

It Just Keeps Going

The first time I heard the phrase “Hate Train,” I was stationed in Japan with the Navy, attempting to enjoy a bowl of oatmeal. Our previous officer-in-charge (OIC) had finished turning over with his replacement and the new guy was proving to be a micromanaging, all-knowing, pain-in-the-ass. Mind you, I didn’t dislike him as a person, he was a nice enough guy. Still, he was awful to work for and his poor leadership, frivolous requests (usually demands), and attempts to force us to endure awkward esprit-de-corp events were a frequent topic of conversation. It was during one of these conversations, early one morning, that the phrase “Hate Train” came up. We all know what the Hate Train is because we’ve all been passengers on the Train at one time or another, hidden away behind closed doors or out to lunch, hating on someone who angers or frustrates us by way of their words or actions.

We all board the Train for different reasons. I can tell you why I ride: a fissure between reality and expectations. I remember hearing a lecture once about relational conflict. The point was that frustrations stem from failed expectations. If all week I’m planning to lay around and do nothing on the weekend and my wife suddenly decides to spend the entire weekend with her long-lost college roommate, whom I barely remember from our wedding and haven’t seen since (about 8 years now), then the odds are there’s going to be a problem.



“Long exposure of a Piccadilly line train leaving Leicester Square station, looking south-southwest.” Copyright Robert Lamb, licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Licence.

Regardless of why we're frustrated, or where it comes from, there are good and bad ways of handling that frustration. In past versions of this essay, I would have logged the Hate Train under "bad ways" to handle frustration. But, if I've learned anything since I first wrote about the Hate Train, I don't think it's as simple as "good" or "bad." Like hearing the same story from two rival sources, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

I made a friend riding the Hate Train. For the sake of dispelling ambiguity, we'll call him Tom. Tom and I were stuck in an untenable situation involving a lazy and inept supervisor and, in our desperation, we became close. Granted, we had other things in common, certain personality quirks and interests but, even when we met away from work, usually for coffee, most of our discussions took place on the Hate Train. By the time we were ordering refills, we had moved on to other

topics, but I'd be lying if I said I can remember a conversation that didn't start on the Train. We'd criticize our supervisor for his lack of presence during training exercises or, when he was present, the way he lapped up all the credit for the work we were doing. You know, real "leadership" stuff. I realize complaining isn't a great foundation for a friendship—and this is probably why we aren't friends anymore—but riding the Train, Tom and I latched onto each other. At the time, we genuinely believed that we were the only ones who knew what the other was dealing with.

There were other people I talked to and there were things that I had to overlook about Tom, nuances of character that I chose to tolerate because this was a "friend." We can all relate to that, wanting to see only the best in the people we choose to associate with, because if we realized that the people we associated with were less than perfect, what would that say about us? While in time, the source of our frustration disappeared, that didn't mean we stopped riding the Train.

Unfortunately, after awhile, the Hate Train got old. That's not to say I didn't enjoy my time on the Train with Tom, but I learned there's a limit to the amount of "talk" I can handle before my eyes start to glaze over, even if it's coming from a "friend." There should be more to a friendship than ripping on others for their inadequacies and blunders. And so, in an effort to expand our friendship, when we met for coffee, I tried to get Tom to talk about his family (I have one too), books (I enjoy reading), movies (who doesn't like movies?), or just life in general. My hope was that in time we would move beyond just being work friends to being "real" friends. It didn't quite work out.

Maybe that sounds needy. Honestly though, at this point in my life, though acquaintances are nice, I have plenty of obligations (that family thing), and if I'm going to take the time to sit down with someone in the morning for a cup of coffee, I'm more interested in investing in an authentic

friendship, not just one built on shared inconveniences.

About six months ago, Tom moved to a different division, work grew busy, we met less often for coffee, and we just kind of fell apart. When I did see him it felt hollow, like going through the motions of a friendship, and so I started finding other things (and other people) to occupy my time. Maybe I should have tried a little harder, put myself out there more, but when there are only so many hours left in a day after work and family have taken their “pound of flesh,” you have to be a little selfish with your time.

When I stopped riding the Train, those flaws I had overlooked started to become more apparent. Tom was good at a lot of things but he was lazy and, honestly, it annoyed me. When it came to the less-than-sexy parts of the job training units preparing to deploy, other people consistently had to pick up his slack because he simply refused to do the work. He was opinionated (who isn't?), but not in the sense that encourages conversation. He refused to listen because no one else knew better than him. And, he was shysty, playing little power games and utilizing his personal relationships to push agendas that only benefited him. Plus, when things didn't go his way, he concocted elaborate conspiracies to avoid the reality of his failures. When one of his training events fell apart, instead of reflecting on his utter lack of presence before, during, and after the “shit hit the fan,” he blamed the guys in other divisions who were forced to run it in his absence.

The irony of our briefly-lived bromance was that as we moved apart, I became a topic of discussion on the Hate Train. Of course I never heard it myself, but people talk and I found out that my “friend” had gathered around himself his own little cohort of travelers. From what I'm told, they practically lived on the Hate Train. Easy to believe given the palpable toxicity that they exuded when they were together and the general air of superiority they put on when interacting with anyone not on the Train. It's sad, but I have to wonder

if that was me at some point. And that possibility, that I was one of those people, more than anything else is what keeps me from setting up shop on the Train—a brief visit maybe, but no permanent residence.

I don't know if the Hate Train is "good" or "bad." Does the Train get old? Yes. Should we try not to ride? Sure. Still, I know the Train is good for something. I learned a lot while riding the Train: how I react to frustrations and how those frustrations can be a catalyst for change. I learned what kind of leader I wanted to be listening to other people's frustrations. I made it a priority to foster an environment of inclusiveness, where everyone had a say, so long as we kept it civil, about how we wanted to execute training, run the division, or where to get breakfast on short days. Not least of all, I learned that I wanted to surround myself with people who didn't need to resort to riding the Train when frustrated, but who would challenge me about the decisions I'd made and work with me to solve our problems rather than walking away to bitch and moan in secret.

Above all, I learned how long term exposure to the Train is toxic and how when I leave military I don't want my legacy to be that of just another shit talker. It's not in me to not act when I can see the solution. Is it easier to just ride the Train and spew hate at everyone as they struggle? Sure, but does that mean it's "right?"

I don't know if it makes sense to label the Train as "good" or "bad," but the Hate Train is a reality we have to confront because the Train won't stop going, not as long as there are people willing to ride.