



Fear and Loathing in the Workplace: Maintaining your Focus and Optimism

BY JANET BICKEL, MA

Man's greatest liberation is the realization that he has the ability to choose his attitude and reaction to any set of circumstances.

—Marcus Aurelius

We tend to see problems as "out there" and focus on others' resistance instead of looking at our own resistance. But the real issue is: what chronic problems around you have something to do with you?

—Kate Ludeman

Dealing with People You Can't Stand; Never Wrestle with a Pig; Working with You Is Killing Me; Since Strangling Isn't an Option. These days too many workplaces seem to be characterized more by gossip and lamentations than by respect and partnership.

Although academic health centers (AHCs) don't have the market cornered in this regard, their complexity and a few other salient characteristics contribute to rampant interpersonal dysfunction. For instance, most AHCs' leadership development and selection practices are inadequate and anachronistic. As Gunsalus (2006) has written, "the path to becoming a leader in academics is to affect a lack of interest in and preparation for these roles." Excellence as a solo achiever may be the worst preparation for team-building responsibilities and motivating people. Worse, some of these high achievers may not actually want the responsibilities so much as they believe they deserve an additional accolade. And the stresses of power often magnify flaws—for instance, that renowned scientist recruited as chair is discovered to act like the Invisible Man. Because administrative roles demand high engagement and emotional intelligence, if the boss avoids people or prefers competition to collaboration or indulges in favoritism, the unit is unlikely to thrive.

Even highly skilled leaders have their hands full. As is well known, loss of support from other funding sources for medical education has forced a heavy reliance on clinical

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revenue contributing to an "eat what you bill [or worse, kill]" environment, with faculty reporting that their departments resemble adding machines more than academic communities. Accelerating competition for grant funding and other critical resources sometimes reaches pathologic levels; such environments are suited more for making enemies than friends.

Even highly functioning units can quickly deteriorate under adverse circumstances. Establishing and maintaining a harmonious and productive department takes a great deal of effective effort, and if the larger system is poorly led or overburdened, these qualities may be unachievable. Some departments have unfilled faculty vacancies to the extent that existing faculty have been taking up the slack, in some cases, for years. Continuously pressed to work harder, faculty face difficult decisions about how much more they can do.

Exacerbating these difficult organizational characteristics is the orientation of many faculty. Although they may be expert at competing for grades and completing tough educational programs, many faculty are stymied by the pressure cooker of competing interests and demands that characterize most workplaces. Their educations have not helped them to develop the now-necessary skills of conflict management, political savvy, and persuasion. Given that what is required for academic promotion may be orthogonal to earning the clinical relative value units (RVUs) on which their salary depends, faculty also need to be skilled at goal-setting and negotiation. But when chronically rushed, few take the time neces-

sary for reflection and assessment; it's easier to blame the system or the boss.

Maintaining Your Focus and Optimism

There has never been a more challenging time to build an academic career—but at the same time, opportunities abound, if you can sustain your morale and focus. Here are several recommendations along these lines:

1. *Recognize what bugs you most—and why.* When you are relaxed and in charge, you tend to feel smart. But when you react with greater intensity than the situation calls for (your heart starts racing, you say or do something you regret), you've lost access to your higher cognitive functions. When your IQ goes down in this fashion, become curious: What "hooked" you? What kinds of interactions cause you to overreact? How do you respond when you feel overwhelmed, disrespected, or challenged? Write down whatever insights you glean from this introspection—and study and apply them.

Emotions are not the opposite of logic; emotions contain a great deal of information. But under stress, we tend to lose the intelligent use of our feelings. Moving from fear to insight and effective action begins with recognizing and accepting our emotions. This acceptance helps shift the emotional charge from negative to positive, from the past to the present, so that you can discover and analyze your options. For instance, imagine you're in a departmental meeting and your mentor takes credit for a brilliant idea you've shared with her. If you get carried away by your first reaction—for example, to see red and then silently dredge up other similar instances of this behavior—you'll miss your chance at a subtle comeback such as "When I ran this idea by her yesterday, we both got excited about it." ❖

2. *Recognize that most of our responses to people and situations are based largely on deeply ingrained ways of seeing the world; these “factory-installed” preferences can interfere with our seeing all the available data.* For instance, many faculty are “purists” and naively assume that hard work and loyalty will translate into promotion. Trading your simpler frame of reference for a more empowering one begins with becoming aware of your assumptions and the “story” you are telling yourself—such as the one about what you’re “owed.” Try to imagine what other stories might also fit the situation—perhaps that you over-relied on your boss or on someone who is competing with you. If an agreement isn’t honored, calling “foul” probably will not help; neither will resenting the maneuverer who took advantage of you. Seek instead to understand what happened and how you can prevent a recurrence. Appreciate how many competing goals coexist within your AHC. Work at reading people with all their fascinating complexities and limitations. Don’t waste energy trying to control something or someone that is not in your control.

3. *Understand the difference between “unconditional” relationships (those that are independent of contexts and situations) and “conditional” relationships (those that are transitory).* Virtually all relationships at work are conditional—for instance, an “ally” will work toward your interests as long as it also serves theirs. The term “co-competition” describes such relationships—in some instances you compete and in some you cooperate. The two most common mistakes are to assume friendship when the relationship is or has become conditional (people and circumstances do change) and to assume that “adversaries” (those who will side with you only when it serves them) are “enemies.” As Confucius said, “the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right name.” In isolation it is impossible to make sense of the chess game of organizational politics. So cultivate relationships with politically astute colleagues who can help you interpret shifting agendas and alliances.



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4. *Take responsibility for your own health.* How long has it been since you got sufficient exercise and sleep? Do you suffer from vacation deficit disorder?

5. *Take responsibility for your own career development.* Are you expecting the universe to open a path for you? Are you waiting for someone to recognize your brilliance and reward you? Then be prepared for a long wait. Is your nose stuck to the grindstone of your immediate goals? Then you’re probably not seeing the bigger picture in which your organization and your field are operating and evolving. These days, achieving your professional potential requires continuous attention to what is emerging and adjustments to environmental complexities.

6. *Identify where you can have the biggest impact, and focus most of your energies there.* If you have too many competing commitments, you’re spreading yourself too thin and will lose touch with what is most important to you. In addition, frequently assess the fit between your goals and the characteristics of your position and institution. If there is not sufficient alignment between your needs and their needs, you should consider alternatives. Career development is like bacteria. In

order to grow, bacteria require either nutrients or replating or mutation—that is, if you’re not able to keep growing in skills, then to keep from “dying,” you must change either your location or your goals.

7. *Notice how you focus your attention.* On most days, are you optimistic or detached? Pay attention not just to problems, but also to what works well and what’s going right. Ask whether you need to try some new approaches to achieve more desirable patterns and outcomes. Smile. Thank people. Both positive and negative emotions are highly contagious.

Use affirmations to facilitate discussion of difficult topics and to keep defenses down. The following PEARLS can create helpful bridges to people: **Partnership** (I really want to work on this with you), **Empathy** (I appreciate that that was hard for you), **Acknowledgment** (You put a lot of work into that), **Respect** (I respect your commitment), **Legitimization** (This is stretching and stressing all of us), **Support** (I want to see you succeed).

In Summary

Staying focused and flexible under stress is a test of integrity and resilience. Rather than accumulating resentment, face what bothers you and take action to address and change what you can. Assess the alignment between your goals and the characteristics of your institution. Engage with your colleagues and students in drawing attention to the good that you are accomplishing together. Solicit feedback and assistance from trusted colleagues. ❖

Sources and Further Reading

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