

Ja-maar®

# OM DENKEN

The Dutch art of Flip-thinking

# at work

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# Working to live

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Work. How many countless expectations do we have about our work? That it will provide us with financial security, for starters. That it will help us bring home the bacon. That we can pay our rent. But there's more. Over the past few decades, work has taken on a more central role in our lives. We expect to have fun co-workers, to be able to develop ourselves, to create a stellar career, to achieve status and a strong identity and, to top it all off, we want our hard work to make the world a better place.

Those are our expectations about work. But there's a *reality* about work too. A reality that stands in stark contrast to our expectations. When it comes to our work, so much has changed and not always for the better. Relationships between employers and employees have become much less fixed. There continues to be a growing army of freelancers, known legally as independent contractors. In reality, however, many freelancers have become sources of cheap labour for an employer, as in "I've got 100 people I could give your job, right now". In the meantime, we've allowed ourselves to be exploited by employers, to be treated like children (or to act like children ourselves). Every day we're confronted with more and more meaningless bureaucracy, while we continue to question the 'why' behind our efforts and our employers. At the end of the day, how ethical, important, or meaningful is our work for us anyway?

Oh, we gladly play along with the idea that work will make us happy, but more and more of us are ending up disillusioned. It's understandable. Think about it - what does society have to

offer a single 27-year-old, who works hard as a delivery driver, a nurse, a teacher, or shop employee, but still can't even rent a house, let alone buy one? Even the people who feel relatively secure financially, experience the constant pressure of an unsure future. How can you make ends meet if your partner suddenly decides to leave you, your far-away father needs intensive home care, your kids demand all your time and attention, and you feel an impending burn-out coming on?

Organisational leaders are also highly concerned about how we've collectively created our corporate world. At least 92% of these leaders feel that traditional work structures are no longer functioning properly. Of even more concern is the fact that 86% have no idea how to treat this situation going forward.<sup>1</sup>

In the meantime, the Covid pandemic has seriously complicated things. Working from home has ended up being surprisingly easy to organise. We've become more conscious of how dependant we are on essential occupations; it's no coincidence that, in addition to supermarkets, these are mostly occupations organised by the government, such as waste management, law enforcement, health care, and education. Miraculously, the world has kept right on spinning, despite lockdowns, mask mandates, and social distancing measures.

All of which begs the following question: isn't it an illusion to expect that work is the answer to everything? Should we begin to think in a fundamentally different way about work? Or, to put it more simply, how about if we could stop living to work and start working to live?

# At the office

What you normally wear.



What you secretly, just maybe, would once really like to wear.\*



\* This image is undoubtedly gender neutral. You're the one who decides what you wear. Do you want to dress up as a firefighter (m/f), or Cat Woman (m/f)? That's fine. Just make sure you put on your fire retardant underwear, but that goes without saying of course.

# The solving reflex

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A finance department manager at the provincial government identifies a persistent problem; various sub-departments are not working well together. It seems that a ‘one man is an island culture’ has taken hold. The IT department doesn’t talk to the cleaners and the company restaurant staff barely talks to the people from Facilities. The manager discusses the problem with the directors. They decide to hire a consultant to tackle the problem.

What is our primary reaction when we’re confronted with a problem? We want to solve it. The problem needs to be taken care of and, preferably, as quickly as possible. You could even say that our brain’s *default mode* is to solve problems. Even the aforementioned ‘one man is an island culture’ is a problem we just want solved. I call this human tendency the *solving reflex*.

The truth is this tendency is understandable. Problems often feel like threats. And what is our initial instinctive response to a threat? Get away! Spot a bear? Run! Hear an explosion? Duck! At one time in our history these impulsive responses were useful. The world was full of danger, lions were on the prowl and a quick response was a matter of life or death. Our contemporary world is much more complex and, when dealing with complex problems, the solving reflex often falls short.

By defining problems with terms such as ‘one man is an island culture’, we attempt to frame the problem. An occurrence has a name, a label, and we quickly deduce that, not only do we have a problem, but we need to do something about the problem as

well. There's still a good chance that our solutions will completely fail to actually solve the problem. Why? Because sometimes there isn't even a problem at all. When a co-worker complains that he's constantly being called by unhappy customers, that sounds like a serious problem. What kind of a company would 'constantly' want to be called by unhappy customers? But after asking a simple question such as "how many times were you called last week?", the answer could turn out to be: two times. Given that, how big is the problem really? Let's stick with this example for a moment: let's imagine that, in the past year, the amount of customer complaints by telephone has actually *doubled*. Shocking, isn't it? That's really bad news, right? But what if the total number of customers in the past year has quadrupled? In that case, the percentage of complaints has been cut in half. What do you mean bad news? It's good news!

In many cases there's only actually a problem at a linguistic level. Perhaps there's only a problem with our choice of words, or our way of thinking. But that doesn't mean there's necessarily a problem in realistic terms. Nothing is as fruitless as trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist. It's like the old saying goes, "*if it ain't broke, don't fix it*".

Let's check back in with the consultant and the 'one man is an island culture' issue. What did they end up figuring out? That the sub-departments were actually functioning quite well. In reality it wasn't even necessary for the sub-departments to work together, which is understandable. After all, what does an IT person need to discuss with a cleaner? The only real problem was the manager's use of the term 'one man is an island culture'. In short, there wasn't actually a problem. The consultant wrote a brief report. "I advise you to reframe your choice of vocabulary

in order to vindicate these highly functioning departments”. Consider yourself warned; the next time someone says, “the communication is bad”, “the workload is too high”, “nobody is on the same page”, or “there’s no energy”, take a deep breath and count to ten. Maybe there’s a different kind of problem, or there’s no problem at all. Or, better yet, maybe the problem is actually the *intention* to begin with.



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