



The Gervais Principle: The Complete Series, with a Bonus Essay on Office Space (Ribbonfarm Roughs)

Venkatesh G. Rao

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The complete Internet cult classic series, the Gervais Principle, plus a bonus essay on the movie Office Space and a TV, movie and reading guide for connoisseurs of workplace politics. Written in six parts between 2009 and 2013 by Venkatesh Rao on ribbonfarm.com, and "Slashdotted" twice, this widely acclaimed series examines organizational dynamics through the lens of the NBC show, The Office and offers a comprehensive tragic philosophy of work for the modern world.

The Gervais Principle: The Complete Series, with a Bonus Essay on Office Space (Ribbonfarm Roughs) Details

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From Reader Review The Gervais Principle: The Complete Series, with a Bonus Essay on Office Space (Ribbonfarm Roughs) for online ebook

Kars says

An enjoyable read for the most part and at times illuminating too. It fails to be particularly useful for me because I haven't seen the American version of The Office so most of the examples are lost on me.

The cynical labels Rao has chosen for his archetypes may be amusing but ultimately prevent me from embracing his theory as a tool for reading my own work environments. That might make me 'clueless' or a 'loser' (two of the three archetypes) but I just don't like to self describe as a 'sociopath' (the final one).

Jude Morrissey says

In this book, Venkatesh Rao introduces us to his very cynical analysis of organizational structure, using the tv show The Office as both model and example. While he focuses primarily on corporate organizational structure, the picture he presents has implications beyond the workplace, as it delves into the mindsets and psychology of the classes of workers involved.

Personally, I found his view interesting, and there is something right in it; but I am unconvinced that it is an entirely accurate portrayal of all organizations. He makes some assumptions that I don't think he can unilaterally make, and many of his conclusions are based on those assumptions. I did, however, think the book made a lot of sense in the context of The Office, although I'm not sure the show was actually conceived and built around these ideas - that might, however, lend more credence to his argument, however, since a satirical look at a thing often picks out truths that are missed when taking it "seriously".

A point he makes later in the book stands out as something he should have said earlier - namely, that different people can and do play each of these roles at different times. It isn't always clear which class a person belongs in, then, except in the context of a particular event or role.

Recommended for fans of The Office and Dilbert, or who want a darkly cynical way to approach corporate structure.

Nicolay77 says

I just saw Office Space last night to finish the book with the required essay. It fits the tone of the rest of the book perfectly.

Something like this is being played in all offices in the world, by both enlightened and unsuspecting parties.

This is a bit like taking the Red Pill in Matrix...

Durin Gleaves says

Absolutely one of the best books on organizational dynamics that I have ever read. Ever.

Ever.

Jonathan says

Pretty interesting. The social dynamics can be applied to most situations. After reading for a bit I began to realize my role in all the different groups I belong. It makes me begin to think about who is taking advantage of me, and if I should be attempting to take advantage of others. Kind of get bored of the Office show though, but I get that it.

Ng Zi Xiang says

Easily 6 stars. An underrated gem. I'm gonna have to reread it though. The language used has quite a lot of subtlety to it, such that a second rereading (or actually watching the shows referenced) gives a better comprehension of the insights by the author.

Catch says

After running across RibbonFarm on numerous rationality blogs, and hearing good things about the Gervais principle ? I finally got around to actually reading it. You need to watch at least Season 1 of the Office (the NBC one) before reading this (ideally around 2 or 3 seasons).

I really liked everything except the second half of Part VI where it kind of goes off-rails a bit and stopped making sense (at least to me). It's entertaining and insightful.

There are essentially three types of people in organizations. The Sociopaths, The Clueless, and The Losers, in an inverted pyramid in that order.

The Sociopath layer at the top comprises the Darwinian/Protestant Ethic will-to-power types who drive an organization to function despite itself (e.g. Elon Musk, and upper Google management think Level 8 and above).

The Clueless layer is the "Organization Man" / middle management (think Google Level 5-7 Senior Software Engineers).

The Losers are not social losers (as in the opposite of "cool"), but people who have struck bad bargains economically – giving up capitalist striving for steady paychecks (think Level 4 and below Google

engineers).

The Gervais Principle

Sociopaths, in their own best interests, knowingly promote over-performing losers into middle-management, groom under-performing losers into sociopaths, and leave the average bare-minimum-effort losers to fend for themselves.

Bare-minimum-effort losers are people who've stopped trying to climb the corporate ladder, i.e., they put in the bare minimum effort to keep their job and try to find fulfillment outside it.

Over-performing losers are clueless people in the making ? since they put in a lot of effort for the company without adequate compensation, a tradeoff they take in their childlike naivety and joy at gaining accolades from the system. In essence, these are the kind of people who've never thought about the pointlessness of school or the ones who take excessive pride in their college GPA.

The under-performing losers are the Randian sociopaths in making ? these are the people who are probably working on a risky project that'll either result in their promotion or result in them getting fired.

That's about enough of an introduction, but there are a lot of fascinating ideas ? I highly recommend this.

Peter says

I don't think that it's overdoing it to say that this book (really a series of curated blog posts) will probably change how you think about work. As a synthesis of the Peter Principle (thesis) and the Dilbert Principle (antithesis), The Gervais Principle is a fitting synthesis of many timeless theories of organizational genesis, growth and stagnation, as well as organizational coercion and internal politics. It's an easy read, and well worth your time, although it is, as the introduction states, a bit of a matrix-book; it's hard to look backwards, and does really force some real self-reflection.

It's hard to describe this; I got some of the same feelings I got while reading Finite and Infinite Games, and there are just so many zen-like counterintuitive concepts within the overall framework that you should probably just go read it. Phrases like "the mediocre will inherit the earth," "happiness is a social construct" and "in traditional accounting, you'll have a net deficit of blame," all jostle for position within a somewhat counter-cultural, but relatively resonant world view.

At the end of the day, the Gervais Principle is something that will stick in your head and provide a valuable mental model for navigating the world. Like all mental models, they are most valuable in aggregate, but that doesn't diminish the joy in finding a new one.

Keith Wilson says

The Gervais Principle, named after Ricky Gervais, the creator of The Office, and coined by Venkatesh Rao, of the not as popular blog, Ribbonfarm, states that at the top of any organization are sociopaths, at the bottom

are losers, and in the middle are the clueless.

In case that isn't self-evident to you, let me explain. A sociopath with an idea recruits losers to do the work and a company is born. The losers accept a bad bargain for the sake of a steady paycheck. They know who cashes in big, and it's not them, it's the sociopaths at the top; so, they punch their clock, put in their time, but derive most of their satisfaction in life, if any, from what they do outside of work. The clueless, the middle managers or any hard worker, don't acknowledge that the sociopaths are in bad faith. They believe they can get ahead by playing the game and busting their butts for the company. The sociopaths snicker, give the clueless a pittance more than the losers, and use the clueless to shield them from the people at the bottom who know the truth. The clueless believe they will rise in the organization, but they never will because they don't understand how the game is played. It's played according to the sociopath's rules, not the rules in the employee handbook.

Folks from Wall Street, or any other rapacious, dog-eat-dog field readily agree that the Gervais Principle is an accurate summation of the firms in which they work. I've been employed by a few non-profit organizations that have proved to be headed by sociopaths and staffed by losers and clueless, as well. I can admit that I've been a loser, stuck in dead end jobs that weren't going anywhere. While at a local health system, I was largely a member of the clueless, until I caught on to the game. Finally, I quit to go my own way, to private practice, taking a few of the local health system's customers with me, as well as the skills they paid me to learn, thus becoming a small time sociopath with no losers or clueless to exploit.

If you agree with this characterization about organizations, what can you do about it? How is a person to behave if he wants to be successful, but also wants to sleep at night? True sociopaths don't have any trouble sleeping, no matter who they screw; but, if you cannot be as ruthless as all that, what else can you do, but take your place in the ranks of the losers and clueless?

I think this is the place where we should turn down the hyperbole. The terms: sociopath, loser, and clueless, are amplified to help you understand the situation, but they don't tell you what to do about it. Therefore, let's tone it down a little and reduce the heat. I don't think, to be successful in an organization, you really need to be an actual, bona fide, clinically certified sociopath, with all the baggage that entails; I think it means that, to succeed in business, you have to be a businessman, to get rich, you've to be a capitalist, to prevail in office politics, you've got to study your Machiavelli. You've got to turn away from morals and ethics just a bit and trust that the market, with its blind hand, will sort things out.

The clueless are not entirely clueless, at least they don't have to be, to be successful middle managers or satisfied hard workers. You should be able to love what you do and work hard at doing it for its own satisfaction, without being derided as clueless because the one percent reaps most of the benefits. The prototypically clueless believe the lies the one percent makes them swallow: that they, too, will thrive in the same way the one percent thrives. Actual middle managers and hard workers know that it's rigged, but take pleasure in work for its own sake.

When I'm on the soccer field, I put it all out there, I try my best, and do whatever I can do to bring my team victory; but, I'm not clueless because, when the game is over, I know it was just a game. I know that, even if we win, it doesn't mean we're all rich, famous, and get the hot chicks. If I score the winning goal, my teammates may hoist me on their shoulders for a celebration, but, by the end of the night, after so many beers, I can be as annoying to them as ever.

Nor are the losers really losers. Sure, they've accepted what one may characterize, in a sociopathic frame of mind, as a bad bargain; but, is it, really? Your average worker, toiling in a factory, office, or school

may never be the one percent, vacationing in Capri. They may not get the stock options, the inflated CEO pay, or the golden parachutes the sociopaths relish. Stuck in mindless, repetitive, and meaningless labor, it might be hard for them to find joy in what they do, to grab for all the gusto they can; but it doesn't have to mean they are losers.

They are not entirely losers as long as they have an adequate, steady paycheck. I was a loser a few times; but every turn I took as one resulted in a net gain. While I worked in food service, I built my house. While I milked cows, I raised small children. While I sawed logs, turning big pieces of wood into little pieces of wood all day, I went to school at night. While I worked at that local health system and saw the groundbreaking mental health program I developed, shut down by the bean counters, I did the grunt work of shrinking heads eight hours a day and wrote my first book. Loser, my ass.

So, you see, the Gervais Principle can illuminate many things about the organization in which you work. Just don't take the terms too seriously.

Keith Wilson writes on mental health and relationship issues on his blog, Madness 101

Caroline says

What the heck did I just read?

Do you think everything from *The Office* was incredibly true to life? Do you want someone to explain to you the underlying principles that make the world work as depicted in *The Office*? Do you agree that companies are made of exactly three types of people - Losers, Clueless, and Sociopaths? (I am not making this up!) No? Then I suggest you not read this.

This felt like an attempt at the Forer effect that got too specific and got all the specifics wrong. A lot of individual parts of the book rang at least somewhat true. I'm sure everyone has heard seen some amount of empty posturing (Posturetalk in this book). But the book claims only middle management does Posturetalk, and they do it 100% of the time. Upper management instead does Powertalk, which is like Posturetalk except there are real stakes. Except when they are talking to ICs, at which point upper management does Straight Talk, where they say exactly what they mean (!). Really, upper management never does any empty posturing? Middle management never has anything at stake? The entire book was like this, and none of it matched up to my experience.

José says

It's a dangerous read, you will start labeling people in your workplace according to rules described here.

Rahul Ramchandani says

I don't write book reviews but this is by far one of the most insightful and brilliant pieces of commentary I've ever read. The fact that it's based on *The Office*, a personal favorite, makes it all the more enjoyable.

Jurgen Dhaese says

A hilarious book analyzing organization dynamics through the lens of the TV show "The Office".

Basically, each organization has three types of people :

1. Sociopaths at the top. Coldblooded visionaries who see the reality of how the world really works, and put themselves into advantageous economic positions - often at the expense of other people.
2. Clueless people in the middle. Those without competence that have deluded themselves into a sick sense of loyalty to organizations that don't have their best interests at heart.
3. Losers at the bottom. People who have struck bad bargains economically for steady paychecks, and suffer the consequences.

This book analyzes the interplay of all these groups in organizations.

Often far-fetched and reaching, yet at its core wildly fascinating, brutally honest, and probably pretty accurate.

Moral of the story: don't be clueless or a loser. Realize how the economic world really works. And position yourself to take advantage of it.

Aman Agarwal says

6/5

Highly recommend to my The Office obsessed friends.

I read this book in a day and then a year later reread it in a few days. As someone who has seen the American version of The Office multiple times and found myself obsessively analyzing it, this was a very interesting and captivating read. I'm not sure how much of the theories presented I believe and if I would at all apply them to my life but nonetheless it was very enlightening at times and I particularly enjoyed the last section on theists vs atheists vs "sociopaths".

Once the framework of "loser", "clueless", and "sociopath" were established, it was crazy and unbelievable how perfectly the interactions in the show fit into this framework.

The parallels to Improv theater were also very interesting and have put the book Improv by Keith Johnstone very high on my to read list.

The author of the book, Venkatesh Rao, has a blog called Ribbonfarm which is a vast and enticing rabbit hole that I have only begun to explore.

The Gervais Principle suggests that in any organization, at the top are the "sociopaths", at the bottom, the "losers", and in between, the "clueless", and he defines these three terms very specifically.

“”””

The Gervais Principle is this: Sociopaths, in their own best interests, knowingly promote over-performing Losers into middle-management, groom under-performing Losers into Sociopaths, and leave the average bare-minimum-effort Losers to fend for themselves.

“”””

This book delves into the psychologies of the characters and explains why each character is either a Sociopath, Clueless, or a Loser.

This book talks about the different ways in which each of these groups speak with one another and primarily focuses on "PowerTalk", the language Sociopaths use amongst themselves. Rao also points out that PowerTalk, if it can be learned, can only really be learned through trial and error and practice and failure, learned through experience, as opposed to from textbooks.

Rao talks about "Arrested Development" where someone's development as a human being stalls because they focus on furthering their strengths, and that their addiction to their strengths results in a failure to truly grow as an individual.

We see the immature nature of the Clueless Michael, Dwight, and Andy, with sufficient psychological detail that it forces me to consider those in my own life who fit the mold of Clueless.

Rao on status illegibility and group dynamics is extremely eye opening to someone who has never read about group dynamics. While there may be other books on group dynamics that are more thorough and correct, the sheer magnitude and concentration of examples provided by the show gives me a way to really better understand the concepts. It is not rare for Rao to explain a concept and follow it up with a long bullet point list of examples that illustrate the concept, something that is rare in books talking about complex, hard to grasp concepts.

Rao also speaks on humor and it's effects on group status. This section was very entertaining because I love making jokes in groups and to see an analysis of various kinds of jokes was both eye opening and simply fun. Both the section on jokes and in group dynamics has made me wary of my desire for group status and made me aware of how changes in group status are ultimately peanuts compared to overall status.

The Office is the show best known for crime humor. There are many people who prefer to not watch the show because of the high levels of cringe. Rao very clearly explains why the lack of self awareness in mainly the Clueless causes us as an audience to cringe.

Finally Rao focuses on the Sociopaths. He claims that they play a game of altering realities.

""

Seasoned Sociopaths maintain a permanent facade of strategic incompetence and ignorance in key areas, rather than just making up situational incompetence arguments. This is coupled with indirection and abstraction in requests given to reports. The result is HIWTYL judo.

""

HIWTYL = Heads I Win, Tails You Lose

I think it is imperative to understand and even be able to play this game that Sociopaths play in order to not be manipulated yourself. Rao touches on key points on how they get and keep and grow their power. It isn't so much that they forcefully take the power but rather it is handed to them by those unwilling to face reality and it's infinite complexities.

The book ends with a highly philosophical discussion on the socially constructed realities we live in and that Sociopaths in pursuit of unmediated reality acquire power or rather it is acquiesced to them by those afraid of peeling off the masks. This is where the connections to Improv come in. Finally the book ends with a discussion of Toby, the failed Messiah figure, a Sociopath who refuses to play the power game and instead uses his nihilistic knowledge to protect the blissfully unaware from facing reality and escaping their paradise of ignorance. The last bit in its reference both to Messiah figures and Priests and The Hero's Journey, is Peterson-esque.

All in all, this book is a 6/5, which is to say, a "Must Read".

Mindaugas Moz?ras says

An interesting and often funny read. The author analyzes company politics through the lens of the TV series "The Office". I've seen this TV series, which makes reading this book much more interesting.

Author's view of the company politics is very cynical. It made me think (sometimes dark thoughts). While I see a couple of the things he mentioned in the companies I've worked at, it's just a few. Not something I can use day-to-day. Worth a read for the fun parts either way.
