They drain the energy and spirit out of their co-workers and the organization, and their ranks are increasing. That's why enlightened leaders need to recognize and awaken every zombie they encounter.

Zombies in the Workplace

Stephen Hacker

A major threat may exist in your workplace…the peril of zombie-ism. In organizations around the world, zombies have infiltrated all levels of the labor ranks. Carrying their messages of victimhood and pessimism, they infect the whole organization at an exponential rate. At this very moment your organization could suffer from lifeless humans. Zombies could be undermining the mission, vision, and the very future existence of your organization.

The good news is that zombie-ism has a cure. Many zombies can be brought back to life; restored as contributing members of the organization. The challenge is that the cure requires each zombie to recognize the condition, desire restoration to the living, and self-administer the therapy. The living can coach initial consciousness in the lifeless; however, to sustain existence among the living, each zombie must discover his/her own meaning in life and remain awake to that purpose—especially in challenging times.

Have no doubt, however; urgent action is necessary now. Zombie-ism, left unchecked, will destroy your organization from the inside out. Leaders at every level must be persistent in rooting out zombies and demanding their redemption or elimination from the work force. Furthermore, it is essential for the human resource unit to revamp the hiring process to avoid letting this terminal virus into the organization.

How to Recognize Zombies

Once you know the dangers zombies pose to the organization and their behavior patterns, they are fairly easy to identify. For too long, hiring and retaining for skills alone caused leaders to be blinded to the Zombie threat. Skills have their value, but having a living work force is indispensable.

You can recognize a zombie by using two primary methods: conversation and observation of behaviors. These methods expose the zombie because a lack of consciousness is the key sign and becomes obvious immediately when connecting with a zombie.

First, the zombie's lack of awareness is detected through conversation. When inquiring about the rationale for performing daily tasks, the zombie sees no connection to the overall mission of the organization. When asking about the reasons zombies are in the organization, they respond, "There's nowhere else to go," "I have to work here," "My schooling dictated this job," or "I've never thought about that." The zombie doesn't have a

life of meaning, so the connection to devoting life energy to an organization doesn't even emerge as a need or way of operating. Instead, they often see themselves as a victim of the organization, acting out of something akin to bondage.

Observing zombies' behavior shows them basically doing what they are told, which is often the minimum required to stay on the payroll. Going through the motions of daily work was once acceptable. Pyramids were built, castles constructed, and the industrial revolution launched when employment meant merely physical behavior. As the spirit of creation and mental problem-solving attributes became a prerequisite for organizational success, however, the zombie's coma-like stance was unacceptable.

Some observed zombie behaviors include:

- Minimal connection to daily work, organizational purpose, or team mission.
- Blaming the organization for a host of personal ills.
- Broken relationships always cited as the responsibility of the other person.
- Downward spiraling conversations that seek to engage others in a negative mind-set.
- Seeing every other organization as a more desirable place.
- Holding conspiracy theories, which target their downfall.
- Lack of initiative with prodding by leadership providing their primary motivation.

In his popular cult book, *The Zombie Survival Guide,* Max Brooks points out that zombies prey on all living creatures.[1] Zombies suck the life out of all living organisms and the organizational climate. Zombies feed not only on human resources but also on any living idea, initiative, creation, or vibrant venture. After all, if the zombie is lifeless, why wouldn't everything with which it comes in contact also share the same fate?

How Organizations Foster Zombie-ism

A view of labor throughout history helps us to understand how organizations have fostered zombies. When strong arms, legs, and backs were the main ingredients for high quality labor or performance; the mind and spirit were seen as liabilities. Although it was important to have some mental faculties, in particular the mental capabilities that addressed the job at hand, no

additional intellect was required or wanted. Asking too many questions was a certain way for getting into trouble. Employers wanted hard work but little else. Too much initiative was seen as a threat to leadership in the power-centric hierarchy of the past, and some of these Neanderthal organizations still exist today.

The world has undergone radical change in the past 100 years, however—and at an ever-accelerating rate of change. To survive these days, an organization must call on the human capacities of mind and spirit. The total quality revolution of the 1980s engaged the entire work force in problem-solving and improvement activities. Far from being a fad, the quality tools and methodologies employed have become standard affair, including lean, Six Sigma, and systems engineering.

The next transformation in organizational performance involved leveraging the entire work force in a spirit of creation to generate a competitive advantage. Although creation complements problem solving, these two mental capacities and manifestations are significantly different. Creation relies on bringing into being that which does not exist at the moment. This is not the same as fixing what already exists. Creating a vision, generating dialogue, challenging conventional wisdom, and white-sheet innovating are all born out of a creative mind-set, sourced by human spirit. Without spirit, there is no creation.

After millenniums of "dumbing down," the work force organizational leaders now need to awaken each individual. This is even worse when you realize that some of these leaders are dead to change themselves, holding on until retirement or a better job. Their skill sets may lack leadership altogether; they may be just managers.

To address the zombie problem, organizations must change. Deep-rooted systems with underlying principles that are wrong for today's work force are entrenched. Policies galore hold the old organization in place, but the needed transformation often is limited to a few wall posters displaying outdated platitudes. Indeed, the challenge is great.

The Living

Fortunately, there are a growing number of people in the work force who are among the living, people who are living lives of meaning. They are connected with their life purposes. They see their creative spirit as producing an opportunity to

contribute to a collective mission; working with other living beings to generate value in the world.

Observed behaviors of these individuals include:

- Seeing causality in their actions (and lack of action) in creating the existing workplace.
- Possessing a strong sense of personal purpose.
- Applying their effort and determination toward projects and initiatives aligned with their purposes.
- Using upward spiraling talk that engages others in seeing the potential in every situation.
- Having an abundance-based mental stance.
- Being conscious of the connection between all sentient beings.
- Displaying tenacity and perseverance in the face of barriers.

How Best to Address Zombies

We have worked with organizations around the world providing direct leadership, and in later years, consulting with leaders on transformational approaches. We have seen incredible spirit not only in the eyes and accomplishments of others, but also in those who are comatose and anesthetized.

Look around your workplace. What do you see? Are you perplexed? Do you wonder why the zombies become zombies? You need to understand that they chose to become lifeless. There doesn't seem to be any five-year-old zombies, so something clearly happened on the way to their present condition. Did the excitement of life become routine? We believe that when life's purpose and meaning aren't clear, people are at risk of zombie-ism. Some become the walking dead during high school, others with the help of mind-numbing substances (including television), and some after years on the job.

Regardless of how they became infected, these people chose to fall under the spell of zombie-ism, becoming unconscious. This is an important mental position to understand. If you think society, the schools, family, or organizations have put them to sleep; you are mistaken and possibly infected yourself. Whether an organization has a great or poor spirit, each person always chooses his/her response. If this were not the case, the many stories of the living emerging from dead situations would not exist. We are creatures of choice, creatures that create our world.

Awaking a zombie can be dangerous. After years of existing as one of the walking dead, a sudden awakening can be disturbing. Anger may be the first response. These zombies have participated at an acceptable, although low, level of performance in the past. With low organizational expectations and little performance feedback, they were left to their infection and allowed to infect others. So start awakening in measured steps but without ever retreating.

Call the zombie to consciousness by asking questions, such as:

- Why did you choose to work here?
- Why have you remained at this job?
- What purpose does your participation in this organization serve?
- What is your life's purpose?

With each question, allow time for consideration. Plant the seeds of consciousness and allow them to germinate. Know that we were not born to be zombies. Many people will leave the zombie state when they reconsider the price of unconsciousness.

Along with using these questions to awaken zombies, the benchmark must be set higher on performance. Reconsider the relationship among the performance standards, the quality of the output, and the excellence you expect. Lose your tolerance for poor work, for inadequate office relationships, and for feeble excuses. Inferior performance is just that, deficient and unacceptable. Once you make a stand, the ball begins to roll.

Your enlivened spirit will have a positive effect. Understand that your spirit may create initial anxiety, like a flaming torch to a zombie, but your spirit also has a power of its own. Do not hide your spirit under a basket to comfort the zombie. Let your spirit's power shine.

Awakening the Organization

Awakening individual zombies is the critical action the living can take. There is an opportunity to help the walking dead become alive to their own spirit, awakening to their own being, and the organization can help. Key steps to awakening the organization are listed below:

- Review policy and procedures from the point of their original expectations. Are they written to allow or foster zombies?
- Stop zombies at the door. Hire for spirit as well as skills. Change the interview approach to assess spirit and spirited performance in the whole life of the applicant.

- Set a meaningful mission and course for the organization. Raise the community vision to make breakthrough, transformative products and/or services.

- Involve everyone in both the daily work and in creating the organization of tomorrow. Once they get energy from creating as a community, their eyes will stay open.

- Demand that your extended organizational system has life. No longer accept zombie suppliers and subcontractors.

- Speak to your customers as if they are alive. Your target should not be zombies (just sample the advertising today). The living are always a better customer market.

The conscious leader has a special role to play. First, establish the expectation that zombie-ism is no longer acceptable. Given a deeper understanding by the leader of what the organization requires, performance attention focuses on the zombies. It is your right to expect people to think and be creative. Zombie leaders often point to organizational barriers and past practices, which discourage them from setting higher expectations and holding people accountable. That is exactly why the leader is there—to move the system forward. Of course, every organization has issues and barriers. What is needed to rid the system of Zombies is for leadership to make a stand. Otherwise, upper leadership should review the infected brains of the leaders themselves.

Final Warnings and Words of Hope

Left unchecked, zombies will enroll others to join the legions of the dead at work. In addition to being counter-productive in the workplace (and getting paid for this destruction), they are not neutral in their impact on the work force. Zombies welcome co-workers to join them in listless existence and victim mind-set. You may see them attacking the new employee group, picking off the weak ones. During extended breaks and water cooler conversations, zombies enlist these new seekers of the corporate culture into the hopelessness of inaction. Zombies may even manifest a smile or an unauthentic welcome, only to draw close to the new employee, drawing the new employee into this web of death.

Additionally, organizations experiencing low competition or the absence of obvious threats often overlook their zombies. The "fat" in their systems hides the danger of zombies, lulling leaders into avoiding addressing apparent personnel problems. Whether they are public, for-profits, or NGOs, all organizations can fail. If not addressed, zombie-ism will infect, spread, and cause organizations to fail, especially when organizations are under the inevitable stress the transforming world delivers.

There is hope, however. Labeling zombies recognizes the threat. Moving to awaken zombies has the immediate payoff of employing the skills initially promised in the hiring process and post-employment training. The turnaround can be dramatic. From lifeless to life filled, the converted zombie can serve as a great influence on others and pave the way to organizational success.

Reference
Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide,* Three Rivers Press, 2003.

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