

PSYCHOLOGY OF SAFETY: The "Nickel and Dimed" culture

How distrust de-motivates employees

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I must walk through Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport 20 times a year. But I never noticed that booth vendors have no place to sit. That was before I read "Nickel and Dimed" by Barbara Ehrenreich. Now I have a new appreciation for working conditions of all sorts.

Take the woman selling sunglasses in the Atlanta airport the last time I was there. Sitting in a waiting area, I watched her for 30 minutes. She made no sales but merely stood calmly in front of her booth.

I approached her and introduced myself.

"How long did you work today?"

"Eight hours."

"Did you get tired standing?"

"Yes, very much."

"Why don't you have a chair or stool to sit on?"

"We're not allowed."

"How much do you make per hour?"

"\$7.50."

"How old are you?"

"38."

Then she volunteered she has only been in the U.S. for two years, and asked if I could do something about the "no-sit-down rule."

"If only I could sit down once in a while, I wouldn't be so tired."

“Nickel and Dimed”

I must confess I’ve never conversed with an airport vendor like that before. But “Nickel and Dimed” has changed my view of both the work world and my own behavior. From 1998 to 2000, Ehrenreich took a number of hourly jobs in three states to study the culture of the low-wage work world and to see how well she could live as a minimal-wage worker. She worked as a hotel maid, house cleaner, and nursing-home aide in Maine, a Wal-Mart sales associate in Minnesota, and a waitress in Florida.

She had to work two jobs at \$6 to \$7 per hour to cover the cheapest lodging available. And none of her six jobs provided overtime pay, retirement funds, nor health insurance. Plus, she found that no job was truly unskilled. She had to master new terms, new tools, and new behaviors for each one. And she quickly discovered that each job was mentally and physically exhausting.

Each of Ehrenreich’s wage jobs presented a self-contained work culture, with distinctive personalities, customs, standards, and hierarchies. Some things never changed. Regarding standards, you shouldn’t be “so fast and thorough you end up making things tougher for everyone else.” And you learn not to “reveal one’s full abilities to management, because the more they think you can do, the more they’ll use and abuse you.”

A U.S. culture of extreme inequality is revealed. “Corporate decision makers... occupy an economic position miles above that of the underpaid people whose labor they depend on,” she writes. Her book documents many problems meeting life’s needs, especially eating and sleeping. From her detailed cost analysis, Ehrenreich concludes “wages are too low and rent is too high.”

“Nickel and Dimed” gave me a glimpse into management systems from the perspective of the minimum-wage earner. I never realized how humiliating a routine drug test can feel. Or how demeaning some managers or supervisors are when conducting an intrusive, pre-employment interview or personality test. And the author discusses the psychological toll resulting from treating employees as untrustworthy. Top-down rules and regulations are designed to catch a potential slacker, drug addict, or thief.

In her words, “if you’re made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you’re paid is what you are actually worth.”

A common perspective

This is obviously a selective and biased view of management, but my numerous conversations with wage workers during more than 30 years tells me this perspective is not unusual. Most supervisors mean well, but many don’t take time to understand the perceptions of those they manage. Instead, they enforce top-down generic rules that seem to consider wage workers as objects or a means to an end — rather than people with special needs, aspirations, emotions, and challenges.

The result: unhappy wage workers who don’t contribute to production and safety as much as they could. That’s unfortunate. Ehrenreich concludes from watching waitresses, retail workers, and housecleaners that “left to themselves, they devised systems of cooperation and work sharing... In fact, it was often hard to see what the function of management was, other than to exact obeisance.”

It's unlikely these workers will go beyond the call of duty to actively care for safety. They can be expected to do only what's required, and no more. That's what happens when workers are managed in a way that lowers their self-esteem and disconnects them from the organization.

The "Sins of Wages"

"The Sins of Wages" by William Abernathy defines a major reason — perhaps a "root cause" — of the deplorable circumstances depicted in "Nickel and Dimed." Most workers are not paid for what they accomplish but only for the amount of time they put in. This motivates a "just-put-in-your-time" mentality.

Combine that thinking with the perception that management doesn't care about the individual worker, and naturally peer pressure builds to do only enough and no more. Actively caring or going beyond the call of duty is out of the question.

Abernathy refers to the typical hourly-wage system as "entitlement pay" that contributes to an "entitlement culture." Employees believe they are owed their pay regardless of personal or company performance.

What happens when you have this kind of disconnect between job performance and wage compensation? Companies set up an accountability system — often based on behavior-based threats rather than recognition. They are implemented by supervisors who have not received effective behavior-management training, and have little empathy for the distressful plight of the minimum-wage worker.

Safety professionals often find themselves in the middle here, working between low-wage employees and command-and-control supervisors. They are working in a culture where supervisors are ill-trained, time pressures great, and employees unmotivated to go beyond the call for safety.

We don't envy any of the players in this scenario. What to do? Any attempt to improve safety here must begin with empathy. I hope this article provided some understanding and compassion for the world of the minimum-wage worker. To gain more empathy, I recommend reading "Nickel and Dimed" and "The Sins of Wages."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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