

BY GIL SCHWARTZ

THE SEAT OF POWER

A decorated veteran of the corporate trenches answers your crucial questions about great work, lousy jobs and the importance of having a good chair

I WILL BEGIN, as I sometimes do when trying to explain these things, with my chair. It's seen a lot over the years and borne a lot as well. If you calculated the amount of my sheer tonnage that has graced this seat over the course of my business career, it would boggle the mind.

When I first acquired it, I was nothing more than a small zit on the rear end of the corporation. Now, some years later, I can proudly assert that I am nothing less than a major pimple on the nose of the corporation. That's growth by any standard, gentlemen. You can do the same, if you know a few things and take a few chances every now and then.

When I first sat in this chair, I was about 30. I'd been hired to do a gunslinger's job for a week or so. At the end of the week, when my job was done, nobody asked me specifically to leave. So I showed up every day, had coffee with people first thing in the morning, kept my desk warm and, of course, warmed this chair here.

After a while, I started to get little assignments and was asked to attend to matters that were neither here nor there. Pretty soon, I sauntered into the vice-president's office and asked for an actual job and since nobody knew I didn't really have one, he said sure.

I've been here, in one incarnation or another, through re-engineering, mergers, cutbacks and a host of other stuff ever

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since, thanks largely to the ability to fake it that got me in the door in the first place.

I also saw early on that business, when you looked at it clearly, was nothing more than people rubbing up against each other. Some people made that rubbing work for them. Others didn't.

My boss, for instance, was a woman in her mid-fifties. As a seasoned pro, she knew what she was doing. The only

problem was, she behaved like a dragon when anybody came within 10 metres of her. Tragically, she was even more grouchy with her bosses than she was with us, particularly after lunch, which often included a couple of margaritas.

One time, she went to a meeting with the entire senior management. I went along as window dressing. They gave her a task to do, a huge, ridiculous job that had to be done right away because the chairman had been bugging around and had left the whole gig till the last minute.

"You people kill me," she snarled, red-faced, because, you know, it was after lunch. "Why don't you give us a little less time and make completely sure we can't do anything but a half-arsed job?"

After she left, I stayed behind to "clean up some papers" – that is, to eavesdrop as the big dinosaurs chewed over the last bones of the gathering.

"Who is that woman?" asked the chairman, gathering up his folder.

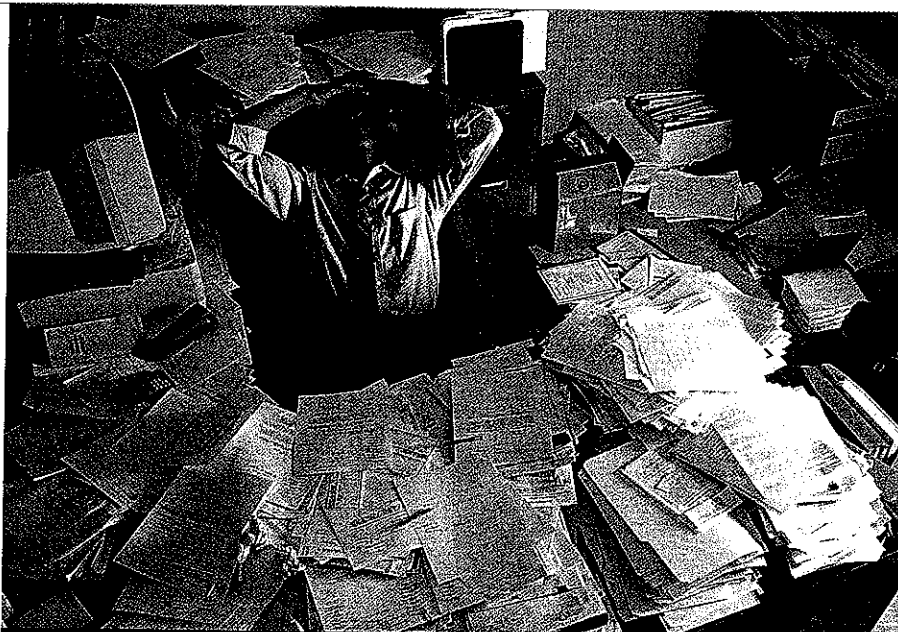
"That's Donna," replied the controller. "She's the director of that department."

"I don't want to be in a meeting with her again," said the chairman affably and left. Donna was gone by the end of the year. >>

WHATEVER THE WORD "BOSS" SENIOR" ETC YOU CAN
REPLACE WITH "CLIENT"

Work

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What your office says about you A mess sends the wrong message, so clean up

Visitors to your office start forming judgments before you even open your mouth. "People will decide on the spot whether you're organised or lazy by how your desk looks and what's on it," says Jo-Ellan Dimitrius, author of *Reading People* (Ebury Press, RRP: \$27.40). Here's what they should see:

▷ ORGANISATION

A messy desk doesn't make you look busier, it makes you look sloppy, warns Justin Henderson, author of *Workplaces and Workspaces: Office Spaces That Work* (Rockport Publishers, RRP: \$71.50).

The solution: remove some personal items and make essential items personal, like a stylised pen. As for paper clutter, draw an imaginary line down the centre of your desk and put things on one half only. At day's end, you've halved the mess.

▷ STYLE

Art on the walls or strategically positioned memorabilia will make you look civilised. "This office has style", is a compliment. "This office has character", isn't.

The solution: when it comes to your manly trinkets, err on the side of subtlety. "Any overwhelming theme puts a barrier between you and a visitor who isn't familiar with that theme," warns Dimitrius. Anything made by a child is charming. No kids? Commission something from a relative's kids.

▷ SIMPLICITY

Too many plaques and certificates suggest a braggart with no personal life, Dimitrius advises. Unframed posters and pinned photos indicate a lack of organisation.

The solution: remove all plaques and certificates, except for your career highlights or most recent accomplishment. Let your performance show a client how good you are. Put all posters and photos in frames; black or dark wood is best.

▷ COLOUR

Every office has the same colour walls, same colour desk, same Orwellian sameness.

The solution: colour reveals genius. "If you want to be linked with excitement or drive, put something red on your desk," suggests Leatrice Eiseman, author of *The Colour Answer Book* (Capital Books, RRP: \$43, www.amazon.com.au). One suggestion: a model of a red Ferrari.

▷ COMFORT

Desk, chair, visitor's chair, filing cabinet. Wow! Memorable.

The solution: get a small corner table and chairs. And if there's space, a couch. "A couch or seating area develops trust and comfort for a visitor," reveals Dimitrius. Ask for the furniture even if you don't normally have guests because everyone will think you do. Fresh fruit (you're health conscious) and lollies (you're fun-loving) always make good impressions.

— John Finkel

By the time my chair had a few thousand miles on it, I'd perceived another important fact, one that I've had to learn over and over again because it's the human condition to forget it.

Business is not a family. Sure, they'll tell you it is when they're hugging you around the old campfire and teaching you the company song. But it isn't.

Families might change, true, but not every friggin' couple of years, shipping half your siblings to the headhunters every time the market fluctuates. But that's how it's been for me and my chair all along. Just as we would get comfortable together — pow! Another merger. *[competitor]*

The only constant for me and my trusty chair has been change. And we rolled on, from a small office on the eighth floor to a bigger one on 11, to the new corporate headquarters on 38! Then across town to brand-new digs in a swanky tower! Then, oops, two divestitures and an acquisition later, back to the other side of the city again.

And bosses! How many have we seen rise and set like the sun? One I loved, call him Matt, then the next, whom I didn't like so much, call him Don and

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