

# **The Conscious and Unconscious Workplace**

*Co-creating Decent Work and Ethical Environments*

By

**David Mathew**

The Conscious and Unconscious Workplace: Co-creating Decent Work  
and Ethical Environments

By David Mathew

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Dedicated to my Influencers:

Wilfred Bion

Sigmund Freud

Elizabeth Chapman Hoult

Neil Hopkins

Jacques Lacan

Anton Obholzer

Nicholas Royle and Nicholas Royle

Davo Ruthven-Stuart

and William Sharp.

“If you do not know what to do, there’s actually a chance of doing something new.”

Philip Glass, *Words Without Music: A Memoir*

“You should get it into your heads right away that it is dangerous to think you understand.”

Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VI, Desire and Its Interpretation*

“...for as I went on tuning the book, often five or six words would pile above one another in the margin at some small crisis of choice.”

Norman Mailer, *The Spooky Art*

“I never explain anything.”

Mary Poppins, in the original 1964 film

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: Return to the Workplace.....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Part 1: The Good Workplace .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Authoring the Workplace.....	10
Negotiating Complex Environments .....	18
Glass Door Etiquette .....	19
Complexity at Work.....	21
The Experiential (First Day?).....	24
Workplace Resilience.....	27
Resilience and Fragile Learning .....	29
Systems of Threes .....	34
Resilience and Your Part in the Team.....	36
Team Motivation .....	38
<b>Part 2: The Painful Agenda.....</b>	<b>51</b>
Saturated Spaces.....	55
Blame Town .....	62
John Steiner and Psychic Retreats.....	66
Anxiety .....	68
Workplace Anxiety.....	74
A Confusion of Tongues: Challenges and Courage.....	79
Challenging Conversations.....	79
“It Is My Problem?” and Preparation.....	83
Stress Awareness.....	87
A Reflective Pause.....	91
Kinds of Stress .....	92
Acute Stress.....	93
Chronic Stress .....	93

Signs of Stress ..... 94

Stress at Work..... 96

**Part 3: The Illuminated Leader..... 101**

Emotional Intelligence ..... 106

Embracing Change..... 108

Meaningful Goals and Personal Growth ..... 118

The Deadline Dogs and Delegation ..... 119

    What is Delegation? ..... 120

    What is Autonomy? ..... 121

    Autonomy and Delegation..... 122

    Delegating the Task? ..... 125

Concluding Reflections ..... 128

**Summary: At the End of the Day ..... 132**

    The Workplace Mirror..... 133

        First Lens: The Passport Renewal ..... 138

        Second Lens: Misheard Lyrics..... 140

    The Enormous Question ..... 143

**Appenix 1: The Memory Board ..... 148**

**Appenix 2: The Curative Function of Nostalgia ..... 152**

**Acknowledgements ..... 155**

**References..... 157**

**By the Same Author ..... 163**

“What question have I spent a long  
time answering?”

## Introduction

# Return to the Workplace

“I would now like to have a look in case I have caught anything  
in the net of my idleness.”

W.R. Bion, *Taming Wild Thoughts*<sup>1</sup>

“Work is made for man, not man for work.”

Ruth Nanda Anshen<sup>2</sup>

*We returned to the rooms, as the rooms knew we would.*

*The rooms had talked about us in our absence; they had lost their pets and they had missed us – pitied us, perhaps even loathed us for our desertion, because a pet that flees will create a confused pet-owner.*

*Then something unexpected happened. The rooms performed an action equivalent to the shaking of a handheld mouse... and the screen cleared; a cosmos of pixels readjusted and shuffled – and the rooms could see us again. We were clear to them once more.*

*We took our steps inside and saw items that we had left behind, in our haste to leave.*

*Did we ever apologise for leaving the rooms? Did we explain? Although we might not have said sorry, we did go back. We went back to the rooms we had abandoned; and they welcomed us with their full forgiveness.*

*But who did the rooms see? Did they recognise us at first? We had been gone a long time. Who were we, these pets who went back home?*

In 2020, shortly after the announcement of the first Covid lockdown in the U.K., a friend of mine built himself an outside toilet, at the end of his large



back garden. Although the gesture might seem in some way symbolic – perhaps with panicky overtones – his decision (he claims) developed from simple factors of cost. “There are five of us at home,” he explained to me on an online platform, “and if we’re all at home all day it’s going to cost me a fortune in water.”<sup>3</sup> Does this sound practical or dreamy? If we were to examine the situation at face value, we might depend on Jacques Lacan for a casting vote. As part of a lecture at MIT, Lacan offered: “Waste is the only thing which testifies that we have an interior.”<sup>4</sup>

While recounting this anecdote to a different friend, who does not know the first friend, the second friend took great interest in how, even in the galaxy of sanitation contemplation, what goes around eventually comes around. Once upon a time, when it came to the removal of our bodily waste, the peak of human endeavour was the outdoors lavatory. It is possible some readers know a story told by a grandparent or elderly relative – a reminiscence about the windswept, rainy winter’s night and the need-to-go; a description of the icy seat and the close walls of the box itself – and I am sure that broadly speaking we can agree that when sanitation moved into the home, it was a mark of progress.

My friend had decided to go back in time. Instead of maintaining the domestically hygienic status quo, and instead of consulting plumbing experts on their views of what might be coming *next*, he turned his back on the present and re-enacted history. Several times since 2020, I have tried to ask him whether, on reflection, there might have been a *soupçon* of emergency planning in his decision to *go au naturelle* (as it were); but he maintains that he was spurred to invention by the prospect of an etiolated bank account. *Furthermore*, he maintains that since creating his *labour of lav* (sorry!), he has not used the indoor facilities even once.

From the very beginning, however, I should like to be clear that this is not a book *about* Covid-19... or even about domestic sanitation. It is not a book about the nexus on the Venn diagram where these two subjects might overlap. Nor even is this a book about *emerging from the pandemic* and learning to try again, professionally speaking; or not exactly. However, any writer composing work on the *subject of work* – writing something on the subject of what it is *like* to work in the contem-

porary workplace, a quarter of a century after the turn of the Millennium – will earn my respect if he manages to eschew the subject of Covid-19 altogether. Completely understandably, for the whole of 2020 (and beyond), the pandemic was the hot topic of conversation. Even today<sup>5</sup> (it would seem) we need to say more on the subject, whether it is in a conversational dyad or on a societal level. Four years after the first announcement to work from home reached our ears, we might occasionally hear from our colleagues of the challenges of home working: for instance, complaints of isolation or ergonomically inappropriate home office set-ups.

For the purposes of what follows, a brief reminder might prove useful. Figuratively speaking, to borrow a line from the musician Tom Waits, “The skies turned black and bruised and we had months of heavy rains.”<sup>6</sup> Silence descended; then din erupted; sometimes – uncannily – these two things happened simultaneously, or in tandem, and sometimes they occurred one after the other – not everyone was certain which of the two conditions was preferred. In the same way that my friend with the outside toilet tried to plan for the future by acknowledging the past, we adopted strategies to make better sense of the present. People adopted new technologies; or grew anxious, grew their hair; or any combination of the above. Even *newsreaders* seemed disheartened and/or rattled; and I hereby candidly assume that everyone reading these words will have at least a tale to tell from the time we spent dancing the Pandemic Waltz. Less ambitiously, perhaps, and more accurately, we took a pandemic *walk*. We walked in a local forest and had the square miles to ourselves. Our dog grew nervous of other dogs, on the rare occasions that she met any; afraid of other humans too...<sup>7</sup>

The arrival of the pandemic had the status of one Wilfred Bion’s “wild thoughts”<sup>8</sup> – a “thought without a thinker” that had happened by. Bion writes:

If a thought without a thinker comes along, it may be what is a ‘stray thought’, or it could be a thought with the owner’s name and address

upon it, or it could be a 'wild thought'. The problem, should such a thought come along, is what to do with it.

Those were tightrope times and liminal spaces, and in one way or another they affected every person with a job. By and large we did *not* know what to do with this stray or wild thought, and society struggled to think clearly itself in the presence of this intruding notion. Here is Bion again:

Or course, if it is wild, you might try to domesticate it... If its owner's name and address is attached, it could be restored to its owner, or the owner could be told that you had it and he could collect it any time he felt inclined... If the owner is prepared to allow you to have it, or if it was understood that you were quite entitled to keep it, then you might try to train it in the way it should go and in a manner that would make it more amendable to the habits of your own resident thoughts and to the thoughts of the community of which you were a member, in such a way that it would gradually become assimilated and part and parcel of the totality of the group of person in which the thought is to continue its existence.

Some workers were furloughed. Others (your author included) were mandated to stay at home and work from there, which I personally enjoyed but plenty of others did not. In other words, with very little notice given (again, completely understandably), colleagues in many industries were asked to work from home from that point on; the ordinary routine (and process and social preference) of reporting to an office was to cease: *right now, please*. After several months of this uncanny working environment<sup>9</sup> (cf. Hopkins, Mathew & Ruthven, 2024), I entered a simple gobbet in my workbook.

*For months it's been like reading in the rain. Not unpleasant, just weird, uncanny. Everything's getting 'wet' and there's no way to dry the pages.*

It was a different reading metaphor that I used within my own work. As part of my job, I taught a wide range of subjects to NHS organisations.

Early on, I started to talk about the Book of Covid, explaining that we had all been assigned the task of reading the book, whether we wanted to or not; and that it was likely to make us cross and weepy from time to time; but that the book, like any other book, *would come to an end*. Both individually and as a member of the cosmic book group known as Citizenship, we would eventually set the book back up on the shelf, for it there to be regarded as a monstrous but unforgettable addition to the library. We must not burn it. We must pass the Book of Covid its due and cautious respect. After all, for many people, the chapters that we lived through proved to be a tough read indeed. And the Book of Covid was a startling monograph, possibly unique in our collective heritage: it read *you* (the reader) as much as you (the reader) read *it*. There was no such thing as a non-reader. We had all bought a copy of the Book of Covid: it was a compulsory purchase.

However, let us reiterate that this is not a book *about* Covid. I was less interested in writing about the caesura – the Book of Covid – than I was in discussing the workplace that we had co-created *before* the pandemic and how it differs from the version that is emerging (and possibly convalescing or sticking itself back together) as we speak. Instead, this book is about the influence(s) that each one of us has on the spaces that occupy us, as colleagues, as much as we occupy *them*. I submit to the reader that a workplace is something *authored*. The rhythms and patterns of our work are not random; indeed, on an unconscious level at least, much planning determines how things look and feel within the saturated spaces<sup>10</sup> that we occupy for the purpose of making a living. Human beings are meaning-making machines; it might even be argued that our search for meaning is a lifelong learning experience.<sup>11</sup>

One contention I propound in these pages is the following: that we should all feel responsible *and willing* to create an environment that is psychologically safe; an environment in which we can do our best work, and which (unconsciously or otherwise) elicits our finest, perhaps most unexpected responses; an environment into which we can pour our whole selves on a regular basis, secure in the knowledge that whatever we give up will be replenished via enriching professional inter-

action and meaningful tasks; and environment in which the execution of these tasks clearly benefits others in one way or another. This does not mean, however, that we should exclude elements that might be considered *negative*. A utopian workplace cannot, and perhaps *should* not exist – and for a number of reasons, the simplest of which being that an author of such a workplace will have edited out or expunged some of the precious human material and contributions – challenging conversations, for instance – that provides a saturated space with its energy and drive. A second contention is that we author the workplace, on an unconscious level, whether we wish to do so or not.

One assumption that your author might make at this point is that his readership is likely to work in a complex environment – or better to say, an infinitely varied *series* of complex environments. (I work in mine; you work in yours; sometimes I work in what looks like yours, though neither of us would ever know this.) Not only is complexity something that is personal to us, we *bring into the environment* a sense of complexity. At the very least, something I do affects others within the environment. Others' behaviours (and achievements and tasks) affect us. This is *partly* what is meant by complexity: the connections that we make, and by which we are permanently altered, within a workplace. Each of us brings into that environment our own set of experiences and our own set of achievements and failures; not to mention having as our psychological cargo our own set of strengths, areas for development, our own resilience, our own emotional intelligence. We bring these items into our environments – and so does everyone else, which is probably the point. This is partly what makes the environment complex.

Although we have plenty to unpack and scrutinise, in essence this book concerns itself with the contemporary workplace, and the rich blend of ethics, ambition and abrasion that is required (I submit) to make such an environment both habitable and productive for the majority of paid staff. While no assumption has been made about the reader's own workplace, it is the shared office and the home office to which we will refer most often.<sup>12</sup> As part of a paid community of workers – or to extend my metaphor, a member of a metaphysical writing group – we have some

idea of the plot and we each have a pen. Although we might not face the task with the determination of a friend constructing an outside toilet, we will each play a part in the authorship of our book of many chapters.

We asked many questions while we stayed away from the rooms, and I would encourage us to ask more questions now: either to keep asking *the same* questions, especially when the answers were not forthcoming, or to ask new questions. One of the abilities that sets us apart from even the nearest of our mammalian neighbours is that of framing questions – and of responding to them with the best will in the world or with lies.

In this book I will ask many of my own, and although I will not expect you (the reader) to have all the answers, I hope that you will take the questions seriously enough to write down an answer. Reflective writing is hereby encouraged; but all I can suggest at this early stage is that you respond in a manner both spontaneous and true.

“What question have I spent a long time answering?” I asked an audience to ask itself during the early chapters of the Book of Covid. Needless to say, I was addressing an online audience. While society – while the *world* – hastily co-created emergent paragraphs, much of what was discussed was discussed on a virtual platform.

Not everyone present on that occasion was capable of an answer; and some said nothing at all, and therefore I was none the wiser as to whether they were engaged, pensive – maybe terrified, maybe indifferent; but perspicacious responses were also received. One participant referred to his own survivor’s guilt, and his submission helped my own thinking on the same subject, here, within these pages. Another relayed his concerns about how to negotiate complex environments while online – and the negotiation of such environments has also forged a space in this book.

Questions help us to understand; this is their function; but questions also help us to make connections, links and attachments (either permanent or temporary). It will therefore come as no surprise, surely, that we will spend time thinking about connections in this book. Why so?

Well, connections are obviously important, and for the reader, perhaps, connections are implied in my repeated use of the *environment*; and indeed, in the notion of co-creation when it comes to the workplace itself. As much a theme as any other, connections are vital for the sustenance and maintenance of the workplace; and *connections* have been much on my mind for years. For a while it has seemed to me that everything is connected; indeed, I have used the very phrase “It’s all connected” in various Author’s Notes or on Acknowledgements pages in books published in recent years.

For the purposes of the work ahead, the workplace is our sandpit in which to play with the other children and create something meaningful (again, a *something* of unknown permanence or ephemerality). Nor do I introduce the metaphor lightly, or for comic effect. For many, what was then described and sometimes feted as a new way of working had about it the air of experimentation in a foreign milieu; these same people experienced the thrill of working in a childlike air of co-creation, adventure and derring-do. Others, of course, felt tortured and picked on, as if by the bigger children in the sandpit. What they had created out of sand and water had been demolished. However, we will also venture wider than the immediate workplace when we consider complex environments. *Society itself* is a complex environment for us to navigate, even if the links are not always obvious (and even if we consciously strive to make the connections). It might be suggested, in addition, that the working world could have been divided into two approximate categories: those who felt *less* connected during the Book of Covid’s chapters and those who felt *more*.

Let me inquire how the reader feels *now*. Less or more connected than during the incomplete times that I refer to as the Book of Covid? (For you, is the book back on the shelf or do you keep it nearby, near your printer, perhaps, near the stationery cupboard.) It is the contention of Rainer Funk that every human being (which includes of course every colleague) must “feel a sense of belonging to a group and satisfy his need for a social identity”.<sup>13</sup> Please cast your mind back to then and explore any differences present in how you feel now. “Such a need to

be socially related,” Funk continues, “also applies to highly individualized individuals, even those who purposefully distance themselves from any group affiliation. Psychologically, people who purposefully distance themselves from all social groupings continue to be concerned with their group membership.”<sup>14</sup> While working through these questions, I will add one more. Another question to keep posing to ourselves is how *comfortable and safe* we feel in the workplace.

For months it was like reading in the rain.

In *White Gloves*, John Kotre opines: “if I do not put our memories into words, I’ll lose touch with them, and something will die in me.”<sup>15</sup> Kotre’s formulation is one way of exploring the (psychoanalytic) compulsion to *return*. Indeed, what Kotre propounds is an important consideration – the subject of mnemonic neglect and oneiric abuse – in the tension between the decision to drop anchor once again, or to stay away. After all, *not to return* is a conscious decision as well. But we returned.

We returned to the workplace.

A quick note on style and presentation, if I may, and a smidge on the book’s exegesis.

The reader will note frequent changes of pronoun within these pages. This decision is not to reflect any current political correctness or sensitivity, for issues of gender identity are not this book’s concern. It is simply the case that a clerical decision was made early on: to vary my authorial embrace of the reader (here I’ll use the first person plural, *we*) with my direct address to him or her or them (and here I’ll use the second person singular, *you*). I hope you won’t mind my frequent questions. As with any book, I could have written it through, read it to you like a presentation where one is sharing the screen and cannot see the audience, and made a risky assumption that the reader was still listening to my voice, even though (on this journey) the back of the car is noisy with the windows open and there are other roadside picnics and attractions to distract one’s attention.



From the very beginning, I'd really like you, the reader, to be *involved*. The origin of this book was a series of workshops that I delivered online to NHS professionals, throughout the early chapters of the Book of Covid. Our employers had asked us to work from home, in the same way that millions of other people had been asked to do the same. The change in our work locations, however, had not stopped the flow of business as usual; and there were tensions in many workplaces – tensions which might or might not have been exacerbated by the pandemic. I gave a series of well-received workshops as my contribution to helping things along in a positive way, even if it was only by a little bit. At the start of these workshops ('Negotiating Complex Environments', 'Self-Acceptance and Meaningful Ties', to name but two) I would say to my audience: *Be part of the workshop. Make it yours as much as it is mine. Do not stand on ceremony if you have something to say...* The comments and contributions from the audience arrived, enthusiastically, in each workshop's allocated sixty or ninety minutes. A few times I formed the impression that people wanted to talk about *anything* other than Covid-19... or their immediate work. Although the aim of the workshops was not therapeutic, I would have been surprised then – and I would stay surprised now – if a by-product of attending them had not been a lessening of the tension, a reduction of the anxiety.

It was a year later, in the summer of 2021, that I started to think about the recordings of the workshops, and what further use (if any) I might make of them. Was there a book, perhaps, in those MP4 files, albeit in seedling form? Certainly, I had referenced the unconscious in those workshops, particularly as it relates to the colleagues in our offices and healthcare establishments. What other links might I make if I could see what I had said online in the form of a written account? In my notebook I likened the experiment to finding the eight pieces of a map that had been quartered, halved again, and then dispersed. Only ownership of the eight pieces would reveal the full picture – and perhaps show clearly where the treasure was buried. We will talk more about buried treasure in the pages to follow. I paid for the workshops to be transcribed, not least by this point I had grown excited by the idea of writing a monograph on the power and influence of unconscious forces in

the workplace. (Indeed, for at least a year this book's title – and the title of the Word file that housed the transcriptions and my notes – was 'The Workplace Unconscious'.)

To cut a long academic story short, I knew I wanted to write a book that would ask questions of the reader – direct questions, and serious ones too. In other words, instead of making this narrative a *presentation*, I have made it a *workshop*. I intend my breaking-of-the-fourth-wall questions (to you) to fatten up the air between us; to give the space substance and coalescence. I would love it if we all chewed through the implications and the consequences. We might interpret the open question of the workplace – the workplace *itself* as a question – or a set of questions – that participants strive to answer with something more expansive than a Yes/No response.

There is more to say on this subject (there is *always* more to say on this subject), but I will break off at this point. The hour looms. It's time to rise and shine and brush your teeth.

It's time to go to work.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bion 1997: 32.
  - <sup>2</sup> Anshen 1962: ix.
  - <sup>3</sup> This friend is the only person I can think of (possibly the only person on the planet) who might answer a question about how his weekend had been with the following: “Oh, fine. I spent a few hours on Saturday cleaning my fountain pens.”
  - <sup>4</sup> Lacan 2022: 94.
  - <sup>5</sup> These particular words were written at the end of May 2024.
  - <sup>6</sup> Waits & Brennan 1992.
  - <sup>7</sup> While mistakes were made by government and citizens alike – while the curve of common sense and the line of public indignation appeared asymptotic – we were taught some subtleties in among the din of headlines and fatality tolls, amid the daily bombshells of blame and bluster. As a nation, we had cause to learn the difference between a pandemic and an epidemic; between quarantine and isolation; between a respirator and a ventilator; and between contagious and infectious (among other distinctions). Never before – in most people’s lives – had the word *droplets* held such ominous emotional weight. In many people’s lives (I would guess), the science of epidemiology swam out of a dreamy focus and into the sort of clarity afforded by a microscope. Can there be a person in the English-speaking world who did not understand the concept of *airborne transmission*?
- Inside the workplace, as many of us were directed to work from home, a sub-language developed, partly ironic, partly practical and partly silly. Sarcastically we referred to actions being *Boris-approved* if our Prime Minister seemed in favour of whatever it happened to be, such as one hour of exercise every day. Phrases such as *Building back better* or *The virus doesn’t discriminate* gained the sort of emotional weight that implies a cumulative tradition ... only there had been no such tradition. Or weight, for that matter.
- Other examples were in evidence, but we were the lucky ones: the colleagues who kept our jobs. As workers were furloughed, citizens considered both herd immunity and community spread – where the first of the two suggested a positive outcome as the result of simple-minded compliance, and the second a negative outcome as the result of people (figuratively and literally) coming together. In a gesture that now seems laughably inadequate, we were advised to wash our hands to the tune of “Happy Birthday”, in an attempt to flatten the curve. Screening was deployed as a synonym for testing.
- <sup>8</sup> Bion 1997: 27.
  - <sup>9</sup> More about the uncanny will follow.
  - <sup>10</sup> Cf. Sapsed & Mathew 2022.
  - <sup>11</sup> Cf. Mathew 2019.
  - <sup>12</sup> Indeed, at several points in the hardback notebook that stands in for the bubbling cauldron that begins any of my writing projects, the question “What do I mean by ‘the workplace’?” is repeated many times. There are many ways that we might regard “the workplace” – *prima facie* being one of them, and perfectly valid, where we might translate *prima facie* as “at first sight”. It is a room or a set of rooms in which people congregate to discuss and execute a series of tasks that will benefit others in the provision of a service that might also generate a fi-

nancial income. Also in the notebook are gobbets like the following, which never took root: THE UNCANNY MANIFESTING AS A WORKPLACE TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE. 'The Complex Nest of the Workplace.'

Maybe next time.

<sup>13</sup> Funk 2024: 39

<sup>14</sup> Funk 2024: 39.

<sup>15</sup> Kotre 1995: 59.

## Part One

# The Good Workplace

“In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sunlike, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as goodlike but wrong to think that either of them is the good – for the good is yet more prized.”

Plato, *Republic*<sup>1</sup>

“The quickest way to learn about a new place is to know what it dreams of.”

Stephen King, *The Waste Lands*<sup>2</sup>

*We said goodbye to the workplace, but did we do so through choice? We were told that we must leave; and for some of us the exodus was conducted in a hurry – perhaps in a panic. The rooms did not understand why we were going, and nobody read the years of feelings and emotions in those rooms and thought to offer an explanation to them.*

*For a long time, the workplace had said “Yes” – Yes, you can! You can do it! Or the workplace had said “No” – That won’t be possible. For a long time, in essence, the workplace had been a closed question: Yes or No. Little variation or prevarication had proved necessary. But then the workplace became an open question, eliciting a response from all of us. A what-if question; a how-about-this question. That question remained unanswered for several years; for some of us, perhaps, it remains unanswered.*

*The workplace had become a conditional clause.*

*When the workplace opened and we were invited to return, did it feel as though the rooms were reading us? Did we experience the sense of being inspected? And if not by the rooms, then by whom or what?*

It is time to go to work.

What does this simple sentence mean to you?

I know of two work colleagues who, on discovering that it was going to be impossible to work from home, back in 2020, arranged to work from *each other's* home, every day, and undertook the necessary commute in a spirit of building up the right head of positive steam (and augmenting one's workplace persona) that helps the settling-into a day's work for many colleagues. Each one of them reported to an office at the other person's house and both of them enjoyed the company of the family they found there. Effectively, the families *in situ* became colleagues from different organisations who happened to share the building's kitchen, loo and outside picnic area for lunch.

What does *going to work* mean to you?

Perhaps you need a train or a bus to reach your destination; perhaps you can walk – or *choose* to walk, simply to get some exercise under your belt. Do you steer your own passage as the captain of your car, enduring the waves and squalls of town centre traffic, or do you enjoy the hectares of business zone car parks? Perhaps you do not need to leave home. Do you move from one room to the next, to another? Do you have a home office (and did you have one before the Book of Covid was opened)? Maybe you take your laptop on a tour of the available spaces? (The topic of “relocation” within one's home was popular in the early chapters. In retrospect, it seems that the nomadic work patterns were as much an unconscious defiance of the situation as they were a quest for novelty and self-motivation.)

Is *going to work* a physical movement or a shift to a familiar way of thinking that you have not deployed for twelve-or-so hours? Would the child I mentioned in the Introduction have a clear understanding of what goes on as the process of your *going to work*, at least up to the point of the door being closed gently in front of her? Literally or figuratively (or both), do you close your own door on the domestic or outside world and hem yourself in? What's the weather like where you are?

Is it a different atmospheric pressure when you are at work? What's on your mind? "When we go to work," writes Manfred Kets de Vries, "we... project our wishes on others and, based on those wishes, rightly or wrongly anticipate how others will react to us; then we react not to their actual reactions but to their perceived reactions."<sup>3</sup> Is it likely that you will project or will you receive another's projections? Can you pick and choose in your workplace in this way?

In order to *go to work* you must leave where you are right now, which is likely to be your home. Are you ready? As we have established, it is time to go to work.

*What happens on your way to work? Do you remember?*

Your walk into the building – let us say – is unconcerned and unhurried; you are on time, you feel comfortable. Your breakfast has been digested and the clothes you have chosen are loose and professional. Because it is Monday morning, you decide to take the stairs to the floor on which your office sits; later on in the week, no doubt, you will be tired – worn down by hours and meetings – and you will opt for the elevator. Right now, however, your body and mind are fresh from a weekend of not-too-much and not-too-little to do. Spring is in the air; a spring is in your step. You are employed to do your job in a Good Workplace.

The author *hopes* (at least) that you execute your tasks in a Good Workplace. But what does this mean? What makes it good? What makes *anything* good?

The question is so vast and the range of responses so multitudinous that anything committed to the pages of this book can only be arbitrary.

It is likely that the reader will work for an organisation – "the bricks and mortar and staff and equipment component of a bounded group of individuals who have a common primary task", to quote Anton Obholzer.<sup>4</sup> The nature of the work – the primary task – will vary enormously, I predict; but for now, I hope we can accept Obholzer's gobbet as a working definition of *the workplace*. It's the 'good' part that will prove more problematic. For example, are we talking about *ethically* good, about *ethics*?

If so, the tide of explanations and definitions remains frighteningly high, although we might well agree on a few basic points. For instance, we might agree that ethics examines the rational justification for our moral judgments. Ethics studies what is morally right or wrong, just or unjust; it elicits, perhaps, an internal discussion that one has on the subject of *grey areas* – the morally chewy decisions that one either has to make or has watched someone else have to make. It asks us to consider what is good, what is beautiful, what is true; it might be thought of as a reflection on how human beings interact with other humans and with the environment around them (including nature, also including a workplace); and it examines our thoughts on responsibility and on justice. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>5</sup> explores, *inter alia*, how human life is best lived and fulfilled. By contrast, Wittgenstein gives us something elliptical and pithy, more otherworldly: "Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts."<sup>6</sup>

Your author hopes that you are engaged in ethically fulfilling work, which in turn would make your work 'good'. I also hope that you are able to be good to your colleagues, even if Lacan (for example) rails against the idea of being good to another person. (What if the person you want to do good to does not want good to be done to *him*?) I am not suggesting that one should get what one wants all the time, for reasons that are explored below, but in general I hope your work is 'good' – and an additional factor that would make your work 'good' would be its execution in a 'good workplace'.

*Do you work in a 'good workplace'? Does the place you occupy – or the series of places that you occupy – during the hours that you call your 'work hours' constitute a 'good' workplace, in the sense that it engages you and your colleagues in substantial and meaningful tasks that benefit you and others in a range of different ways? In the words of de Vries, "organizations as systems have their own life – a life that's not only conscious but also unconscious, not only rational but also irrational."*<sup>7</sup>

In your opinion, of what *substance* is the good workplace? What does it contain? What does it exclude? Or if we are discussing authorship,



what *genre* is your workplace? Is it an *easy read* or a *difficult read*? If the latter, bear in mind the advice provided by Olga Cox Cameron, to wit: “every difficult work presents us with the choice of judging the author inept for not being clearer, or ourselves stupid for not grasping what is being said. The challenge is to remain open to both possibilities.”<sup>8</sup> The question of what “difficulty” means is addressed below, from a number of different angles. Something tricky can be good at the same time.

Is it a place that fosters passionate convictions? We might consider the good workplace as one in which freedom, courage, spontaneity and respect for life are held aloft as shared values; where humanity, compassion and even love are respectfully encouraged. The ‘good’ workplace is the *human* workplace (however obvious that might sound); it is also that which gives us an individual and a group identity, not to mention a purpose – a purpose that was either or eroded or challenged for many in the early chapters of the Book of Covid. Purpose is important because, in the words of Eric Klinger, the human brain “cannot sustain purposeless living. It is not designed for that. Its systems are designed for purposive action. When blocked its systems deteriorate and the emotional feedback from idling these systems signals extreme discomfort and motivates the search for renewed purpose, renewed meaning.”<sup>9</sup> From Kline’s contribution we might infer that “the workplace” means more to us than simply a place to go (or to be) in order to execute tasks. A good workplace, indeed, is itself a source of inspiration and motivation, at least to some of us. It is where our performance is measured, and where we might measure our own responses and behaviours. The following is by Stephanie Schechter:

...we all occasionally fall short of our own internal standards of ethical practice. There are moments that we regret a choice we have made, perhaps placing our own needs ahead of those of the patient, unconsciously acting out our own jealousy or aggression, or somehow momentarily departing from our own ethical ideals. There is a gap between our aspirational selves and our actual behavior.<sup>10</sup>

A truly “good” workplace will be kind to this sort of introspection and re-evaluation. It will be a safe space in which mistakes, occasionally, will be made; but it will be a mirror into which to gaze, to reflect, rather than a windowless cell – a space for us to pace in a spirit of contrition and worry. It will be an atmosphere saturated with possibility; an environment in which we can accept that our emotions are legitimate, and in which we can experience the emotional stages that follow the announcement of a major change coming.

In a Good Workplace, I can seek an audience with my manager to discuss my concerns. I can create a new daily pattern if I need one; I can treat myself with kindness. I can explain my feelings with colleagues. (What harm can it do to say “I am feeling a bit sad because...”?) I have a clear space and a willingness to think about my colleagues; when I ask how they are, I am genuinely interested; and when I ask how I can help and support them, I wait for an answer. In my workplace, it is likely that I will make meaningful ties: the ones that enrich you; the ones that make me feel that I am glad that I know this person, this colleague of mine.

Two-thirds of the way through the previous century, a neat and tidy fifty years before the world opened the Book of Covid to read the first chapter in 2020, Erich Fromm wrote:

This century, ‘the age of anxiety’, has produced ever-increasing loneliness and isolation. The breakdown of religion, the seeming futility of politics, the emergence of the totally alienated ‘organization man’, deprived the urban middle class of a frame of orientation and of a feeling of security in a meaningless world. Although a few seemed to find new frames or orientation in surrealism, radical politics, or Zen Buddhism, in general the disenchanted liberal was looking for a philosophy that he could subscribe to without any fundamental change in his outlook, i.e. without becoming ‘different’ from his friends and colleagues.<sup>11</sup>

Can we make the connection that for some of us the workplace – and the tasks that we complete within it – is an example of Fromm’s ‘philos-

ophy'? It is what we do to combat "loneliness and isolation"; and what we do to stop feeling "different". It is the equivalent of laughter behind the hand at the joke that no one articulates but which we all comprehend.

By stark contrast, let us briefly consider the *bad* workplace, or even the Bad Workplace; and ask ourselves the questions: What do we mean by 'bad'? and 'Can a truly 'bad' workplace exist? To qualify for the adjective, it would have to be bad for everyone, would it not? – or at least for the majority of workers. Some of us remember the opposite of the good workplace, and we will venture a few thoughts on why this is so. Semantically, at the matter's simplest, the opposite of the 'good workplace' is the *bad* workplace, but another category is possible – the 'good place where no work gets done'. The place that is, shall we say, a workplace in name only.

Let us take these two categories one by one.

The bad workplace is bad for reasons that all (or many) participants agree on, or it is bad because I say it is bad... or more likely, because I *think* it is bad, especially if the nature of the badness involves the element of danger of speaking up to voice an opinion. What makes it bad? It negates our ability to speak with assurance; it confuses our willingness to behave with attached but calm confidence; or it stamps into one's passport the cancellation of one's handy privileges. You've been stripped of your right to speak the truth – or even to *acknowledge* the truth. Time has moved on. So has your capability to address rational decisions. You are nervous in your workplace – maybe frightened.

Why did you choose to work here? (Was there much choice in the matter?) Where did you come from? Did you travel far, professionally speaking, from your most recent paid employment to this one, the one you currently occupy? (Have you travelled far, professionally speaking, from your *first* paid employment, to the one you currently occupy? And what does *far* mean, anyway – mean *to you*?

Looking at it a different way, it is *boring* to work there; *perilous* to work there; it is cold in the winter and hot in the summer, and the corridors

reek either of urine or of dead mice decomposing in the skirting boards. It is dirty. Bad manners are common currency. There seems to be no such thing as a plan or a set of goals. I feel neither inspired nor uninspired; or I'm pressured by deadlines so proximate to unachievability that were intended to act as inspirations but in fact perform better as instruments of control or paralysis. Or I have nothing significant to do – nothing that matters much to me or to those setting the tasks. The next stop on this gauge, of course, is the post-banal. I have (sometimes) *literally nothing to do*.

In 1994, before I trained to be a teacher, I temped at a couple of local businesses. For one assignment, I was employed from 9 to 5, to observe a screen on my desk that displayed international air fares and to compare these prices with information in a physical brochure. If a fare changed, I had to make a manual overriding amendment on a different screen. This was my job in its totality. Moreover, this was my job for about a month – five days of seven hours (deducting an hour for lunch, at which point there was nowhere to go but a pub over the road) for roughly twenty-eight days. 35 by 28 equals 980 hours. And in all that time I made one solitary entry on the second screen. In all that time only one fare altered to occasion my typing-in of an alternative number. Let us imagine I was to change 349 to 369; and that I did indeed execute this momentous labour of love. For this attention to duty and detail I was elaborately praised, but not until I had spent the rest of the morning – a couple of hours? – checking and rechecking that no imp of dyscalculia had prompted me to type (say) 396 or 339. That I had done what I was supposed to do, correctly.

The reader might infer that this was a bad workplace. When I read and recently re-read *The Pale King*<sup>12</sup> – David Foster Wallace's final statement as a novelist, published posthumously – I would occasionally think back to my temping job described above. I do not suppose we will ever know for sure how much of Wallace's novel is true, in the sense of it having happened to the real-life author who appears in the pages – but true-to-life or not, the novel is a study of workplace boredom if ever one has been written. In Wallace's pages, boredom is a social adhesive;

boredom is what makes the tax offices the author describes sing with hollow humour and localised dread. The author makes it clear that the infrastructure at the IRS building was designed to be intentionally frustrating. Although the workplace that *I* reported to was in the travel and not the tax industry, the importance of accurate numerical work and the burden of boredom were certainly shared.

In the absence of relevant work tasks, a workplace can feel pointless (at best) or even threatening. If I do not have enough (or *anything!*) to do, and I see my colleagues hunched over in their own endeavours, I am likely to feel guilty or embarrassed, fidgety and ill. I am not deserving of my place; nor am I encouraged to play Free Cell or Snake on the computer for hours on end. Should my colleagues see me engaged in games, the very least my pastime activities will elicit is a look of derision or disgust.

Perhaps, however, the whole team is without a primary task... or the whole *floor* is, or indeed the whole *organisation*; but let us keep things on the team level. In *Experiences in Groups*, Wilfred Bion<sup>13</sup> found that every group has two (simultaneous) tasks: a primary task, which involves the group in its pursuit of agreed-upon-objectives and completion of tasks; and a survival task, which leads the group into a latent and unconscious set of assumptions and coping mechanisms that ensures the group survives. If the team lacks a primary task, it is likely to lack motivation as well. The workplace identity has been diluted; the team has been robbed of ambition, of momentum and fundamental purpose. Disappointment rides the airwaves. Anxiety spiderwebs from laptop to laptop.

Given what has been said already, it will come as no surprise for us (as a dyad, you and me, author and reader, reader and author, or even a group of us) to think of the Bad Workplace as the place we go to where no work is achieved; where nothing happens – at least to the naked eye. (Wilfred Bion advises that “there is no way in which the individual can, in a group, ‘do nothing’ – not even by doing nothing”.<sup>14</sup>) We should not think of a bad workplace in terms of complexity or ill feelings, nor even in terms of aggressive behaviours, for as we will see (if not agree, neces-

sarily) the Good Workplace needs tension and aggravation to survive and thrive. The need for limits on poor behaviours is of course noted.

For the moment, let us consider again the lazy workplace – the *workless* workplace? Would the workless workplace be sustainable? Almost certainly not, we might have agreed already. Who would pay for it, for one thing? But let us interrogate this theory further. Assume a financial stability built on fiscal solid rock. The premises are paid for; and while the office might not contain state of the art equipment, everything functions. Methods of communication are secure. There's a kitchen, there are gender-specific toilets, and those who drive to work are able to pay for a parking space directly from their monthly salary or are provided with free parking. The workplace has nearly everything a colleague could want.

What it does *not* have is *purpose* or a *way of operating*. A good workplace requires both. And *if* we can agree on these points, a question begs to be answered. To what extent do we *author our own workplaces*? What influence do we have over these shared spaces? What do we do to ensure that they are safe, creative environments in which to work? What might we offer when it comes to *authoring the workplace*?

## Authoring the Workplace

A few words on authorship seem warranted.

"Work becomes enjoyable," writes William Czander,<sup>15</sup> "when the employee is able to accept or internalize the organization's definition of pleasure."

If we happen to agree with this statement (and your author does), and – further – if we happen to have been processed in such a systematic manner, it makes sense that he would feel something like joy when he enters a workplace room. Would it not? In which case, let me ask you: What do *you* feel when you walk into a workplace room?

"I enter a physical space... and I'm the first to arrive."