

Capitalism and Morality

DESPERATION CITED IN THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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Anyone who has ever ordered anything knows that two business days is an incredibly short time. In David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize and Tony winning play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, we learn exactly how much can change in two short business days. Everyone deals with stress in different ways. When the stress of the workplaces becomes too much to handle, we learn that desperate men take desperate measures in desperate times. Four salesmen are given the unenviable task of selling undesirable land to uninterested people. To keep their jobs, they justify lying, cheating, and stealing.

In the film version, an extra scene is included at the beginning which introduces an extra character named Blake. Blake is invited by Mitch and Murray, the unseen bosses, to come and light a fire under the sales force. His blunt rant is notable as arguably being Alec Baldwin's only worthwhile performance in a film. Blake is quick-witted and merciless. He first refuses to let Shelly Levene get coffee, as "coffee is for closers." He then literally waves the Glengarry leads in front of the salesmen's faces, and states that giving the leads to the salesman is just like throwing them away.

The men protest that the leads they have been given are garbage. Blake shows no sympathy and tells them to do better with the leads they are given. He introduces a sales competition where the top salesman on the board will receive a Cadillac, the second will receive a set of steak knives, and the rest will be terminated. Blake reinforces the "ABC's" of salesmanship; A- Always, B - Be, C - Closing. At this point, Dave Moss has heard enough and calls Blake's credibility into question. Blake responds with his incredible sales figures and proceeds to tear Moss down. Roma, the top seller, in the company is not present for the meeting. Moss and Aaronow are appalled at the way they were talked to and walk out. Shelley Levene is a different story.

With a sick daughter at home, Levene needs quality leads so that he can make money to take care of her. Using the same worthless leads he always gets, he attempts to work his charm and do some business over the phone. A scene is added where Levene visits an uninterested potential client. It is hard not to feel sympathy for Levene's plight. He appears to be a hard worker, trying to do the best with the poor leads that are given to him. This was not always the case, however.

At one time, Shelly "The Machine" Levene was the man in the sales game. Much older now, Levene has not had a lot of recent success to speak of. Along with his fellow salesmen, Levene lives every day in fear, knowing that his previous accomplishments do not equal job security. When Levene blames his misfortune on the lack of quality leads he has been given, office manager John Williamson shows no sympathy. Levene tries whatever he can think of to convince Williamson to give him better leads. Williamson is unreceptive to all but bribery, expecting Levene to pay cash up front.

At this point, Levene's self esteem is crushed. He has no self-efficacy, whatsoever, as every task he is expected to accomplish is beyond his ability. If motivation is indeed a function of fairness, Levene would be able to justify a lack of passion for his work. His daughter's illness is really Levene's sole motivating factor.

What is hard to understand is why Mitch and Murray would pay Blake to come in and talk to the salesmen, rather than paying him to mentor those who they think are not living up to expectations. This is essentially the Golem effect in action. The Golem effect attributes loss in performance to low leader expectations. It is apparent that Mitch and Murray do not believe that their workers can get the job done when they refuse to let them get a shot at the Glengarry leads.

Research shows that some of the best ways to get things done through others are clarifying goals and objectives, encouraging participation, facilitating work, and empowering employees. This company obviously does not use these methods. Rather, Mitch, Murray, and Blake seem to subscribe to Theory X, which states that people hate work and fear punishment. None of them trust their employees to direct themselves and show responsibility. The company is driven by dollars rather than by people. Absent from the office are job security, power, and trust. The culture of the organization is unhealthy.

Following Blake's tirade, Dave Moss and George Aaronow are fed up. They make their way to a small Chinese restaurant, typically frequented by the salesmen, The constant pressure to sell without quality leads has Moss one step too close to the edge. Moss develops a hypothetical plan that would surely humble Mitch and Murray. Moss suggests to Aaronow that the best way to stick it to their bosses is by stealing the Glengarry leads and selling them to a competitor, Jerry Graff. Initially it sounds as if Moss is thinking aloud, but we learn quickly that this is more of a plan than an idea. Moss suggests Aaronow be the one to break into the office. Aaronow is uninterested, but Moss suggests he is already an accessory for listening to the plan. If Aaronow does not participate, Moss will handle it himself and identify Aaronow as an accomplice.

Meanwhile, in the same restaurant, dynamic salesman Ricky Roma is taking care of business. Roma is currently the most successful salesman in the office. He will go to any length to keep his name at the top of the board. A smooth talker, Roma buys a number of drinks and has a lengthy dialogue with potential client James Lingk. Roma speaks very philosophically about the meaning of life and tests Lingk's capacity for risk and adventure. Lingk is infatuated with Roma, and it is just a matter of time before Roma pulls the trigger on the sale. In the film version, Al Pacino portrays Roma. Pacino was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for his performance. Roma is slick and he succeeds in getting Lingk drunk and selling him a plot of land he really can't afford.

You certainly will not find a push for total quality management in this real estate company. Instead scare tactics are favored over training. There is no commitment to employees, who are viewed as expendable failures rather than individuals with the potential for continuous improvement. However, the administrators are not the only ones with questionable ethics when it comes to their treatment of people. Roma shows us that the salesmen are not innocent either, as customer satisfaction is the least of his priorities. The constant stress and pressure of making sales has the men narrowly focused on closing the deal at any cost.

The next morning it is apparent that the plan to steal the Glengarry leads has come to fruition, as the office is disheveled and the phones are gone. Williamson, Aaronow, and a detective are in the office when Shelly Levene enthusiastically bursts in. "The Machine" has made an 80 thousand dollar plus sale the night before. He barely pays attention to the fact that the office has been robbed. Levene is riding high, believing that his sale is evidence that his cold streak has ended and he is indeed "back." He demands to be placed on the Cadillac board.

All the while, Aaronow sits and fidgets, obviously very nervous. Roma attempts to comfort him, noting that the only people who aren't nervous when talking to cops are thieves. Roma is certainly not happy with the fact that the office has been ransacked. He feels that he secured his Cadillac with his sale to Mr. Link the night before and he expects to be rewarded accordingly.

While the detective continues interrogating one salesman at a time, Link enters the office to make sure that his check has not been cashed. Link's wife is less than happy with the deal her husband made the night before. Link's wife has the situation well researched, knowing that they have three business days to change their minds. A sober, somber Link returns to the real estate office to cancel the contract. Roma goes on a convoluted rant to confuse Link into dropping the whole objection. Together with Levene, Roma puts on a fantastic farce to avoid the situation. Unfortunately for Roma, he ultimately fails when he is accidentally foiled by the office manager, John Williamson, played by Kevin Spacey.

Roma is attempting to make it out of the office, while convincing Link that the contracts have not yet been turned in and the check has not yet been cashed. Williamson enters and mistakenly believes Link wants assurance that the deal has gone through despite the robbery. Williamson assures him that the deal is done, much to the dismay of Link.

Roma is furious. He immediately goes on a rant questioning his penchant for his job as well as his manhood. Roma has to meet with the detective, and when he does, Levene takes over in berating Williamson. Levene scolds him for not understanding how the game works, and lying about the cashing of the check. On the walk back to his desk, Levene must know that he has just talked himself into the doghouse. Williamson realizes Levene's miscue and calls him out immediately. Every night Williamson takes the checks and contracts to the bank, but on the previous night, he did not. Levene could have only known that if he was there the night before.

Williamson now holds Levene's fate in the palm of his hands. Levene admits that he and Moss collaborated on the crime and begs for mercy. He attempts a bribe, the only thing that tempted Williamson previously. He offers the commission from his recent 80 thousand dollar sale. Williamson scoffs and systematically tears Levene apart. He tells Levene that the Nyborg's are a crazy old couple with no money that just enjoys talking to salespeople. Williamson's only intention is to bust Levene. Levene asks him why, and Williamson replies, "Because I don't like you."

As soon as Roma leaves the detective, Williamson enters to reveal Levene and Moss as the thieves. Knowing nothing, Roma again congratulates Levene on his sale from the night before, suggesting they form a partnership. This undoubtedly has to be a low point for Levene, who knows he is moments away from being arrested for his crime. Roma asks him to lunch, as the detective calls for him. In the film version, Roma appears genuine in his admiration for Levene. In the play, we learn that his flattery is only a means to con Levene out of money for his sales. In both, Levene walks away a defeated man.

Organizational culture is significantly correlated with employee behavior and attitudes. When people are forced to live defensively at work, they tend to have lower job satisfaction. Any non-fiction business owner would be more than happy to avoid this type of drama at any cost. The bosses' history of valuing money over people and their high tolerance for poor treatment of others are the basis for the employees' enacted values. That dangerous me-first mentality first exhibited by management and then replicated by their employees created an environment of desperation. That desperation is accountable when it comes to the figurative deaths of many men as well as the company they work for.