

TJ Blog by Stuart Walkley

A merry dance – future career planning

Forget “Dancing on (thin) ice”. Forget “Strictly Come prancing”. Let go of the New Year *Bop*, *Jive*, *Jam*, or *Rave*, depending on your generation. The dancing in which we should all participate during 2013 and beyond is the career dance. A great time to be had by all.

A decade or so ago we talked of careers as one endless progression up ladders, through glass ceilings, up precipices and ultimately to the top where the view of those poor struggling wretches below us became increasingly distant in the clouds of uncertainty. We had made it, a “Pointy person” far removed from the humdrum concerns of the real world. Careers were defined by a series of forward moving steps, leaps and bounds with an end goal clearly fixed well ahead.

To some extent we continue to perpetuate this myth especially in schools, colleges and universities where “getting on” still appears to be an objective in itself. By jumping over an inordinate number of hurdles and rushing breathlessly towards a finishing point we define our success as being first one past the line. Students become increasingly adept through our training on focusing on targets and finish points.

The difficulty with this mind-set is that it leads to vastly unrealistic expectations in the workplace and endless career disappointments for those who see progress as being one promotion followed by another in that fast-moving, forward-thrusting and seemingly inexorable race to the line followed, perhaps, by the now infamous Mo Farah “Mobot” and then a quiet retirement to the shingle of Worthing or the leafy glades of the New Forest.

I should not blame these “modern times”. Izaak Walton summed up life as a “hodge-podge of busi-ness, of money and care” (*The Compleat Angler*) whilst Samuel Pepys longed for respite from the hurly-burly of his career. “God grant me a brief respite between work and the grave”. Career advancement in a hectic and striving world has seemingly always been an objective albeit resented.

The world of work is no longer like that for most organisations or for many people. The offer of endless promotion and routes to the top are no longer there. Talent, commitment, hard-work and achievement may all be valued, but they cannot lead to an automatic step up on that career ladder. We have to measure success in other ways.

Recently I have been working with a couple of highly talented and creative people who were looking to make career moves. Inevitably perhaps their first thoughts were that they should in their next position be seeking more responsibility, a better title, and a larger salary. Success for one would have to be a Board position, for the other the word “manager” clearly embedded in the job description. These were tremendous people whose enthusiasm and capability was boundless. But I would challenge whether rising on the career ladder for their next position would really bring them much joy or even much satisfaction. Taking my lead from Walton, but resisting the lure of his fishing on the banks of the Thames, I encouraged them to “dance a little”.

Now, the first thing about dance is to get in step. That means catching the beat, feeling the rhythm as well as listening to the melody. Careers should be like that too. They are not a preoccupation with self-advancement but the movement of the self in step with the organisation. Far too often our individual ambition is out of step with those organisational needs.

Second, the dance is not about rushing ahead or in necessarily straight lines. It is about side-steps and even backward moves performed with grace and dexterity not always speed. You may complete a series of complex steps simply to arrive back at where you started and success is the elegance of the steps made, not their momentum nor their forward trajectory. If you can *merrily* dance, as with the erstwhile Quaker and his wife, then that is the measure of success.

*And then the miller sat down to play
A tune upon the spinet.*

*Merrily danced the Quaker's wife,
And merrily danced the Quaker.
Merrily danced the Quaker's wife,
And merrily danced the Quaker.*

Finding the job that literally gives you joy is to achieve the ultimate in Aristotelian ambition for mankind --- the pursuit of happiness. For both my career strivers this sense of “joy” was lacking in their initial scoping for what they wanted and yet became crucial to their final decision-making. The point of the dance, the point of careers, is to give expression and meaning to life and through that to lead us to those Aristotelian heights of happiness rather than those somewhat meaningless career spikes of “pointy people”.

Finally the intrinsic point of dance is that it brings excitement and a breathless sense of pleasure. It is a means and an end in itself. It is not about *getting* somewhere, it is about *being* somewhere. The comparison to careers and to life itself is obvious enough.

Helping people in the workplace to find joy and meaning in what they do, to feel a breathless excitement simply to be where they are rather than to go somewhere, will be our challenges for this year and beyond. We are all looking for brighter times ahead but those brighter times have to have meaning for us beyond the need to rush headlong for the finish line. We have to enjoy the dance before we join Pepys in that brief respite between work and the grave.

Stuart Walkley

For further information contact:

Brigit Egan - Director

Oakridge

Tel: 0161 327 2031

Brigit.egan@oakridgecentre.co.uk