



Lessons from Susie and Celeste's Most Excellent Adventure

Career Development



Susie and Celeste's most excellent adventure reminds me of the perils of taking a job with a new company. Once you get on the "boat" and it pulls away from the "dock," you may be disappointed to find out that your new work colleagues are dancing to a tune that is not to your liking. Your boss, your colleagues, your job responsibilities, and the company's culture might be at variance with your expectations.

In 1989, a friend of mine, Susie, and her best friend Celeste took a road trip to Montreal, Canada. On the way, they stopped for an evening in Gananoque, Ontario — a small city on the Saint Lawrence River advertised as the gateway to the Thousand Islands. They were in their 20s and looking for adventure. Once they checked into a hotel, the pair looked for exciting things to do in the local paper. They came across an advertisement for an evening cruise on the Saint Lawrence River with dinner and dancing. They decided to go for it, not only because clubbing was one of their favorite pastimes, but also because it was the only thing going on in town that night.

Reservations made, they suited up for their evening out. Celest dawned her Boy George-inspired ensemble complete with long black pants, big belt, white shirt, and big-rimmed black hat. Susie was similarly clad in high-heels, leggings, an oversized sweater with shoulder pads, large dangly ear rings, and freshly permed big hair with a lot of styling gel to keep it under control. They were primed and primed for fun on the dance floor.

As the boat pulled away from the dock, the girls got their first hint that they may have misjudged the venue when they observed many of their potential quarry wearing jeans, flannel shirts, and Timberland boots. The women on the boat sported printed sweatshirts, jeans, and sneakers. As they continued to their seats, they also noted that their fellow shipmates were, on average, 30 years their

senior. Still, they figured they might salvage their evening with a nice dinner, a lot of wine, and some dancing. Their hopes faded when, to the delight of everyone else, the DJ began playing a series of country music hits. Too far from the dock now to swim for it, the girls — who had been attracting some attention — settled in to make the best of an awkward situation.

After dinner and over an hour of sitting on the sidelines watching the Texas Two Step and a series of line dances, Celeste took matters into her own hands by asking the DJ, with a note of desperation in her voice, to play anything that had a beat to dance to. Taking pity on the out-of-place lass, the DJ obliged by playing “She Drives Me Crazy” by the Fine Young Cannibals.

As the middle-aged, country-music loving crowd looked on, Suzie and Celeste took the floor and were joined by several other younger women who shared their taste in music. Once the country tunes returned, the girls escaped to the upper deck for a reprieve from the relentless twang. Hours later they returned to their room — a bit wiser than when the evening began.

Susie and Celeste’s most excellent adventure reminds me of the perils of taking a job with a new company. Once you get on the “boat” and it pulls away from the “dock,” you may be disappointed to find out that your new work colleagues are dancing to a tune that is not to your liking. Your boss, your colleagues, your job responsibilities, and the company’s culture might all be at variance with your expectations. Obviously, as Susie and Celeste learned the hard way, it is best to avoid such a situation by engaging in thorough due diligence before you “climb aboard” a new “boat.” But, once you have made your choice and the ship sets sail, your options are limited.

You could “jump overboard” by quitting and “swimming” for it. However, if you have insufficient funds to keep you afloat, this might result in significant hardship for you and your family. A safer approach might be to continue on the cruise while looking for other boats. Or you could go along for the ride and learn how to dance to the music being played.

Nevertheless, if you’ve clearly gotten on the wrong boat, you need to find a way to disembark — even if doing so carries with it some risk. Life is too short to put up with a job that is incompatible with your professional goals or your sense of right and wrong. However, in most circumstances, I think the optimal response is the one that Celeste chose when she asked the DJ if he would change the tune and, in so doing, found that others shared her musical sensibilities.

Aside from the perils associated with the other options, there are very few employers who are perfect in every respect. Every corporate “dog” I’ve ever met had “fleas.” If you decide to settle for only the perfect employer, you may find yourself looking for some time. Presuming you are not working for a criminal enterprise and the circumstances you find yourself in are reasonably tolerable, instead of cutting and running, think deeply and strategically about what actions you might take to make a positive difference in the workplace by seeking answers to the following questions:

- What do I stand for?
- What do I really want to change?
- Will it benefit the organization?
- What kinds of changes are reasonably within my sphere of influence?
- How can I best find allies in the company who feel the same way?
- How can I best connect with potential allies?
- What approach is most likely to succeed in persuading them to work with me to effect a positive change in the workplace?

The impact of your efforts will depend on many factors, such as your position in the company, the size of the organization, the issue you seek to address, and the effectiveness of your efforts. However, the culture of any organization is driven by the collective attitudes and beliefs of its members. If you're going to stay "onboard," you should do your part to drive the culture in a positive direction. In doing so, you may find that more of your new colleagues would prefer to dance to your kind of music.

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