

Working Happy Through Adversity

Learn from others who have succeeded.

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Excerpted from Working Happy! How to Survive Burnout and Find Your Work/Life Synergy in the Healthcare Industry (American Association for Physician Leadership, 2024). Copyright© 2025 by American Association for Physician Leadership®.

We all face challenges in our workplace or career path, especially if we're entering a field that's well-entrenched and may be difficult for newcomers to enter and thrive. If you happen to be in a situation where you're facing outright opposition to your presence, but you love your work and are determined to succeed, you'll need a thick skin. You'll need to be like a cheerful little armadillo, protected by her tough hide, marching forward, never giving up, always seeing the good and ignoring the bad.

Consider Katherine Johnson, who was the subject of the popular film *Hidden Figures*. Born on August 26, 1918, as a child she showed evidence of being a prodigy in math, and her parents, although they were not wealthy, ensured that she received a good education. At the age of 14, she graduated from high school and enrolled in West Virginia State College, an historically Black college. Regarding discrimination, she said, "I didn't have time for that. My dad taught us, 'You are as good as anybody in this town, but you're no better.' I don't have a feeling of inferiority. Never had. I'm as good as anybody, but no better."

In 1937, at age 18, Johnson graduated summa cum laude with degrees in mathematics and French. This was at a time when just 2% of Black women got a university degree, and more than half of those became teachers. Johnson took on a teaching job at a Black public school in Marion, Virginia, but she wanted to become a research mathematician, a career field rife with discrimination against women and Blacks.

Her career took off in 1953 when the National Advisory Committee

male human computers. Johnson's workplace at Langley was subject to Virginia's Jim Crow laws and racially segregated; Johnson and the other Black female computers worked in the all-Black West Area Computing section, while the white computers worked in the East section.

Johnson found ways to assert her humanity. She refused to obey the segregated bathroom rules and avoided eating in the segregated cafeteria. During breaks, she talked about aviation magazines and played cards

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for Aeronautics (NACA) hired her to be one of several women in the Guidance and Navigation Department. The women were called "computers," which is funny because, in those days, there were no computers as we know them, just people with slide rules. (If you're too young to know what a slide rule is, just Google it.) Like that of the other women, Johnson's job was to make fast and accurate mathematical calculations relating to aeronautics. This was regarded as "women's work," while the men handled the actual engineering questions.

By 1946, the Langley Research Center had recruited about 400 fe-

with her white male colleagues. She even successfully demanded that she be allowed to attend high-level briefings—and her white male colleagues were compelled to accede because the quality of her work made her presence not only tolerable but necessary.

In 1958, NACA became part of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which was officially de-segregated, and Johnson became a key numbers cruncher; however, discrimination continued, and during her early years at NASA, Johnson could not even put her name on any reports—her own work prod-

Continued on page 124

Working Happy (from page 123)

uct—because she was a woman. Eventually, her male boss was forced to put her name on a report about orbital flight because her contribution was important and undeniable.

Among other historical tasks, using her trusty slide rule and adding machine, she did trajectory analysis for America's first human spaceflight, Alan Shepard's Freedom 7 mission in May 1961. At a time when digital computers were relatively new and untested, she checked the computer's math for John Glenn's historic first orbital spaceflight by an American in February 1962. Glenn had personally insisted that Johnson review the electronic computer's calculations as a prerequisite to his agreeing to be hurtled into space. In 1969, she performed the calculations for the first moon landing.

Find Happiness in Your Present Job

Johnson worked on the space shuttle program until 1986, then spent her retirement encouraging students to enter the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. She died in 2020 at the age of 101. The mother of three daughters, Johnson is a shining example of someone who enjoyed an almost perfect work/life synergy. She entered a profession that was openly racist and sexist, but she stayed laser-focused on her special gift and was so good at what she did that she forced the organization to adapt to her.

This does not mean that a Black woman, or any minority person for that matter, needs to be superhuman to earn fair treatment. That would be absurd. Fair treatment must be available to everybody, but we can thank Katherine Johnson and the other Black women “computers” for being strong enough to break down walls purely by the force of their will.

Make Change Within Yourself

The other way to survive burnout at your current job is to change yourself from within. Once again, it does not mean accepting an abusive job situation. It does not mean becoming

a victim. It means finding as much good as you can in your job and career and having a personal goal that keeps you motivated during difficult times.

How can you do this? There are several strategies you can use. In the environment of a mid- or large-sized organization, it's your job to get along with those who have authority over you, including the board of directors and your colleagues, with

yourself is, “Do I feel happier and more productive in a group or on my own?”

In 1956, author William H. Whyte explored this question in his book *The Organization Man*, which became a best-seller and one of the most influential books ever written on management. The book came about when Whyte, while employed by *Fortune* magazine, did a series of interviews with CEOs of major Amer-

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whom you must have a smooth and frictionless working relationship.

In this article, we'll examine how you can thrive by changing yourself from within, embracing the best parts of your role, setting limits, and staying healthy.

Become an “Organization Person”

To thrive and achieve work/life synergy, you first need to know yourself. This may seem like a question that's almost too simple, but have you ever thought deeply about whether you see yourself as a self-employed entrepreneur or as a person who works better in a large group? This is a valid question for nearly any industry.

You can be a doctor and have your own practice, which brings its own burnout challenges, or you can work for a big hospital, which brings different burnout challenges. You could be a lawyer in private practice or practice with a big firm. You could be a writer and be self-employed or work for a national media company.

All these situations have the potential for burnout, but in different ways. If you work for an organization, the source of your burnout is likely to be your boss and, to some extent, your co-workers. If you're self-employed, you're your own boss, and if you're burned out, you need only look in the mirror to see who's responsible!

A key question you need to ask

ican corporations such as General Electric and Ford. A central theme of the book was that average Americans were shifting from the prevailing notion of rugged individualism to a collectivist ethic, that people believed that organizations and groups could make better decisions than individuals, and, thus, serving an organization was a better choice than trying to forge an individual path. Whyte believed this to be incorrect and described how individual work and creativity had produced better outcomes than collectivist processes. This was the age of middle management when conformity was prized, and the standard uniform of the businessman (women were not part of the equation) was the blue or grey suit, white button-down shirt, and necktie.

You may or may not agree with Whyte's viewpoint, but his portrait of the Organization Man was interesting. Today, we talk about the Organization Person as someone who thrives within an organization and enjoys the collaboration and team focus that are hallmarks of an effective organization of any type. The Organization Person also enjoys, or at least tolerates, the tribal backstabbing and double-dealing that are a part of most profit-driven organizations. The successful Organization Person is also keenly aware of the most prominent liability of organizations: lack of innovation, embrace of

Continued on page 125

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Working Happy (from page 124)

the status quo, and criticism of those who are perceived as non-conformists.

Let's discuss Mary Barra, who is the quintessential Organization Person. She has obviously thrived within the vast beehive of General Motors, whose very name suggests bland conformity and has found a way to exert her vision for the company across its 167,000 employees. In all her interviews, she has never once suggested that she disliked working at GM or had considered employment elsewhere.

It helps that she's a "car gal." She loves cars, always has, and harbors a deep personal interest in the products made by her company. Her husband drives a Chevy Camaro, their son has a Pontiac Firebird, and the family owns a Hummer.

As of 2022, Barra herself was driving a Chevy Bolt EV, which anyone could buy for less than \$30,000.

You never know who might thrive within an organization. For example, Steve Jobs co-founded Apple and helped build it into a significant company until 1985, when an internal power struggle with then-CEO John Sculley led to his ouster. At that point, it would have been easy to conclude that the volatile, eccentric Jobs was not

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an Organization Person and could not function within a company that at that time had 5,000 employees.

In 1997, Jobs returned to Apple as CEO. The company now had 8,400 employees but was on the verge of bankruptcy. He is credited with reviving Apple, and by the time he left for health reasons in 2011, the company had grown to over 60,000 employees and had a market capitalization of \$297 billion. Clearly, to accomplish what he did, this unpredictable and demanding innovator had significant strengths as an Organization Person.

He was succeeded by Tim Cook, who in many ways was seen as the opposite of Jobs: introverted, low-key, almost mousy. Most analysts predicted that without the fiery presence of Steve Jobs, the company had seen its best days. Tim Cook, they said, was too weak to take charge of such a cutting-edge technology firm.

Tim Cook proved them wrong and thrived as Apple's CEO. By 2021, 10 years after the death of Steve Jobs, Apple had grown to 164,000 employees, with a market cap of nearly \$3 trillion and \$62 billion in free cash—the most of any company.

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Continued on page 126

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Working Happy (from page 125)

not with your current employer. But perhaps you could become one. If you do, the most important things to remember are the three rules, which apply to any job, but especially to a job with which you may not be totally in love:

1) Resist efforts by management to work you like a farm animal. Some companies have no regard for the welfare of their employees. Don't feel guilty about asserting your rights.

2) Focus on what you're doing that pleases you, such as making customers happy. The thing about customers is that they don't care about the behind-the-scenes drama at your workplace. They pay their money, and they expect good service and quality products. Remember them as you work.

3) Fly above internal politics. Make no alliances and make no enemies. Commit to doing the job you're hired to do and give no support to people who are negative or divisive. If you are the target of racist or sexist attacks, only you can decide if you can—or should—ignore them and keep marching forward.

You can train yourself to become emotionally detached from practices that have offended you in the past and take an attitude of "I'm just going to float over it, keep a smile on my face, and get on with my life."

In such a case, succeeding within the challenging environment at work becomes one of the missions of your life. It's what will give you personal satisfaction in much the same way as shooting under par on the golf course or completing a marathon. Everyone has personal goals, whether it's ensuring a child goes to college, paying off the home mortgage, or bowling a perfect 300 game. Setting goals helps you develop new behaviors, sharpen your focus, and increase your momentum in life. Your goals should be value-based, meaning they're tied to the overall health and well-being of you, your family, and your community. Goals that are shallow, such as "make more money," are more difficult to sustain.

Your personal goal could be to navigate your way through the challenging job environment and come out on top. For some people, playing the game of corporate chutes and ladders is enjoyable.

Ask yourself: Do you enjoy working with a team where there's a hierarchy? This is a situation in which you have a boss who can direct your work, colleagues with whom you must cooperate, and perhaps subordinates who report to you. If you enjoy that, or if you have no choice because of your job options, then you can develop skills that will help you succeed. You can focus on the good parts, rise above the bad parts, and look at your situation with an objective eye. PM



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