

THE GUIDE BY YOUR SIDE

THE ESSENTIALS OF SELF-DISCOVERY
TO MAKE GOOD CHOICES AND MANAGE YOUR CAREER
IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY

Briefing Paper

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Vision

I envision OJT-Tulsa as a center for Career Development that is literally “the guide by the side of every participant with a plan for their success.” It helps job seekers to learn how to make good choices that utilize their innate strengths and uniqueness to craft a personal pathway through this transition and five years into their future career. It will do this by providing education about personal insight and foresight through structured conversation and discussion that personalizes growth and development.

It will provide a firm foundation for career placement efforts by producing people who are self-aware, focused and engaged in career development from their first day at OJT. The result will be people with a competitive edge to add value to any organization.

Introduction and Purpose

Over the last few years I have attempted to re-perceive the process of career development among organizational professionals. The purpose is to help individual contributors and their and mentors to find a mutually beneficial ways to think about and act upon individual growth and development. There are two sides to the career development coin. One side focuses on deepening and broadening technical skills. It is the continuation of the professional course classroom and laboratory. The other side is the development of human potential. This side focuses on self-discovery through structured conversation. It is mutually beneficial because leaders have as much to learn from the individuals, as individuals have to learn from leaders and the organizations they represent. To do this I have merged a number of best practices (things that have worked for me consistently over forty years) into a single package.

This paper focuses on the human potential side because it is often of less concern to technical professionals. However the lack of insight into who you are and what you want can derail promising technical careers. The two sides are the yin and yang, point and counter point, of career development. The human potential side includes the concepts of Insight, Foresight and Connectedness. Insight is in-depth self-discovery and the process of re-perceiving an individual. Foresight is imagining a best future with discipline and reason. This includes long-term, value-based personal goals as well as

alternative futures or personal scenario planning. Finally it examines connectedness to help emerging professionals gain access to people and resources to execute their plans. This is about building relationships and the understanding of networks and networking.

Career. A career is an unfolding sequence of work experiences over time together with an equally significant sequence of transitions. The underlying process is the choices we make in our career journey. Choices are subject to many influences, parents, teachers, peers, and youthful experience, et al. Learning to make choices that are consistent with whom we are is a critical skill.

Career Development. Career Development, or People Development, constitutes all the activities undertaken by people and their mentors to create opportunities for an individual to add value to him/her-self and whatever enterprise. It is up to the individual to insure that he/she continually adds value throughout his/her career. Performance is the measure of that effort. There is an inescapable paradox. Individuals are responsible for their own development, but they cannot do it alone. Everyone needs a guide by their side who has a plan for their success. Also, there are two career transitions that everyone must undertake: the transition from dependence to independence and the transition from the present into the future. The guide is indispensable in doing this.

“It is not what THEY do, it is what YOU do about what they do that counts”.

Performance. The measure of added value is personal performance. With age there is an expectation of increasing challenge and complexity of problems to be solved. This requires increase in the skills and abilities to solve more complex problems, achieve higher goals and accomplish more difficult tasks. Performance reflects success or lack of it. The constant balance between increasing complexity and increasing skills and abilities puts everyone on the path to higher and higher performance. This lesson needs to be instilled early.

Choices: Perhaps the most undervalued so-called “soft” skill is the ability to make good choices. High performance depends on good choices. You may set a goal and achieve it but if the accomplishment does not add value it is wasted effort. Goals need to be established with purpose. The primary choice you make dictates a series of secondary choices. It is essential that

your primary choice is worthy of your efforts. You are where you are in your career based on the choices you have made. How is that working for you? Could you have made better choices? What can you learn from this?

“Creativity is the invention of the new and the rearrangement of the old in new ways.”

The more old stuff that you have at your fingertips the more opportunity you have to rearrange it into something new. The same applies to self-discovery. The more you know about what you have done, the stuff you worked with and the skills you brought to bear to achieve past accomplishments, the greater your chances to re-perceive yourself in a variety of ways to cope with change. Self-discovery is a way to take inventory of you.

Re-perceive: to look at again, but in a different way.

Doubt. Doubt is a potentially crippling mental state that can undermine any career. “I don’t know what drives me, or what drains me”; “I don’t know who has my back or who I can trust”; “I am fearful of saying ‘I don’t know’, how I will be perceived”; “I’m not sure how I can bounce back if I make a mistake”. This is the subtext of organizational life. Doubt needs to be confronted. It is hard to do this alone. The guide by your side can help. I was told by a mentor to “doubt the doubts”. That can be difficult when you feel isolated.

Responsibility and Failure. One of the obstacles that very smart people face in their careers is learning from failure. If you have never experienced failure you must know how to respond to it when it inevitably happens. The normal knee-jerk reaction is to find someone or something else to blame. When people become defensive all opportunity for learning stops. The better response is to look inward before ever looking outward. The question is, “What did I do to contribute to this failure?” “What can I learn by taking responsibility that will strengthen me in the future?”

Insight

Take Inventory. Who are you? No coach would send a player into a game if he/she did not know what skills and abilities the player possessed. The coach needs to know not only a player’s technical skills but also his

motivation and how the player fits into the team on the field. The same is true for you and your leaders. This is the reason for self-discovery. You need to know yourself better than anyone else. Personal bias prevents you from seeing yourself as others do. This requires structured conversation.

Conversation. The pivotal process for self-discovery is one-on-one, in-depth conversation. It is a process of asking without telling and without bias or judgment, listening, and then asking again with the attitude of a humble servant and the open-mindedness of a child. The focus is on listening. The parties involved are the inquirer, or guide, who asks the questions and the individual who is seeking self-discovery.

“The master teaches essence. When the essence is perceived he teaches what is needed to expand the perception.”..... Chinese teaching philosophy.

Learning to Learn. All people do not learn in the same way. Some learn by observation, some by reading and literature search (even on the web), some accept what they are told by others (including professors), some learn by hands on trial and error and by experimentation. Some people are motivated to learn by the need to solve a problem. Others are motivated by the problem itself, some are motivated by desire to explore the unknown. The list goes on. Knowing what drives you to learn and how you do it is another key chapter in “the book” on you.

Talk About What? The initial conversational inquiry is about the individual’s core career values. What is most important about having a career? Core values form the boundaries, the guardrails, on a person’s highway to success. Goals rooted in core values generate commitment. Core values are the foundation for making good choices. Finding your best fit in a company is, in part, discovering shared values.

The essence of self-discovery involves questions about past accomplishments that provided a great sense of personal satisfaction. In this inquiry the participants discover true strengths, most comfortable subject matter, best job fit, motivational drivers, ideal surroundings, ideal relationships and roles, and how he/she learns.

From the information revealed in this process individuals can re-perceive themselves and create their best story. The results of self-discovery allow the individual to examine their choices with discipline and reason. One of

the key outcomes of discovery and re-perceiving is the need to focus on purpose. There is a key set of questions to ask as this process unfolds. In order to realize my aspirations, “What do I need to start doing, what do I need to stop doing and what am I doing that I need to continue?”

Finding Uniqueness. Everyone is different; everyone is unique. One of the aims of self-discovery is to find the uniqueness that sets one apart from another. An MBA, engineer, lawyer has his/her own strengths aside from their “technology”. They have different values, motivations and aspirations that govern their choices, their fit and their ultimate performance. Learning this about themselves gives them a competitive edge,

Foresight

Depression is sometimes defined as the inability to construct a future. It is a state of hopelessness and helplessness. It leads to apathy and disengagement among professionals in the workforce. Constructing a future is not like self-discovery because there is no memory involved. Constructing a future is a matter of dreaming of things to come, analyzing options and making informed choices.

Value-Based, Need-Driven Goals. Most organizations are goal driven. Goals are assigned to individuals or agreed upon in meetings between leaders and individual contributors. These are generally short-term goals, perhaps a year. They are driven by the needs of the company. Each individual at the same time needs a set of long-term, personal goals independent of any organization. These are driven by the needs of the individual. The foundation for these goals is the set of core career values of the individual. Suppose one of your core values is Technical Excellence (however you define what that means to you). The question to ask is “What do I need to further my commitment to Technical Excellence? Then rewrite this need as a personal goal. These personal goals are a key element in crafting scenarios of the future.

Scenario Planning. Uncertainty about the future is a constant factor in career development. The best way to deal with an uncertain future is to re-perceive the future. The tool for re-perceiving your future is scenario planning at a personal level. This involves the crafting of three or more plausible alternative career pathways. You may have a Plan A. But your imagination can envision more. No one can predict the future. The scenario

planning process almost always illuminates opportunities or obstacles you did not expect. The planning process is a tool for learning.

At this point we have explained Insight and Foresight. Insight is the discovery phase that asks the question “Who are you?” What are your core values, your greatest strengths, your motivational driver, your best fit and your choices? You discover how you deal with doubt, failure, transition and how you learn. It also helps you to discover your purpose.

Foresight is an imagining and dreaming phase that asks, “What do you want?” It asks the question, “What are your choices?” The result of this process is a set of long-term values-based goals and alternative scenarios of the future.

This is the who, what and why of career development. It is the Discover, Dream, and Design phases. The next phase is how to Deliver.

Connectedness

“The man with a powerful why, can tolerate any number of hows.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

For the lack of a conversation a relationship was lost,

For the lack a relationship trust was lost,

For the lack of trust creativity was lost,

For the lack of creativity the company was lost.

.... My variation on, *“for the lack of a nail the horse was lost, etc*

To achieve goals, they are generally broken down into a series of action steps, strategies and tactics. This where it is vital to learn to deal with a world full of people with different ideas. This requires learning how to work with others. Whether it is as teams or short-term collaboration or the politics of a corporate hierarchy, the fundamental need is to make connections.

Very few people succeed entirely on their own. People need access to resources, information and most of all other people. This requires some skill at building relationships. Management has been defined simply as getting work done through people. The work of career development is getting things done with people. Relationships are built through conversation. Trust is built through relationships. Creative work in organizations depends on teamwork. Relationships offset isolation and stimulate personal growth.

Relationships as Networks. Networks in the purest form consist of nodes connected by lines or links. In networks of people the nodes are individuals and the links are relationships. There are rules and facts about networks and networking that help people build and utilize their networks to better navigate their careers and learn from the relationships they have developed.

In any network nodes and links are not uniformly distributed. Some nodes have many links some have very few. Nodes with many links are called “hubs”. Since nodes in career thinking are people with many connections it is wise to know whom the hubs are and how to relate to them. The personal network of relationships is the engine that makes things happen. People can have thousands of connections through social media. The question to ask is how many connections represent genuine relationships.

Career Development is an unfolding process over time. It is not mastered in a single seminar or a workshop. It is a fundamental element of the learning process that needs to start in school and continue life-long.

Your Story

What is Your Story? When people are asked what they do or are asked to tell something about themselves they often become tongue-tied. They respond with a generic profession or job title. Everyone is much more than that. The result of this process of people development makes a richer more interesting story possible. It focuses on uniqueness, strengths, motivations and aspirations that have been discovered. It tells people who you are and what you want. With practice the gist of your story can be told in two minutes as, perhaps, in a job interview.

Summary

Career development is a process that is life-long. Natural strengths emerge early. Core values are formulated early in childhood. The partnership of the individual and guide/coach helps individuals discover and implement their innate creativity and gifts. It is this guidance that lays the foundation for career self-management and career independence.

The Essential Library of Career Development

Agyris, C., 1991, **Teaching Smart People How to Learn**, Harv. Bus. Rev., May, HBR Classics, 71 pp.

Absolutely must read and discuss with others to avoid career derailing through defensive reasoning

Barabasi, A-L, **Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else in Business, Science and Life**,

Most comprehensive non-technical book on networks and networking

Csikszentmihayli, M. 2003, **Good Business: Leadership, Flow and the Making of Meaning**, Penguin, N.Y., 244 pp.

_____, 1997, **Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life**, Basic Books, N.Y., 181 pp.

These two books provide an introduction to the concept of “Flow” (optimal performance) in layman’s terms, especially for people in organizations

DeGeus, A. P., 1988, **Planning as Learning**. Harv. Bus. Rev.

Four pages packed with essentials of corporate learning

Fritz, R., 1984, **The Path of Least Resistance**, Fawcett Columbine, N.Y., 285 pp.

An off-the-wall guide to be yourself (see Miller)

Frankl, V., 2006 ed., **Man’s Search for Meaning**, Beacon Press, Boston, 180 pp.

Finding purpose and meaning in life.

Hanson, M., **Job Fit and Creativity**

May, R., 1976, **The Courage to Create**, Bantam Books, N.Y., 173 pp.

Creativity is the encounter of a courageous person with the “Truth”

MacKenzie, G. 1998, **Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool’s Guide to Surviving with Grace**, Viking.

Most illuminating guide for creative people dealing with the corporate hierarchy

Miller, A. F., 1999, **The Power of Uniqueness: How to Become Who You Really Are**, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 255 pp.

The most basic guide to personal development I know. Who are you?

Schein, E., 2013, **Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Without Telling**,

Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 121 pp.

The paradox of career development is that it is the individual’s responsibility but no one can do it alone. Requires critical Q and A conversations.

Schwartz, P., 1991, **The Art of the Long View: The Art of Planning in an Uncertain World**, Doubleday Currency, 258 pp.

One chapter (Rehearsing the Future) devoted to scenario planning for individuals.

Sutton, R. I. and H. Rao, 2014, **Scaling Up Excellence: Getting to More Without Settling for Less**, Crown Business, N.Y., 346 pp.

Avoiding the traps of Illusion, Impatience and Incompetence

Wack, P., 1985, **Uncharted Waters Ahead; Shooting the Rapids**, Harv. Bus. Rev.

Two HBR papers on re-perceiving the future. How Wack’s vision and analysis alone anticipated the 1973 Arab oil embargo for Royal Dutch Shell. Helped catalyze scenario planning and corporate learning.

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