

Bob Gunn, Editor

Don't Say It's Too Much

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

When a key executive died, the owners of a small publishing company quickly asked Andrea to take on additional responsibility. They agreed that as soon as the dust cleared, they would discuss a raise to match her promotion. Before Andrea headed out the door on the morning of that meeting, the last thing her husband

said to her was, “Whatever amount of money they offer you, *don't say it's too much.*”

He knew her well. That night she came home

with a 25% bump in compensation—and tooth marks on her tongue. “I'd always felt that if I were a little underpaid, somehow that gave me the upper hand,” she explains. “If I were paid a lot more than I could get anywhere else, I'd feel that I couldn't leave, that somehow they owned me. Even worse—I'd constantly be stressing over whether or not I was doing enough, whether I was good enough, or whether I was worth it. Better to feel like a martyr—‘Look how much more they're getting from me than they have a right to expect!’—than to feel like a fraud. Better to feel that I could quit at any time than to worry about being fired.”

A consulting colleague,

Marisa, recently negotiated a contract with a man who could be Andrea's emotional twin. He works in Italy, where fees are low compared to the rest of Europe. Adhering to the firm's European rates, our colleague offered the Italian contractor *double* his normal daily fee. She assumed he'd be thrilled; instead, he reacted as if she'd said something terrible.

“He protested, ‘The quality that will be expected of me for that fee is beyond what I can imagine,’” Marisa reports. So she asked him: “How do you consider the quality you normally deliver?” He replied: “Top level.” Then she challenged him: “So if you find a client who will finally pay top money for your top quality, isn't that OK?”

“It took him more than an hour to conclude that he deserved the higher rate,” Marisa says. “It was interesting to see his mind-set. He could come to terms only after I pointed out that the higher pay would give him the margin to spend extra time on the project without feeling resentful. But his first reaction was one of fear—fear that he couldn't give work of any higher quality than what he was already doing. Not for a moment did he

ILLUSTRATION: G. BRIAN DARAS/ARTVILLE



think, 'I'm normally underpaid, so perhaps I actually deserve this higher amount.' It was unbelievable how uncomfortable he was."

Money evokes more reactive thinking and powerfully adverse emotions than practically any other subject. We all have experienced or seen coworkers exhibit feelings such as resentment that others are paid more, insecurity about not making enough to support a particular lifestyle, anger that pay is out of synch with contribution, and so on. Money is supposed to motivate us to work hard, yet the topic often induces reactive feelings. Bedeviled by negativity, our thinking runs wild. And we can never do our best work when our minds are in a highly roiled emotional condition.

The topic of money links our *internal* sense of worth, value, or happiness to the *external variable* of compensation. As in all our columns, we start with the knowledge that our well-being, creativity, and performance are correlated to our internal state of mind. The more aware we are of our thoughts and emotions, the more effortless and enjoyable work—indeed, life—becomes. As the mental chatter quiets, we are no longer "triggered" by convoluted thoughts.

Money, then, becomes a rather simple concept: a mechanism to exchange goods and services. Transactions are less complex when our thinking is clear, for we can measure more dispassionately what one commodity is worth or what makes pay and incentives fair. Compensation loses its grip on our egos; money takes on a completely neutral tone. We see it simply as a necessity for the world to function as it is currently structured but not something that has any intrinsic

power over our happiness.

One of the preeminent voices on this subject is philosopher Jacob Needleman. In a June 1997 interview in *Fast Company*, Needleman encapsulated the link between money and thinking as he quoted the great boxing champion, Joe Louis—who gave money away about as fast as he earned it, ultimately landing in hot water with the IRS. "I don't like money very much," Louis reportedly said, "but it calms my nerves."

The blurb for Needleman's 1991 book, *Money and the Meaning of Life*, states: "If we understood the true role of money in our lives, we would not think simply in terms of spending it or saving it. Money exerts a deep emotional influence on who we are and what we tell ourselves we can never have. Our long unwillingness to understand the emotional and spiritual effects of money is at the heart of why we have come to know the price of everything, and the value of nothing."

Needleman elaborates, "When money... fattens your ego, which it often does, then look out. That way lies madness.... If you don't know how you are toward money and really understand that relationship, you simply don't know yourself. Period."

As such, focus on self-awareness and your state of mind when the topic is money. Step back emotionally to allow insight regarding your feelings about money and how those feelings relate to your own sense of well-being and happiness. When does money trigger a seemingly unstoppable flow of anxiety, resentment, greed, selfishness, or anger? Does having money encourage you to feel better than others, cocky, arrogant? Does its lack make you fearful, insecure, doubting your value as

a worker or, even worse, as a human being?

Our colleague Marisa has reflected on such matters. "I used to link the word 'value' to 'responsibility,'" she says. "If nature has given you 'x' amount of gifts, and you've been able to develop and benefit from them, you also have a certain responsibility to use those gifts creatively. Will I be up to the task? More money was nothing but a very heavy burden until I let go of expectations and said to myself, 'I'm just here to learn in this life, to accomplish some good, and to connect to the people around me.'"

In short, what enables us to do good work is how well we stay grounded. That depends on our thoughts about who we are, not on money. The irony is that at the moment when people are most eager to show how much they value your performance, you have the least need for such external validation.

As Marisa has concluded: "When you feel okay with whatever number they pay you, then you don't show up arrogant or fearful. In fact, it's far easier to show up in the most positive way and make the best contribution you can to the task at hand. When you can feel as though compensation no longer matters, you are most apt to be creating the most value for your institution and, ultimately, yourself." ■

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