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Selling your soul? Hit the eject button

Once upon a time there was a young, bright-eyed litigation lawyer. She was talented and her career was expected to soar. Lawyers befriended her. Judges respected her skillful cross-examination abilities. She was given increasingly higher profile cases to litigate. She made great money and lived in her own funky condo. Everything was picture-perfect.

But there was one problem. A big problem, actually. Our young lawyer was deeply, inconsolably unhappy. Some days, she felt like a prostitute, selling her intellect, passion and energy to clients and causes in which she did not believe. Anyone with sufficient funds got to own the best of what she had to offer.

Life felt empty and meaningless. She had sold her soul.

3 easy ways to sell your soul

Prostitution does not relate to sexual matters alone. The dictionary defines it as “the act or an instance of offering or devoting one’s talent to an unworthy use or cause.” That bright-eyed, lost lawyer was me and I can personally attest: The prostitution experience robs us of our vitality and wrecks havoc with our lives.

Chances are, as an HR professional, you’ve dealt with skilled professionals who are going through the “prostitution” experience. Perhaps you’ve even gone through it yourself. Such soul-selling tends to unfold in three predictable scenarios:

Wrong career: Sometimes people choose the wrong career to begin with. Recently, I spoke with a man in charge of organizational development and training for a 4,000-strong corporation. He was originally employed at the same company as an engineer but had been chronically unhappy in a profession that was divorced from his need to impact real people in a real way. In his case, the organization was able and willing to support his new path while still keeping him within its ranks.

Wrong environment: The environment can be problematic due to a bad boss, a dysfunctional team or an organizational direc-



GUEST COMMENTARY

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tion that does not align with your own priorities. Sometimes we sell our soul to maintain retirement or other benefits. Take for example an accounting unit within a large organization at which I consulted some time ago. Here, 14 certified accountants passionately hated their jobs and would openly say so to anyone who would listen. They felt deeply compromised by the new rules the company had imposed following its purchase a year earlier by a global conglomerate. My simple question, “Why not get another job?” was met with the bitter response they could never leave because nowhere else would they find comparable salaries or benefit packages.

Wrong company: When your company asks you to engage in activities that contradict your values or are downright unethical, you know you may be headed for a mega prostitution experience. HR professionals in Ontario may find themselves in increasingly hot water on this front with the introduction of a new code of ethics by the Human Resources Professionals Association which requires them to “support, promote and apply the principles of human rights, equity, dignity and respect in the workplace.” As we all know, in the real world, many organizations don’t practice these principles consistently, thereby leaving the HR professional with a complex dilemma.

The ‘SOS’ ejection seat

If you’re trapped in a soul-compromising experience, there’s a powerful process you can rely on to eject yourself from the

situation. I call it the “SOS” system — stop, observe and shift.

Stop: In the midst of being stuck, we often can’t hear ourselves think. Or we’re suffering so badly we develop tunnel-vision, as happened to the trapped accountants. The “stop” step requires us to heed the warning signs and pause. Warning signs typically include any or all of the following: depression, a sense of emptiness, mistakes on the job, physiological stress symptoms, anxiety, withdrawal and an overall decline in performance.

Observe: Here you take an honest, hard look at reality. Ask yourself tough questions, such as: What’s actually happening to and around me? What specifically is troubling me? What is triggering my reaction? What are my symptoms? Can I identify any patterns?

Shift: Once you’ve observed and gained insights into your situation, it’s time to shift. Sometimes the shift is dramatic, requiring courage and significant risk-taking. The engineer-turned-OD-leader certainly made a giant change. I left law and obtained a master’s degree in social work. It took several years of denial, angst, soul-searching and exploration before I set myself free, but it sure was worth it.

In some situations, the shift involves internal work rather than the initiation of external changes. For example, the accountants could have chosen to shift from a place of bitterness and anger to an altogether different mindset: Being grateful for having a high-paying job with unparalleled benefits. This internal shift would liberate them from the prostitution predicament and re-establish a sense of pride and fulfillment.

Finally, it may require courage to admit you’re devoting your talent to an unworthy use or cause and then to follow this recognition with action. But when you’re in it, you really have no other choice.

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