



You Can Whine or You Can Shine

EVER known anyone who seemed to be “hostile to happiness?” I have. Her name is “Sally” and she’s a chronic complainer—someone who drapes “funeral crepe” everywhere she goes, drawing others and their energy to her like a black hole.

At work, Sally perennially complains about her job. For years she’s felt plateaued and pigeon-holed in her position—even though she is marketable and highly regarded where she works. And while she calls me and others frequently (mostly to complain but sometimes for job advice), she never acts on our suggestions.

Sally just can’t seem to dust off her resume and mobilize herself to network, or approach her boss about how to make her job more meaningful—advice she’s heard others recommend repeatedly.

Yet, Sally’s phone calls keep coming. And the complaints keep mounting! “I can’t go on here,” Sally has intoned on more than a few occasions. “My boss is an idiot. And this organization is so toxic. God, why would anyone work here?”

Why do I share Sally’s story? Because most of us know somebody like Sally. And sometimes that somebody is us!

Many of us have acted like martyrs at times in our careers, sometimes when we’re stuck in a rut, or when we’re working in particularly toxic environments. And sometimes it’s because we resist making things better.

Workplace martyrs like Sally are powerfully articulate about why they have no options but to work for slavedriver bosses. They can wax eloquently about their disempowerment and the dysfunctional organizations they work for. But then they never make any changes.

Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t advocate a stoic heart or silent mouth if you’re dealing with a bad job situation. As Barbara Sher notes in *Wishcraft*, it’s good sometimes to vent.

But once we do, it’s time to get off our duffs, take action, and move ahead. We’re entitled to wallow in our discontent only so long (not bathe in it daily!). Eventually, we need to take steps, even faltering ones, to make things better.

Maybe that means exerting energy to jumpstart a career that’s stalled, reinventing ourselves professionally, or deciding that, yes, we’re entitled to a better job but that we have to create it—not hold our employer (or family and friends) responsible for it.

How do you do that?

◆ Give up the idea that your boss and organization have all the answers for making your job and career more meaningful. I still encounter too many people who expect their organizations to take care of them professionally. Nowadays they don’t. And

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won’t. And even the most enlightened bosses and benign organizations sometimes lack the insight, inclination, or imagination to use us to our fullest. So, it’s *your* responsibility to figure out what you want, create it where you are, or go someplace else.

◆ Recognize that your boss may prove a valuable mentor, or just a boss, with nothing special to offer in the way of guidance, support, or advice. It’s an unfortunate legacy of hierarchies that many of us still view our employers in general (and bosses in particular) as ersatz parents, to whom we should kowtow and defer, not only in doing our jobs but in planning our careers. While some bosses make great mentors, others don’t. If your boss doesn’t, look elsewhere, either inside or outside your organization.

◆ At work, don’t think of yourself as somebody’s subordinate or employee (that’s disempowering). Instead, think

of yourself as a consultant or subject matter expert with specific expertise to share. The way to get ahead at work today is to realize that your skills and experience are your “currency of passage” to future job and career success. They’re your assets; the keys to future marketability and employability. To ensure you keep playing value-added roles where you work, look for ways to continuously refresh your skills and update your experience.

◆ Develop a clear vision of where you want to go professionally, then engage others to help you “reality-test” your vision and take concrete steps to get there. Good career planning never occurs in a vacuum. It’s done with others: colleagues, friends, co-workers, and contacts you make on the job hunting and career-planning path. So, the person you call on today for collegial support or feedback in helping you make job and career decisions may be someone to whom you can return the favor in the future. I call this co-mentoring. For professionals today it’s a powerful way to stay energized with your job, while engaging in continuous learning and collegial interaction.

◆ Finally, as you think about ways to manage your career, consider whether an attitude adjustment is in order. Do you view the world as full of options, opportunities, and choices? Or do you see it as a dangerous place where you need to watch every step? Think of the world as dangerous and you’re unlikely to take risks. But think of the world as full of potential opportunities available to you if you’re resourceful and willing to take carefully considered risks, and you’ll have the recipe not only for professional success, but for the resilience and confidence you need to deal with career adversity.

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