



ON "EATING SHIT"

An Essay about Life in Organizations by Fred Nickols



FEBRUARY 21, 2017

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A lot of people in corporate America complain about having to eat shit. Such an unusual yet seemingly widespread practice warrants analysis and commentary.

The first thing to know is that you should not eat *too much* shit. There are three good reasons for this.

1. Shit has very little nutritional value. It's just not good for you – no matter how much you eat.
2. The color, odor, taste and texture of shit are (to most people) less than appetizing. Eating shit on a regular basis not only provides a less than elegant dining experience, *it can spoil your appetite for other things*.
3. If you eat a *lot* of shit on a regular basis, you might develop a liking for it, much the same way some people force themselves to acquire a taste for Scotch whiskey. This further means that you run the risk of developing what on certain dogs is known as “a shit-eating grin.” Any kind of grin, of course, makes you suspect by your boss as well as among your peers and these too are not good for you or your career.

It is important to note that the prohibition here is against eating *too much* shit. All of us should have to eat a lot of shit at least once and some of us need to be made to eat a little shit every now and then.

To have to eat a lot of shit at least once guarantees that we know from firsthand experience what it is like. The redeeming social value of having to eat a lot of shit at least once is that doing so reduces the likelihood that we will make others eat a lot of shit on a regular basis.

The suggestion that some of us should be made to eat a little shit from time to time is a much different matter and deserving of its own analysis.

As is always the case in civilized societies, some of us are more fortunate than others, which is to say that some of us have to eat a lot less shit than others or, conversely (and sadly), that some of us have to eat a lot more shit than others.

Owing as much to faulty memory and preoccupation with current events as to any personality flaw, those of us who don't have to eat a lot of shit can become insensitive to those who do. We forget what it's like to have to eat shit on a regular basis. Being made to eat a little shit from time to time is good for us, then, because it reminds us that we and others are human beings, not dogs.

We come now to a special case to be considered in our examination of shit-eating practices in corporate America.

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During the course of 50 years in the workplace, I have observed that there are people among us who take great delight in making the rest of us eat a lot of shit. In all fairness, I must point out that my observations over the years also suggest that these poor souls were themselves the hapless victims of being made to eat excessive amounts of shit when they were children. They got off to a shitty start in life.

The treatment of those who delight in making others eat a lot of shit is not furthered by seeking revenge and making them eat a lot of shit. Remember: being made to eat a lot of shit when they were young is what caused them to become what they are. Remember also, that revenge is what drives them and that an important aim of society is to reduce the number of people who make other people eat shit. In brief, don't make matters worse by becoming one of them.

One obvious course of action is to deny such people the power to make others eat a lot of shit. Ah, yes, you say, but how to effect this? How does one deprive people of the power to make other people eat a lot of shit?

Revolution is a tempting possibility – until you realize one of history's great lessons; namely, that revolutions generally accomplish nothing more than substituting one set of assholes for another and assholes are the source of the very material we are trying to avoid eating. No, my friends, I do not think revolution is the answer.

Refusal to partake of the fecal feast being forced upon us is another option – until you remember that it is being forced upon us. Refusal is not an option.

Having ruled out revolution and refusal, we come to retreat as a possible course of action. As an occasional course of action, retreat is viable. As a habitual response, retreat is demoralizing and leads eventually to a crushing of the spirit. Retreat won't do.

Another possibility is organization and, through organization, the development of a counterbalancing power, one that is strong enough to impose checks and balances on what is currently in many organizations an unchecked and unbalanced exercise of power. Here, too, history teaches us a lesson. The unions were a response to abuses far more terrible than simply having to eat a little shit now and then. With those egregious abuses largely halted, the unions lost much of their appeal. Corruption ensued. Today they are largely irrelevant. Let us not go down that path.

Doesn't it strike you as strange, if not unconstitutional, that one person can make another eat a lot of shit? There ought to be a law against it – and there is: the Constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Sadly, democracy and the Bill of Rights do not yet extend into the workplace in any significant way. Nor is there any other constitution there to take its place. There is just an oligarchy with a hierarchical system of authority that, without any substantive checks and balances, leads to its almost unbridled and unchecked exercise. In

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short, current organizational systems of authority are what make it possible for one person to make other people eat a lot of shit.

In conclusion, it is probably not likely that we can control those who take delight in making others eat shit. The best we can hope for is to control our own shit-eating habits.

In a full-employment economy, it is tempting to simply say, “Stop eating shit! You don’t have to. Jobs are plentiful and you don’t have to take that crap, let alone eat it.” Ah, but things change, don’t they? We no longer have a full-employment economy. Jobs are scarce and growing scarcer. Today’s defiance can easily turn into tomorrow’s regrets. So, if you decide to stop eating shit, it’s probably best if you stop eating it without an undue display of defiance. Remember: the aim of this little paper isn’t to get you to stop eating shit; it is to help you focus on not eating too much shit.

Eating shit is much like drinking or smoking. Some people don’t know how to make either of those a moderate practice so they either overdo it or simply quit altogether. Others keep it under control. Our shit-eating practices reflect decisions we each make. Me? I choose to eat as little shit as possible. That costs me but it’s a trade-off I’m willing to make. I see others around me who have clearly chosen to eat a lot of shit and on a regular basis. I can’t bring myself to do that. Can you? I see others who refuse to even smell the shit they’re handed let alone eat it. They pay a heavy price. I admire them but I’m not willing to pay the price they do. How about you?

I have one last observation. There are countless people in the workplace who eat a lot of shit on a regular basis and seem not to know that that’s what they are doing (or, as I suspect in many cases, denying that that’s what they are doing). They have all kinds of other labels for what is essentially a matter of eating shit. Here are some of the more common labels people use to explain their behavior and thus rationalize away the fact that what they are actually doing is eating shit:

1. Overlooking life’s little indignities
2. Acting in a “professional” manner
3. Accepting constructive criticism
4. Being open to feedback
5. Swallowing their pride
6. Being a “team player”
7. Taking it like a man
8. Showing reserve
9. Being polite
10. Fitting in

Well, that about does it. You’ll have to excuse me now. I’m going upstairs and brush my teeth.