

Seduction

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Some people choose a career and work toward making it happen. Others accept an opportunity that comes along. Why did you choose or accept your career? Were you seeking high salary, employment security, intellectual affirmation, opportunity to cause change, to please a parent, a new challenge, or what?

I recall telling others that as an engineer I helped design sustainable processes to make products that benefit human welfare. Such a socially acceptable purpose affirmed my position within the community. I have the suspicion, however, that I really chose chemical engineering as an undergraduate because it offered both a high salary and significant intellectual challenge. I wanted to show that I could pass the academic test of the curriculum. And, I recall carrying mathematics and engineering books across campus, so that the titles showed, hoping it would be chick bait. In industry, my role was to make money for the company stockholders, but that was not my personal purpose. I did not slave for 4-years in college, or work overtime on the job, to make the stockholders happy. I wanted annual reviews that affirmed my prowess, and promotions that led to higher a salary for me.

I have enjoyed my careers in both industry and academe, and had my ambitions affirmed in each. Psychologists call personal desires that lead an individual to action as drivers. What are truly the drivers that led you to choose or accept your career?

While you think about that important question, also consider this: According to many of our traditions, in the competition of good and evil, acquiring souls seems the goal for scoring. How would a malevolent presence get good human beings to do bad things? Would it be effective by appearing in the red skin with horns and saying to a good person "Do something evil"? I don't think so. I think a better way is to seduce the person, by masking the consequences, appealing to personal drivers, and tying the act of providing a good service to also satisfying a personal desire. Perhaps like this:

I wanted to be recognized and get promoted. Apparently, most of my peers and bosses had parallel motives, and we were continually immersed in a culture that sought daily performance. It feels like it requires daily performance for survival, which leads people to claim to have a role in successes of others, promote inconsequential events as successes, and to rationalize politically advantageous conclusions from scant data or naïve calculations.

"This job can make your dreams come true." We migrate to an environment that affirms our persona and promises fulfillment of our personal drivers. There in is the danger.

Want to seduce me? Appeal to my desire to understand and learn, and you can distract me from making progress, to spending time studying and calculating. How? Just tell me that I don't seem to understand. Or, appeal to my desire to be recognized for creativity, and you can get me to push half-baked ideas long after they should be dropped. How? Just tell me that I'm not innovative enough. It is easy. We all have hooks and buttons.

It is possible that good decision processes and desired engineering methods are cast aside, for corrupt or unworthy purposes. It is possible to seduce nominally well-intentioned people. Remember the decision to market Thalidomide, keep the O-rings in the Challenger, run the Titanic at full steam at night, or dump

waste in Love Canal? Take care that your personal drivers are not infecting how you do your job, that they are not leading you to corrupt or unworthy purposes. Know what is driving you. Know how a malevolent presence might seek appeal to your drivers to seduce you.

To tidy-up possible loose ends: 1) Book titles of advanced math and engineering do not work as chick bait.
2) Counter to what some students may say, I am not a malevolent presence.