On Being a Mercenary

By Eric Postal, MD [2]

Being compensated for your work is seen as acceptable, even honorable. But sometimes, one is expected to work for less or for nothing.

“You’re just in it for the money.”

Go ahead. Try and imagine someone saying that in anything but a negative way.

In most of the free world, receiving some form of compensation — monetary or otherwise — for something you otherwise would not be doing is acceptable, even honorable. You are using your talents, skills, and efforts to get ahead. Meanwhile, you are contributing something to society, and the government is extracting its share to theoretically keep the system running smoothly. Everybody benefits! Kumbaya.

Sometimes, however, one is inexplicably supposed to be above this, and work for less than one otherwise might, if not entirely gratis. The real reason (because others would rather not pay, or hope to portray themselves as champions for those not paying) is usually kept quiet.

The term “mercenary” tends to evoke images of soldiers, or paramilitary types, for hire. The concept has been around for awhile. My brief and non-scholarly investigation managed to dig up references harking back at least as far as the Crusades. There is a recurring theme of resentment against these hirelings, even from those who hire them or fight alongside. The purported reasons are vague notions that the mercenaries should really be doing their part unpaid, or paid less, because it is noble and in just cause, and that it is unseemly for them to be motivated by tangible reward.

When the notion of working for nothing at all is too absurd for even the would-be shammers of the mercenaries to put forth, the next-best thing is to decry the amount of payment. Even if the mercenary is only collecting what was negotiated in advance (as opposed to, say, drawing a gun on whoever hired him), somehow it’s an unconscionable gouge, and he should have been doing it for less. Or he should subsequently give it back in some charitable way. If all else fails, there’s the fallback of throwing around words like “greedy,” implying dishonesty, and alleging corruption on the part of the mercenary, hindering his ability to negotiate the next time he’s needed.

Such aspersions need not come from afield, such as a politician blaming runaway medical costs on physician reimbursements or a rival practice negotiating for coverage of a local hospital. It can be a senior member of one’s own team, for instance, telling juniors that they need to do more work without better compensation in return, in the name of “building the practice.” Such exhortations ring hollow when the senior is exempt from the additional responsibilities, yet pocketing the extra revenue they bring.

The fact of the matter is, most of us are mercenaries, whether we recognize it or not. I know there are some folks out there who say, and maybe even believe, that they would continue with their jobs even if they weren’t getting paid. They love the challenges, maybe, or they feel spiritually fulfilled from their work. Even if they are substituting intangible rewards for material compensation, though, they are still doing their work for what they get in return — and there’s nothing wrong with that. As long as they recognize that other mercenaries’ motivations are no less legitimate.

Disclosures:

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