

Bob Gunn, Editor

Addiction

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

We started our careers during the heyday of the three-martini lunch. The women managers just ahead of us were proud that they could drink their male colleagues under the table and still show up for work the next day. A dozen years later, more and more cocktail party attendees were nursing one glass of

wine or toting a club soda, but the “old gals” were still “knockin’ ’em back.” On one unforgettably uncomfortable morning, one of our mentors was to emcee an awards breakfast after having stumbled into bed at 3 a.m. She made it to the microphone but was so incoherent that

one of the honorees led her gently back to her chair where she sat, staring at the floor.

Back then, nobody called that alcoholism. But we know now that it was. Even more important, we’ve come to see addiction for what it is: merely a misguided strategy to avoid difficult situations, thoughts, and feelings. In other words, in order to

avoid discomfort, addicts turn to the numbing effects of drugs or alcohol or to such distractions as gambling, eating, and shopping. Addiction is at the extreme end of an all-too-common spectrum of escape hatches that allow us to be less *present*.

Even teetotalers know what it is to be sad, depressed, angry, anxious, or afraid. We’re all somewhere in the cycle of suffering and distraction, so it’s normal to want to hide at times. Even if we aren’t addicts or alcoholics, don’t we all have our own ways of diverting our attention?

Those involved in recovery have a term for it: RID, which stands for Restless, Irritable, and Discontented. RID is an important marker for those in recovery because it’s the warning sign of relapse. Indeed, before sipping a drink or taking a drug, an addict is a “dry drunk,”

effectively in relapse if he or she is experiencing RID. The individual’s thinking is already chaotic, which leads to the search for distraction from being present.

On an organizational level, too, RID points to a negative churn. Restlessness manifests as impatience (i.e., jumping from agenda item to agenda item), irritation breeds frustration (e.g., e-mail volleys), and discontent fuels office politics (including the blame game). Like the addict, the organization is distracted from its real issues.

For example, consider one company where growth had slowed from high to low single digits. Employees were *restless*, leaving voluntarily at rates of up to 30% a year. A recent survey revealed *discontent*: Employee engagement scores were at the fourth quartile. Of particular concern was staff *irritation*. Responses to questions about management were stuck between 60% and 77%, pegging management as reactive, bureaucratic, directive, indecisive, and punitive when innovative ideas failed.

Naturally, the requisite task force was formed to “deal with” the survey. At the first meeting, the assembled

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team leaders began reviewing the survey scores. In all too human fashion, they distanced themselves by using such words as “them,” “those employees,” or “that site” until finally someone asked, “Didn’t we take the survey as well? Aren’t *our* scores reflected in these data?”

Immediately a chorus of voices shouted, “Don’t go there!”

No way were they willing to share the pain. Admitting their problems was simply too frightening. It seemed so much easier to lose themselves in restless activity, be irritated with the messenger, walk out of the room in discontent, and turn their attention to their BlackBerry devices.

Compared to alcoholics/addicts, these were highly functional executives earning high six figures and enjoying the perquisites that come with offices on high floors! As with substance abusers, however, they were powerless to see clearly. They were ensnared by their unspoken, fierce determination to avoid pain. They simultaneously became both victims and victimizers.

Social workers know it takes deep reservoirs of kindness and compassion to help the addicted. The hurt is so acute, the misery so unrelenting, and the hopelessness so pervasive; mental anguish cuts such bottomless channels in the brain that virtually no daylight is visible. Paradoxically, that torment can become the very energy needed to fuel change. The conviction that “I have hit bottom” marks the moment at which transformation becomes possible.

Back in the task force meeting, the “Don’t go there” comment provoked nervous laughter. But then one person quietly stated, “Well, maybe we might—‘Go there,’ I mean.” Profound silence ensued. “The words touched our hearts; all of us felt

something shift in our beings,” notes one participant. “A few people’s eyes actually brimmed with tears. The only thing we could bring ourselves to do was to set the next meeting date....As the next meeting approached a few weeks later, we all wondered what was going to happen. Had we hit bottom? And was change possible?”

The facilitator opened the session by sharing how much the last meeting had affected him and then asked the group to reflect on what mattered to them, personally, right now. The next hour was electric. One leader after another said how much they loved the company, what having such talented and capable colleagues meant to them professionally and personally, how deeply the employee engagement scores hurt, how badly they wanted to change, and how much it mattered that their legacy might be one of creating a productive, happy workplace instead of a sweatshop where staff were miserable. The thinking had shifted—and a different energy was unleashed!

Even though the experience was still unfamiliar—even tender—the group got right down to working with openness, honesty, respect, and caring. In the course of two hours, they made 10 decisions that would irrevocably transform the fabric of the company. Quite literally, they set out on a new path, climbing toward the sunlight that they knew was possible for them, for their staff, and for everyone the company touches.

In other words, the engagement survey had pointed to RID in the organization, and the task force found the three-step antidote:

1. Recognize the negative thinking that lies under unproductive behaviors, and diagnose the dynamic. Is imagination throwing fuel

on the embers of insecurity? Are assumptions running rampant? Are expectations out of whack?

2. Take a deep mental breath; reflect before you act, remembering the admonition to medical students: “First, do no harm.” The louder and more insistent thoughts seem, the more cautious you should be. Even acknowledging that thoughts are in play takes you out of the vicious circle of victim/victimizer and allows you more choices.
3. Keep your antennae tuned to your common sense and the collective wisdom of your team. Listen quietly for an insight, a kind of knowing that has a quality of freshness and dynamic possibility, and then do what that insight suggests.

The bottom line is that certain things are true for addicts and “normies,” for organizations and individuals, at work and in life: Everybody has insecurities, and nobody likes to be uncomfortable.

At the same time, nobody is unable to change. Everybody has innate mental capacities that can be tapped at any time. Above all, true success doesn’t mean being happy all the time but being able to be resilient and responsive to whatever comes your way. And we don’t have to hit bottom to find the motivation to face our habits of distraction. ■

Robert Gunn is a cofounder of Accompli, a consultancy that helps leaders achieve transformational business outcomes while deepening their awareness of the human element (rgunn@accompligroup.com). Betsy Raskin Gullickson was an EVP for Ketchum Communications and is now a leadership coach and author (bgullickson@sbcglobal.net).