

TJ Blog by Stuart Walkley

Grit and making do -and a warning to Cheshire Paper Boys

Three highly successful business-leaders in the North West and I met for lunch earlier this month in Liverpool. It is one of the greatest pleasures of work to have these opportunities to meet, listen and talk and is far richer than any evening spent surfing Linked-In forums, or scratching around on Facebook. It had struck me forcefully early in the new year that having 500 plus contacts sitting on a data-base meant very little: having three wonderful people in a cosy restaurant on a dry, cold, bright and windy February lunchtime down at the Albert Dock was somehow far more meaningful. This was what networking was all about. The menu looked distinctly appetizing.

Our conversation wandered, as conversations should do, but as the lunch progressed so our attention turned to how well had they planned for success in their careers. One was the Regional Director for Skills and Work Programme provision, another a Deputy Director of an innovative Employability Programme at one of our largest Universities, and my final lunch guest the Human Resource Director of a specialist Pharmaceutical devices company.

It came as something of a surprise to find that none had started with such a career path in mind. None indeed had started with the so-called qualifications associated with such posts. In fact all had strayed considerably from their own plans and from the prescriptive expectations of the positions they held. Whilst all had dreams and had started with attempting to realise dreams things had happened which transpired to change their vision completely. Life threw at them the unexpected, the unplanned. Interestingly it was that imposter “disaster” which had led to their success rather than “triumph” although, with Kipling, I am sure they would have treated both in the same matter-of-fact way.

One found their family business, started by their father, suddenly hitting the rocks, another was similarly made redundant from one position and had jumped into something they disliked intensely, and my third dinner guest, munching away on the ubiquitous slab of Tuna, needed to support a partner and a child whilst finding the current post unexpectedly coming to an end and a financial end-of-the month clock ticking away.

What do you do in such a situation? It seemed obvious to the gritty, redoubtable three although I suspect the rest of us are lagging behind. You “make do” and “make it work”. Now this sounds dangerously near to a Wartime Austerity Poster or to something your grandparents might say, but it was for each the secret of their success. There was something so straightforward, so disarmingly simple, about the way in which they turned such disaster into triumph. They did not seek their “ideal” position, they did not even think through three or four good options and then pursue each to a suitable end-point. Instead, they stumbled across what was available and turned it into a career.

This may well be the “leap of faith” we all need to make sometimes. It is the faith we have in ourselves to be able to recreate the future, our future, in ways which had previously been unknown to us. It requires career agility, suppleness and speed, to see the new opening as one which will “do” and then to turn it into something truly transformational. It is, of course, what transformation is all about --- the nature of change in making the present and the future better than the past.

One had a chance telephone call with someone who had heard of “the perfect position”, another wandered into a recruitment company looking for work only to find that recruiting itself was a real possibility, and another passing by another office popped her head round the door and discovered there were several part-time posts around that might do. Turning “might do” into “successful career” seems to be a tall order. They would all attest to the importance of luck, of being in the right place at the right time but in fact I suspect that they could all have turned almost any place and any time into the “right” one simply because of a mental framework and a sense of self-determination that meant they would make it do.

Perhaps we should cease striving for the ideal. We know in the current situation that we are not going to find it that too often. We are not all going to win *The X Factor*, *The Lottery*, or even make a passable dive on *The Splash* and we have to confine these to our lazy Saturday night TV fantasies.

Perfect positions in perfect companies are not coming our way anytime soon and we shall always face barriers of being too young, too old, too experienced, too junior, too qualified, too underqualified. The faith we need to provide is not some blind belief in the unattainable, but rather our steely trust that people can make anything work if they set their mind to it through their own determination and grit.

My mind has happily chanced upon this as we finished our meal with a Double-Expresso, A Cappuccino, and two Lattes. (I eyed the pudding menu but have long since leaned that ladies who lunch do not do pudding as well). There was one more sting in the tail to come. One recounted how in recent weeks she had taken to early morning walks around the leafy lanes of Cheshire with the dog in an effort to fit in more exercise. She had noticed on these brisk encounters with the morning air, two paper-boys, each aged about fourteen, completing their paper rounds in cars driven by their mothers to each of the doors.

Collective sharp intake of breath, general tutting, clicking of tongues, and shaking of heads. That was not “making do” and nor did it show much grit. It falls to us to wonder whether it later life such paper-boys will really have the resources, grit, or determination to turn their head and hands to whatever is needed and to make do.

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