undermine, and their strength is directly linked to their organization.

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