

## Detoxing from the Corporate Kool-Aid

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Jennifer carried herself with quiet authority. A picture of elegance, the long, lean, impeccably dressed executive delicately deposited her cappuccino mug on the cafe table, excused herself, grasped her necklace, leaned over and threw up in the flower pot.

"How indelicate!" she remarked when she was finished. "I don't know what I ate that caused this, or maybe it was too many years drinking the corporate Kool-Aid!"

She proceeded to tell me a story that would make anyone nauseous. Following a year-long struggle to prove her value to a new boss - a year filled with doubt and fear, isolation and frustration - she was suddenly fired, despite 14 years as a role model in her organization. Then, as if a criminal, she was quickly escorted from the company by plain-clothed security guards. Fourteen years of devoted service to the organization ended with 20 minutes to be discharged, remove personal items from her office, and leave.

The event was unexpected. That morning, she arrived at work as the Vice President of Operations and Facilities. By evening, Jennifer's only viable titles were "Mom," "wife" and "daughter." In addition to being stunned, the descent from the top ranks crushed her self image.

"What had she done wrong?" she asked herself repeatedly. Her new boss only told her that the organization was going in a different direction and she was not to be a part his new group. Her head swirled from the rapidity of the change. She remembered feeling nauseous then, too.

A year earlier, her organization was acquired by a bigger fish in the same industry, but nothing seemed to change. Business went on as usual. Customers seemed loyal and happy. Work routines remained largely similar. The company facility looked the same. Yet a few changes were noticeable in the executive suite, most conspicuously the absence of the company president at major meetings and the addition of a new executive vice president to whom many of the old guard now reported. Brought from another industry, this new Executive Vice President was a rigid man with a terse manner and had indeterminate authority. His title was simply "Executive Vice President," not "EVP of Operations", or "EVP of Sales." He was the "Executive of Everything," assuming total authority while his paper boss (the company president) was nowhere to be found. He defined himself by his clout, not his title. A turnaround artist, I thought.

Jennifer found it hard to read his intentions. She focused on meeting her stated goals and coached her subordinates to do the same. They shared a common mantra "Keep your head down, this will pass. He won't last. Just do your job well." But his goals were overly aggressive and ultimately unattainable, forecasting a year with less than stellar results. As she told me this, she held her stomach, burped, and sipped from her water bottle. Nausea again commented on her narrative. It was hard to digest this dismissal, but talking about it brought up unprocessed events from the entire year.

Psychologists use a phenomenon called *introjection* to explain that untenable and damaging

experiences must be expunged, literally and figuratively. Chinese medicine's version of this is sometimes called "reverse stomach *qi*"; the body's forceful purgative of ingested poisons. One school of Chinese medicine has a practice called "de-possession," which assumes that certain emotional states can be internalized and then become totally dominant in the person's spirit. Regardless of the framework, common sense tells us that very bad times can hurt you in the gut.

What experience had Jennifer ingested? Speed. Too much to do. Too many goals. Too much growth. Don't think. Keep your language positive. Never admit problems. Cut staff but grow. Cut budgets but get more done. Do more with less. She was accustomed to a fast pace and gradually glazed over as unrealistic expectations were slowly taken for granted. The relentless pace led to a consistent feeling that she wasn't doing enough. Eventually, she believed she wasn't good enough to measure up to this job, and never would be.

I'm sure you have met people, or even have been the person who cuts off the knowledge of what you feel in order to cope with an untenable circumstance. Scary conditions produce adrenaline that lets us be hyper alert and simultaneously numb. Originally, this mechanism saved our species from being eaten by bears, and it's very effective as a lifesaver over short durations of time.

Prolonged fright, however, depletes a person's energy, and leaving them simultaneously speedy and tired. For 14 years, Jennifer worked in a driven institution, but enjoyed reasonable goals and the support of her colleagues. Though clearly sleep deprived and speedy, she was fed by the camaraderie, great pay and a quick climb up the corporate ladder; enticing Kool-Aid providing just enough refreshment in a tormenting environment to keep her alive. As her real energy drained away, she drank more. Her acupuncturist hoped that regular needling would at least help her cope but didn't see the chance for cure. It was really just thimbles of *qi* added to a draining reservoir.

Looking back, Jennifer asked rhetorically, "What was I thinking? Did I think I could succeed? Push people just because I was a good leader? I thought I could influence the place. People trusted me! What was I thinking? I sure drank the Kool-Aid! And I think of myself as aware, competent and an expert at change!"

In fact, the year prior to New Boss's arrival, Jennifer took a week-long class at a prestigious business school in managing change. Everyone in the class was wired and tired, had positions of authority, and hoped to improve life at work by learning to manage change. The class taught Jennifer the virtue of collaboration and "transparency" (corporate speak for a willingness to admit when mistakes are made or real problems exist). Back at work, however, she was criticized for these attributes and was now considered by her new boss to be unfocused and soft.

In a country where leaders rarely admit vulnerability and openness is often perceived as weakness, Jennifer was a risk-taker. Until New Boss arrived, her team-oriented, outcome-driven style led her to the top. However, as a Kool-Aid addict, she missed the signals that change was afoot, having lost sensory awareness of her environment.

Addiction, as we know in Chinese medicine, has many interlocking components. If someone has depended on a substance for a long time, there is usually deficiency of some form of energy. Organs are eroded or possibly damaged. Emotions lose control. The spirit escapes and sense of equanimity floats away. The true self is replaced by a great need that must be met. A great need for what? Influence. Authority. Money. Self worth. Acknowledgement. A sense of belonging. A real place in the world.

Addicts become dependent on something that masks their true need, thus making them not really feel the hole they are filling with something that doesn't support them. Whether it's alcohol, drugs

or work, addiction is addiction.

As is true for those whose addiction started by taking necessary medicine for pain or a social drink to enhance pleasure, work addiction may have started as true enjoyment of camaraderie and purpose. As many American workplaces have reduced staff and added work, the pace has increased. Coffee consumption is at an all-time high, as are sales of sleep medicines. We need help to keep the pace and then need medicine to put us to bed. Add the recession to this phenomenon and we find people fearful of losing their jobs and willing to go an extra mile in a race that is already a marathon.

My client's dismissal was a blessing in disguise. She faced her addiction with great courage and humility, found her core strength, and is one of the many happier professionals who left the fast track for consulting. She represents an increasing trend among working mothers.

There are unanswered questions in this story. Can you work in a driven organization and simultaneously pace yourself? Is it possible to set realistic goals in while being in a hyper-alert state? In short, is it possible to resist the corporate Kool-Aid?

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