



We just need to see the work

Corporate Curmudgeon DALE DAUTEN Syndicated Columnist

“The message that kills us is the one that pops up on the computer screen on the rare occasions when we remember to shut everything down for the weekend just before we turn the computer off.

“ ‘Are you sure you want to quit?’ ”

That’s from the novel “Personal Days,” by Ed Park, which recounts the day-to-day activities (and lack thereof) of one New York office, a place where the answer to the question “Do you want to quit?” is always yes.

“For the past three months Pru’s been saying, ‘I have to get out of this place.’ Lizzie started muttering similar sentiments two weeks ago. Jonah has been saying ‘Time to leave’ for six months now. We have all been saying it, in some fashion, at assorted volumes, without quite realizing it. Perhaps we’ve all been saying it ever since we started here, in our dreams, in our strained and silent thoughts, the right brain murmuring it to the left, or is it the other way around?”

However, here’s the Bad Office Irony: While everyone in the office wants to quit, they spend much of their time worrying about getting fired ...

“Whenever we sniff a layoff coming, which is always, each one of us thinks, ‘It can’t be me because ...’

“Because I have too much work to do.”

“Because I’m exploited as it is.”

“Because, really, how much money would they save by getting rid of me versus what untold profits my labor/hardearned know-how brings in?”

“I mean, I’m joking, but seriously.”

Fear and loathing, wanting to leave and desperate to stay, that’s the Bad Office Irony. “Personal Days” eventually reveals itself as a metaphor for office life — interesting characters but nothing happens. And isn’t that the way of most jobs in most careers — just not enough plot?

But here’s what got me thinking: As I read “Personal Days,” I kept coming back to a lesson for upper management. Consider these two excerpts, and see if they don’t ring true as something that could happen in your office.

“The top magenta Post-it of the stack on Crease’s desk bears a message: ‘Please stop stealing me.’ Nobody has been stealing them, but now some of us start, just to confirm his fears. We keep removing the top Post-it, taking a few of the ones beneath, and replacing the one with Crease’s request.

“He can always tell. The edges are never perfectly aligned.”

And ...

“The department manager used to be almost normal to talk to, but now he’ll ask if we’re ‘on the same page’ and say something is a ‘no-brainer,’ all in a single sentence. It’s not just the frequency of these expressions but their haphazard use. Last week he told Laars to ‘think outside the box.’ They were talking about which size manila

folders worked best. Afterward he said, 'Keep me in the loop and let's touch base next week.' "

In reading these and reflecting on how much of the typical office day is spent in nattering, nagging and nothings, I kept thinking, So why do we still have employees come to an office? It's time to admit that there are more distractions at the office than at home, and just give in to the idea of remote employees.

The idea of bringing employees together is left over from the old notion of industrialization, from the assembly line and the old management of "keeping an eye on employees." These days, there aren't enough management eyes to go around, and even if there were, it's rare that you can tell if someone is working simply by looking at him or her. In fact, thinking back over my times as a manager, one of my most important functions running an office was "looking the other way."

It's time for management to stop overseeing employees ... and overtalking and overmeeting and overcommitteeing. When you liberate employees, you liberate management. Maybe the price of gas, not to mention the time and pollution of commuting, have finally reached the point where managers can say, "I don't need to see you working, I just need to see the work."

