

## Chapter 1

# THE NEW WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

**F**orget everything you have ever learned about workplace communications. Ignore all the rules for office behavior you've followed for years. Throw away all the books you acquired in past decades on job interviews and networking. The world of work has been transformed in ways both large and small. In less than two years the workplace has undergone a shift that is as dramatic as the transition that happened when we moved from an agricultural to an industrial economy. A sea change has occurred and business has truly entered the twenty-first century.

The Great Recession of 2008 was the obvious tipping point for this transformation. However, in hindsight, it's a change that has been building for years, perhaps even decades. Optimists may hope it's only a temporary shift, a short-term symptom of a finite economic crisis, and that the world will soon return to the way it used to be. But it is realistic, not pessimistic,

to accept that the economic crisis was the dawn of a new business world that will last for the rest of our working lives.

While this shift will impact every aspect of our money life, the most obvious day-to-day effect is in the way we communicate and relate to our fellow workers. Quite literally, the way we say things to each other in the workplace must be different now. That's because how we all think and feel about our jobs, our careers, our employers, our peers, and our employees has changed.

I've been closely examining workplace communications for more than two decades. My name is Stephen M. Pollan and I'm an attorney, career coach, and financial advisor in private practice in New York City. While my practice has always been holistic, treating the personal and professional needs of my clients as a single cohesive whole, much of my work for the past 10 years has centered on the workplace. That's because it has been, and continues to be, the arena in which my clients' greatest fears and troubles play out. Besides taking a comprehensive approach, another thing that has always separated me from other advisors is that I offer extremely pragmatic advice. I tell my clients exactly what I think they should do and say. My clients and I develop scripts for their problematic dialogues, planning exactly what to say and how to respond in whatever situation they face.

This pragmatism and my scripting approach led me to write a book called *Lifescrpts*, offering advice on what to say in a variety of difficult business and personal scenarios. I took a graphic approach to each conversation, plotting it out with a flow chart that followed all the possible responses, counters, and variations. The original book and its graphical approach was so successful that it spawned a number of successful sequels and follow-up editions, focusing on additional scenarios. Up until recently, I had assumed that I'd addressed all the most common situations and offered scripts for every eventuality.

But then in 2008 the workplace changed forever, forcing me to rethink and revise all the office communications advice I'd been offering over the years.

It's easy, even tempting, to characterize the changes of 2008 in a negative way. Change of any form is often frightening. And the past almost always takes on a nostalgic glow, whether or not it is deserved. With so many of these changes resulting in job insecurity or loss, declines in income, and narrowed future options, the urge to bad-mouth the new environment is strong. But that's an impulse it would be wise to overcome. There are few less appealing coworkers than the chronic complainer. No one wants to work for a bitter boss. And disgruntled, "sad-sack" job seekers are simply never hired. The best thing to do, the only thing anyone can do that actually matters, is to deal with the workplace as it is now, however we might feel about it.

What are the elements of this new workplace environment?

- Face-to-face communication is rare.
- Jobs and careers have expiration dates.
- Short-term results are all that matter.
- Employees do not trust employers.
- Everyone's work future is uncertain.

Let's explore each of these in some detail.

*Face-to-face communication is rare.* The ubiquity and convenience of new electronic communications devices and formats have allowed everyone to be in touch with everyone else, 24 hours a day, almost anywhere in the world. We can send an e-mail from the summit of Mount Everest to someone in a New York City subway car, who can then forward it to someone else who is on an aircraft about to land in Dubai. Many people now prefer to communicate electronically, even if a more

direct form of exchange is available. And the younger someone is, the more indirect most of his or her communications.

All of this electronic communication has unquestionably increased productivity and efficiency. But it has also had the unexpected consequence of making face-to-face communication much less common. The fewer chances we have to communicate face to face, the worse we get at it. Today many of us are more comfortable sending a text message with our thumbs than talking out a problem across a desk. One-on-one meetings are increasingly limited to only the most vital matters: such as hiring interviews, performance reviews, and terminations. As a result, during the most important communications of our working lives we're relying on skills we rarely practice anymore.

*Jobs and careers have expiration dates.* People used to lose their jobs because of personal conflicts, poor performance, or temporary economic conditions. You didn't get along with your new boss, so you were replaced. You weren't able to meet your sales quota, so you were fired. Or the company's revenues dropped, so you were laid off. These events were always frightening and difficult, and often unfair, but there were obvious ways to bounce back. You could find a job working for someone with whom you got along. You could improve your sales skills or find a product or service you were able to sell successfully. Or you could find a job with a company that was doing well, or wait and be rehired when business at your previous employer's company rebounded. However, today, people are being fired because their jobs have become extinct. And that means there's no hope of easy recovery.

While terminations still occur due to personal conflicts, poor performance, and temporary problems, the vast majority of employees today are losing their positions because of irresistible forces and inexorable societal trends. The first is the influence of information technology, which has impacted

every industry, allowing tasks to be accomplished by fewer individuals. Whether it's producing a jet aircraft, a sweater, or a newspaper, fewer people are needed and, as a result, jobs are vanishing. The second trend is the move toward globalization. Technologically, logistically, and politically, borders are no longer the steep barriers they were before. Many of the jobs that haven't been eliminated by information technology can now be done at lower costs by employees working from their homes or from a remote location halfway around the globe. In today's workplace there's a natural, and entirely rational, sense that every job is temporary.

*Short-term results are all that matter.* In recent years, the leaders of most large businesses have changed the way they view finances and performance. Executive evaluations and compensation have become more closely linked to stock performance than to any other measure. Instead of rewarding leaders based on, say, the long-term growth and positioning of the company for the future, corporate boards and shareholders make their decisions and judgments based on how the stock fared for the quarter. Share prices almost always are linked to short-term rather than long-term measures. Exceed analysts' projections by a penny when a statement is released, and the stock climbs; fail to meet those projections by a penny, and the stock falls.

The obsession of corporate management with stock price has had a cascading effect on every other level of business hierarchy. With information technology allowing management to more closely and frequently track the performance of departments and individuals, employees are now expected to meet or beat projections and expectations on a quarterly or even monthly basis. Rather than being viewed as assets of the corporation, employees are now seen as being either revenue producers or as expenses. In either case, they are being judged on short-term results. Focusing on what is most

expedient in the near future often has the unintended effect of harming future results. Robbing tomorrow for today almost always ensures eventual job extinction.

*Employees do not trust employers.* The concept of corporate loyalty has been dead for more than a generation. No one who has been in the workplace in the past two decades believes companies have any loyalty to workers. And at the same time, no rational employer has suffered under the illusion that an employee would remain loyal to the company unless it was in his or her own self-interest to do so. But while this lack of mutual loyalty was assumed and accepted, a degree of trust remained among employees toward the ethics of business. This residual faith was based on the notion that ability and performance would always be rewarded. Even if times were tough financially, and raises were impossible, employees believed that the smartest, most effective, and most productive among them would be the most secure. After all, wouldn't it be irrational for any company to fire its most productive workers? And yet, this one remaining belief has been shattered in the past two years, eliminating the sole thread of trust still linking employees to their employers.

Superior skill, knowledge, and productivity were no defense against termination during the Great Recession of 2008. Contrary to what every employee had believed, these traits often made it more likely for someone to be fired than retained. That was because the best employees were almost always the most highly paid employees. Faced with negotiating their way through dire straits, employers in paradigm-shifting numbers opted to give up productivity, because this sacrifice offered the greatest short-term expense cuts. Rationalizing that digital memory would compensate for the loss of institutional memory, employers fired their most experienced workers. The long-term impact of this is, and will continue to be, dramatic. If high performance is no longer rewarded and,

in fact, turns the employee into a target, what motivation remains for someone to work hard or well?

*Everyone's work future is uncertain.* Separately, each of these four new elements of today's workplace is a game-changer. But taken together, they have combined to create a fifth element, one that's the most consequential of all. There is a near-universal feeling of uncertainty in the workplace. The future of everyone, from the CEO in the corner office to the security guard in the lobby, seems to be subject to change on a whim. The clear paths and expected patterns that we have all used as maps in our working lives no longer apply. Everyone feels cast adrift.

Before the Great Depression and World War II, when we lived in an agricultural and industrial society, most people followed predictable occupations. They found a trade to follow or a paying position and held onto it for as long as possible. They might get raises over time or shift jobs, but by and large their working lives were stable, if static. Since the end of World War II, most working lives have, in one way or another, followed a career path. It has been assumed that people would join the workforce in an entry-level position after acquiring some amount of education. As time passed and individuals gained knowledge and skill, they would move up in the hierarchy of their business, industry, or profession. Along with this increased ability, their incomes would rise as well. At some point, either because they ceased improving relative to other employees, or there was no opening above them, or there was no higher rung to climb to, they stopped moving up the ladder. However, their income would continue to climb, albeit at a slower pace, because seniority and experience were valued by the company. Then, when they reached the age of 65, they would retire from the workplace and rely on income from pensions, savings, and Social Security for as long as their golden years lasted.

With our national transition into an information age economy at the end of the twentieth century, this career model has slowly but surely been crumbling. The final collapse came with the Great Recession and the entirely new workplace it has left in its path of economic destruction. The expectation of an upward climb in responsibility and income, from entry into the workforce until retirement, is over. The age of the career is gone. We are now all employed in an ad hoc workplace in which excellence is no guarantee of security, let alone advancement; in which incomes could fall just as easily as climb with each new position; in which career changes will become the norm rather than the exception; and in which we may have to rely on earned income of one form or another for as long as we're physically and mentally capable of earning a paycheck.

What hasn't changed in this new ad hoc workplace is that you still have to engage in difficult dialogues. You still have to fire people with whom you're friendly. You still need to ask for raises and increased budgets. You still must put an end to office gossip and give performance reviews. You still have to break bad news to clients and defend your department's performance to your boss. No matter how different this new environment may be, you are still going to face all the vexing conversations of the past. And today they are even more problematic because of the changes that have taken place.

Let's look at the general changes created by this new environment.

With face-to-face communication much rarer now, we have fewer opportunities to hone our skills, not only at verbalizing, but at using our body language and facial expression to reinforce the spoken message we're trying to send. What once may have come as second nature now may require conscious effort. In addition, the partner with whom we're communicating is probably just as unpracticed at this as we are. That means their

responses and reactions will be less predictable, requiring us to be a bit more nimble in our scripting.

The finite nature of every job means there's less investment, both emotionally and financially, in relationships to other workers, or to the company. There's less personal history to draw on in communications. In years past you were more likely to know what buttons to push with another party, or more important, what buttons *not* to push. Today almost every face-to-face dialogue is taking place between individuals who really don't know each other.

Since short-term results are all that matter, we are losing one previously valuable tool in our communication arsenal. Promises of future or potential events simply don't hold the value they did in years past. Appeals for patience now fall on deaf ears. Strategies that once made sense are apt today to require too much time to prepare or come to fruition. Time is no longer as valuable as money—it's more valuable.

The well-deserved lack of trust that employees have for employers today has done more than simply put an end to promises being accepted at face value. Employees approach conversations of any type with any representatives of higher management with skepticism. The assumption that, at the very least, the other party is being honest is gone. Verification and documentation are now required. Rewards deferred are perceived as being rewards denied, and also as signs of impending termination. The slightest failure to deliver on the part of management can generate a cataclysmic loss of morale and effort.

Finally, with everyone's future so uncertain, the workplace is a much tenser place than ever before. Nerves frayed during the Great Recession are going to remain so for the foreseeable future. Anger and fear are apt to be palpable. Short fuses and sharp words are more common in today's workplace. Forget about looking for warmth; civility is the best we can hope for.

The specific implications of this new environment differ depending on the type of dialogue. The finite nature of jobs, for example, will have a different effect on a conversation in which you're asking an employee to take on more responsibilities than it would on a dialogue in which you're turning down a request for a budget increase. In the former it could provide you with subtle leverage, while in the latter it could suggest a warning that you may not wish to send.

These general and specific changes are what led to the book you now have in your hands. *Workscripts: Perfect Phrases for High-Stakes Conversations* is an entirely new and updated look at the most problematic workplace dialogues, using my successful *Lifescrpts* approach as its model. Each of the conversations is treated in a flow-chart form. In this way it's easy to see not only how to start conversations, but how to deal with the most likely responses and how to counter the most likely arguments. Each workscript will have its own introduction to offer guidance on the specific scenario, such as how to approach the conversation, the best days of the week or times of day to have the dialogue, the best locations for the discussion, how to dress and act to improve your chances of success, and what, if any, preparations you should make before the meeting.

Rather than organizing the workscripts based on whom you're speaking with, as I did in earlier books, I've now grouped similar conversations together into chapters. I've done this so that I can get into the specifics about how the new environment affects each type of dialogue. Each of these chapters will begin with a discussion of the new rules for being successful at this type of conversation, in this new workplace world, before examining the individual dialogues. When appropriate, dialogues will be examined from both sides. In other words, I'll explain how to respond to requests for raises from those who work for you, and then how to ask your boss for a raise of your own. In prior editions of *Lifescrpts* I went

though multiple rounds of back-and-forths in each situation. I've since learned that what readers find most helpful are the first-level responses, and so I've concentrated on those rather than trying to script each possible permutation of a dialogue.

I think it is only appropriate, at such a mercurial time in the workplace, for us to begin with a chapter that focuses on transitions.

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