

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Bet you your very last thebe that the McDonald's supervisor who fired one of his employees a week ago for a \$17 misdemeanour feels like a real heel now. Because the young man he fired, one Robert A. Hawkins, a high school dropout with a criminal past, went into an Omaha shopping mall on Wednesday and began a shooting rampage, killing eight people and finally himself. Losing his lousy job seems to have been the final straw that triggered Hawkins' murderous spree and it certainly seems a bit inappropriate for his former employer to be selling any of those Happy Meals for a while.

Closer to home, in 1999 disgruntled senior pilot, Christopher Phatshwe eluded airport security one early Monday morning, stole a twin-engined Air Botswana plane from the runway and circled the city and airport for about two hours demanding to speak to President Mogae or Vice-President Ian Khama. Apparently, having been demoted to a desk job due to ill health, Phatshwe sought reinstatement as a pilot through this deranged action. This incident also ended in tragedy when Phatshwe crash-landed into two other aircraft parked on the runway and was instantly killed in the fireball which ensued, simultaneously reducing three-quarters of Air Botswana's fleet to scrap metal.

Safe Auto Insurance Salesman of the Year 2000, Reggie Edwards, 47, was later fired from his job for poor performance issues. His reaction was to go out to his car and return with a gun. He fired shots inside the building and then took the human resources administrator hostage. Law enforcement quickly arrived as he barricaded himself and his hostage in. Negotiations seemed to be going well and the hostage was released but Edwards then killed himself shortly afterwards.

There can be no doubt that an unhappy, bitter or frustrated employee can wreck havoc in an organisation and these examples give new meaning to the cliché "this job is killing me". Seriously, it does however show the depths of frustration that employees experience and are capable of feeling and what can happen if such feelings go undetected.

But what causes employees to go completely off the rail? It's a phenomenon that's been tagged as 'professional suicide' and according to the experts it is not something that happens overnight. The syndrome affects countless talented hard driving

Those most likely to be affected are good employees who constantly operate in a crisis situation because of management's lack of planning or leadership. These initially highly motivated employees begin the suicidal process within three to five years after developing a solid record within the organization. The despair of not achieving what they want in what seems by now to be an absolutely hopeless situation begins to undermine their self-confidence and bruise their egos. They lose interest and fail to keep up with new on-the-job developments. They develop physical complaints, many classically psychosomatic or self-induced (migraine headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, frequent colds or flu) and seem unable to change this downward spiral. Sometimes they quit on the flimsiest of pretexts and take another job beneath their capabilities. Many times they become disruptive, overstep policy bounds, or do things they surely know they will be fired for doing. In short, they push the self-destruct button, rapidly and illogically destroying their careers and sometimes themselves.

Dr Donald Cole, who wrote a book on professional suicide, conducted a study of corporate life. The style of corporate leadership he identified as necessary for keeping people healthy and productive offered a clear vision for the future—engage the employee in goal setting and planning; provide performance evaluations on a regular basis along with recognition and rewards. This style of management may seem self-evident as a good one but it's all too rare and not as easy to achieve as it seems.

Coming at it from another angle I think the amazing thing is this: If bad management can evoke such a violent and all-encompassing reaction, surely the reverse must also be true? If we can drive people, through our actions, to do the unthinkable, like kill themselves or others, then we should surely be able to motivate people to do almost anything for the good of the organisation and for their own careers and self-esteem?

Industrial psychologist Abraham Maslow, researched human motivation extensively and determined 50 years ago that the desire for recognition, acknowledgement of our achievements, is paramount amongst our more sophisticated needs. We all need to feel that what we are doing is important and valued. For proof you need look no further than the recipients of professional awards – long service certificates, sporting trophies, Oscars. Their reaction is often an emotional one such as tears of joy – their efforts have been publicly recognised and this is an extremely powerful medium, triggering an equally powerful response. But this proof of worth is one of the most difficult needs to achieve, because it is the only one of which we are wholly dependent upon others to respond appropriately. In other words, recognition, by definition, must come from someone else. It is not an automatic result of good work because unfortunately at times we have a tendency to underestimate its importance. We just don't seem to thank people enough. There are literally thousands of polls which ask employees what they want and simple recognition is right up there. And it doesn't matter if it's recognising achievement, effort, opinion or feelings – if we are not recognised it's as if we don't exist.

And when we don't exist we can go crazy, like our three unhappy fellows at the beginning of this tale; Robert Hawkins who in his suicide note threatened to go out in style (remember me), Christopher Phatshwe's twisted logic for reinstatement (listen to me - hear me) and Reggie Edwards' need for revenge after what he clearly felt was unfair dismissal (acknowledge me). Maybe all these tragedies could have been averted. Just maybe if Robert Hawkins could have made McDonalds Employee of the Month, if Christopher Phatshwa had not had to have been grounded, if Reggie Edwards could have kept his award-winning sales figures up, their stories would have had a very different ending. But there's one more very important factor in the recognition equation which is that most of us really want to become legends in our own lifetimes and it's just the tiny sad, mad minority who'll claim it at any price, even death. Those three and others like them all did achieve a form of posthumous prominence, their 15 minutes of fame that Andy Warhol foresaw. And yes, they'll certainly be remembered but sadly, for all the wrong reasons.

