

Career advice I wish I had
instead of bumbling my way through:

HOW TO IDENTIFY PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE WORKPLACES

and

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND YOURSELF IN ONE

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ABOUT THIS ZINE

All of the things mentioned in this zine come from my own mistakes. This zine is the guidebook I wish I had 10 years ago when I just joined the workforce. Since the main audience for this zine is my younger self, I will not claim that this zine is suited for all audiences.

- If you are just starting out in your career (you haven't landed your first job yet)...
- or if you just got a job offer that you're feeling iffy about...
- or if you have doubts whether you should be in your current workplace because you feel like your morality is being chiseled away...
- or if you know that you are in a psychologically unsafe workplace and you need that push of encouragement to take action...
- ...then some parts of this zine might resonate with you.

If you find even one thing that is useful, then my mission is accomplished.

LASTLY

"Integration with one's context, as distinguished from adaptation, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his decisions are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer integrated. Rather, he has adapted. He has 'adjusted.'"

(Freire, Paulo. *Education: The Practice of Freedom*. Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976, p.4)

This was THE passage that inspired me to put my thoughts down in writing and to share it. Although the original context refers to critical pedagogy and Freire's literacy campaign in Brazil in the 1960's (it is vastly different from this zine's context), if I borrow Freire's words, I was "adjusting" for far too long. This zine is a promise to myself that I will not make the same mistakes again, and a wish that maybe one reader might feel compelled to shift from "adjusting" to "integrating." Could that be you?

(Special thanks: Kimberly Geswein, for the "Gloria Hallelujah" type-face!)

"On the outside, everything looked peachy - as if I were a picture of success. On the inside, I was feeling defeated and helpless. In accordance with the self-improvement mindset, I rationalized these feelings as stemming from my own inadequacy. If I felt I was juggling more than I possibly could, I clearly had to hustle more. 'I just need to work harder,' I told myself. 'I'm out of my comfort zone. I'll get better. I'll adjust.'"

(From Please stop telling me to leave my comfort zone, by writer and executive coach Melody Wilding)

This was what I did when I first joined the workforce, and I worked myself into illness over the course of several years. Don't do what I did!

Looking back, I probably could have prevented this from happening (or got out of it faster) by:

- Understanding that while not all things can be controlled (e.g. getting an offer or a rejection), there are still some things that I CAN control (e.g. accepting vs. rejecting an offer).
- Understanding the difference between stepping out of my comfort zone and stepping out of my MORALS.
- Understanding that being rejected from a job simply means that I was not the best fit with the job at the time. Being rejected from a job has nothing to do with how much I am worth.

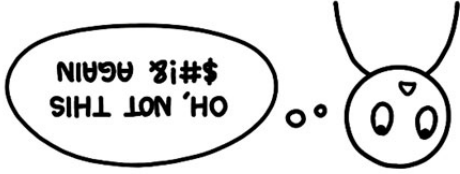
TABLE OF CONTENTS

· About this zine	01
· Table of contents	03
· How to tell if a workplace might be psychologically unsafe during an interview	04-06
· How to tell if a workplace might be psychologically unsafe from a job offer	07-08
· When do you accept vs. reject a job offer?	08
· You started your new job and you can sense that something is off	09-13
· I think I found myself in a psychologically unsafe workplace	14
· The cost of tolerating workplace bullying and/or harassment	15
· If you decide to fight, bear in mind	16
· Leaving is not a sign of cowardice	17
· When is the time to look for your next job?	18
· The "AT LEAST'S" that will try to stop you from moving on	19
· Giving notice	20
· Causes and prevention strategies	21-22
· Lastly	23

HOW TO TELL IF A WORKPLACE MIGHT BE PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE DURING AN INTERVIEW

EXHIBIT A: If there are multiple interviewers in the same room and one is talking about how great their organizational culture is, etc., try to pay attention to who is NOT speaking. Do you see them doing interesting things with their eyes?

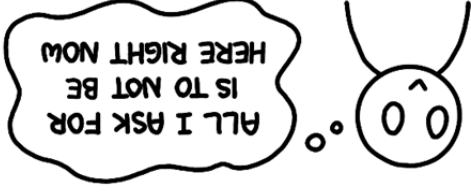
1) Eye-rolling



2) Wide-eyed

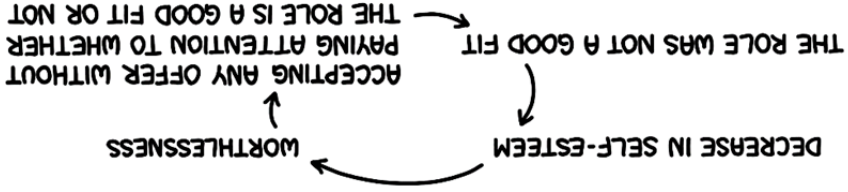


3) "Dead fish" eyes



CAUSES AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES A CASE STUDY

All these things I mentioned in this zine are based on my own experiences. I think one question you have as a reader might be "How did all this happen? Why did you learn this the hard way?" so I'll attempt to answer it in two pages. In hindsight, I think I fell into a vicious cycle:



After facing numerous rejections and the overall uncertainty about what I should do for a living, I lost my self-respect. I felt like I was lucky if I was able to work anywhere, and asking for a place that is well-suited for me was too much to ask for.

One thing that made it difficult for me to break free from this vicious cycle was the overaggressive use of the growth mindset. While the growth mindset definitely helped me go places (and it still does!), my perfectionism interacted very badly with the growth mindset (I can always do better... right?). Let me share a quote because I can't describe it better than this:

GIVING NOTICE



Once the cat's out of the bag, it's not going back in. If you feel compelled to provide information but don't know how to word it, there are resources out there created by people who are much more knowledgeable than me about the subject. Get a counter-offer? It is best to stick to your original intent and say no. Things will get increasingly awkward in the long run if you accept it (you and your employer will not trust each other moving forward).



After giving notice, make sure you celebrate the day you walk away from a psychologically unsafe workplace, whether it is when you gave notice or your actual last day of work. (I celebrate both days.) It is more important compared to landing your dream job. Put it on your calendar. Celebrate it every year.

EXHIBIT B: When you ask the interviewer(s) or someone else who works in the organization about what makes them enjoy what they do and come to work every day and then you see any one of the following, you might want to reevaluate the organization.

1) They visibly have trouble coming up with an answer:



2) Their body language and facial expression gives it away (you can tell that they're not enjoying it!):



3) The answer they came up with sounds scripted:

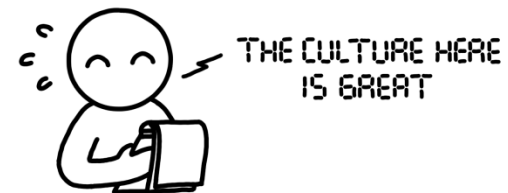
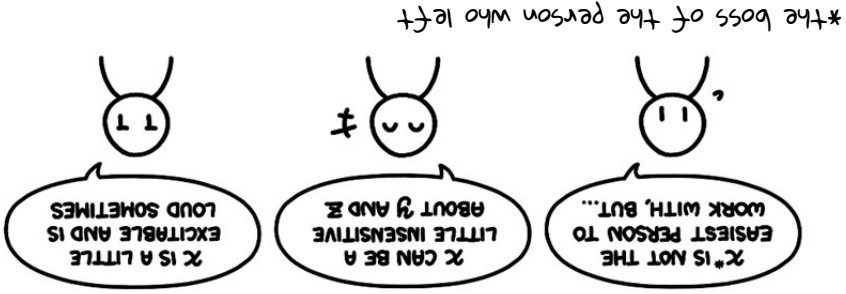


EXHIBIT C: Why did your predecessor leave the organization in the first place? You might not get a direct answer from your predecessor's colleagues, but if they say things like this:



*the boss of the person who left

They could actually mean this:



Why would they sugarcoat?

- They could be trying to survive, barely hanging in there.
 - They might be resigning soon too, and prefer to not burn bridges on their way out.
 - They could be well aware of the problem(s), and may be looking to you for help.
- If you see these signs, it may be worth making an attempt to get in touch with your predecessor for more information.

THE "AT LEAST'S" THAT WILL TRY TO STOP YOU FROM MOVING ON

AT LEAST I'M GETTING PAID

If you decide to work somewhere only for financial stability, do not stop the job search, keep looking. As soon as you see a role that is better suited for you, go for it.

AT LEAST I CAN GET A REFERENCE

Are you sure you are getting the reference from the right person/organization? I won't elaborate on it here, but there are resources out there that could help you find other referees who can speak to your strengths better.

AT LEAST THIS ISN'T AS BAD AS MY LAST WORKPLACE

You do not deserve a slightly less horrendous workplace compared to the last one. You simply deserve a non-horrendous workplace. You may have said all of these things to yourself before. You may have heard these phrases from your loved ones. It is up to you to decide whether to stop moving on, or to move on regardless.

WHEN IS THE TIME TO LOOK FOR YOUR NEXT JOB?

Start your job search the first time you feel something is off (your hunch will probably tell you something within a week of starting your new job if something is off). It might feel easier to believe that it was just you overthinking and things will get better, but there is no downside to starting your alternate job search early on, while you still have the energy and motivation to start something new.

You don't need to go into 120% full time job seeker mode right away, but it is definitely worth starting to look. Spend a moment here and there looking through job postings. You can look for a role that you are particularly interested in pursuing. You can also scan the landscape and what kind of jobs are out there. Reach out to people for informational interviews if you have the mental energy for it.

Fun fact: A few months after I started my job search, my dream job (which I applied for in the past and was a runner-up for) appeared on job boards. I went for it the second time and got the job. You never know what job you will find if you never start looking!

HOW TO TELL IF A WORKPLACE MIGHT BE PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE FROM A JOB OFFER

EXHIBIT A: It sounds like they are doing you a favor.



This happened to me once: I had an awful interview but ended up getting an offer. It sounded like they were giving me an offer out of mercy. I took it out of desperation, and this was a bad decision on my part because it sets up an expectation that the employer has the upper hand and that I have little value.

EXHIBIT B: It sounds FLOWERY.



If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. If you sense that an offer is basically a sales pitch, take a moment to consider WHY they are trying to close the sale on you.

accepting the offer.

Another thought experiment that is worth trying out: Let's say that you accepted the offer but the next day you get a phone call saying that the offer is called off. Would you feel devastated, or would you feel... relieved? If you feel even the slightest sense of relief, do NOT accept the offer. Something is telling you that the job is not right for you. Listen to yourself.

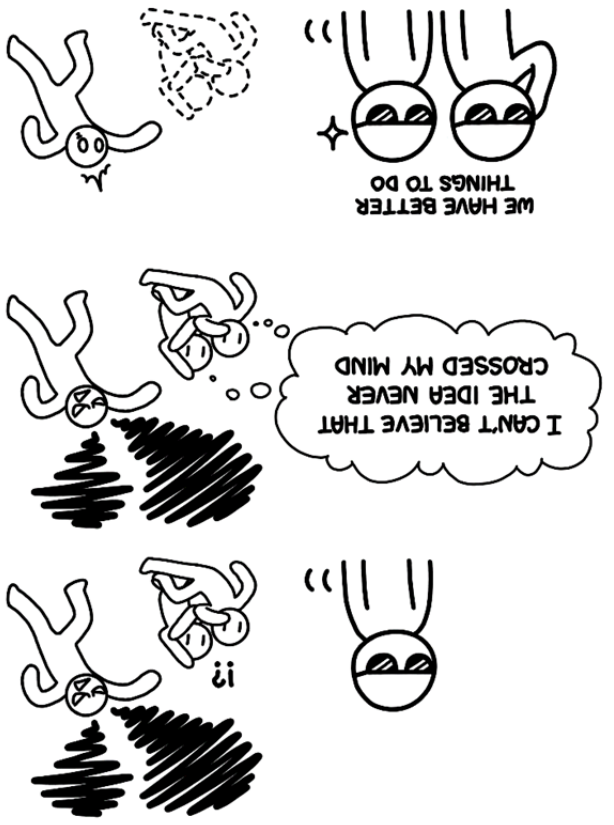
WHEN DO YOU ACCEPT VS. REJECT A JOB OFFER?

This might sound great at first glance, but take a moment to consider why they are acting so urgent. If the urgency intimidates you, they are trying to pressure you into accepting the offer. Think about why they would do that.



EXHIBIT C: It sounds very urgent for some reason.

A fear-based organization controls people through fear. If it runs out of people to control, it will starve. That is to say, simply leaving could be the most beneficial act for yourself (you get to spend energy on something better), others (they will realize that leaving is an option), and society at large (you stop adding fuel to a badly managed organization).



You might think: what can one person leaving do to an organization? Consider the following:

LEAVING IS NOT A SIGN OF COWARDICE

IF YOU DECIDE TO FIGHT BEAR IN MIND...



- 1) Bridges may be burned
- 2) Egos will be hurt
- 3) You might get no recognition
- 4) The change might look shockingly small
- 5) The change could be immediately reversed on a whim

CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES WISELY

I usually hear this phrase from people who are afraid to break free from their horrifying workplace and prefer to stay and not rock the boat. But I use this phrase for a different reason. Fighting takes an enormous amount of energy and time and there is no guarantee of any reward. Is it really worth it compared to leaving and joining a better place or starting something new? If it is, go for it.

YOU STARTED YOUR ⁺NEW⁺ JOB, AND YOU CAN SENSE THAT SOMETHING IS OFF

EXHIBIT A: Do you hear yelling on a frequent basis?

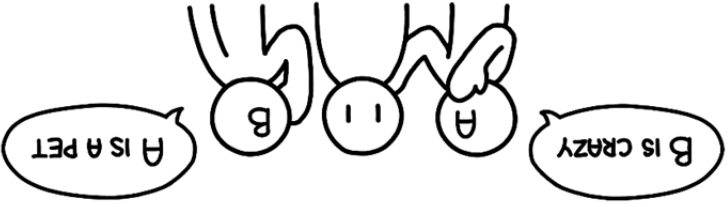


Put a check mark on each statement you agree with:

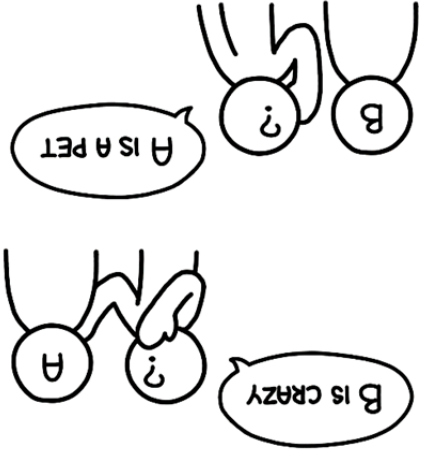
- ___ I hear angry yelling on a weekly basis.
- ___ Actually, I hear it on a daily basis.
- ___ It's so loud that I can hear each and every word.
- ___ Actually, the public can hear each and every word.
- ___ The same person is yelling all the time.
- ___ The same person is getting yelled at all the time.
- ___ There is a lot of swearing and other foul language.
- ___ The person is yelling for bad reasons.

How many check marks did you get? The more you got, the more urgent it is to look for a psychologically safe workplace.

EXHIBIT B: Why is everyone bad-mouthing each other?



That could be a situation where bad relationships are engineered so that everyone is at each other's backs:



That is already unpleasant, but the scary thing here is that all of this (everyone is too busy backstabbing each other) could be a distraction set up so that nobody gets at the root cause. It is worth thinking about whether there is an incentive for someone to engineer adversarial relationships.

THE COST OF TOLERATING WORKPLACE BULLYING AND/OR HARASSMENT

When you witness workplace bullying and/or harassment that makes the workplace psychologically unsafe, it may be tempting to not do anything at first:



- 1) It's not good for you: Your conscience will start to keep you awake at night. If left untreated, you will start to observe your physical health declining.

- 2) It's not good for others: If you don't take action, it is likely that more people will develop mental and physical illness.
- 3) It's not good for society at large: think of the opportunity cost, i.e. there is a better organization out there that is not doing as well as it could BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT THERE. Instead of feeding fear-based management and letting it wreak havoc, you could be contributing to something much better instead - either somewhere else or by working for yourself.

I THINK I FOUND MYSELF IN A PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE WORKPLACE

When you realize this, keep in mind that you have a choice:

TO TOLERATE:



TO FIGHT:



TO LEAVE*:



What will you do?

*Not everyone can just leave their job, but I have seen cases where people are not leaving even if they could.

EXHIBIT C: You're getting paid, but at what cost?



If you feel like you are earning money in exchange for your soul, now is an appropriate time to stop and rethink.

There was a time when I used to be in a data reporting role. I put in the utmost effort to ensure the integrity of the data and that the numbers were truthful. Things got heated when the numbers did not "look good" (the numbers are telling us something bad, therefore the numbers should be wrong, right?). In some occasions, the numbers were "rounded" when they were published.

In an organization with a high employee turnover, I feared that if I would be fired if I spoke up. I did not have an alternate source of income at the time so I was in a predicament where my job security was in conflict with a core value.

I did not last long in that situation, but in retrospect I spent way too much time worrying and not taking any real action. If this situation is left untreated, you will likely see a decline in mental health and physical health.

EXHIBIT D: Did you get gaslighted?

Let's say that you worked on a project that really burned you out to a crisp. You feel like charcoal and are overwhelmed with

constant stress.



When you communicate to your employer that you feel overwhelmed and if they discourage you from seeking help:

YOU ARE DOING JUST FINE

THE STRESS IS JUST IN YOUR HEAD

(these statements could sound like encouragement, but they express that they will not take action to rectify the situation, it is a red flag.

12

EXHIBIT E: Do you find yourself rationalizing "I just stepped out of my comfort zone, that's all..." after a traumatizing experience?

Tolerating workplace bullying, harassment, or abuse (whether that is you getting abused or witnessing someone else get

abused) is not the same thing as "stepping out of your comfort zone." DO NOT CONFUSE THE TWO.



If you are feeling burned out, broken, slowly rotting or decaying from the inside, or if the anxiety keeps you up at night, or the dread of tomorrow tempts you to never wake up again...



You are not only miles away from your comfort zone, **YOU ARE IN DANGER.**

13