Creating A Quality Work Life: A Decision Making Tool

An individual’s employment occupies a significant portion of his time and, in many ways, sets the tone for other aspects of that person’s life. For some, work represents economic vitality, social standing, sense of personal worth, and physical and mental vibrancy.

Studies of the American workforce conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (www.gss.norc.org) provide interesting and perhaps predictable results. Their research found that job satisfaction and general life happiness were positively related. This is significant in that one’s general happiness may be made up of a multitude of factors (independence, family, friends, hobbies, service contributions, and the like) that are unrelated to one’s employment. The findings of this national survey also noted that as an employee’s occupational prestige increases so does his job satisfaction and general happiness.

The types of employment that yield the highest job satisfaction were professions that involved service or care to others such as the clergy or physical therapist, or those that allowed for creative output such as artist or author. General happiness was found in employment that, once again, involved helping others such as fire fighters and teachers and work that highlighted creativity such as architects and actors.

However, is there a way that individuals may look at their work to determine why they may or may not be satisfied or happy? Is there a way to make changes in ones work to increase satisfaction or happiness? The following decision making grid may be of assistance.

In the decision making grid there are two elements that the employee considers: goodness of one’s work and happiness of one’s work. Goodness refers to tasks that are performed at work that are helpful, valuable, necessary, important, essential and critical for the success of the organization. The assumption is that the worker is committed to those tasks that are important to their employer and faithfully fulfills them. Happiness refers to elements of one’s work that have personal meaning and bring happiness, satisfaction, and sense of value for performance of an assignment well done. It is hoped that in everyone work these types of values can be found.

Note in the grid there is a green zone. This zone represents the ideal work environment in which both the goodness of work and the happiness of the tasks meet. This is the place we should all strive for in that these will bring both organizational success and achievement and personal satisfaction and happiness. This is the zone of a high quality of work life. What tasks could you place in this zone that meet both the criteria of goodness and happiness? If possible, this zone should become the primary focus of one’s work.
There is also a red zone in the grid. This zone is where the employee is performing tasks that have little meaning to the organization and also do not bring happiness. These activities are destructive both professionally and the personally. This is the area that may require personal correction or organizational re-evaluation. There is probably no value to the work here and the effort is probably not responsive to society, self or co-workers. This is a zone were a serious plan of correction needs to be made by the organization, the employee or both. Why would anyone have such a work environment?

There are two yellow zones. One that highlights goodness to the organization, but with little personal happiness and then the other zone which is just the opposite, that is personal happiness but little organizational value.

The upper left yellow zone of the grid represents difficult work assignments. This usually consists of duties that must be carried out for the good of the company, but may be particularly painful to fulfill. Unfortunately, we have become all too familiar with this zone in austere times. Tasks such as reducing budgets, disciplining employees, eliminating programs, complying with difficult regulations, work reduction actions, and unanticipated conflict resolutions may be the bulk of this work zone. There will probably always be these types of situations. Knowing that this work is required and is for the good of the organization does place the unhappiness of the work in context.

The lower right yellow zone of the grid is work that on the negative consists of activities of self-satisfaction in which the interests of the organization are of less value than ones personal happiness; this is a time of serious self reflection. On the more positive note, there are times where the employee needs to re-assess, re-focus, and re-energize. At times, we move to work that involves less pressure and stress and we do so on purpose or with organizational
permission. A time of re-tooling or re-training may be necessary. Work in this zone should be viewed as temporary and over some time frame shifted to the green zone.

Employees and employers both seek commitment to the good of the organization and to oneself. At times, we may question the quality of our work life. One tool that can be used to get a better sense of one’s work is the goodness-happiness grid. This tool is helpful on the private personal level or as a group decision-making exercise. As one finds times of concern, it may be helpful to map their work activities onto the grid. With this different perspective important and hopefully positive changes can be made.