

From Entitlement to Equality—Transforming the Corporation from Within

The American corporation is a fascinating and complex creature, capable of miracles that can change our daily lives and yet all too often, a diseased and wounded entity that seems to thrive on becoming more unhealthy at the expense of its own people. What will it take to transform these cultures into dynamic, healthy cultures?

I spent seven years in various Bay Area corporations, ending in 1997. I was a graphic artist designing icons and interfaces, illustrating computer games, and finally art directing and team managing on a major computer sports game. I entered the corporate world juggling two careers: breathwork facilitator—intuitive/spiritual consultant and graphic artist. I continued my healing practice part-time through my corporate years, and naturally brought a healer's awareness to what was happening around me.

I have worked with some wonderful and brilliant people, some disturbing people, and some tragic people. I saw and had to respond to every dysfunction that can arise in a corporation, and had to forge tools that would keep me intact emotionally, morally and spiritually. I want to share my observations into the origins of the corporate wounding, and describe the tools I used.

Entitlement and Expendability

At the heart of American corporate dysfunction lies a mentality that is really no different than that of an addict or alcoholic, and that is **entitlement**. Within any addictive behavior, the quiet rationalization is essentially that of “I am entitled to do this, because of the piece of me I gave away over there”. Addictive behavior is a form of compensation for loss of self and grief, a short-cut to feeling whole and good that deeply isolates the person from the world around them.

This isolation makes parts of that person's life—and people in that person's life—**expendable**, while they pursue the compensation to which they feel they are entitled. As the isolation progresses, a numbness sets in that dismisses what has been made expendable. This was played out with a disturbing brilliance in the Enron scandals and other recent CEO financial debacles, even to using the language of “compensation packages”. As an American cultural dysfunction, entitlement and expendability has its historical roots in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which gave license to the enslavement and genocide of the Native American people. This whole mentality has become a kind of cultural cancer that can—and must—be healed.

But how do we initiate this healing? Can any one of us walk into a CEO's office and demand that they give up their entitlement? In the wake of massive downsizing, in which millions discovered what it feels like to be suddenly expendable, is there some immediate alternative? No. These are the forces of a culture discovering the consequences of its own addictions, convulsing in shame and fear.

The healing can only begin in each of us, becoming emotionally sober and making the choice not to participate in the addictive mentality of entitlement. For it lives not only in the upper management. Entitlement trickles down into the entire organization—each tier has its own forms of compensation, isolation and techniques for making others expendable. Entitlement takes root through the rationale of “They get away with it, why can’t I?”, and spreads insidiously throughout a corporate culture. One of the most seductive and erosive ways that entitlement takes root in companies is when people begin to feel entitled to break agreements and enable each other in doing so.

The Tools

The techniques I am going to suggest are deceptively simple, until you actually try to use them in a group setting where people don’t want to give up entitlement.

1. **Create Sober Agreements** — Practice the discipline of setting realistic goals and milestones. Feel-good meetings that gloss over past failures and over-commit to unrealistic goals are the beginning of a cycle that perpetuates expensive and demoralizing breakdowns.

2. **Keep Your Agreements** — As simple and powerful as it gets. No excuses, no entitlement to rewrite an agreement just because it is uncomfortable or forces you and others to stretch. You are accountable for your agreements.

3. **Focus on Results** — On a day to day level, this means disengaging from blame-shame-guilt dramas and conversations, and getting to the real results that were promised.

4. **Hold Challenges with Gratitude** — Using every setback as an opportunity to challenge one’s self to be part of the solution, not part of the problem, even if there is no immediate reward or recognition.

5. **Give the Company Your Time** — When you proactively and consistently create the results you agreed on, that is time that was structured by you, not by the forces of erosive entitlement that live in missed milestones and cost over-runs. This is a real boundary that discourages the secretive patterns of entitlement from trying to enmesh you.

Applying these tools throughout an entire project sends clear messages to those around you that you are not available to be seduced into entitlement—and most important, that your self-esteem is not expendable. It takes time for this to have an impact, but it does, and ultimately can result in higher productivity and healthier group pride, as well as healthier people, with a positive impact on health and medical expenses.

In reality, how does this transform a corporation? Because it gradually exposes and isolates the core entitlement addicts. It is invaluable for a corporation to experience the success of sober planning, execution and results, and to take away one of the addictive triggers for dysfunctional leaders – shame and failure. An empowered corporate culture that owns accountability and expects it from within can ultimately demand sobriety from whomever is really abusing the power. I am not being unrealistic in suggesting this. I know that dysfunctional executive boards, fear of disappointing shareholders, management intimidation tactics and persistent denials exist—it is not a walk in the park to challenge these patterns.

Nonetheless, we do not have to wait for corporate leaders and management to acquire humility and conscience, and to stop making employees, shareholders and communities expendable, before we can act. Every person has the power to challenge entitlement through the professional boundaries they create, and to gradually create a sober corporate America.

Geoff Brandenburg is an Intuitive and Spiritual Consultant living and working in Truckee, CA who is developing a number of books and transformative programs to be introduced in the near future. In his corporate years, Geoff worked for Oracle, Informix, Stormfront Studios and other Bay Area corporations.