

A skill for the future is courage

Designing your career

With organizations downsizing, rightsizing, restructuring or becoming reengineered, many talented people who thought they had their future planned have had their socks knocked off. There's even a name to describe them: "transitioners".

Some have been fortunate enough to have outplacement as part of their package; others haven't. This article is dedicated to the people who have found themselves in need of reinvention.

A friend of a friend of mine is one such individual. He was the president of a Canadian subsidiary of a US company, who after an acquisition became redundant. Now in his mid 50's, which some would say is the pinnacle of wisdom, he finds himself rudderless. He wisely took the first few months off playing golf, but is now eagerly back in the looking-for-a-job saddle.

Let's call my friend's friend Larry. As his coach, we labeled the project "Designing Larry". Why? He has a choice: he can design his future or he can drift into the future that's coming anyway. "Designing Larry" requires a mindset where you detach yourself from past jobs. It has two homework components, in his case: Reading Larry and Reading the World. It involves knowing yourself intimately and opening yourself to the "world" (community, industry, business) since transitioners' goals are to superimpose the two.

For those who are forced into the design process because of business, or for those who have the courage to momentarily stop the world and voluntarily reinvent themselves, here's how the process works.

Reading Larry (or Nancy, Bob, Phil, Fred...)

Take a pencil, paper, computer or stick in the sand and brainstorm answers to the following questions. Keep a journal on this so you can reflect, input, wait, sleep on it, and input more. Allow yourself to "float" in the question rather than look for "right" answer since there are none.

- What is the value that you believe you could bring to any organization? (This is not "resume-speak").
- What are all the activities you love doing, even if they don't feel like they add up to a

job. Indicate for each what about it gives you energy and joy.

- If you could design the absolutely worse job in the world for you, what would it be asking you to do?
- What are the projects, tasks, activities from your past that you have felt the most pride in? What were the consequences of the outcomes from a personal and business perspective?
- What are your talents? Don't be shy.
- Thinking back over your life, what were key moments for you? Why? In retrospect, what did they offer you or what did you learn from them?
- What is the kind of environment you like... that brings out the best in you?
- What is the kind of environment you dislike... that brings out the worst in you?
- What are some things you haven't ever really done, but the thought of them sound exciting to you?
- What sounds scary to you?

READING THE WORLD

Figuratively, think of yourself as blind, but a blind person who doesn't even know that he's blind. That's the way most of us are. This provides the opportunity to remove the veil and get an un-skewed picture of our surroundings. This involves taking some time with people (best at a senior level) and asking them questions. You might be wondering, "why would a senior person, who is busy making million dollar decisions about the future of his/her organization be willing to talk to me?" Senior people in particular enjoy provocative questions because it gives them reflection time, and helps them articulate things that have to this point only been dancing in their heads. My experience has been that profound and extraordinary conversations are a gift to executives.

Remember, the purpose of the conversations is to Read the World, not Sell Yourself as a Candidate. (That comes much later). The focus will not be on you... the focus will be on what you discover. Set a goal to have several provocative conversations each week with someone. These could be friends, association members, churchgoers, golf

buddies, former colleagues, former competitors and even complete strangers. Get outside of the normal industry of your past life. Target incredibly different industries and dabble outside of your comfort zone. Be aware that you'll probably try to talk yourself out of this, so stay committed! Consider that a skill of the future is courage. If you're successful in talking yourself out of this, what's stopping you? Any patterns to other things that have stopped you in the past?

HERE ARE THE KINDS OF QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- As you look off to the future, what are the kinds of challenges you see your organization (industry) facing?
- What are the forces (i.e. political, economic, societal, technological, environmental...) that are impacting your industry/business?
- What skills do you think your organization requires to lead in its field?
- What are the kinds of demands that the "world" is making on your people and your organization?
- What are the changes you see coming down the pipe?
- What do you see different about your job compared to several years ago?
- Where are you beginning to see scarcities?
- What kinds of jobs or roles are becoming more necessary? Why?
- What kinds of jobs or roles are becoming less necessary? Why?
- What are the lessons you're learning from your customers? From your competitors? From your suppliers?
- What are the biggest lessons you've learned in the past few years?
- What kinds of things are your customers/shareholders/stakeholders saying that are different from before?
- What are the paradigm shifts that your organization/industry is encountering?
- What is the most recent experience where you were totally blindsided? What did you learn from it?
- What are you finding the most difficult aspects of being a leader now?
- If you could do last year all over again, knowing what you know now, what might you do differently? Why?
- What are the messages that you're learning about success and effectiveness?

What's the guarantee? Your eyes will be opened. A mind once expanded will never return to its original shape!