

Bob Gunn, Editor

The Pursuit of Unhappiness

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Karen got a raise, and she's mad enough to quit. "I really hit my stride last summer," she told a friend. "I coordinated several new business pitches and was instrumental in winning important contracts. You know that I don't like to be a squeaky wheel, but it was really important to me to make more money.

I screwed up the courage to ask for a \$10,000 raise, and I got it! I even took my boyfriend out to dinner and celebrated.

"But then I found out that other people with my title elsewhere in the company are making more than I am. And a colleague just got a big offer from a competitor for a lot more money, and our firm matched it. Worst of all, my boss let it slip that she had put me down for a \$10,000 raise in the annual payroll plan. So it turns out that I didn't get anything special.

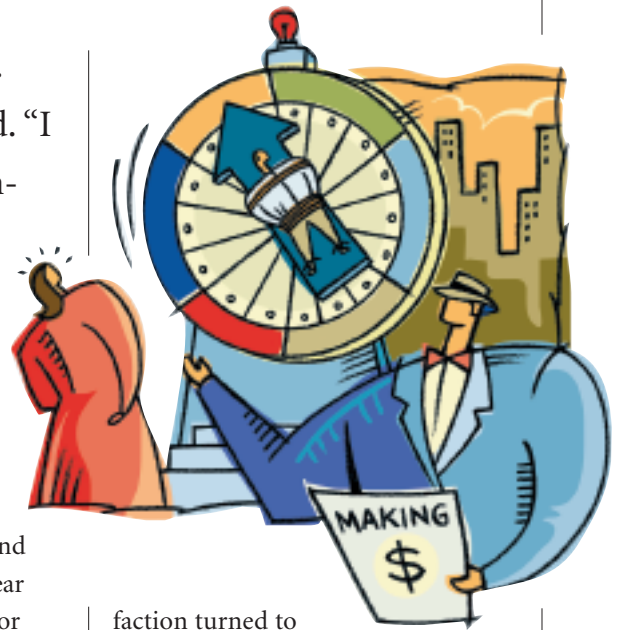
"And that's the way it is with this company," she complained, her words coming faster and faster. "The only way to get the attention of the higher-ups is by threatening to quit. I really like it here, but they take me for granted. I want to be valued. I guess I'm going to have to go out

and look for another job. It shouldn't have to be this way. Why can't they..."

"Wait a minute," Karen's friend gently interrupted. "Did you hear what you just said? You asked for \$10,000, and they gave you \$10,000. I'm curious. *What would it take to make you happy?*"

The question jolted Karen into stillness. She blinked, then burst out laughing. Her friend was right—she *had* gotten what she asked for. That simple fact was, in and of itself, a positive thing.

Considered in comparison to other factors, however, Karen's bright and shiny raise became tarnished. The direct experience of asking for and receiving her raise engendered feelings of pride in Karen. Then she took some bites of a poisoned apple: comparison. Satis-



faction turned to resentment. The raise was something tangible and external, but it couldn't stand up to the internal force of Karen's thinking about it.

This wasn't the first time that unfavorable comparisons had spoiled a triumphant moment. With a flash of insight, Karen realized that she had a habit of assessing her experiences based on whether she was good enough...or not, equal to others...or not, or meeting expectations...or not. It all added up to an unconscious pursuit of unhappiness.

Karen is hardly alone in allowing habits of thought to interfere with

happiness in the moment. Experts have found that people are motivated in the work environment by three fundamentals: money, recognition, and cause. Note the importance of personal thinking in each of these. A cause that has deep meaning for you may not interest me at all. In some companies, you need a title and corner office to feel that you've "arrived," while others make "nontitles" badges of honor. Even money, the most tangible of motivators, has a subjective piece. As we found with Karen, we tend to compare our paycheck to what others get.

With so much going on in people's minds, it's no wonder bosses have a hard time keeping employees motivated. How can we ever know what somebody else is thinking, particularly when they are often on autopilot? Indeed, some of the early studies of women in the labor force traced dissatisfaction to confusion over what was really motivating to them, what matters to each individual's own sense of satisfaction. It was found that women often took jobs for the wrong reasons. "I'm working for the money; I'm happy to be behind the scenes," one woman would say—only to complain six months later because her boss took all the credit. Another would say, "I just want to know that I'm making a contribution to society" and then be jealous of friends making more money.

Karen thought that money would make her happy, but she now realizes that she's more motivated by recognition—signals that she is special or is especially valued. As helpful as it is for Karen to know that, the most promising change is her newfound awareness of the dynamics of happiness. Counting on money or recognition puts powerful

levers into the hands of someone else, and Karen blamed external forces for engendering resentment. Now she sees that it isn't what the boss does that "makes" her happy, it's the thoughts she has about what the boss does.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? All we have to do to be happy is to realize that we can release our thoughts when we become gripped by negativity, resentment, or whatever personal thinking takes over. The first problem, however, is that we've often started down the rabbit hole before we even realize what we're thinking. Certain thoughts are so familiar and habitual that we cease to "hear" them. We're reacting to "what is" without seeing that what looks real and locked in stone is really just our thoughts, which ebb and flow all the time. Paradoxically, the more powerful a thought habit is—the more often we repeat it—the harder it is to be aware of it. As the old saying goes, "Fish don't see the water they swim in."

Karen, for example, didn't realize how often she was comparing her experiences to her expectations. When she made a conscious effort to track the habit, she was amazed, chagrined, and a bit ashamed. She realized that even her positive comparisons—times when she performed above her expectations or better than someone else—were insidious. Not only did today's "better than" pave the way for tomorrow's "less than," each "I'm king of the world!" fed Karen's addiction to comparison. Her problem wasn't that she made negative judgments and found fault with herself or her experiences. Rather, she was cutting herself off from full engagement with life by continual assessment.

With her newly heightened aware-

ness, Karen is about to go after another raise. This time, she's carefully sorting out her thoughts first by asking herself:

- What do I really need?
- Does my boss have the authority to give me what I need?
- If I ask for what I need and my request is granted, will I be satisfied?
- What if I just stop dividing my attention between work and reward? Won't that end the constant tug of dissatisfaction?
- What if I just concentrate on the job at hand and try to do the best I can, standing firmly in the present and unconcerned about my future reward?
- What if I just release my attachment to money, recognition, fame, praise? Will knowing that I am doing a good job allow me to generate satisfaction myself?

In short, the key question isn't "How can the boss make me happy?" Nobody else and nothing external have the power to do that. Karen is now asking, "What can I do to improve my mental condition in order to find it easier to feel positive about my work?"

All happiness is personal. The choice is ours: Will we allow unexamined habits to drive our reactions to people and events, or will we step into the full richness of experience and life uncensored by our thoughts? ■

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