



Breaking Organizational
Codependence:
Downsizing's Liberating Wake-Up Call

David Noer

Living in Interesting Times

I'm told there is an ancient Chinese curse that translates into "May you live in interesting times." That it is a curse certainly rings true as we experience today's global pandemic of downsizing. Layoff victims and survivors alike react to this new reality with a toxic stew of debilitating emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety and depression—what I call layoff survivor sickness. We can *change that* though. We can reframe the death toll of the old paradigm into a wake-up call that will help us create an exciting world of work that is more autonomous, personally relevant, and more in congruence with our unique gifts.

We first need to understand the nature of the change and the insidious power of organizational codependency. Then we need the courage to break its stifling grip on our human spirit and creativity. Part of our "interesting times" involves living through the most fundamental change in the psychological contract that has connected employee to employer since the industrial revolution. Like it or not—and initially, most of us find a lot not to like—in this new paradigm people are viewed as short term costs to be reduced or eliminated, as opposed to assets to be nurtured and developed over a career. Despite our cultural conditioning, we need the courage to face this fact and reconceptualize our identity.

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Who You Are Should Not Be Where You Work.

If who you are is where you work, there is a lot more at stake than a paycheck when you are threatened by a layoff. It's not just your job that's vulnerable; it's your self-esteem, identity, sense of relevance and purpose. The human resource strategies of tying employees in for the long term that evolved during times of stability and predictability have very bad unintended consequences in today's epidemic of downsizing. We were seduced into a codependent relationship with our employers. Organizations provided trinkets—key chains, bracelets, watches, etc.—to celebrate tenure. Benefits, services, office size and parking spaces were all perks that rewarded longevity. Recreational activities, group travel discounts, and employee clubs and associations served to channel employees' social patterns into organizationally sanctioned outlets. The result is that many employees have put all of their social and emotional eggs in the organizational basket. And, as the new, short-term psychological employment contract between employer and employee has unfolded, the basket has been dropped—causing the classic survivor symptoms of anger, guilt, fear and anxiety, and triggering codependent behaviors like control and manipulation.

The Seductive Dynamics of Organizational Codependency.

In order to be free of it, we need to understand it. Initially, codependency was used to describe the relationship of a significant other with an alcoholic. Those who denied their feelings, altered their identities, and invested a great amount of energy in the attempt to control an alcoholic shared the alcoholic's addiction—they were codependent with the alcoholic. The idea has now been expanded to cover many other forms of addiction, and codependency is considered by some social scientists to be an underlying, primary disease in itself. Here is how I use the concept in an organizational context: Just as a person can exist in a codependent state with another person in relation to an addiction, a person can also be codependent with an organizational system.

People who are organizationally codependent have enabled the system to control their sense of worth and self-esteem. They have lost their autonomy and their self-esteem is held hostage to employment continuity. They invest tremendous physical and psychological energy in an unsuccessful attempt to control the system. A primary symptom of codependency is that the codependent's sense of value and identity is based on pleasing, and often controlling, not himself or herself but someone or something else. Codependents make themselves into permanent victims. People suffering from layoff survivor sickness are similar full-time victims. Survivor symptoms are caused by survivors surrendering to organizationally imposed values and organizationally imposed identity.

Strategies for Breaking Free

Relationships that are free of unhealthy control and dependency are fun, spontaneous, and creative. The same is true of organizations. Organizations that are free of codependency are vibrant, open, and productive. They are filled with employees who are invested in good work and managers who are competent in helping skills. Although they too may have layoffs, their survivors are largely immune to survivor sickness because the survivors (and those laid off) do not index their self-esteem and sense of personal worth to the organization, but rather to their own good work.

Layoff survivor sickness is dealt a double blow in these organizations: employees are virtually immune because they are not unhealthily dependent, and the organizations tend to be much more productive and competitive because employees' immunity frees up employee energy and creativity. Here are five things you can do to break free of codependency and bring joy and creativity into your work.

- » **Develop Personal Autonomy and a Task Focus.** To break the organizational codependency chain, you must maintain internal control, keep your personal power, and love yourself without making that love conditional on organizational approval. You must maintain your authenticity without obsessively and schizophrenically attempting to both please and control the system. The organizational payoff is empowered employees working with minimal control. They work because they are invested in the task and interested in a quality product or outcome, not because they need to control or please others to maintain their self-esteem.

- » **Detach Your Self-Esteem from Your Place of Work.** In codependency treatment, detachment is a facilitating strategy. Without detachment the codependent cannot take actions that promote personal autonomy and healing. In classic codependency treatment, the object of this detachment is the addicted other. Codependents must detach themselves to the point where they no longer index their self-esteem and identity to the behavior of this other. Detachment is also necessary to break organizational codependency. If who you are is where you work, you will do almost anything to hang on. If you derive your sense of identity, self-esteem, and uniqueness from pleasing the boss and remaining in an organizational system, you are in an organizationally codependent relationship. You have given up your uniqueness; your focus and energy are external, artificial, and bent on pleasing. It is a bad bargain at the best of times, and a fool's bargain in today's new reality. The person you need to please is yourself, and you need to let go of an organizationally imposed identity to do so.
- » **Ground Your Self-Definition in Good Work.** The quest for "good work" is the most important task any of us undertake in our work lives. It means finding work that is a manifestation of our human spirit, work that is in congruence with our individual uniqueness, sense of purpose, and relevance. It doesn't need to be lofty, cerebral, or antiseptic. If serving others is our unique gift, good work can be plain, gritty and humbling. Discovering our core purpose and grounding our self-esteem in work that is congruent with that purpose is the foundation to an organizational detachment strategy because we index our self-esteem on our tasks and our work, not the organization where we happen to perform those tasks. Good work always starts internally and is the outward expression of our unique gifts and talents. In its essence, good work is internally goal driven, not externally relationship driven. The purpose of good work is to produce something or to accomplish a task of internal value, not to please the boss or impress the system. Pleasing the boss or impressing the system may happen as a consequence of good work, but these consequences are not good work's primary intent. Good work is all about finding work that is nutritious to our human spirit.

» **Cultivate a Diffuse Root Strategy.** Breaking organizational codependency begins with a conscious decision not to rely on our employer to nurture all aspects of our lives. The fundamental change that must occur can be most easily illustrated by comparing two types of plants. One plant gets all its nourishment from a single taproot, just as an employee's self-esteem, identity, and social worth can all be nourished by a single organization. When we have a social and emotional taproot into an organization we will manipulate, cajole, control and scheme simply to hang on. Considering the option, manipulating and controlling make sense. But, what happens if that single taproot gets cut?

Another plant variety has a diffuse root system, reaching out to different areas of soil. Emotionally healthy individuals reject the simplicity and seductiveness of having all their needs nourished through a taproot into the organizational soil. Through planning and effort, they can develop a diffuse root system. They have a number of roots into the community, professional associations, families, clubs, religions, and friends from outside their place of employment. If the organizational root is cut, they can still function, grow, and thrive.

You can diagram your own root system, and it is usually helpful to have your significant other do it with you. Many who have tried this are surprised at the extent of their taproot into the organizational system. This discovery can serve as a wake-up call and stimulate them to cultivate other options—and diffuse roots. The **Susceptibility to Codependence Index** is another good way to assess your root system.

Susceptibility to Organizational Codependence Index

- 1 = Almost all/to a great degree
- 2 = Most/to a large degree
- 3 = Some/to an average degree
- 4 = A few/to a slight degree
- 5 = Very few/to an insignificant degree

How much of my social life revolves around my business and organizational affiliation?	1	2	3	4	5
How many of my friends are part of my organizational affiliation?	1	2	3	4	5
To what degree are my recreational interests (golf, tennis, travel etc.) associated with my business or organizational affiliation?	1	2	3	4	5
To what degree is my sense of purpose, relevance, importance associated with my title, level, and organizational affiliation?	1	2	3	4	5
How organizationally specific are my skills and how difficult would it be to transfer them to another organization?	1	2	3	4	5
What would be the impact on my self-esteem if I lost my job tomorrow?	1	2	3	4	5
To what degree are my support systems (people and resources that can help me through difficult times) centered on my organizational affiliation?	1	2	3	4	5
To what degree is my job the center of my life?	1	2	3	4	5
My spouse or significant other thinks I invest too much of my social and emotional life in my job.	1	2	3	4	5
Who and what I am is where I work.	1	2	3	4	5

Total:

10-25 High Risk
 25-35 Moderate Risk
 35-50 Low Risk

Pay attention to items evaluated as 1 & 2

» **Stop Attempting to Control the Uncontrollable.** In my work, I continually see employees of all levels and generations, desperately trying to retain control of a decaying and nonproductive work environment. The old employment contract is dead, and holding on to it is energy depleting and nonproductive. Despite this reality, newer “generation Y” employees—who grew up expecting immediate gratification within a parental and educational bubble that protected them from ever experiencing failure—seek someone to blame, seldom looking within themselves or the system. Managers cling to fantasies of organizational permanence and long-term decision making. During crises such as layoffs, controls are intensified, information is managed, the truth is feared, and straight talk is driven underground by control talk.

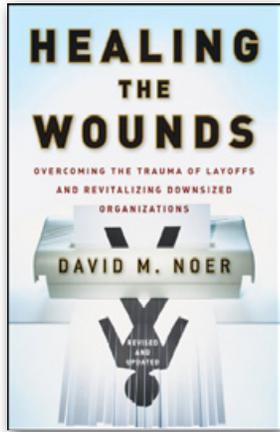
Don't let this happen to you. Attempting to turn back the clock just reinforces an unproductive codependent relationship. No matter how much they try to control the system, codependents are ultimately controlled by it. The journey from organizational codependency to autonomy and independence involves moving away from control and blame to personal responsibility and autonomy.

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The Pain is Worth the Gain

Breaking organizational codependency is going against the grain of experience for most of us. It requires fortitude to let go of an organizationally imposed identity and venture into the uncharted waters of personal autonomy and relevance. Others can help us, but in the final analysis, it is an individual act of courage. The gain, however, is well worth the pain. Finding work that is in congruence with our unique gifts and human spirit, and grounding our self-esteem and purpose in that work is a magnificent quest that will benefit not only us, but our organizations and—if enough of us make the transition—society as a whole. 📖



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Get more details or buy a copy of David Noer's [Healing the Wounds](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Noer is the author of four books including, *Healing the Wounds: Overcoming the Trauma of Layoffs and Revitalizing Downsized Organizations* (Jossey-Bass, 2009). He is an Executive Coach, Speaker, and Leadership Consultant. He has been named an Honorary Senior Fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership and Professor Emeritus at Elon University. David lives in Greensboro, North Carolina. You can keep up with him on the [Healing the Wounds blog](#).

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