

# WATERBOARDED ON THE 27TH FLOOR

BY

Justin Cayse

I'm told that, when performed correctly, waterboarding brings on the sensations of drowning and imminent death as poured water cuts off airflow. The victim isn't supposed to die—confession from the dead often being hard to obtain—so the water is withdrawn for breathing to resume. The sputtering subject is given renewed hope that death has been eluded because (s)he can breathe again. And then, BAM!, the water comes on again. To everyone but senior George W. Bush administration officials and Sean Hannity, waterboarding is *torture*.

You shouldn't find inclined boards with restraints, towels, and blindfolds in corporate offices (though there *are* lots of pitchers of water...). That doesn't mean, however, that the technique is not being applied in spirit every day all around the world, sometimes even unintentionally.

Maybe I'm unique, but in too many work situations I feel as though I am being drowned of hope that I can be productive, contribute as tasked, ultimately succeed, and so be suitably rewarded. It's all much less physically threatening than the real thing but perhaps equally debilitating psychologically as genuine waterboarding. After all, for those of us not in a position to be tortured by radical groups or the CIA (redundant?), our career is the "life" at risk when the technique is being applied. Stay with me here.

A career *life's* journey is to stay employed and progress upward while collecting the money needed to live in real life. At any given time though, we need the general purpose afforded by a job. And the "air" that sustains the career life is the tasks, projects, and activities that prove our value and provide a reason for remaining employed. Not to put too fine a point on it, successful completion of those tasks is what ensures that we will continue to have a job, a career, a *life*. Being reasonable people, we are committed to (successfully) performing our jobs: that is, to *living*. Anything that gets in the way of achieving our projects cuts off our "air." That's a problem.

Within large institutions, those in power above us not only control our career life's mission and success criteria, but they enable and should support it. At the abstract level of vision and mission statements, and in management bluster about what we (read: you) "have to do," and "how we (read: you) need to do it," and the "right things to be done," we get encouragement in spades. At retreats and other executive rah rah sessions, at team meetings, and in regular interactions with our (highest) superiors, we all breathe the notional language of enablement, action, success, and so on. Like the air around us, it's ubiquitous—and cheap.

At the level of enabling and supporting genuine action, however, many of us get career waterboarded. Seemingly capricious interference by those same managers, with well-meaning (one hopes) and textbook perfect yet practically ineffectual "directions" that support ongoing indecision, abruptly steals away the very air that jobs/tasks/projects—careers—need. The utter inconsistency between (a) what's said and demanded, and (b) (in)actions that make achievement of objectives unlikely if not impossible is the soggy cloth over the face.

Surely, I can't be the only one waterboarded like this over the years. For a long time and probably like most people, I'd simply lay back and let it happen. (It was coming; I couldn't grow gills; so, best to let it wash through me.). I still do. But it weighs on me.

I think that like most people, I'm conscientious and want to succeed. The work that I do is not easy at the best of times; it certainly needs no unnecessary, added obstacles. Yet for too many years I've tried to rise to these challenges because I expected it was normal. Now I'm not so inclined. Even if what I've described is common, that's hardly solid argument to say it's "normal." The Geneva Convention would probably frown on it too.

My guess is that organizational waterboarding is the result of the cavernous gap between saying and doing,

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between the ease of expressing desire in note-perfect business-speak and the responsibility of making messy choices in the midst of the fog of execution. It may also be a function of a culture of overeducated but practically inept leaders. (Fit managers, perhaps, but hardly leaders.) Besides, at every step in the hierarchy, since it's not the leader's air being cut off: no harm no foul. Not to worry, they get wet too.

Waterboarding has been a favoured technique for hundreds of years because it's easy, effective for extracting compliance, and—unlike other alternatives—it leaves behind no tell-tale marks as evidence of its application. But damage is being done. It simply may not show up for a while. Since we are all on the same side, we might want to stop hurting ourselves.

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