

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WORK?

THE 5 FRUSTRATIONS
OF WORK AND HOW TO
FIX THEM FOR GOOD



Blaire Palmer

Book What's Wrong with Work

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Blaire Palmer
Wiley, 2010

Recommendation

Anyone who has received a paycheck can relate to the frustrations Blaire Palmer outlines in her useful guide to solving the practical problems of work. Her advice on meetings seems the most practical and easiest to put into use, and Palmer provides similar guidance for other work irritants, including bad leadership and that universal cry: “It’s not fair!” None of the five frustrations seems like a major problem, so the book might feel a bit long. But these are the problems people cite when they complain about work. Eliminate them, and imagine happy employees generating big profits, working productively and feeling fulfilled. *BooksInShort* admits it sounds pie-in-the-sky, but can’t help suggesting that managers – especially middle managers – should give this a try. If nothing else, you’ll reclaim many hours wasted in the boardroom.

Take-Aways

- Workplace annoyances shouldn’t make you hate your job.
- Correcting five seemingly minor problems can transform your productivity.
- Start by turning bad meetings into lively, useful gatherings that make work fun.
- Give meetings specific purposes and time limits, and make sure only necessary people attend.
- Have meeting attendees set ground rules. Post the rules and enforce them.
- Leaders overcome “mis-leadership” by understanding and defining their roles.
- Improve productivity by developing and properly communicating a vision, a succinct mission statement and clearly defined company values.
- Tear down the barriers between departments to improve efficiency, creativity and employee happiness.
- Banning office gossip will help bring down “silos.”
- Tackle charges of “unfairness” by trying to understand all sides of any argument.

Summary

Getting Work to Work Well

Work may not be a day at the beach, but it shouldn’t feel like hard labor, either. You can work effectively, passionately and productively. Eliminating the frustrations and aggravations that impede real work makes the difference. As a manager, you can transform your workplace in three ways: changing yourself, changing how you manage or changing your organization internally. Each requires a readjustment of your view of four things: yourself, others, your company and the outside world. Managers who might feel stuck between bosses above and workers below can initiate change from the middle and see results. Successful managers regard helping their staff meet the day’s challenges as a primary responsibility. Feeling that they make a difference gives managers a sense of accomplishment and well-being. Employers, in turn, benefit. Now is the time to fix five small but powerful work troubles. Research shows that correcting minor but important institutional problems can transform working conditions and results.

“Frustration 1: Waste-of-Time Meetings”

Bad meetings aren’t hard to recognize. They’re unfocused, resistant to participation, consumed with a single idea, or bogged down with debate and indecision. This

would not be such a problem if meetings didn't consume an average of 37% of workers' time, according to estimates. Employees believe that up to half of that time is wasted. That adds up to almost a full workday lost each week. Pointless meetings cause other problems, too, like the "hangover effect." That's when workers leave a meeting drained, confused and distrustful, instead of excited about the work they've just discussed. Bad meetings – caused by anything from poor leadership to misplaced priorities and beyond – produce poor results. And they are not cheap, considering lost time, prep time, and possible travel, food, and room rental expenses.

“Who can stop work being boring, frustrating, stressful, unhealthy, unfulfilling, limiting and meaningless? You.”

Meetings can be the lifeblood of your organization: the place for robust debate, swift decision-making, team unity and great ideas. Meetings vary, but meeting problems spring from the same issues: a poorly defined purpose or agenda, the wrong participants, decision-making problems and a lack of candor or creativity. Eliminating even a few of these irritants will improve and shorten meetings. Meetings must be active work zones for everyone attending. Those running the meetings aren't the only ones who can fix them. Start by eliminating unnecessary information-only meetings; use a less time-consuming, data-sharing method, such as email.

“Leadership (and management) isn't a science. It is an art.”

Run meetings where hard-working people solve problems, make decisions, or hash out mistakes and successes to further company improvement. Focus on daily operations or on strategy. Separate the two, since strategy often gets neglected because it doesn't seem urgent. Shorter, more regular meetings on operations will keep things running smoothly. Longer, less-frequent strategy sessions will allow for valuable work on big-picture subjects. Restructure all your meetings. *Death by Meeting* author Patrick Lencioni thinks four types of meetings should fulfill any group's needs:

1. **Daily checks** – A five-minute morning session to confirm daily plans and reduce communication gaffes.
2. **Weekly plans** – A 45- to 90-minute gathering where team members discuss what's been done and what's up next. Focus on priorities; push the rest to the next meeting.
3. **Monthly strategies** – A two-hour-per-topic meeting for delving into upcoming challenges and wrangling out solutions. The two hours include preparation time, so everyone has enough information to make sound decisions that will stick afterward.
4. **Quarterly overviews** – Leaders get together away from their regular offices to address topics such as the company's direction, thorny issues that require tact, and large concerns.

“Meetings should be... forums where the most difficult issues can be thrashed out. They should not be for the weak-hearted.”

These meetings allow for better opportunities to improve trust among employees, and they can lead to long-sought solutions to tough problems. If reorganizing isn't in your job description, rethink the meetings you do run. Have meeting attendees set ground rules to get everyone invested. Revolutionizing meetings isn't easy, so don't give up if change takes some time. Think about what didn't work and try another method. That's your job as a leader.

“Frustration 2: Mis-leadership”

Are you a leader or a manager? Organizations need managers who focus on pragmatic issues and leaders who develop ideas and don't mind chaos, says leadership expert Abraham Zaleznik of Harvard Business School. Successful businesspeople need to be both – “leader-managers” who move between roles as the situation dictates. Define your role to fit your strengths and interests.

“People working together [can] achieve far more than people slaving away in solitude.”

Adopt a leader's big-picture outlook, with a willingness to reconsider norms, break rules and challenge the status quo. Expect obstacles. Businesses and employees are not machines. Leaders and managers must be flexible and accept a lack of control. This approach demands more conversation and trial and error than old-fashioned leadership or management styles, but produces results. Trust your employees to solve problems. Today's workers want purpose, flexible hours and proof that they're doing good work for the world. In addition to salary, they need worthy co-workers, recognition from bosses, and opportunities to learn and grow.

“Ground rules create the environment and... unless you create them and review them, you will end up with an unwritten rulebook based on hierarchy, power and historical precedent.”

Keep in mind the difficulties of defining and measuring leadership and management. Even bosses who demand leadership don't necessarily know what that means. To flourish, start a career-long journey. Know yourself, and your strengths and weaknesses. Read, ask for feedback, critique yourself, watch others, try different approaches and observe your results. Work to become a better you. No two great leaders need the same skills, authors Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones write in *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?* Trying to be someone else only leads to trouble. Follow these three guidelines to being yourself: Align your words and actions; be consistent and know and accept who you are.

“Where there is gossip, there is a victim. Sharing information is about revealing facts and data, experience and study.”

Putting these into practice will let you shine as a “natural leader.” Limit your assumptions and tap into your workers' individual motivations. Often, money is not an employee's primary motivator. Beyond a certain point, wages and benefits don't inspire people. Instead, they get excited about working for one of six fairly universal reasons: “achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement and growth.” Tap into whichever element applies to your employees. Embrace all the emotions flowing in your office, including the arguments. Disagreements often lead to breakthroughs. Raising voices and drilling down to the real problems can be good for business.

“Frustration 3: Blurred Vision”

A business needs a clear, defined vision to shape every worker's daily agenda and give purpose to every decision made. Without a vision, employees invest in short-term problem solving that doesn't consider the big picture. Small concerns snowball into time-consuming major problems. Defining your vision, mission, and values motivates employees and reminds them of your business's goals.

“Fairness saves companies money because it is valued more by employees than financial rewards and benefits.”

Vision is a compelling and unchanging description of your overarching objective. Your mission focuses on your central work, typically with a short statement that looks to inspire employees, not investors. Values regulate behavior within your business, providing support and leading the way toward following the mission and achieving the vision. For example, car rental company Avis declares: “Our business is renting cars; our mission is total customer satisfaction.” Everyone needs to understand the vision and to know how it affects his or her duties and behavior.

“If you are open, no matter how thorny and unpopular the issue, people will respect you even if they don’t agree with your decision.”

Developing your vision and mission statement isn’t easy. But working without a vision wastes time. A vision provides meaning and motivation, which younger workers crave. A company whose employees focus on a solid vision can produce dramatic results. Helping people see the future encourages them to stay and finish the job. Simply repeating the vision won’t spread your passion. Improve your abilities by listening to everyone from office cleaners to trusted advisers. Pay special attention to criticism. Ask good questions, especially “what” and “how.” Match your message to your audience. Use stories that demonstrate your point. Connect your vision, mission and values to what your team does every day by setting short-term goals as steps to big-picture goals.

“Frustration 4: Silo Mentality”

Too much competition within a company can lead to separation, lack of shared information, bad feelings and other problems characterized as “silos.” If you feel stymied when you seek information from other departments, your company has silos. Silo culture exists because it functions in some ways: granting power, seeming to increase efficiency and creating “fun” competition. In fact, isolating departments costs time and money. Problems include restricted knowledge flow, diminished creative power, reduced outside focus and enabled hiding places that conceal real problems.

“Being a great leader-manager is about being a great person. People don’t want to follow a cardboard cut-out. They want to work alongside someone real.”

Eliminating silos isn’t easy. Target specific departments, and even people within those departments, to help you dismantle barriers, streamline goals, and make improvements. Consider sales and marketing. Their ultimate goals align, but their methods vary. What if they teamed up with the development team to talk about what customers really want and how to accomplish it? Figure out which department’s help would make the biggest difference in your work. Call a meeting to air your differences honestly and to learn a few good things about each other. Then, face the problems individually and dream of the perfect fix. Skip the details at first. Instead, find common ground for what might happen if you work together. Choose one project as a test run.

“Visionary leaders don’t have to know all the answers, but they are expected to ask...visionary questions.”

If you can’t get everyone together, try your own “influence plan” by finding people inside the company to persuade. Get to know them personally and to understand them at work. Your influence will grow. As you share information, your work will become more effective. Sharing doesn’t mean spreading rumors. Eliminating gossip helps teams work together. Managers and leaders also must open up to outside help and reduce their territorial tendencies. “Breaking down silos... requires looking inside yourself and asking whether your mindset plays a part in propping up the silos.”

“Frustration 5: Unfairness”

Unfairness runs rampant, but that doesn’t mean it’s good for business. Whether fair companies do better financially hasn’t been determined. But some evidence shows that businesses with ethics policies outrank those without in “market added value” and “economic value added,” according to the textbook *Business Ethics and Values*. Researchers see some proof that fairness saves money: Seventeen percent of employees who think they were fired unfairly sue, compared with 1% of those who think their firing was fair. Many employees would prefer fairness to a raise. Charges of inequity come in many forms: The bosses are deceitful, they make people work longer or in unhealthy conditions, or they reward lazy employees. In truth, people who make seemingly hypocritical decisions often do so for sound reasons. Whether extra hours are in and of themselves unfair is another question, since many people gain status from the hours they put in, and others complain about more hours than they actually work. Promotions often get awarded for reasons outsiders know nothing about. Fairness or its lack often depends on context.

“Managing and leading people is the real work.”

To fix unfairness in your office, you’ve first got to identify and understand it. Start by asking questions of people you think acted unfairly – not to change their minds but to imagine making that decision yourself, with all the knowledge they had. Look for common language to bridge the gap with the person in charge. If you’re still unsatisfied, consider speaking with a higher-up. Think carefully, however, about the weight of the offense, the values of your organization and how the offense fits with those values, how much others will back you up, your personal values, and your power in the situation. Fairness ultimately relies on honesty and candor. Employees want to understand and contribute to decisions. Listen and be open to them.

About the Author

Blaire Palmer, a leadership coach, is the author of *The Hyper-Creative Personality* and *The Recipe for Success*.
