Burnout

In his ethnography called *Engineering Culture*, Gideon Kunda examines an engineering startup company that he calls High Technologies Corporation in order to protect its identity. High Technologies seems like a great place to work. Presumably, the workers at High Technologies are highly skilled, and their salaries are good. There is a relatively even distribution of power: most workers receive the same salary (Source... maybe in chapter 2). An interviewee describes the ideal worker as "Someone who is innovative, enthusiastic, willing to work hard, who isn’t hung up on structure, and who has absolutely no concern with educational background" (Kunda 2006: 73). The philosophy of the company hinges around the phrase “do what is ‘right’ to do in each situation,” apparently giving the employees freedom to act as they please (Kunda 2006: 55). The employees at High Technologies love the company. An engineer exclaimed, “I love this company. I would die for it!” (Kunda 2006: 174). An engineering supervisor commented, “I’m trying to get my son into Tech—that should tell you something [about how good the company is]” (Kunda 2006: 171). “Tech caters to engineers,” yet another engineer remarked, “Its reputation in the industry is a country club for engineers” (Kunda 2006: 176).

We would expect the workers at High Technologies to experience a great deal of satisfaction. The workers seem to be content with their jobs, but the mean age of the workers is low, and burnout is common. At High Technologies, the average age of employees falls between the late twenties and the mid thirties (Kunda 2006: 2). One could argue that this preponderance of young workers is because of the nature of a startup: startups attract young people whose careers have not begun. However, High Technologies is a large company, so it is
probable, well-established. Such a company should attract a wide range of workers. Burnout is such an issue that its definition in a company publication's glossary takes up as much space as the definition of “networking,” a skill integral to the growth and development of the company (Kunda 2006: 75-76). These observations imply that stress accumulates as employees spend time at the company, because the amount of time workers spend at a company is directly related to the workers’ age. This indicates that there must be an insidious factor at play in the company causing the employees a great deal of angst, giving rise to burnout, and ultimately forcing them to leave their jobs.

To identify the source of this problem in the jobs at High Technologies, we will compare the work to another salaried job that attracts employees of the same age, but in which burnout is unheard of—production workers at a chemical factory.

David Halle follows the production workers in a New Jersey factory plant in his ethnography titled America’s Working Man. Work at the factory is lonely (Halle 1987: 109). Shifts are long, and they impose on the workers' social lives and biologic rhythms (Halle 1987: 115-119). Halle writes, “Most men find the work dull because it is largely routine and repetitive” (Halle 1987: 105). Additionally, the work is dangerous (Halle 1987: 109-115). Workers mention the dangers placidly, and they acknowledge the risks. One worker remembers his colleague's death: “He cut off the fuel—but it killed him... blew him against the wall and the wall came down on him. He did the right thing, shutting it down, but it killed him” (Halle 1987: 112). Work at the chemical factory is, at best, dismal. Despite these negative aspects of the job, however, workers at the factory tend to stay for years. The ages of the employees interviewed in the ethnography ranges from 19 to mid fifties (Halle 1987: 107, 116). Halle notes that “often men with enough seniority to transfer into [a better job] will remain in production because they
can earn more money there” (Halle 1987: 118). Presumably, the oldest men have worked in the plant since they, too, were about 18 years old.

Though we cannot examine either company’s motivations, we can observe how the employees of each company handle their work. Comparing the lives of the workers at High Technologies to the lives of the workers at the chemical factory reveals the concerning effect of High Technologies’ regulatory system. This suggests that the recent trend of managing workers through communicating values rather than rules has detrimental effects on the workers.

The administration at High Technologies crafts and circulates what they call the Culture in order to control the workforce (Kunda 2006: 5-10). The Culture is carefully crafted on the premise that “you can’t make ‘em do anything. They have to want to” (Kunda 2006: 5). The Culture coerces workers at High Technologies to work hard, and it minimizes the number of rules the company enforces (Kunda 2006: 10). This increases the influence the management has over the workers by providing open-ended expectations. On the other hand, the workers at the New Jersey chemical factory respond to a series of supervisors and are supposed to follow strict rules (Halle 1987: 108-109).

At High Technologies, the Culture compels the employees to “do what’s right” (Kunda 2006: 69-72). Because there are no explicit rules at the company, the workers cannot be sure that they are doing the right thing, so they must always try as hard as they can to ensure they keep their jobs. The Culture also acts to make the transfer of ideas from workers to the company seem natural. It does this by creating a sense of connection between employees and the company, transferring the relationship between the workers and their products to the company and the products. This enables workers to work on projects with no moral reservations. We see a similar theme at the New Jersey chemical plant. The chemical plant has a traditional
management with rules and no Culture, but the employees demonstrate a lack of attention to the final product in a similar way that the High Technologies employees do. The chemical workers abbreviate procedures to give themselves more free time (Halle 1987:108). Competition is not a motivating factor. The workers alter the way they make the chemicals with no regard to any hazards such changes may impose (Halle 1987: 119-123). Although work at High Technologies and the New Jersey chemical plant is very different, the workers at both places are incognizant of the repercussions of their work. This demonstrates that the difference in burnout at the two locations is not due to differences in the work, dangers, the physical environment, or competition among workers.

At the chemical plant, dangers keep employees on their toes, and the jobs are lonely (Halle 1987: 109-114, 109). Despite these negative aspects of chemical plant jobs, workers stay at the plant for many years (Halle 1987: 107, 116). One could argue that the workers become accustomed to the danger and the loneliness. It is true that the workers are callous to these conditions, but human instincts would prevent a complete sense of immunity to them (Halle 1987: 108-112). In contrast to the environment at the chemical plant, the environment at High Technologies seems pleasant. High Technologies is located in the countryside, the atmosphere is full of energy, and the cafeteria is attractive (Kunda 2006: 2-3). Additionally, the workers who were interviewed seem to be happy and the work, by its nature, is not dangerous (Kunda 2006: 170-187). The high rates of burnout at High Technologies imply the presence of a pervasive stress. If the stress does not come from competition, dangers, or the physical environment, the next place to direct our attention is the social atmosphere. We will turn to High Technologies’ Culture, the factor that many employees would identify as “what makes us what we are” (Kunda 2006: 3).
High Technologies disseminates Culture in the forms of stickers, memos, newsletters, and recorded speeches (Kunda 2006: 6, 50-51). Analogous to propaganda, the Culture causes the workers to feel an emotional attachment to the company, and it creates "an obsession with technical accomplishment, a sense or ownership, a strong commitment to the company, identification with company goals, and, not least, "fun"" (Kunda 2006: 7). A document circulated by the company’s “culture expert” highlights several of High Technologies’ values, including “Do What’s Right” and “Individual Freedom” (Kunda 2006: 69-72). Implicit in these values is the theme that workers should trust their instincts and follow their own paths, but the descriptions note that the workers must direct their work towards the gain of the company, not personal gain (Kunda 2006: 71-72). At the New Jersey chemical plant, chiefs and managers supervise the production workers (Halle 1987: 108-110). Because the factory barely responds to safety issues, one could argue that the company does not care about the health of the workers, so emotional issues among workers would not be a concern of the company, either (Halle 2006: 113-114).

However, this is not to say that High Technologies promotes the Culture to support its workers. Kunda describes the Culture as “the vehicle through which [the company] consciously try to influence the behavior and experience of others” (Kunda 2006: 7). Are the workers being brainwashed by the company’s Culture, or are they misinterpreting it? Instead of confining the Culture to only their work, the workers let it permeate into their lives. For example, the workers refer to High Technologies as “Tech” (Kunda 2006: 2). Instead of calling the company by its full name, they use an abbreviation. This shows that the workers’ peers are familiar with the company, which in turn is telling of the workers’ social lives. Another example of Culture in the workers’ daily lives is the bumper sticker that reads “I LOVE TECH!” that many workers have
on their cars (Kunda 2006: 50). One could argue that the abbreviation for the company is easily recognizable by those not associated with it, or that the bumper stickers were given to the workers only to recruit more employees to the company; however, only a person who truly embodied the Culture take such measures.

High Technologies' Culture is dangerous because it forces workers to embody the values of the company. By not stating explicit rules like the New Jersey chemical factory does, High Technologies puts its workers in a position where they need to exert a lot of effort in order to feel that they are adequate for the job, to feel like they will not lose the job. This subtle way of management is extremely effective from an economic point of view because it is appealing to workers and it yields highly productive workers; however, it is dangerous for the workers because it can overwhelm their lives with work, forcing their personal values away.

High Technologies' definition of burnout is as follows: "A person is considered burnt out when they are unable to contribute. Working too hard, worrying too much, stress, frustration etc. cause burnout..." (Kunda 2006: 75). The term burnout blames failure on the company's employee, but it is really a term the company uses to conceal the failure of the company. Burnout occurs when the vague guidelines implied by the culture force a person to, in the words of High Technologies, work too hard, worry too much, and stress. The gravity of using Culture to control the workforce is immense: the chemical workers at the New Jersey plant who are exposed to toxins on a daily basis, sacrifice their social lives, and work dull jobs are able to endure their jobs for upwards of twenty years longer than the workers at High Technologies.
Works Cited
