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Fire Your Boss—A Book Review

by Mary Pat Campbell



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Fire Your Boss by Stephen M. Pollan and Mark Levine, HarperCollins, 2004.

When I was lazily thumbing through the bargain bin in a Pigeon Forge outlet book store, the title *Fire Your Boss* jumped out at me. I thought it would be about leaving the cubi-sphere for brighter pastures of self-employment, but I could not have been more wrong. While some have labeled this book “mercenary” and “cynical”, I agree with those who say the book helped them “put things into perspective”. It is ultimately uplifting; it tells people to get a grip and quit looking for self-fulfillment in all the wrong places.

The core message of *Fire Your Boss* is really “Kill Your Career.” (I’m going to guess they thought that title would not sell as many books.) The problem, the authors write, is that many people fixed on the idea of a career are trying to achieve so many things at a job, that they ultimately fail in all their goals—of satisfaction, happiness, even making money.

One of the authors, Stephen Pollan, is a career counselor as well as financial advisor, and he lists some reasons his clients have said they work:

1. For power
2. For respect
3. For security
4. To travel
5. To serve
6. To meet people
7. To express yourself
8. For money

Pollan’s point is that all of the goals except money can be met more satisfactorily outside of work. For example, it’s better to make plenty of money through your job (in a reasonable amount of time) to pay for the travel you desire, than seek travel through your job. I have many friends who travel extensively as part of their jobs—but they never get to enjoy the destinations because when they get there, they have to work. Plus, you’re not likely to have much control over where you travel to as part of work.

To take this to an extreme, once upon a time I wanted to be an astronaut because I wanted to go into outer space—but that’s a lot of hard work, and I don’t have many of the required aptitudes. Once I heard of Virgin Galactic, I realized that my new goal was to make enough money to pay for a vacation in space.

But back on track—many actuaries have already made the calculation to work for the money; salary surveys are a perennial favorite in the actuarial world. The actuarial profession is chock full of ex-academics and ex-teachers, people who really wanted to serve the community, but realized they weren’t getting paid much to do it. For many of us, it is more helpful to the world at large if we work at our jobs and donate our money to educational charities or volunteer our time to tutor kids in math. Most of the fulfillment people look for at work is easier to find at home, with friends or in hobbies.

Another way to kill one’s career is opening one’s mind to having multiple job possibilities, rather than getting stuck in predefined paths or depending on other people to determine a career arc. Given the well-defined exam process, this seems to be the more likely trap for actuaries. While going through exams, the path to advancement and the jobs available along the way are pretty well-defined. Even beyond FSA, people look to well-worn paths to actuarial management positions, chief actuary, CFO or CRO. We can end up with blinders on, seeing our possibilities only by what has gone before us.

This is where the “Fire Your Boss” concept comes in—instead of sitting around waiting for someone else to tell you how to develop your skills and knowledge, and which jobs and industries you should pursue, you need to take charge. As Pollan and Levine caution, this does not mean staging a coup d’état against your current bosses, but to take mental control of your development. They propose a four-step process (paraphrased from pages 36-43):



1. WRITE YOUR OWN JOB DESCRIPTION

Survey your actual activities and distill them to as general a statement as possible. An example from the book took a woman's statement from "I work for Acme Computer as a technical writer preparing software manuals" to "I gather, analyze and digest complex information and then translate and present it in a form that meets the needs of a particular audience."

2. GIVE YOURSELF A PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Using the above job description, research salary and benefits earned by people doing similar things, not necessarily in the same industry, looking for which skills and activities are most highly valued in the market. An example from the book is a news photographer who found that corporate and wedding photographers were paid best in his field, and that skills in posed, studio photography, as opposed to his own specialty of outdoor and candid photography, were most valued by the market.

3. DEFINE ALTERNATE COURSES

Using the results of the first two steps, brainstorm possible jobs as well as skills to develop that will make you more saleable in the job market. The technical writer mentioned in Step 1 determined she could work as a political speechwriter, a CIA analyst, and any number of report- and article-writing jobs for specialty groups and publications. This step keeps you from feeling trapped in a dead-end career, or a career arc with no branches.

4. PUT YOUR PLAN IN WRITING

Make a map of how to deal with your current situation and future possibilities. Determine how to be more valuable in your current job, as well as how to develop new skills relevant to your alternate paths and how to find jobs in those areas. The photographer mentioned in Step 2

decided to take graduate coursework in technical photography as well as specific studio work, such as portraiture. Having further credentials makes him more marketable in a variety of jobs, including teaching photography courses.

So far, everything sounds like good, solid advice. So why have some readers had negative reactions? Some object to the concept that one cannot achieve fulfillment at work. The authors don't deny that you can—but by searching for fulfillment at work, often you will not achieve your stated goals. More importantly, you'll find employers taking advantage of this attitude to get you to stay longer on the job and to pay you less than you could command if you went for the "mercenary" path.

Mostly, though, it's some of the follow-up chapters that make people recoil:

Chapter 4: There's No I in Job

Many reviewers react negatively to this chapter, seeing it as brown-nosing. The concept is that job success is dependent on pleasing your boss, so find out your boss's pain points and relieve them. This chapter can come across as very cynical, but I prefer to look at it as win-win. You make your boss happy, thus you are successful at your job, and you have more time and money to spend in your personal life.

To turn this around, if you have your own business, you need customers willing to pay for your goods or services. You want to be successful in the bottom line, and you do this by providing pleasure or relieving pain through solving a problem of theirs. If your customers aren't happy with what you provide, and if you do not fulfill their needs, then ultimately you will have no customers and no income.

If you think of your boss as a customer of your business, why wouldn't you want to do these things? Your sense of justice may bristle at letting a glory-seeking boss take credit for a problem solved when it was your work that solved it—but what do

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you care? It's just a job—the purpose of a job is to make money, and you're not going to do well by making your boss look bad.

Chapter 5: Go Fish

This chapter does not cause many objections—it's about how to keep one's job search wide and varied, how to set up the “bait”, and how not to narrow choices too early in the process.

Chapter 6: No One Hires a Stranger

This is another chapter that gets a negative response—using social connections to land a job. Given the social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, I think it's somewhat disingenuous to think that trying to find jobs through social contacts is cynical. It's a time-honored method of finding jobs and, as the authors write, people prefer to hire someone they know over a complete stranger they know only through a resume and interview. While the authors pooh-poo networking groups, I think it depends on the focus and the actual network involved. Finally, they're not saying to do something you wouldn't want to do normally, but to become publicly active in your interests, whether it's getting involved in local civic groups, special interest clubs, professional organizations (e.g., actuarial meetings), and even church activities.

Chapter 7: It's the Money

Ah, the Jerry Maguire-ism “Show Me the Money” that makes people say “What a mercenary book!” But why not go for a job that gives you the most money possible, for a reasonable workload? They are not saying that people should try to become investment bankers (especially not in this economic climate), but that one should ignore things such as amenities, opportunities for advancement, inflated title or status, as many of these are just ways for employers to pay less for you. As Paul Graham, a noted programming expert, wrote on prestigious jobs:

“If it didn't suck, they wouldn't have had to make it prestigious.”

I don't think this idea is that new or objectionable to actuaries. However, we do seem to be tied in to looking at only insurance-related industries, where we may be able to net higher salaries and benefits (for using the same skills and having the same workload) in other industries, such as hedge funds or financial advice. The authors are not telling you to ignore your skill set, but to maximize your income given your skills and experience (as well as keep an eye on the types of experience valued by the market).

It is similar to the advice given to companies to leverage their strengths to maximize revenue. Who would say that IBM was mercenary when it changed its core business from hardware manufacturing and design to IT business consulting? Likewise, if you decide to use your skills in pension valuation to jump over to wealth management, why should this be any worse?

Chapter 8: Hello, I Must Be Going

The idea here is that one has a foot out the door the moment you enter a job. People like to slap “mercenary” and “cynical” on this reasoning, but given how fast business changes and how little company loyalty there is to employees, this is the only way to have any level of economic security in your own life.

Going back to the analogy of business, when a company enters a certain line of business, they should also have an exit plan. Likewise, one doesn't want to be boxed in to any particular path, as it limits your freedom to maneuver and exposes you to the risk of job insecurity.

Though I've pretty much given the game away here, I still recommend you get the book, especially since as of this writing there are six copies of the hardcover selling at Amazon selling for a penny each (it's all about the money—in this case, saving it). In the book itself, Pollan relates the stories of many of his clients, so you can see how these ideas work out in real life. In addition, there are extra chapters relating to how to implement these ideas

if you're unemployed, looking for your first job out of school, or trying to change jobs between industries.

Companies and managers are told all the time to keep an eye on the bottom line, and as a worker, it would serve you well in your own job. The kind of advice found in this book is extremely practical, borne of the experience of decades and providing a perspective that one doesn't get from normal management and career development training (as it undermines many of those messages). Firing your boss, mentally, will help you take control of your working life so you have more time and money to spend on what you truly love. ●

