

The Workplace Zombie

**One Bureaucrat's Path to Better
Understanding the Virus and Its Vectors**

A productive day is a happier day. When we get things done, it feels good. But disengaged zombie workers build up like plaque in society's arteries and get in the way. They must be stopped from spreading their virus, damaging our organizations, and harming the souls they touch.

David A Dolinsky

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife Beth, daughter Dottie, brothers Arthur and Evan, my Mom - Carolyn F. Jacobson, my wife's parents, Allan and Tanya, grandparents, aunts, uncles, extended family, close friends, former coworkers and supervisors, teachers, and others who have been kind enough to mentor and encourage me and put up with my many eccentricities.

It is also dedicated to those who reported to me when I was in leadership positions, both early and late in my career. I made thousands of mistakes, yet many stayed with me for years. I am grateful and humbled by how much I learned from each of them.

There is one person who needs a special mention. Her name is Esterle G. Cobourn (1933 - 2017). We met through my first job after leaving the Army. She was a business leader long before that was possible for most women. She was intelligent, funny, and had more business and people skills than anyone I've met before or since. She took an interest in my success based only on kindness and generosity. I learned so much from her and know that she would have enjoyed this book.

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To my closest friends who aren't mentioned above, know that I will start writing a sequel to this book soon. Plan to be enlisted to work on that next one!

FOREWORD

The book rests on two fundamental theories: 1) It is worth striving for a world where people find meaning in their work, no matter the role, and achieve satisfaction as a result, and 2) With people increasingly divided by community, identity, and opinion, applying wisdom to bridge divisions and humanize those we interact with improves their lives and our own.

Some friends considered the book's longstanding working title too harsh. *Workplace Zombies Must Die!* was an homage to the movie *Surf Nazis Must Die*. Godwin's Law about the inevitability of a Nazi analogy being used holding true. The current title just seemed right.

There were several iterations of the title in the drafts. It started out as *Petacque's Path*, in honor of my Great Uncle Ralph David 'Dave' Petacque, my namesake, and to what Archibald Putt called the "P Literature" in his book *Putt's Law and the Successful Technocrat*. The "P Literature" included: *The Peter Principle* (Peter and Hull - 1969), *Parkinson's Law* (Parkinson - 1957), and *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship* (Potter - 1947).

The twelve chapters roughly adhere to Buddhism's Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path. There are eighteen subsections. Eighteen is a lucky number in Judaism. It stands for the word "chai" or "life." As in "L'chaim!" which translates to "To life!"

Nobel prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman said, "No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story." The chapters have stories that illustrate the concepts and thoughts that follow. The personal stories, even the oddest ones, are all real.

Thinking about choice architecture, reducing friction, and what many in leadership positions are always pushing for, but shouldn't, its meetings! Time is zero-sum. You never get it back. An irony of the typical workplace, where outcomes should matter more than activity, is that there are so many useless meetings.

One solution to the time-wasting meeting problem is to issue agendas. Break a thirty-minute block of time down by the minute, by the person, with decisions framed and potential follow-up actions outlined.

One of the last agreements I helped negotiate was five billion dollars for another department to procure personal protective gear for COVID-19. Negotiating agreements between civilian and military agencies in the federal government is fraught with friction. Even in government, five billion dollars is a lot of money. Lots of lawyers, senior executives, and general officers get involved. Publishing agendas before meetings allows people to have input in advance, shows respect, and makes the discussion more productive. Limits on talking benefit everyone.

It took work to arrange these thirty-minute meetings, but it was a great investment. We spent a few hundred dollars' worth of time on planning and coordination. Considering all the participants, we saved tens of thousands of dollars in payroll hours. We also quickly accomplished an objective that benefited the nation.

Short meetings, designated speakers, and clear objectives have many benefits. If nothing else, it blocks the ultracrepidarians from having time to add their unnecessary, workplace zombie virus-inducing BS into the equation.

WE'RE NOSEBLIND TO OUR OWN BS

In *On Bullshit* (2005), Harry Frankfurt works to define bullshit, how it differs from lying, and why its prevalence is increasing. He references, *The Prevalence of Humbug and Other Essays* (1983) by Max Black. Black defines Humbug as: "deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes."

Frankfurt writes that "Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about." The circumstance where bullshit is spewed when talking about something outside of one's scope of knowledge is referred to as Ultracrepidarianism. Humbug and bullshit in the workplace set the stage for the creation of workplace zombies and enable the virus to spread.

With the medical condition anosmia, an affected person loses their ability to smell entirely. I read about it in comments from someone who asserted that the 'community' of anosmia sufferers took offense to an air freshener commercial. The commercial made light of people not being able to smell foul odors in their homes. Did one person speak for the community of anosmia sufferers or did their assertion lack integrity?

"The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office." - Dwight D. Eisenhower.

My paternal grandfather refused to ever take me to a Chicago Cubs game. My Dad took me to my first Cubs game on September 21, 1971. The Cubs won. That was the only baseball game we would ever see together. One day on his way home from the office in June of the following year, he died suddenly of a heart attack.

My grandfather was a World War I veteran in 1919 when the Chicago White Sox were accused of losing the World Series in exchange for money. Baseball is put forth as America's game, one of sportsmanship and integrity. Using different words, my grandfather thought baseball was noseblind to their own BS. I've read recent research that says there is more to the story, but that was not known when I was a kid.

Like my father before me, I am married to a Southsider, aka a White Sox fan. How does the family stand the shame? Love can overcome a lot of divisions. Do you know who lived in the same neighborhood as my wife but about a dozen years earlier? Ted Kaczynski. The Unabomber...Southsiders... Oy Vey!

What did we watch on TV at my grandparents' apartment instead of baseball? Professional wrestling! My grandfather loved professional wrestling. It is the only thing I can remember watching there on TV other than the news of Mayor Daley (Richard J.) dying.

My favorite wrestler was Baron von Raschke, "The Claw." If you're unfamiliar, one of his hands functioned as a claw, attacking other wrestlers. It was autonomous. Sometimes he'd lose control of it, and it would attack him. This was the golden age of professional wrestling. James Raschke had been on the University of Nebraska's wrestling team, won a medal

at the 1963 World Games, and qualified to be on the US Olympic wrestling team in the 1964 Olympics but was sidelined at the last minute due to an injury. He also served in the US Army and worked as a teacher. He was not a lightweight, figuratively, or literally but even an eight-year-old could figure out that his character and the claw were totally made up.

Professional wrestling didn't hold itself up like the nation's honor was tied to it as baseball did. My grandfather respected professional wrestling for not taking itself so seriously. I have an autographed photo of the Baron with a personalized message. It was a gift from a friend and one of my prized possessions.

 "I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you." - Friedrich Nietzsche.

Integrity in little things matters in big things. That holds whether it is something you say in a passing conversation, what gets written in an email, and especially your actions. Without it, people won't trust you, potentially won't trust your organization, or feel safe around you. That may cause those you rely on to hesitate in their actions or decision-making. Over time, it results in the type of anxiety that turns good people into workplace zombies regardless of what side of the activity or decision they are on.

A hesitation to trust explains my Mom's uneasy relationship with pickle relish. Years ago, a relative owned a hot dog stand and told my Mom that

sometimes a screw would end up in the relish during its manufacture. Food factories have metal detectors now to ensure the integrity of their product, but fifty years later, she still orders her hot dogs ‘easy relish’ so she can be sure. Every time I order a hot dog, the story of the screw in the relish comes to mind. Those small things can lead to larger, strategic level impacts.

In “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War” (*Marines Magazine*, January 1999), Marine Corps General Charles Krulak, the 31st Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, discusses the complex challenges that lower-ranking leaders face in modern military actions where within a space of only three city blocks they may be fighting on one, keeping the peace on another, and providing humanitarian assistance on a third. He asserts that modern militaries must have effective training for those at lower-ranking leadership levels to ensure their success in complex environments. In those environments, the lower-level leaders like corporals will be making decisions and taking actions at a tactical level that could have a strategic impact.

This is illustrated in the viral internet video of a group playing *World of Warcraft*. In that staged video of the gameplay, watched more than a million times, you hear players acting seriously as tacticians planning an attack. Leeroy Jenkins, one of the players, gets tired of the all the talk and decides to charge into battle on his own, forcing the rest to follow. As a result of his actions, this relatively low-level player causes all the rest to die.

Think back to the baseball players on the field for the Chicago White Sox in 1919. They weren’t high-ranking, but their actions, demonstrating a lack of integrity, had a decades-long negative strategic impact.

Nostril-Damus

“Nostril-Damus is a seer, predicting organizational outcomes through the detection of BS, much like an ancient hunter sniffing scat, and interpreting the ‘droppings’ of management.” - David A Dolinsky.

Our organization was responding to a disaster one week, but luckily, the response looked like one that wouldn’t involve a deployment of people or resources for more than a week. The senior leader of the travel section for our organization contacted me by email and said that he wanted “to throw \$50,000” onto an agreement with the lessor for where their offices were housed for air conditioning outside of regular business hours for several months. For some in government, amounts of money exceeding what a billionaire would consider a lot get referred to as “budget dust.” His acting like a \$5 chip was being thrown onto a roulette table bothered me. We are all taxpayers. Federal employees need to act as fiduciaries for the rest.

This response looked like it wouldn’t last long, and once an agreement was signed with the lessor, we couldn’t get money refunded if we no longer needed the service. Because of this, I only authorized enough funding for a couple of weeks. We could extend the service again if needed. That’d take an extra hour of paperwork. To save tens of thousands of dollars, the small amount of time to extend it again was reasonable.

His reaction was to tell the facilities management people in writing to ignore me. I replied to his email stating that if he did this, there would be “serious

consequences” as he had zero fiscal authority. He returned with the statement that I had “denied travel air,” as if the travel personnel had to work while wearing Scott air packs as firefighters use to go into a burning building. A close friend started referring to me as “Cohaagen” after the character in the movie *Total Recall* (1990) who shut off the air systems on Mars in retaliation for a mutant uprising.

A couple of days later, he presented the email chain to his supervisor and said I needed to be disciplined because my email constituted a threat to his life. The entirety of the threat being my statement that there would be serious consequences. The consequence of a financial penalty or reprimand for overstepping his authority would be normal, and couldn’t be interpreted as a death threat. He was just unreasonable.

His supervisor ignored his request to go after me. He then contacted our division’s senior leader, a Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretary, who told the Human Resources lead to meet with me. That worked out well. The Human Resources lead and I bonded over our discussion of the absurdity of the complaint.

Having an HR guy as a friend whom I could call for advice was very beneficial over the years that followed. He helped me with advice on getting paperwork through the federal hiring process and so much more.

 “I won’t insult your intelligence by suggesting that you really believe what you just said.” - William F. Buckley Jr.

A workplace disease worth mentioning at this point that randomly infects people is ‘Bsbola.’ Like its namesake, the Ebola virus, Bsbola results in a type of hemorrhagic symptom. Instead of blood, those affected bleed BS from every orifice. It generally isn’t as deadly as Ebola but just as dangerous. Those infected with Bsbola can transmit it almost in perpetuity, creating even more workplace zombies.

Those fully infected with Bsbola are experts at the art of ‘Hikaru Uncidango.’ You might not have heard of it. This is the first time that term is in print. There is an ancient Japanese art form called Hikaru Dorodango. Roughly, Hikaru is a word for shining, Doro means mud, and Dango means round dumpling. It is the art of polishing mud into a shiny ball. The word Unci means poop, so Hikaru Uncidango is the fine art of turd polishing. I watched an episode of *MythBusters* on the Discovery Channel, where they sought to test whether a turd can be polished by testing the Hikaru Dorodango process. They didn’t use the term Hikaru Uncidango. They did successfully polish a mud ball.

There are other related theories, of course. A specific one I heard for years before seeing that *MythBusters* episode was that you can’t polish a turd, but you can roll it in glitter. Why all these references to excrement? Two reasons. First, inside every guy, no matter how serious their job, responsibilities, or how they appear, is a twelve-year-old boy who finds these kinds of things hysterical. Second, the ability to laugh at these sorts of things is an antidote and cure for the workplace zombie virus. Humor at the right time, and used effectively, brings people together. Taking yourself too seriously has real-life detrimental health effects.

The guy in the story about the air conditioning took himself too seriously. That alienated people and resulted in an exceedingly intelligent guy being less effective. My interactions with him weren't an issue of my not trusting him. My impression was that he was a probably a decent guy. The problem was that he didn't trust anyone else. Whether he was 'projecting' that distrust on me or others isn't something I could know.

What I have learned over the years, and we're talking about my having served in high-stress positions where trust is the coin of the realm, is that being trustworthy barely gets you halfway to being trusted. The only concrete way to earn someone's trust is to demonstrate trust in them.

"A team is not a group of people that work together. A team is a group of people that trust each other." - Simon Sinek.

Simon Sinek is an anthropologist, motivational speaker, and the author of multiple books, including *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't* (2014). In my experience, in Mr. Sinek's studies, the quote about teams and trust holds.

Sinek is also quoted as saying, "Trust is built on telling the truth, not telling people what they want to hear." That demonstrates integrity. When a doctor made famous during the COVID-19 pandemic discussed providing increasingly higher estimates about what percentage of the public needed to be vaccinated to achieve 'herd immunity,' he commented

that his [then] recent statements about herd immunity were partly influenced by his "gut feeling" that the country was "finally ready to hear" what he really thinks. Millions of people already didn't trust public health experts due to past catastrophic ethical failures.

Someone will eventually ask for an example of a public health failure from the past. In my mind, a quintessential example of bureaucratic injustice is known as the 'American Plan.' It's detailed in Scott Stern's excellent book *The Trials of Nina McCall: Sex, Surveillance, and the Decades-Long Government Plan to Imprison "Promiscuous" Women* (2018). The book details actions taken against women by public health officials at the federal, state, and local levels from the early 1900s until the 1970s in the name of national security.

The Chicago White Sox players who cheated, the guy conflating the words "serious consequences" related to an unauthorized financial transaction as a threat to his life, and the people involved in leading the so-called American Plan all suffered from a lack of discipline in their thinking that led them to act with a lack of integrity. That they were no doubt utterly unaware of their lack of integrity wasn't a bonus.

"Administrative discipline is the index of combat discipline. Any commander who is unwilling or unable to enforce administrative discipline, will be incapable of enforcing combat discipline." - General George S. Patton Jr.

The organizations I've seen up close that experience

the non-combat equivalent of a combat failure lacked discipline when it came to administrative affairs. The naysayers will argue that correlation must not be confused with causation. It can be argued that in the bureaucratic organizations we encounter daily, administrative friction is caused by a lack of administrative discipline, but it's not necessary.

Those who don't care about discipline in their administrative actions are often either inefficient, ineffective, or both when it comes to their mission essential functions. They'll say that it is 'operations' or the 'vision thing' that matters, and it certainly matters when it comes to job promotions, but my experience aligns with General Patton's quote. I'm not saying that the leader needs to be administratively competent themselves. What they need is to hire people who are, demonstrate their trust in them, and enforce administrative discipline in their organization.

In "Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders?," Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic writes in the August 2013 edition of *Harvard Business Review* that people "misinterpret displays of confidence as competence." Hubris, masked as charisma, gets mistaken for leadership potential, and men have this more. Generally, "what it takes to get the job is not just different from, but also the reverse of, what it takes to do the job well," and that is why so many good people fail. That's the Peter Principle in action. Good leadership ends up as the exception. He goes on to assert that a woman's path to leadership is more challenging, but they are more likely to be transformative leaders.

The displays of overconfidence Chamorro-Premuzic

writes about lead to adverse outcomes, especially when in leadership roles. In the May - June 2019 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, Sydney Finkelstein, Professor of Management at the Tuck School of Business, writes in "Don't Be Blinded by Your Own Expertise" about the downfalls that overconfident leaders experience. He attributes it as stemming from two leading causes, "...believing that brilliance in one area leads to competence in another...[and] when deep knowledge and experience leave leaders incurious, blinkered, and vulnerable - even in their own fields."

Before going further, by now, you've noticed a bunch of references come from *Harvard Business Review*. That's no accident. I've been a subscriber for years and love the magazine - so many great ideas and discussions. I can't recommend getting a subscription enough.

Where the Chamorro-Premuzic and Finkelstein articles, Boyd's OODA Loop, and bridging divisions of opinion mentioned in the foreword of this book intersect is squarely at the heart of this chapter's title.

The first story in the Finkelstein article concerns a retired US Marine Corps brigadier general in a senior civilian leadership role with experience in military disaster response operations not deploying resources as soon as he should have in response to Hurricane Katrina. Finkelstein attributes this to the official believing that if help were needed, "key federal emergency officials would automatically report information up the chain of command."

If that retired brigadier general believed that he'd automatically get reports, he wasn't as competent as people made him out to be in his military or civilian

leadership roles. He was running an operations center. Having worked in military and civilian operations centers for years, you learn that they operationally control very little. Successful operations centers move actionable information where it needs to go, bring decision-makers together, and remove roadblocks to operational elements receiving support. Unfortunately, many are simply Self-Licking Ice Cream Cones, taking information in, forwarding it, and adding little value. The worst of them would be rendered virtually inoperable if the cut/paste command within their email software was disabled.

In his paper, “On Self-Licking Ice Cream Cones,” retired US Air Force Brigadier General Pete Worden, in his later civilian role as a leader within NASA, wrote about the federal appropriations process from his point of view. The paper is a short, concise, timeless read on federal funding and bureaucracy. The first use of the term Self-Licking Ice Cream Cone, a “self-perpetuating system that has no purpose other than to sustain itself” is attributable to Norman Friedman’s book *Desert Victory: The War For Kuwait* (1991). Organizations that add less value than they create lead to a second problem every leader must be aware of: the ‘Sloan Syndrome.’ It forms barriers to awareness that affect every ridged hierarchical bureaucracy I’ve seen.

In *Malice in Blunderland* (1973), Martin discussed how Sloan Syndrome results in top executives not having the accurate, timely information they need to make optimal decisions. He noted Dr. Charles Reich of Harvard as articulating the cause, “Top executives know only what they are told. In effect, they are “briefed” by others...Yet the briefing may be three

steps removed from the facts...[and] nearer to fiction than fact by the time it reaches the man at the top.” Martin goes on to note that “...the men at the top of simple pyramidal hierarchies rarely know what is really going on. And every one else in the organization knows that they don’t know what is going on....It is a characteristic of bureaucracies that subordinates, who have no authority, know precisely what needs to be done, by whom, and in every conceivable circumstance. ... Thus, in a distressingly large number of cases, hierarchical subordinates have only contempt for their bureaucratic superiors.”

“ The fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.” - Bertrand Russell.

Displays of confidence get people promoted over others. They are then positioned to become overconfident in their abilities. That overconfidence eventually results in an inaccurate view of the world. As these ‘leaders’ are increasingly noseblind to their BS, hierarchical subordinates become disillusioned. They may end up with only contempt for their leadership. The final result is the creation of new workplace zombies. So, what can be done to prevent this?

In “Don’t Be Blinded by Your Own Expertise,” Finkelstein suggests warning signs to look out for and strategies to fix the problem. He mentions the Buddhist concept of ‘beginner’s mind’ and strategies, including “challenging their own expertise, seeking out fresh ideas, and embracing experimentalism.”

One effective strategy I've found to combat this scourge of nose blindness is to have a reprover close by during difficult situations. A reprover is someone in your circle of trust. They may even be subordinate to you in the hierarchy but a person that has the moral courage to let you know if you're going in the wrong direction. You may recall the story from chapter six, where I mentioned having someone close to keep a leader grounded. Coincidentally, shortly after that incident, I read "The Nathan Solution to the Bathsheba Syndrome," written by two military officers, Dan Stallard and Kurt Sanger, in the *Marine Corps Gazette* (April 2014). How did I happen to be reading that publication? I was reading a blog post on the "From the Green Notebook" website titled "How to Avoid Making the Front Page of the Military Times" that mentioned it. Links are in the references section. There is too much within them to summarize here.

In EOD school, I partnered on most tests with a fellow student, who was my upstairs neighbor in family housing, and a Force Recon Marine. The school was physically and mentally challenging for sure, but also a master class on learning that a reprover was very often the difference between success and failure.

We are all in danger of being at least occasionally noseblind to our own BS. It is impossible to maintain full situational awareness at all times. Having trusted reprovers, teams where people feel safe to speak, and timely feedback loops are critical. Otherwise, you could have a functioning organization with competent leadership but, due to a lack of situational awareness, create additional workplace zombies, and experience a catastrophic failure.

DAVID A DOLINSKY



David has deep experience in and around military, private sector, and government bureaucracies. After serving in the U.S. Army, with one brother in law school and the other thinking about medical school, his only option was to become a Certified Public Accountant.

Following ten years in the private sector, he is proud to have served as a career federal bureaucrat. He is a former Staff Sergeant and graduate of the joint service, "Naval School Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD)," where students learn to handle the most extreme situations while operating under pressure, and served as an EOD Team Leader. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting from Northeastern Illinois University and recently completed his Master's in Business Administration at Northern Illinois University.