

# DEVELOPER HEGEMONY

THE FUTURE OF LABOR



ERIK DIETRICH

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Erik Dietrich

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# Introductory Notes

## **Who should read this? Is it only for software developers?**

Let me start out by answering this question unequivocally. No, it is not only for software developers. Anyone can (and hopefully will) find this interesting.

As far as readers who will have skin in the game, though, there will be a hierarchy. Assuming you're not just in it for my clever turns of phrase and charming wit, this will feel most relevant to you if you earn your living as a knowledge worker.

A knowledge worker earns a living mainly via non-routine problem solving. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, entrepreneurs, management, scientists, professors—and, yes, software developers—all count. If you earn a living this way, this book will resonate more with you.

You'll find even more of interest in this book if you work in a standard corporate workplace, and more still if you work in or around software development. So many work with software in some capacity these days, so I imagine this applies broadly. This book covers things like software development project management techniques, so the subject matter will be more familiar to those with direct experience.

And finally, this book should hit home the most for those who work or have worked as software developers. We are the stars of the show here, and the book is really about our path forward and our fate. While these topics will probably interest just about anyone, they directly and personally affect us in the development world.

In this book, I talk in pretty frank and cynical terms about the

corporate world and office politics. My central thesis is that the pyramid-shaped corporation is fundamentally flawed as a way to manage knowledge work. If you like comics like Dilbert and movies like *Office Space*, I promise you will relate.

But if you're a software developer, there will be both empathy and calls to action in this book. This is *our* story and thus *our* book.

## **A note about names and demographics of developers**

For the names in this book, I used the site [Fake Name Generator](http://www.fakenamegenerator.com)<sup>1</sup> with the name set American. This is in part to outsource the activity of coming up with names, but it's also to absolve myself from the perception that I'm baking in any statements about programmer demographics.

The only exception to true randomness was that I specifically chose a female name for the protagonist of Part 1 of the book. I did this not to pander but because I think that the suggested future I propose will naturally lead to more equal-opportunity entry into the field of software development. Things like earnings and value delivered will not be obfuscated and vague the way they are now, hidden by a corporation whose self-interest competes with that of its employees.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.fakenamegenerator.com>

# More info after reading

What if you want more information about my proposed future of developer hegemony after reading the book?

Well, I've created a landing page on my site called, "[What Now?](http://www.daedtech.com/what-now/)"<sup>2</sup>. I intend for it to be a living follow-up to the book—one that evolves with time. It's here that I've started to create content aimed at helping people realize developer hegemony. The page will serve as a "start here" guide.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.daedtech.com/what-now/>

# Other books by me

If you wind up enjoying this book, you can check out some other ones that I've written.

*The Expert Beginner*<sup>3</sup>

*Starting to Unit Test: Not as Hard as You Think*<sup>4</sup>

*How To Keep Your Best Programmers*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup><http://amzn.to/2mdWUbI>

<sup>4</sup><http://amzn.to/2nrpaaX>

<sup>5</sup><http://amzn.to/2me55op>



# Part 2: The Corporate World: You Are Here

Be forewarned. It's going to get worse before it gets better. This part may seem deeply cynical at times, but it's necessary framing for the parts that follow. After all, to convince you that we can and should take rather dramatic steps to change our concept of careers, I first need to convince you that the *status quo* isn't so great.

I can easily recall my reverence for the corporate world when I graduated college. College, after all, was dress rehearsal for adulthood, while a corporate job was the real thing. No student was buying himself a brand new car with a salary paid to him by some college. That, my friend, was only for VIPs who had been ushered past the velvet rope by a hiring authority somewhere.

I went to school at Carnegie Mellon University from 1998 to 2001, and during my time there I watched people graduate from the filthy dorms and fast food of college to the rich, yuppie world of twenty-two-year-old kids making seventy thousand a year or more. It was right in the middle of the dot-com boom, and what a time to be an upcoming computer science graduate. The job market was so hot and frenzied that the dean of computer science at our school called a special assembly of my class in the year 2000, pleading with us not to drop out to take jobs with desperate companies who couldn't be bothered to wait for us to graduate. It was a feeding frenzy. I watched my older peers graduate, take high-paying jobs, buy fancy cars, and rent swanky apartments. I couldn't wait for my turn.

But, in a development that experts would knowingly predict after the fact, the dot-com bubble, well...popped. I was at the head of the line, having freshly graduated, and was taking interviews. They would go well until, one by one, I'd be told things like, "We're implementing a temporary hiring freeze," and, "Oh, we've just revised our policy and we're no longer hiring entry-level candidates." I was frozen out. Offers turned into "Oops, sorry," and second interview invitations turned into "We'll call you when things settle down."

It was actually a lot worse for those a little older than me. I hadn't signed any leases or bought any cars when the downturn hit. But it was, in some ways, more discouraging. The club had closed when I'd been the last person standing in line, waiting for admittance past the velvet rope, and I'd never gotten so much as a glimpse at the swanky wonders within. This combination of expectation and then elusiveness made the corporate world seem even more formidable to me. Not only was it the home for money, power, and influence but it was also a fickle, cruel master that could shrug me right out into the cold. Oh, how I wanted in.



### Waiting to be let in

When I reflect back through a veil of experience and the accompanying cynicism, I realize I never had much of a chance with this early outlook. My parents are both college grads with professional master's degrees, and both of them spent accomplished careers working their way up to impressive director and C-level positions. During the protracted job search and discouraging retail jobs that followed my ill-timed graduation, they kept me from giving up, reassuring me that I would eventually get my foot in that door. They told me I'd even do better for the lessons I'd learned, dealing with early adversity. They were right, as I'd learn much later.

And so it was that the corporate world remained in my mind some kind of promised land, populated by people that I simultaneously envied and wanted to emulate. While I was slinging cell phones at Radio Shack, corporate people were out doing important, wonderful things, like wearing slacks, having meetings, and zeroing their Outlook inboxes. It got so bad that, at one point, I showed up to a meeting with a guy who I'd met as a customer in Radio Shack. He said that he had an e-commerce business venture and wanted

to talk with me about it. I thought it was a job opportunity. When I got there, I found myself in an auditorium full of gleefully shiftily people cheering at a flip-chart drawing of a pyramid. They chanted along in unison with the emcee of this affair when he demanded to know why so many people were so unhappy: “because they’re sick of having jobs!” You see, the allure of the Amway—excuse me, e-commerce—promise is that the wonders of multi-level marketing allow you to get rich passively while the suckers of the world go to work.

It was a low point for me. As I sneaked out of there, dodging the huckster that had tricked me into meeting him, I could almost have wept with bitterness. Those lazy people, frothing with avarice and glee at the prospect of suckering others out of their money. *You horrible human beings*, I thought. *I would give anything to have a job. You’re the suckers—not the people who are collecting money to do honest work.*

Almost fifteen years have passed since that day, and their take on the nature of nine-to-five work no longer offends my sensibilities in the slightest. Don’t get me wrong. The enemy of my enemy is not my friend. I find the value-destroying proposition of Amway to be reprehensible, no matter how many stadiums and lobbyists they buy as they dance narrowly within the realm of legality. But I also find that many of the trappings of the corporate world are empty, arbitrary, and life-wasting.

There’s an irony to a room full of get-rich-quick schemers criticizing the citizens of the corporate world for being suckers. You have to work extraordinarily hard to con enough people into a multi-level marketing scam to make any real money at it—harder, in fact, than people work in most nine-to-five gigs. It’s a lot easier to get roped into an Amway meeting and be parted with your dollars to sign up than it is to convince dozens of people to do the same and then inspire them to convince dozens more each. But all of you reading know people at the office that sit and browse Facebook every day in

lieu of doing any actual work. You all know people that contribute exactly nothing to your group's effort. You all know programmers that, literally, do not know how to program computer software. This means that we all know people who earn a comfortable wage adding absolutely zero value to anything.

So is it really amazing that there's a group of people out there that feel spurned because they couldn't hack it in the corporate world, so they fork over \$200 (or whatever the buy-in winds up being) to go to a series of meetings that could aptly be titled "Catharsis for Scumbags?" And how ironic is it that they've opted out of a life of loafing for a comfortable wage in favor of pursuing a high-risk, grueling, "entrepreneurial" career of moving endlessly from one small con to the next? And how weird is it that, in spite of creating such an unsavory personality cocktail of greed, laziness, and stupidity, they've basically got the modern corporate world pretty well pegged?

Does that sound harsh? Well, let me prepare you. This may be a section of bleakness, but things will get better by the end of the book. I promise. To understand where we *can* go, where we *should* go, and how we might get there, it is essential to be completely frank and forthright about where we are.

## Chapter 6: The Corporate Cave

I got a job, you know. That Amway debacle was almost certainly the nadir of my post-college job search, and I'd like to treat you to the kind of storybook redemption that had me land a job the next day, but that didn't happen. It would be months before I received my coveted invitation to the corporate dance, but it did come, and I knew vindication. I can still remember mouthing my new title with a sense of reverence: "software engineer." (Well, initially, "software quality engineer," but I won't tell if you don't.)

The job treated me well and provided me with some of my most stable professional years. I lasted longer at that company by far than I have at any since. I attribute this to how new I was to professional software development and to an excellent manager that provided me with plenty of challenges, autonomy, and air cover from organizational politics (while still allowing me to observe them). I became a sponge. A new chapter began in my own education, and I dual majored in corporate politics and software development in the real world.

As a fresh college grad, I had viewed the corporate world as a place of remarkable constancy. This remained true through the years I spent at my first job. Every three or four years growing up, I had switched schools, but in the corporate world at that time, prevailing wisdom held that you switched jobs every five to fifteen years. For my parents' generation, this number would have been even larger; corporate jobs used to be more akin to marriages in duration. And I was thus a young newlywed, convinced that the next fifty years held nothing for me but business-y matrimonial bliss. I'd work hard and prove myself, kicking butt on every rung of the corporate ladder

all the way to a corner office.

That multi-pronged strategy was partially effective. I worked hard and kicked butt but remained on the exact same rung of the ladder for five years. Oh sure, there were accolades, raises, glowing performance reviews, and leadership responsibilities, but none of this was codified into real career movement. As a matter of fact, I didn't even receive the ego-boost of a fancier title, which galled me by the end and led me, for a time, to value titles to a degree that I now find naively comical. After five years, the reverence with which I had mouthed the title "software engineer" had been replaced by bitterness.

Looking back, my overvaluation of title was just a symptom of a deeper illness. And the deeper illness was the grand delusion that the pyramid-shaped organizational chart is some semblance of a meritocracy. It isn't, and it's not close. But I had some jobs to hop before I'd figure this out. Back there at my first job, the great unfairness of it all finally caught up with me. I had sole responsibility for more than one software product, and I was now the lead on other initiatives, *leading* people with more advanced titles than mine.

I simmered and seethed like an unattended pot of chili left too long on the stove, concluding that your value to the company and your title must have nothing to do with one another. Ironically, I wouldn't learn until well after I quit that this wasn't *entirely* true. But before that, I took stock and realized that, regardless of aptitude or skill, people "earned" their way from software engineer I to software engineer V by waiting for five years and having it handed to them. No matter if I was leading a team of IIs and IIIs and getting more done than all combined. I hadn't put in my five years yet, so a software engineer I is what I would remain. I did some math and had an existential career crisis at the ripe old age of twenty-six. I'd be forty-eight years old before I reached software engineer V, and the cartoon I had in my head of my career had me

as a VP or CTO by then. Something had to give.

Eventually (and before I would learn the silliness of my title-focused outlook), I quit and left for greener pastures and more enviable titles—or, at least, so I thought. In quitting, I learned one of the most important lessons of my corporate career, which was that of leverage. On my way out the door, I was offered more money and the coveted software engineer II title. I didn't take it, having been soberly schooled in "the dangers of the counter-offer" by a recruiter taking himself entirely too seriously, but I did note it. For all of their talk about meritocracy, corporations seemed lightning quick to reassess your "merit" when you had other options. Five years of saving troubled projects, producing miracles, and running teams hadn't earned me software engineer II. But offering resignation did. Lesson learned.

Growing up, the world had been simple. We went to class, took the occasional aptitude test, and then went in different directions, depending on our scores. At the risk of sounding cocky, I'll tell you I spent a childhood acing standardized tests and being put in advanced classes. At the time, it seemed overwhelming, but next to the corporate world, it was easy. Show up, get a good score, get "promoted." The criteria were objective and unassailable. You never had to threaten to drop out of school to get into AP physics. That had continued through college as well, this paradigm of taking tests and being judged. And yet, in the corporate world, there was nothing like it. There was no objectivity. In college, if you'd gotten a C and marched into the dean's office to announce that you were quitting, the dean would have laughed at you, but in the corporate world, it apparently resulted in them changing your grade to an A and asking you to stay.

After leaving that first job, I started reflecting upon this a good bit. It could be argued that I became mildly obsessed, attacking this problem, mentally, the way that so many of us attack an intractable bug. I ruminated and even brooded about it at night, when I should



have been paying attention to my girlfriend or even working on various side projects. I fixated. I needed to understand. How did the strange world of office politics work, and why was it so different than the relatively simple world of software problems?

One of the oldest pieces of philosophy that exists is Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In it, Plato describes a tribe of people that live in a cave and are bound so tightly and inescapably that they cannot move at all—even to turn their heads. And they are fixed in place to stare at the cave wall. Behind them, people enter the cave periodically, make fires, and put on puppet shows for the cave dwellers. All that the bound cave dwellers can see are the shadows from the puppeteers, who are tricking them. Those shadows are almost the entirety of their lives, and they measure social rank on the basis of who can best predict future movements of the shadows and remember past ones.

Now, imagine that a puppeteer unbinds one of the cave dwellers and shows him the fire and the puppet show. It would irrevocably alter the cave dweller's world and perception thereof. Further, imagine that the puppeteer removes the cave dweller from the cave, altogether, and shows him the full, vibrant world of the sun beating down on the countryside. The cave dweller would be changed to such a degree that his former life would be inconceivable. Now, imagine trying to put him back there with his former friends, exchanging social status on the basis of how well they remembered moves of the shadows and how well they could predict their next moves. He would predict the next moves easily, take no pleasure in doing so, and find his former friends unrelatable and pathetic.

My first resignation was my initial step away from the cave wall. I wasn't out in the countryside, taking in the full splendor of human existence, but nevertheless, I'd won an important victory. I should mention at this point that it may seem a bit dramatic to compare corporate workers to the cave dwellers. I'd ask you to ignore the Matrix-like implication that corporate workers are so sheltered

and trapped that their entire lives are shams. Rather, I invoke the Allegory of the Cave to convey that there are layers to how the corporate world works and how, once you see them, you really can't un-see them. Your perception is changed. This section is about my journey from naivety to relative understanding—relative in that it's allowed me to play the game well enough to get ahead in short order.

## Chapter 7: Growing Up

During the course of my aforementioned brooding about the corporate landscape, I came to perceive some common archetypes. At my first company, if you took one of the developers' years in the corporate work force, divided by five, dropping any remainder, and added one, you could predict his or her level of software engineer. So as someone with fewer than five years, I was four-fifths, which rounds down to zero, plus one, equaling software engineer I. Someone with seven years would be software engineer II, while someone with seventeen years would be software engineer IV. And so there was an archetype whose position could be predicted entirely as a mathematical function of "number of years managing not to get fired." Indeed, this was the source of my eventual bitterness at that organization. If I were honest with myself, no small part of that feeling was self-disgust for having tried so hard when it clearly didn't matter.

The next archetype that stood out was the people who had inexplicably cut in line somehow. What I mean is that my boss's boss was the VP of engineering, and his roughly twenty years in the professional work force did not square with " $\text{floor}(x/5) + 1$ ". He should have been a software engineer IV, not my boss's boss. I hadn't worked out the math for "boss's boss," but surely that would have to wait until you were eighty or something. This was even more befuddling when I considered the CEO, who was even a bit younger than his subordinate, my boss's boss. Once LinkedIn became a thing, I vaguely recall looking at their profiles and those of some other, similarly inexplicable folks, and realizing that some kind of black magic was at work. The black magic seemed to center around switching companies.

Another archetype that I noted was the "line manager as principal

engineer emeritus.” If you’d given the company something like twenty-five-plus years, it appeared that you inherited some kind of director/manager position as a sheer product of longevity. It reminded me of the papacy, but without much competition, since the number of people that hung around that long tended to be small enough that it was just a question of waiting for the previous guy to retire. It’s like the papacy in the sense that a lifetime of service gets you a crack at the boss role when you’re probably not far from retiring either way.

Since I was looking for patterns, I noticed these key archetypes and other comparably minor ones. There were the insufferable (transparent) boss imitators, though these were not normally engineers. There were the “oh noes, don’t take my keyboard” reluctant recipients of promotions to project manager. There were the overworking, self-flagellators that put in sixty-hour weeks for no reason I could discern and to no benefit. And there were intense loafers whose contributions I struggled to grasp.

At this point, I could continue to walk you through the evolution of my perception of the corporate landscape, but my chronology from here forward isn’t especially interesting. Instead, I’ll offer a framework of thinking about corporate citizens that makes sense of and encapsulates the archetypes I’ve described so far. To do that, let’s turn back the clock.

Think back to being a kid. You can probably remember a rather dubious rite of passage that occurred when you figured out that you weren’t going to be a sports player, lead singer, or Hollywood star. You probably felt sad even as your parents sighed with relief that you’d never be explaining a manual labor gig as your “day job.” State lotteries notwithstanding, giving up on improbable dreams is considered by society to be a measure of maturity.

If you think about this, the easy message to hear is “you’re not going to be great, so give up.” But that’s not what’s actually being expressed. The real lesson is that the expected value of these vocations

is horrendous. For baseball players, actresses, and rock stars, there's a one in a million chance that you'll make ridiculous sums of money and a 999,999 in a million chance that you'll make \$4,000 per year and have half of it paid to you in beer nuts. The expected value of these "careers" is about a \$4,200 per year salary and a handful of beer nuts. So the message isn't really "give up because you'll never make it" but rather "steer clear because anything short of meteoric success is impoverishing."

The better play, we tell our children, is to head for the corporate world where the salaries range from minimum wage in the mail room to tens of millions per year for CEOs of international conglomerates. Most importantly, you can find every salary in between. If you aim for the heights of CEO and fall short, mid-level manager making \$140K per year isn't a bad consolation prize. And so a funny thing happens. We consider it to be a rite of passage to abandon the delusion that one will be Michael Jordan, but we encourage the delusion that one will be Bill Gates until people are well into middle age.

That's right. "The delusion that you'll be Bill Gates." You won't be him. You won't be a CEO, either, unless you pop for your state's incorporation fee and give yourself that title. You're about as likely to "work your way up" to the CEO's office over the course of your career as any given child is to luck into being the next multi-platinum pop star. So it's a rather strange thing that we tsk-tsk children for indulging pie-in-the-sky fantasies past a certain age while we use nearly identical fantasies as the blueprint for modern industry. Kid wants to be Justin Bieber? Pfft. Thirty-year-old wants to be Mark Zuckerberg? Sure, why not? Keep working hard, kicking butt, and acing those performance reviews, and someday you'll get there!

Pfft.

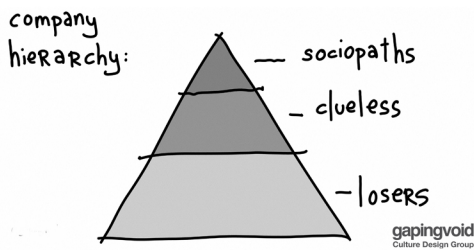
It took me five years in the corporate world to realize that working my way up the ladder to great heights was about as likely as

my childhood ambition to play for the Chicago Bears had been. Some may figure this out much sooner, but I suspect that many never actually figure it out. And the cost of not figuring it out isn't particularly high. I was comfortable as I went nowhere fast—I wasn't playing guitar in a bar for beer nuts.

# Chapter 8: Cynical Theories of Management

One might consider me to be a something of a cynic. (I submit that I'm actually just an impatient optimist, but that's a story for another time.) I certainly feel cynically toward the corporate structure as it exists today, but before I get too deep into my assessment, I'd like to discuss some that I consider to be a good bit more cynical than my own.

This is a drawing by a cartoonist named [Hugh MacLeod \(of gapingvoid.com\)](http://gapingvoid.com/)<sup>6</sup> that's ingenious in both simplicity and critique. Drones at the bottom, ruthless manipulators at the top, and a creamy center of buffoons. These are the ones that think they're going to make it to the top. They won't. And they're clueless to that fact. They're the kids that still think they're going to grow up to be Jennifer Lawrence.



Hugh MacLeod's Company Hierarchy

Venkatesh Rao took this cartoon, combined it with the television show *The Office (American version)*<sup>7</sup>, and created a spellbinding and beautifully provocative theory of corporate management that

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<sup>6</sup><http://gapingvoid.com/>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.nbc.com/the-office>

cut to the core. The Gervais principle,<sup>8</sup> as he coined it, refined the Dilbert principle, which was itself a refinement of the Peter principle. The two Gervais principle predecessors were cynical to the point of comedy, whereas the Gervais principle is cynical but accurate to the point of tragedy.

The Peter principle<sup>9</sup> holds that people are promoted until they prove incompetent in their roles, and there they remain. Competence is rewarded with promotion and incompetence is rewarded with the status quo. The Dilbert principle<sup>10</sup>, with more of a knowledge-worker focus, rings true to those of us who have seen terrible programmers promoted to project managers. It states that bad employees are promoted into management to prevent them from doing damage with their incompetence. The Gervais principle, with its “sociopaths” (“ruthless manipulators,” in the cartoon), “clueless” (“creamy center of buffoons”), and “losers” (“drones”) gives a lot more credit to those at the very top, which, in my opinion, makes it far more accurate in its reasoning about corporate leadership. This principle says that the sociopaths that run the organization knowingly overpromote dedicated but relatively inept people into middle management.

Why would they do this? In middle management, these clueless folks serve various ends for the sociopaths. But the most important ones are “foil” and “buffer.” As foils, they can be cannon fodder on projects with low chances of success and they can be blamed when things go sour. The buffer play is a bit subtler. The sociopaths that run the company have power, influence, and lives that make most people jealous. The losers at the bottom rungs of the corporate ladder are jaded line-level employees resigned to a relatively powerless lot in life. They put in just enough effort to remain in good standing at work and remain aware that their employment is

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.amazon.com/The-Gervais-Principle-Complete-Ribbonfarm-ebook/dp/B00F9IV64W>

<sup>9</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Principle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Principle)

<sup>10</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dilbert\\_principle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dilbert_principle)



a pretty bad deal for them and a pretty good deal for the sociopaths at the top. A lot of direct interaction between the executives and the rank and file would quickly lead to resentment. So these high-level sociopaths overpromote a handful of the low-level losers who put forth disproportionate amounts of effort. These former losers enter the clueless ranks of middle management to act as a buffer. The remaining losers can't really hate the promoted clueless because the clueless aren't calculatingly taking advantage of them. The clueless believe that they're on track to be CEO while the losers and the sociopaths both know that's absurd. In the *The Office*, Michael Scott represents this archetype—incompetent, fanatically loyal to his company, and clearly not headed for the C-suite, whatever he might think.

If you want to really conceptualize this and have it driven home, consider a hypothetical scenario as follows. The CEO of some large organization with thousands of developers decides to hold a mandatory contest to see who can write the “best” web application, whatever “best” means (left vague intentionally). The contest will be done on the developers' own time, but the winner receives a \$50,000 bonus and a promotion to CTO. Picture what happens next.

A solid majority of the developers roll their eyes, spend an hour implementing some hello world kind of thing because it's required, submit it and forget about the contest. A sizable minority heads in the complete opposite direction and goes absolutely nuts competing, certain that they're going to win that sweet, sweet prize. These developers pour hundreds of man-hours each into it over the course of months, completely losing sight of the fact that they're each individually contributing tens of thousands of dollars in free labor. Who wins? Well naturally, it's the developer who figured out that his sister is friends with the CEO's favorite nephew, parlayed that relationship into favorable treatment, and then plagiarized some web app from GitHub.

What's the fallout of this? The losers always understood that the

contest was pretty hokey and probably too good to be true, so they yawn at the CEO and his nepotism and figure it's business as usual. The clueless are disappointed, but they know that the best, most qualified candidate won. They had their chance but just didn't quite work hard enough. They vow to work even harder next time, and the company sells their free labor for millions, earning fat performance bonuses for the sociopaths at the top. The sociopath who cheated earns a seat in the executive room.

Do the losers resent the C-levels? Sure. Do they mutiny? Not if the clueless are promoted into a role above them. The clueless so genuinely believe in the organization and its wisdom that it's impossible for the losers to hate them. What they feel for them is a mixture of pity, disgust, and occasional gratitude (if they happen to be nice or generally benevolent in application of power), but not hate. The losers satirize them in cartoons with pointy haired bosses and they gossip about them around the water cooler, but because of the clueless buffer, they don't collectively revolt and go out in a blaze of spite.

In effect, the clueless create two different organizations within one organization. There is the organization of losers and clueless, where putting in sixty-hour weeks and being obsequious lets you claw your way up a few of the bottom steps of the pyramid. And then there is the organization of clueless and sociopaths, where putting in sixty-hour weeks and being obsequious keeps you right where you are with that next level of advancement always being oh-so-close-but-better-luck-next-time. Creating the bottom level organization, where tripping over yourself to provide free labor is rewarded with small stakes promotions, allows the top level organization to sustain a model where the losers and clueless get terrible economic deals and keep coming back for more. The clueless have no idea this is occurring and the losers understand it but have no appetite for rebelling against their clueless managers who are answering emails at three in the morning and working sixty-hour weeks. The people they'd *actually* like to rebel against are, quite simply, out of reach.

# Chapter 9: Defining the Hierarchy (With Less Cynicism)

Venkatesh's treatment of these archetypes is wonderful, and you should [buy his book](#)<sup>11</sup>. In particular, the sections that describe how these archetypes deal with one another are absolute goldmines of strategic understanding of corporations and their players. But I have three main problems with using the archetypes, as described, to elaborate on my own theories of corporate politics: (1) the names themselves, (2) the assertion that overperforming middle managers are generally idiots, (3) and the placing of corporate citizens into one of three buckets on the basis of assigning them serious shortcomings.

In terms of the specific shortcoming buckets, the losers are some mix of lazy and cowardly, having given up on the idea of controlling their own destinies. The clueless are idiots that don't understand the nature of their relationship with the organization. And the sociopaths are ruthless users and manipulators of other people. All three archetypes are mainly defined by their core flaws.

This seems to work well as shorthand and for catharsis. Frequently I feel the need to completely withdraw from the corporate world and recharge a bit, and whenever that happens, I bask in this sort of cynical characterization. The structure and those who inhabit it are flat out ridiculous. But when I take a few deep breaths and calm down, I just can't make myself view anyone who works at a corporation as most aptly identified by what's wrong with them. When every component of a system appears to be functioning

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<sup>11</sup><http://amzn.to/1TZmREC>

poorly, one has to consider that it may be the system, not the components, that isn't working.

I thus prefer not to think of corporate citizens in terms of their shortcomings. Instead, I think of them in terms of what the modern corporate structure has done to them—broken the losers, tricked the clueless, and forced the sociopaths into ethical conundrums. I don't agree that the corporate structure is optimal or inevitable, and I think its deep flaws show themselves through the human beings that execute its various rituals. Don't think of what's wrong with these folks. Instead, think of what they've lost.

The loser is pretty simple to size up in terms of loss. What's generally been taken away from most line-level employees who lack organizational faith is their hope. These are people from whom you can expect to hear pithy consolation narratives like, "I don't live to work—I work to live." The loser has forked over any real hope at a dream life in favor of small optimizations designed to make a common grunt's situation more livable.

What's been stolen from the clueless is a bit subtler, but I'll couch it in terms of information. A sense of perspective has been stolen from them by the rat race, resulting in wild overvaluation of perks and honors conferred on them by the organization. Part and parcel with this is the cognitive dissonance of assuming that their ascension in an organization was the result of merit and hard work rather than inevitability and patient waiting.

The most difficult to assess is the sociopath, who has an enviable position at the top of the organization. It's easy enough to think that sociopaths are the ones *taking* things from the other two archetypes and thus are sitting pretty themselves. But in reality, their position is something of a default one. They refuse to cede hope and they refuse to cede perspective, so they acutely understand that the corporate citizenship game is one where the only outcome of playing by the rules is to lose. And so what they give up is the ethical compass they had when they began their corporate journey.

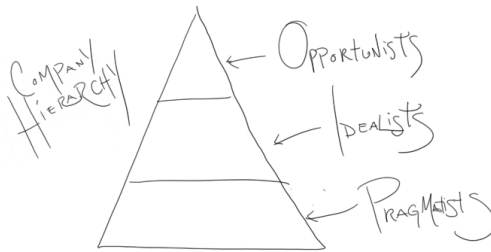
I'll offer a temporary diversion into some terms coined by Karl Marx that roughly parallel the organizational dynamic. Generally, when one thinks of Marx and gets past the modern political notion of communism with the vacuous partisan squabbles it inspires (at least in the USA), the terms that come to mind are "bourgeoisie" and "proletariat." (The latter was also made famous by George Orwell, in whose *1984*, a free peasant class was referred to as the "proles.") A lesser-known term is "lumpenproletariat," and it refers to mercenaries and criminals that are products of the system, so to speak. It's easy to think of the CEOs and jet setters of the corporate world as bourgeois, but resist this temptation. Mid-level managers (clueless) are the corporate bourgeois, while line-level employees (losers) are proles. Sociopaths are lumpenproles. They are the Jean Valjeans of the corporate world, with clueless Javerts as their foils, should those clueless ever come to understand that the sociopaths win by cheating.

Sociopaths are the most quickly disillusioned and repulsed by the corporate rat race, and they recognize that the path to real success and influence is to cheat while everyone else toils away in good faith. They give up guilt-free operation in favor of a feeling of dirtiness as they cut in line to get to the top and make decisions that impact the lives of others. It's easy to think, particularly given the "sociopath" moniker, that the offices of corporate movers and shakers are filled with remorseless villains, but that's really not the case. For each true psychopath that gleefully steps on people to get to the top, there are far more that regret various stones along the path.

I've spent a lot of time in a lot of different organizations of different sizes and domains, and I just don't run across cartoonish people like Michael Scott and Dwight Schrute. By and large, the people in these organizations, at all levels, are relatively well-intentioned, reasonably intelligent, and doing the best that they can on the micro, day-to-day level. Corporate structures are, however, substantially less than the sum of their parts, so good faith efforts on a small scale are

perverted into rampant dysfunction writ large across the face of industry. Organizations are pathological, as Venkatesh points out, and they are pathological in a way that corrupts their components.

It's for this reason that I propose that we rename the losers, clueless, and sociopaths to "pragmatists," "idealists," and "opportunists." Their roles and dynamics remain the same, aptly described by Venkatesh. But these suggested new names soften our attitude toward them. Pragmatists are line-level employees who find value in life outside of work, mainly because the hope of any meaningful advancement and enjoyment of their profession has been taken from them. Idealists believe heartily in the meritocratic company (and organizational superiors) as a benevolent steward of their careers because perspective has been taken from them. Opportunists refuse to yield hope or perspective and recognize that the only way to win the corporate game is to play by their own rules. In this realization, they give up ethical certainty and human connection. Opportunists play a lonely, sad game to get what they get.



#### My Company Hierarchy

But, as I mentioned, the dynamics are not altered in the least. Pragmatists contribute as little as possible to preserve stability, getting a bad economic deal and recognizing it. Idealists, believing in the company, work even harder and make their economic deal even worse. Don't be fooled by a slightly higher salary and meaningless

perks like offices and parking spaces. Working 50% more your entire career to eventually get paid fifteen thousand more per year is an abysmal deal, compared not only with opportunists' deals but also with minimum effort, lower-wage pragmatists' deals. And the opportunists feeding the grist to the mill certainly overpromote idealists because of strategic necessity rather than any kind of merit. Even with different labels and humanized, sympathetic consideration, the show must go on. It just might be easier for you to see what role you have when they aren't all described so negatively.

I should also mention that, in spite of the neatly drawn, layered pyramid, you will find the occasional archetype representative outside of the normal bounds. One will generally become an idealist well before earning an actual promotion to any management role. Opportunists are similarly fired in the forges of lower roles and their opportunism enables their swift ascendancy.

Here's a very simple example to illustrate these dynamics. Let's consider an employee named Alice, laboring away as part of a group of line-level knowledge workers. In the group, there is an official "team lead" position that has no reports but is a leadership role. This role has recently been vacated, and the odds-on favorite to replace the former team lead is a loud-mouthed, long-tenured guy named Bob. Let's further assume that this role is at least passingly desirable to Alice.

Alice the pragmatist (formerly called "loser") looks at this wistfully and shrugs because she knows that, even though Bob is an idiot, his assumption of the role is inevitable. She makes peace with that, feels generally checked out at work, and enjoys her life in other ways.

Alice the idealist (formerly "clueless") looks at this opportunity and resolves to put in sixty-hour weeks to Bob's fifty-hour ones. She also begins to match Bob blow for blow in self-promotion, grandstanding, and managerial posturing. She knows that, for the short term opportunity, she's unlikely to edge Bob out, but over the long haul of several years of sixty-hour weeks, she'll prove that she

deserves that role. The economics of working 50% more for free to earn an eventual promotion never really occur to her.

Alice the opportunist (formerly “sociopath”) looks at the situation and finds common ground with her pragmatist and idealist selves. She realizes that she’s no match for Bob the incumbent but she also knows that trying to prove herself one over the next five years is a sucker’s game. Like her idealist self, though, she wants the role. So Alice the opportunist updates her resume to include weasel terms like “thought leadership” and, with plausible deniability, starts interviewing for team lead roles at other companies, eventually landing an offer and either taking it or parlaying it into being placed in the role ahead of Bob.

Throughout the rest of this book, I will use this shorthand liberally, describing corporate citizens as pragmatists, idealists, and opportunists. Before continuing, however, it bears mentioning that I understand the somewhat reductionist nature of this categorization. I promise you that if you look around your office, you will find an example of someone who doesn’t fit neatly into three buckets. People can be outside of these categorizations. The purpose of the shorthand here is to make it easier to describe corporate dynamics and speak to general trends.