

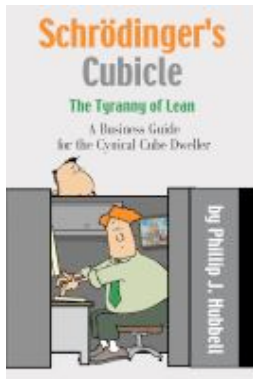
Schrödinger's Cubicle

The Tyranny of Lean

A Business Guide
for the Cynical Cube Dweller



by Phillip J. Hubbell



When did you last see the sky from your desk? When did you last speak in a normal voice at your desk? Do you even have a desk? Or, is it a work surface posing as a desk? Do you know too much about your co-workers' personal grooming habits? Schrödinger's Cubicle is for the cube dweller. It is not a serious book but, if you're sitting in a cube, it's not a serious job.

Schrödinger's Cubicle or The Tyranny of Lean

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Or

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**A Business Guide for the Cynical
Cube Dweller**

Phillip J Hubbell

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First Edition

Business Books

Unlike some business books, it is unlikely that you have this one because to your manager selected it for everyone in his department to read. You might even get in trouble if someone sees this one on your desk. It isn't as though I'm revealing any great secrets in this book, but times have changed. Pointing out the obvious has become just as controversial as breaking new ground once was. We are conditioned to look past what is actually happening around us and embrace the ambiguity. The impression trumps the actuality.

This is not an expensive business book. The purpose of a lot of business books is to pay off student loans of people with MBAs or PhDs. I don't have either and I don't have any student loans. I went to school long ago when you could afford it with only a part time job delivering pizzas. That was before cheap money backed by the government drove the cost through the roof. It was way back before someone thought loaning tens of thousands of dollars to some stupid 18 year old with no credit history or job experience was a good idea.

Business books often are tied into some sort of formula for success. This one isn't like that. This is mostly about getting through your day understanding all the silly crap around you. It is about cube living. It is about authority for authority's sake. It is about committees and why adding more of them never seems to make things better. It is about productivity measures that never seem to stick. Most of all it is about frustration.

I know....I know...everyone is looking for the positive message in everything. Negativity is horrid and we should all smile and pretend to be happy little cube dwellers waiting anxiously for pizza Thursday or birthday cake day. We are supposed to ignore that our company has become perk free over the last few years and the fun stuff you used to do in the office has ended...never to return. We are supposed to understand that there is good reason why no one has taken you to lunch on the company dime in four years and that the talk of taking your airline miles into a companywide pool is really going to happen.

Most business books are written by people who got downsized at some big company and need something to pay the bills and lure potential employers to consider looking at their impressive book length resume. Business book authors are generally people who have such lengthy and impressive academic records of achievement they can't actually do anything other than tell people how they should be doing things. Since their lofty view is so unattainable, they weren't contributing anything tangible to the bottom line...hence...unemployment and a writing career.

This book is not like theirs. I haven't reached any lofty academic heights. I have worked all my life in all kinds of environments from tiny businesses to huge corporations. I have had manual labor jobs and office jobs. I have picked cotton for five cents a pound and consulted with the Fortune 50 for three hundred dollars per hour. That's the range.

I have always been an advocate of situational awareness. I teach it to my children. Being aware of

your situation is when you pay attention to activities that can cost you your job...then don't do those things. It is a skill not taught in our higher education institutions. It is advice easier to teach than to follow for us writer artsy types. Today, you're taught to believe your own press and to think whatever you're doing is helping because you came out of school believing you know everything. You become a condescending snob. I think that losing the common touch is fine as long as you don't advertise it as a skillset.

You have to be at least a senior vice president before being a condescending snob becomes part of the acceptable landscape. People will still hate you, but fewer can fire you as a result. If you live in the cube dweller world, it is never okay to be condescending. Everyone around you can clearly see how untrue your pretense to being better actually is. This also doesn't mean that you're not better than others are at something, or smarter than everybody in the room. It means that you haven't used it well...so keep it to yourself. You also can't forcefully slam the cube door for emphasis after winning the water fountain argument.

Business book writing is a big industry. It isn't necessarily an important one. The books that sell the best are the ones that are cheap AND have caught the eye of a lot of executives who invite their subordinates to read them. Could be the executive is an idiot and the book sucks. Sales numbers don't judge that. I'm not writing this book to get rich. I'm almost certain that I won't get rich. At best, I might supplement my impending forced retirement.

I also don't expect my book to change things. The people who will like my book work in cubes. The people who can change things won't read it. The one or two who do will be looking to see if I should continue to work in this cube. I think that cubicle environments are reaching a point of diminishing returns. I also believe that technology has become so instantly interactive that making people drive to a central office will soon become a thing of the past. It won't end because it is right or wrong, it will end when the businesses figure out they can eliminate brick and mortar expenses and still watch you closely at home. All they need is a camera at your house that you can't turn off or cover up.

The telescreens George Orwell warned us of will not start with a tyrannical government. They will start as a measure to reduce traffic and save the company money for the next fiscal period.

Insecurity and Fear

"In terms of organizational models and human relationship models, humankind has not evolved much over the last millennia." Miguel Reynolds Brandao

The view most people have of corporate America lacks perspective. I know because, I'm both a consumer of the news and embedded in corporate America. High enough to see what's going on, low enough to be under the radar. Listening to the media, you get this picture of some malevolent beasts sitting high up in dark corporate towers plotting against the lowly consumer. Of course, if you would just turn off the TV and think a minute, you would understand that the whole point of a corporation is to help the lowly consumer. They hope that you will rise above your current station in life so you can buy more stuff.

Nobody in any corporation wants to kill you. Relax. What they want to do is sell you services and gadgets. If you're poor they want to sell you a cheap gadget, if you're rich they want to sell you an expensive gadget...and in order to sell the most profitable gadgets, they need you to prosper. Corporate America loves you. The government on the other hand hates you. They want you poor. If you're poor, you're more likely to vote for things that make their lives better and their positions more secure. The popular culture has it exactly backwards from how things actually are.

Corporations are like governments in one respect. While they aren't efficient enough to harm anyone on

purpose, they are big enough to trip and fall on you. This is not intentional. It all comes down to levels of royalty. In a normal corporate organization, there are kings, there are princes, and at the bottom are the peons. Peons live in cube farms. The kings make vague references, the princes make strategic decisions about those references and the peons make sure that no work occurs that makes their prince look bad.

Then there are stockholders, a mix of peons, institutions, kings and princes. A former corporate Vice President of a Fortune 500 company, whom I know, was fond of the saying "when the elephants dance, the pigmies die." You see, the princes are always jousting with one another in the hopes that they will one day get to be a king. Princes are judged and rewarded on how little money they spend.

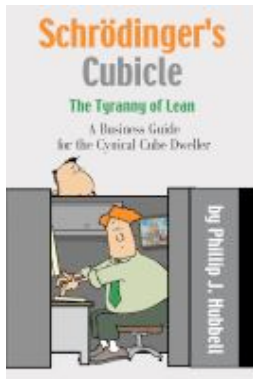
Being a prince in a corporation is a stressful position. It's like dancing in a spotlight in the middle store that sells crystal and china. You must keep dancing and you must break less than the prince dancing alongside you. (I'm sticking to masculine pronouns and titles, king and prince instead of queen and princess as those words have meanings not in play here.)

There is also an ego factor. Kings and princes do not get to be kings and princes without a whole lot of butt kissing and once you reach a certain level it is your butt being kissed. Those of us with souls who don't kiss any butt or desire our own butt kissed are called managers and that is all we will ever be called. So as a manager, one has to be careful around the kings and princes. They are always on the lookout for someone who isn't properly in awe of their magnificence.

If you're incredibly competent, efficient, and you always make your prince look good, he will often overlook some level of non-butt kissing or deference to his exalted position. However, you must be constantly aware and ever vigilant of how their ego swings in this regard. In addition to being egotistical in the extreme, they are volatile and unpredictable. It is a short trip from "golden boy" to "who used to sit over there?"

The official corporate levels are intern, assistant peon, peon, senior peon, supervisor, assistant manager, manager, senior manager, director, senior director, prince, senior prince, executive prince, and king. This hierarchy, taken to an extreme can be a sign of an unhealthy business model. The company with the fewest layers between king and peon is much more likely to be consistently profitable. Everybody knows this. Those companies that have the most layers pretend it's not true.

At the top, just past king, is CEO. "CEO" is not really a title but more of an acknowledgement of deity. The CEO sets the tone for everything that happens. Usually such a person is rich beyond belief and doesn't really have any skin in the fight. To them it is just a game. They don't come to work thinking that if they lost their job they will lose their home or starve to death. They are in zero danger of losing anything other than ego. It is a little disheartening. Fortunately for us peons, the average CEO is really into the game and sees their reputation as every bit as important as us peons having something to eat.



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