

# 1

## Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life

Let's explore the two faces of business—the clear, crisp Kodak image that companies present to the outside world, versus the day-to-day reality of working in any company, which is usually messy, complicated, political, and full of emotional traps.

On the surface, business is about making money, delivering goods and services, and producing results. The focus is usually on crunching numbers, meeting deadlines, and increasing sales. We assess individual companies by their empirical facts—profit and loss, cash flow, stock options, and growth potential.

Scratch the rational surface of any company, however, and you uncover a hotbed of emotions: people feeling anxious about performance, angry with coworkers, and misunderstood by management. You find leaders who are burnt out and assistants who are buried in resentment. For example:

*Meet Eric, manager of customer service for a fast-growing software company. He's proud of his company's products, but his head starts throbbing whenever he hears from a certain very large account. They're never satisfied with any of the products they've purchased. They claim that the accounting software is too complicated, the database has too many fields, and the time-tracking*

## Working with You Is Killing Me

*program doesn't download fast enough. Eric and his staff spend hours addressing their complaints, troubleshooting problems as they arise. "We bust our humps for these guys. As soon as we solve one problem, they call with something else." In between complaints they threaten to leave Eric's company for a better deal. "It's exhausting," Eric sighs. "I can't win."*

*Jessica is the administrative assistant to the vice president of a small public relations firm. Early each morning, this VP leaves piles of work on Jessica's desk with a note: "Off to scare up more business. Please take care of these things before I return." Jessica arrives at the office, sees the stack of papers on her desk, and immediately feels anxious and overwhelmed. "My boss always gives me more work than I can possibly complete in one day," she complains. "I can't get her to meet with me and prioritize the workload." If Jessica doesn't finish everything, she's labeled "inefficient" or "lacking initiative."*

These individuals feel trapped by their circumstances, stuck in a losing game. They're unable to free themselves from a bad situation. Because business calls for unemotional behavior, their feelings remain largely unexpressed and suppressed. They think their options are just to suck it up or quit.

We call the experience of feeling caught in an emotionally distressing situation at work being **hooked**. If you find yourself consistently having a strong negative internal reaction to someone or something in your work environment, you are probably hooked. Emotional hooks vary widely from person to person and job to job. Something as trivial as the nasal tone of a colleague's voice or as weighty as a manager's personality disorder can hook you. A hook can be as simple as a rude remark or as complex as professional sabotage.

If you are a living, breathing, thinking, feeling, normal human being, there's a good chance that you've encountered people and circumstances at work that hook you. In some cases, the incident may generate only mild irritation. In other cases, you may reach a

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

3

point where you feel like the person or situation is literally killing you.

We've met hardworking individuals who want to be productive and happy at work, but instead feel emotionally trapped in numerous ways. They feel overwhelmed, overworked, underutilized, undermined, disrespected, discounted, interrupted, interrogated, sidetracked, steamrolled, set up, and fed up. Their job descriptions differ, but their experiences are the same.

For most people, earning a living is not an option; it's a requirement. Work eats up more time than any other activity in their lives. At a time when our culture places such emphasis on feeling good, being happy, and having it all, why is it that so many people are dissatisfied at work? Our experience reveals it's largely because they feel trapped, hooked into positions, relationships, and situations that zap their energy, invade their thoughts, and keep them stuck in no-win positions.

The workplace affords numerous opportunities to get hooked, and almost no guidance about how to deal with it. It's appropriate to go to the boss with questions regarding production, accounts receivable, or sales figures. These are nonemotional, factual issues that can be addressed objectively. But when you feel nauseous after a staff meeting or a certain account gives you a migraine, where do you turn?

*Take Susan, a marketing executive for a large financial services company. It's Thursday morning and she's sitting at the weekly staff meeting where the departments are giving their reports. Susan's colleague Tracy unabashedly takes credit for a brilliant promotion idea that Susan had originated.*

*Susan feels a flash of heat surging through her body. Her face turns red. Her eyelid starts to twitch. Her hearing fades. All she can think about is how she'd like to strangle Tracy. Instead of speaking up or joining the meeting, Susan mentally checks out.*

Susan just got hooked. Her reaction to Tracy's behavior was to seethe with anger and stop participating. While Susan's response is

understandable, getting caught in her own anger doesn't help her situation. In fact, tuning out makes her appear uninterested in the very idea she created.

Susan's experience at her company's staff meeting is not unique. In fact, it's commonplace. The normal reaction when someone else's behavior upsets you is to blame your internal responses on that individual's conduct. As Tony Soprano would say before shooting his latest betrayer, "Look what you made me do!"

In many cases, your response to the situation may make perfect sense. Vicious office gossip is infuriating. An incompetent coworker can be maddening. When a diva of a customer won't return calls it *does* feel insulting. But, as with Susan, your righteous indignation doesn't improve anything. It just keeps you hooked.

There is a way out. You don't necessarily have to kill anyone or quit your job. You can stay right where you are and still have a different, more satisfying experience. We've helped thousands of people like Eric, Jessica, and Susan transform their workplace from a den of personal frustration to an arena for professional development.

In our work with executives, managers, and employees from every industry, we've learned that the most effective way to resolve interpersonal problems in the workplace is to approach the situation from the inside out. We teach our clients that the key to dealing effectively with difficult people and situations at work is to manage our *internal responses* first. By internal response we mean the automatic reaction that someone else's behavior triggers inside of you. People lose it in different ways. You may heat up, blow up, shut down, freeze up, or go into a tailspin.

**If you can change your reaction, you'll change your life.**

We call the activity of changing your reaction to emotionally upsetting circumstances at work **unhooking**. Unhooking is a system that gives you tools for managing yourself and taking charge of your work life. Whether you feel caught in political crossfire, trapped by a difficult coworker, or held hostage by the antics of a certain department, you can unhook and take practical steps to change your behavior and create a different result.

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

5

Unhooking provides an alternative to your automatic reactions: You can despise the malicious office gossip or you can unhook by setting clear boundaries and showing a lack of interest. You can judge the incompetent coworker or you can unhook by lowering your expectations and avoiding the negative impact of that person's ineptitude. You can feel insulted by the customer who won't return your calls or you can unhook—take it in stride and accept it as part of doing business.

There are four essential steps to unhooking.

Step 1—Unhook physically

Step 2—Unhook mentally

Step 3—Unhook verbally

Step 4—Unhook with a business tool

The first two steps, unhooking physically and mentally, help you release negative emotions and calm down your system. The second two steps, unhooking verbally and with a business tool, involve taking actions to change your experience. To show you how unhooking works, we return to Susan and offer a revised scenario:

Sitting at the same meeting, Tracy proudly takes credit for Susan's brilliant promotion idea. Susan feels herself reacting—feels the surge of heat through her body, feels her face redden, her brow twitch. She realizes, "I just got hooked." What Susan needs to do now is to unhook; she needs to change her reaction to Tracy's sabotaging behavior.

**Unhook physically:** Susan breathes deeply to calm herself down, release her anger, and check back into the meeting.

**Unhook mentally:** Susan tells herself not to be intimidated by Tracy's behavior; she can find a way to be heard.

**Unhook verbally:** Susan speaks up: "When I first ran this idea by Tracy, we both got excited about it."

**Unhook with a business tool:** Susan writes and distributes an e-mail summarizing the results of the meeting and clarifying the fact that the promotion idea originated with her: “. . . *I’m glad that my promotion idea received such a positive response from the rest of the team. I look forward to working with everyone to develop it further.*”

Like Susan, once you realize that you’re hooked, you can begin taking responsibility for your own reactions. You can use our four-pronged approach to free yourself from any person or situation that causes you emotional turmoil. Unhooking takes practice, but it works.

Here is a more detailed description of how to employ each step in the unhooking process:

**Unhook physically:** Calm the body and release unwanted negative energy so that you can see your situation more clearly. Physical unhooking begins with focusing on your breath, because emotional discomfort normally produces shallow breathing, which inhibits your ability to think clearly. As you consciously breathe in deeply and gently, you can also scan your body to determine how and where you may be holding tension.

In some cases, unhooking physically requires releasing energy through physical activity—you may need to walk around the block, punch pillows, engage in rigorous exercise, take a boxing class, or get a massage. The more extreme your emotional response is to your external circumstances, the more vigorous your physical unhooking activities need to be. The goal is to release pent-up energy and quiet your nervous system so you can approach the problem with a sense of control.

For example, you come out of a business meeting feeling upset because your boss unfairly bashed you in front of your peers. You know you need to cool down. You look at your options. If you can grab a brisk five-minute walk outside, you go for it. If you can’t go outside, you go to the bathroom, splash your face with cold water, and BREATHE.

We know that when you’re in a distressed physical state, the last thing you want to do is calm down. You’d probably prefer to punch

## Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life

7

someone's lights out or tender your resignation. The last thing you want to hear is, "Take a breath, relax, go for a walk." But the fact is that if you want to change your life at work, you have to focus on relaxing physically first.

Many places of employment understand the importance of exercise. They may offer in-house yoga, stretching, aerobics, or running. Your company may offer discounted memberships to health clubs or exercise programs nearby. Check out what is available to you, and find the form of physical unhooking that works best for you.

We will use the term **unhook physically** repeatedly in this book. It refers to healthy ways of physically releasing negative energy, and covers a wide range of activities, from exercise to deep breathing to splashing water on your face. It's important to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy forms of releasing negative energy. For many of us, our natural instinct when feeling distraught is to overindulge in one of the following: food, sleep, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, or television. These activities only eliminate stress for a short period. They do not solve or resolve the problem. In fact, they can cause other problems such as depression, anxiety, alcoholism, obesity, or ulcers. What we are suggesting here is the healthy alternative to alleviating emotional discomfort in the workplace. We can't overemphasize the importance of finding healthy ways to unhook physically.

### COUNT TO SIX

Here's an easy method for calming your body through breathing. Breathe in for three counts, hold it for three counts, and breathe out for six counts. Repeat this exercise until you feel your system cooling down.

**Unhook mentally:** Unhooking mentally is the internal version of talking yourself down off the ledge. It involves looking at your difficult situation from a fresh perspective. The goal is to view your circumstances objectively and see what practical options are available. The rational part of your brain must help the emotional part of your brain cool off, calm down, and strategize. Mental unhooking begins with a quick inventory of the situation:

- What's happening here?
- What are the facts of the situation?
- What's their part?
- What's my part?
- What are my options?

As you can imagine, that fourth question, "What's my part?" is usually the toughest to answer. When a situation causes emotional distress, your natural reaction is to blame the primary offenders, not yourself. Still, if you can uncover your part in the difficult situation, you can also find your point of leverage.

Let's illustrate what we mean: If you're a very nice person, you may not set firm boundaries with people at work. You may find that coworkers, bosses, and customers take advantage of you. Your part in these scenarios would be your inability to draw the line and establish clear limits within these relationships. You have a hard time saying no and sticking to it. Once you discover your role—trouble setting boundaries—you can commit to learning boundary-setting skills.

Once your mind can see the situation from a clearer point of view, you can prepare to take action. For example, say you go to the department file room to ask the clerk for a particular report. She snaps at you: "I have more important people than you waiting for files. I'll get your document when it suits me." You feel your chest tighten. This isn't the first time this person has chewed you out. You don't like her attitude. Instead of striking back, you begin to unhook mentally. You ask yourself:

- What's happening? *The file clerk just snapped at me (again).*

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

9

- What are the facts? *I need that report and she doesn't want to get it for me.*
- What's her part? *She's moody and not very happy at her job. Everyone is afraid of her.*
- What's my part? *I take her anger personally. It stops me from completing my own responsibilities.*
- What are my options? *I can stop personalizing her bad behavior. This person isn't angry with me, she's just angry. I can acknowledge her feelings of being overworked and still find ways to get the chart.*

**Unhook verbally:** Find the words (or sometimes the silence) to protect yourself and get out of a workplace trap. Verbal unhooking may involve finding ways to say no without jeopardizing your job, speaking up when you feel overlooked, or tolerating your boss's temporary silence immediately after you ask for a raise.

To unhook verbally, you must be willing to focus on your overall goal in any situation rather than staying stuck in the petty details. It's a high-road approach to communicating. The goal is to express your ideas and convey information in a manner that resolves problems rather than perpetuating them.

High-road communication contains no judgment, no anger, and no accusations. It includes taking responsibility for your side of the situation.

- Low road—"You messed up again."
- High road—"How are we going to solve this problem?"
- Low road—"Can't you do anything right?"
- High road—"We need to create a system for quality control."

Taking the high road isn't about smoothing things over or being too nice. It's about communicating effectively, in a way that enables the listener to hear you and consider your ideas. It creates a bridge (not a wedge) between you and the person whose behavior is driving you crazy.

For example, say you work for a company where the design

department is continually late delivering samples to your production department. You sit for hours waiting for their prototypes. By the time you receive them, you have to work overtime fabricating enough product for shipping. Instead of fueling your own frustration regarding the design department's poor planning, you unhook verbally. You approach the senior designer and say, "How can I help you get your samples out on time? I have workers that can assist you or we can requisition the help you need."

**Unhook with a business tool:** A business tool is any standard procedure or written document used in a business setting. It includes contracts, timesheets, job descriptions, memos, performance reviews, company policies and procedures, and other forms of documentation. Business tools help depersonalize challenging situations by providing objective ways to track events and measure performance. To unhook, survey the business tools available to you and identify which ones can help improve your situation.

For example, suppose you're a manager who is constantly irritated by your employee's sloppy work habits. He arrives late, hands you half-baked reports, and spends hours playing computer games at his desk. Instead of letting his poor work ethic drive you crazy, you can unhook using business tools. First, you can refer to his **job description**. Is this person fulfilling the responsibilities of the job? If not, you can devise **performance standards** that spell out the quantity and quality of the work you expect from this subordinate. You can **document** any incident wherein he produces substandard work. Finally, you can give regular **performance reviews** where you evaluate every aspect of his behavior on the job.

### **Your Business Toolbox**

There are a number of professional tools available to you that can move any situation out of the emotional realm and put it back into a business context. Even the most complex interpersonal traps can be improved if you employ the right business instrument.

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

11

An unruly client can be put in his place if you refer to and implement your company's customer policies. Careful documentation and cc'd e-mails can expose the covert actions of a cutthroat coworker.

Selecting and utilizing the right business tool for your condition requires strategic thinking. You have to consider the players involved and determine which tactic will produce the best results. You don't want to overwhelm anyone with too much documentation or lengthy, rambling reports.

The following is a list of business tools available to you for unhooking. If your circumstances seem too complicated for these techniques, never fear. In later chapters we'll reveal advanced unhooking techniques for the really tough scenarios.

If you work for a small company, standard workplace documents such as job descriptions, performance reviews, and company policies and procedures may not exist. You may want to help develop these systems for your employer. If you're working for a large, established corporation, all of the following business tools should be readily available.

1. Job descriptions—detailed explanations of the responsibilities that any job entails
  - Managers can refer to these to hold an individual accountable for performing the duties of a job.
  - Employees can refer to these when they need to define the limits of what should be expected of them.
  
2. Employee expectations/goals—concrete, measurable benchmarks for performance

A salesperson's job description may say, "Sell xyz product." The company's expectations/goals should specify, "Sell \$3 million worth of xyz product by April 1."

  - Managers can use these to evaluate performance.
  - Employees can draw on these to monitor their own success, and to know how they're being evaluated.

**Working with You Is Killing Me**

3. Performance reviews—quarterly, semiannual, or annual appraisals of an employee's overall job performance
  - Employers and managers can use these to tell employees where they need improvement.
  - Employees can use these to substantiate promotions and raises.
4. Policies and procedures—also known as an employee handbook, a document that delineates the company's overall code of conduct
  - Both managers and employees can refer to this as a guideline for defining acceptable and unacceptable behavior.
5. Disciplinary action forms—written reports that document unsatisfactory employee behavior and forewarn the employee of possible termination
  - Employers and managers can use these to let employees know when their behavior has crossed the line or their job is in jeopardy.
6. Memos, e-mails, letters—any form of written correspondence
  - Both managers and employees can use these different modes of communication to report a success, follow up a meeting, clarify a misunderstanding, lay out a plan, or convey other kinds of important information.
7. Meeting agendas—formal lists of topics to be discussed at meetings
  - Managers can refer to their agendas to keep their meetings focused and on track.
  - Employees can bring their own agendas to meetings with coworkers and supervisors to guide the conversation and cover important points.
8. Documentation—a written record that provides factual information regarding an event, including time, date, and a description of the incident

## Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life

13

- Both managers and employees can draw on this tool to gather data regarding any situation that has them hooked.

### How to Identify a Hook Before It Reels You In

Most people become hooked before they even know what's happened to them. Identifying potential hooks *before* they grab you takes years of practice. Still, you can realize you're hooked before it wreaks havoc on your professional life. The sooner you recognize that someone else's behavior is hooking you, the sooner you can do something about it.

### Are You Hooked?

Individuals respond to emotionally upsetting circumstances differently. Some people react **physically**. Their bodies send them physical signals that indicate the presence of emotional distress. If you are someone who gets hooked physically, you may experience one or more of the following symptoms: clenched teeth, stiff neck, tension headaches, tight chest, overheating, chills, stomach pain or nausea, shortness of breath, tingling arms, backaches, muscle spasms, facial twitches, insomnia, or fatigue.

*Harvey works for the leasing department of a major car manufacturer. He hears his phone ring, looks at the caller ID, and experiences a tightening sensation in his upper back. It's Mr. Sullivan (also known as Mr. Talktoomuch), his neediest leaseholder. Harvey checks the time on his desk clock: 2:15 p.m. He's got an important meeting with his supervisor scheduled for 2:30 p.m. The pain in Harvey's back begins to creep up to his neck because he knows that Mr. Sullivan will want more than fifteen minutes of his time. By 2:40 p.m., the pain in Harvey's neck is sharp and persistent. He manages to get Mr. Sullivan off the phone and sprints to his supervisor's office.*

Some people react to hooks by experiencing **emotional** symptoms. They feel strong negative emotions such as anger, fear, panic,

anxiety, embarrassment, confusion, depression, repulsion, helplessness, or despair. If you are an emotional reactor, you may respond to people and circumstances that drive you crazy with emotional outbursts such as uncontrollable rage, sudden tears, or inappropriate laughter. Emotional reactions to hooks are often accompanied by physical reactions.

*Cara is the personal assistant to a well-known interior designer, Erica Payne. When Erica saunters into the office, Cara immediately feels a wave of anxiety. She knows that Erica will seek and find something to criticize. Yesterday, Erica singled out Cara in front of the other employees. She reprimanded her for organizing the swatches incorrectly. "Didn't they teach you anything in college?" Erica chided. Cara felt embarrassed and furious at the same time. Ever since Cara started working for Erica, her moods have taken a downward turn. Every time she even thinks about work, she starts to feel depressed.*

Another common reaction to hooks in the workplace involves unproductive **mental** activity. A difficult relationship or scenario on the job may generate obsessive thinking, spacing out, constant distraction, paranoia, revenge fantasies, forgetfulness, or an inability to concentrate. When you're mentally hooked, your mind works overtime in an attempt to solve the disturbing situation.

*Jose recently got promoted to head of receivables for a bottle manufacturer. Because he's new to this detail-oriented position, he requires long periods of concentration. Jose has two chatty coworkers who sit right behind him. They talk to each other all day long. Sometimes their conversations are work-related, sometimes they aren't. Their incessant chattering feels like a swarm of gnats buzzing around his head. Jose can't concentrate long enough to complete his assignments. Either their noise distracts him, or he obsesses about how to shut them up. Either way, he can't get their voices out of his head.*

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

15

Whether you are someone who gets hooked physically, emotionally, or mentally, the sooner you can establish that a person or situation at work has you hooked, the sooner you can begin to address it. During the course of your work week, notice which people and circumstances elicit positive internal responses in you and which ones leave you feeling tense, churned up, or defeated. See if you can identify who and what hooks you. From there, you can apply our four-pronged process and begin to unhook.

The following stories illustrate how unhooking works from start to finish. Read about Glenn and Tom. See how they discover that they are hooked, and how they unhook from their challenging situations. Then conduct your own unhooking exercise using the assessment at the end of this chapter.

**Glenn's Story**

*Glenn is a senior software designer for a West Coast software company. His life changed the day his boss, Arthur, left the company for a new position. Arthur's hands-off management style really worked for Glenn. Arthur allowed Glenn to design new software programs with minimal interference. Together they produced a wide range of new products.*

*Arthur's replacement, Mike, works very differently. Within the first week of his arrival, the new VP of software development meets with Glenn. "I believe in hands-on management," Mike explains. "I don't accept sloppy work and I require detailed daily reports from my employees regarding the status of their projects."*

*At the end of each business day, Mike insists on meeting with Glenn to go over his report, point by point. He questions Glenn regarding the design decisions he makes. Glenn is appalled to find himself defending his software models.*

*After just one month under Mike's management style, Glenn feels tired, irritated, undermined, and frustrated. His new boss is driving him crazy. Glenn believes that the reports are a*

waste of his time, and he resents having to justify his design choices. "I'm so busy substantiating my work, I'm not able to accomplish anything."

For several weeks, Glenn obsesses about his new situation. He can't stop thinking about Mike, talking about Mike, complaining about Mike. In his mind, he plays and replays imagined conversations where he summons the courage to tell Mike off and prove him wrong.

Glenn talks about Mike to his wife for hours. When his wife can't listen anymore he calls his best friend, Hal. Even Glenn's running buddy, Fitz, gets an earful. Finally, Glenn's fifteen-year-old son walks into the living room and casually remarks, "Dad, you're out of control. This guy Mike is running your life. Chill out."

In that moment, Glenn realizes he's hooked. His negative feelings and thoughts about his new manager are making him miserable. Before Mike became his boss, Glenn enjoyed his work and appreciated his employer. Now he constantly feels frustrated and upset. Instead of focusing on Mike's shortcomings, Glenn decides to try changing his own reaction first. He begins the unhooking process.

**Unhook physically:** Glenn goes for a really long run. This time, he runs by himself. Instead of obsessing about Mike, he focuses on releasing pent-up energy and clearing his mind.

**Unhook mentally:** After his run, Glenn sits down and takes an inventory of his situation:

- What's happening here? *I have a new boss, and I don't like his management style.*
- What are the facts? *Mike insists on daily meetings and regular reports. I consider these a waste of my time.*
- What's his part? *Mike believes in hands-on management, and he won't let me do things the way I used to.*

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

17

- What's my part? *I don't like change and I refuse to see the value in Mike's approach to designing software.*
- What are my options? *I can continue to be unhappy with Mike's style, or I can give it a chance. I can also look for another job.*

After taking the inventory, Mike admits to himself that even though he and Arthur created a lot of imaginative software, each program usually contained numerous bugs. These design glitches took months to solve before the software could be mass-produced.

Glenn decides that he can at least experiment with Mike's more cautious approach to software development. For the next few months, he can adjust his attitude about the daily status meetings. He can adhere to Mike's method and see if it generates positive results. If Glenn is still unhappy after three months, he can circulate his résumé.

**Unhook verbally:** Glenn finds the words to let Mike know he's ready to really cooperate. "I respect your desire to create a higher-quality product. It's taking me a while to get used to the new routine, but I'm behind you."

**Unhook with a business tool:** Glenn meets with Mike every day for three months and goes over his reports. As the quality of his work improves and the bugs disappear, he asks Mike if they can meet a little less frequently—weekly rather than daily—so that he has more time to design software.

**Tom's Story**

*For ten years, Tom has worked as a reference librarian for a top university. Recently, he received a promotion to director of the entire reference department. As soon as Tom assumed his new position, Denise, his coworker of many years, began to act strangely toward him. Before the promotion, they enjoyed a warm friendship. But now Denise is cold and icy.*

Denise won't talk to Tom or look in his direction. At lunch, she sits with her back to him. At meetings, she glares when he asks her a question. For reasons Tom doesn't understand, his former friend resents him and treats him with contempt.

Afraid of exacerbating the situation, Tom responds to Denise's cold shoulder by avoiding her. He begins to dread going to work. One day, Tom walks by Denise and George, another reference librarian. He overhears Denise putting him down. "Tom is a study in incompetent leadership. I could run the department more efficiently with my eyes closed."

Tom feels his blood boil. He wants to kill Denise. He imagines himself "accidentally" pushing a bookcase on top of her. He realizes that he is totally hooked by her hostile behavior. Instead of acting out his violent fantasy, Tom leaves the building and begins to unhook.

**Unhook physically:** Tom takes a brisk walk around campus. He starts to have a conversation with himself. He's tired of feeling bullied by Denise. He needs to sort through his options.

**Unhook mentally:** Tom takes an inventory of his situation:

- What's happening here? *I got promoted and my former coworker is treating me poorly.*
- What are the facts of the situation? *I am her boss. She reports to me. She was my friend. Now she won't talk to me.*
- What is her part? *She's angry and treating me with contempt.*
- What's my part? *I'm afraid to confront her. By remaining silent, I tacitly permit her unprofessional behavior.*
- What are my options? *I can continue to let her terrorize me, or I can start setting boundaries by clarifying the behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable to me.*

After taking the inventory, Tom establishes that he's been allowing Denise to control their relationship. Technically, he is her boss. He has the power to confront her rude conduct. His silence allows Denise to continue acting out.

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

**Unhook verbally:** Tom returns to the library, walks up to Denise, and says, “We need to talk. Meet me in a half hour in my office.” If Denise challenges him he can say, “This meeting isn’t optional. I’ll see you in my office.”

**Unhook with a business tool:** Back in his office, Tom sits down and begins to document specific incidents during the past two weeks where Denise refused to answer him, ridiculed him in front of coworkers, or withheld information. He prints up a copy for both of them. When Denise arrives for their meeting, he hands her the list. He clearly states his position: “This is what I’ve experienced in the last couple of weeks from you. It’s unacceptable behavior. I’m going to put this document in your HR file. It will be part of your permanent record unless you improve within the next week.” Tom completes the meeting by saying, “We’ve gotten along well in the past. I’d like to return to having a positive work environment here.”

**Putting It All Together—Your Personal Unhooking Assessment**

Now it’s your turn to practice unhooking. Pick one person or situation in your workplace that has you hooked, and complete the following assessment.

- 1. Describe the overall situation. Who is involved and what keeps happening?**

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20

**Working with You Is Killing Me**

**2. List the symptoms you're exhibiting that indicate you're hooked:**

**Physical:** How is your body reacting? Where is the discomfort?

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**Emotional:** What uncomfortable feelings are you experiencing?

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**Mental:** What thoughts are invading your day-to-day activities?

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**3. Unhook:**

**Physically:** List the actions you can take to release energy and calm down your body.

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**Mentally:** Take a mental inventory of your situation:

- What's happening here? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Change Your Reaction, Change Your Life**

21

- What are the facts of the situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What's their part? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What's my part? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What are my options? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Verbally:** What can you say that will resolve the problem rather than perpetuate it?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Business tool:** What business tools can depersonalize this challenging situation and provide ways to track events and measure performance?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Repeat this process with each hook you encounter.

## UNHOOKING AT A GLANCE

### Warning Signs That You May Be Hooked

**Physical**—clenched teeth, stiff neck, tension headaches, tight chest, overheating, chills, stomach pain or nausea, shortness of breath, tingling arms, backaches, muscle spasms, facial twitches, insomnia, or fatigue

**Emotional**—anger, fear, panic, anxiety, embarrassment, confusion, depression, repulsion, helplessness, or despair

**Mental**—obsessive thinking, spacing out, constant distraction, paranoia, revenge fantasies, forgetfulness, or an inability to concentrate

### Four-Pronged Unhooking Technique

**Unhook physically:** Breathe, exercise, calm and release your physical energy.

**Unhook mentally:** Ask yourself, “What’s happening here?” Stick to the facts.

**Unhook verbally:** Decide what you will say to resolve the problem.

**Unhook with a business tool:** Scan your business toolbox and pick the best one.