

# THE NUANCES OF WORK

## *How Subtleties Drive Success*

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*Work must have life in it—vitality.* —CLIFF HAKIM

### **OBSERVATION**

I often go to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to be inspired by a dazzling 42-foot sculpture like Dale Chihuly's Lime Green Icicle Tower. The tower is stately, reminding me of an ancient evergreen, with glass branches that seem to radiate energy from the inside out. When I asked the MFA guide, "Is it alive?" She responded, "It is!"

She then commented on a notebook I was carrying. "That's a beautiful cover. Where was it made?" I told her that my artist friend Elles designed the book and that it was a New Year's gift. The guide responded enthusiastically. "Tell her I'm a fan!"

When I passed on these comments to Elles, who also designs my website, she said, "You made my day!"

If we awaken to the nuances in our environment, we pick up important information that helps us to build better relationships with our colleagues and coworkers.

Martha, Chief Financial Officer with an investment firm, explained how this works for her. "You have to pay attention to every detail during an initial public offering. Once we had to satisfy some very stringent SEC guidelines on a tight deadline. Our process stalled, due to an oversight. My team worked through the night to draft a thorough response to the SEC and when

we explained our thinking to their accountant, he offered us guidance and encouragement. He even called me at the final hour to say that we'd passed muster." Martha relayed the compliment to her team and took this opportunity to talk about the subtleties of good communication. At the end of the project, the group felt rewarded for their efforts.

Careful observation not only supports our productivity, it adds to our happiness. I asked Elijah, a software programmer, why he was struggling with his current job, "What symbolizes your unhappiness?"

"The cubicle," he said. "It feels so restricting and I spend the bulk of my time in it. I used to be the guy who would take off, alone, and travel through some exotic country."

"When do you get to leave the cubicle? What happens then?"

"When a customer calls with a problem, I meet with them onsite. At that point, I come alive. I'm totally focused on their needs. I listen and once a clearer picture emerges, I start to offer my solutions."

Elijah shared this insight with his boss, and eventually, turned his office space into a place of information gathering. It was no longer "just a box" but an outpost for client interviews.

Petra, a graphics designer with an MBA, was ready for a change, and started by noting the tasks that she enjoyed the most. Her goals were to combine her creativity with financial independence. This observation led her in a whole new direction. Petra became an analyst in a real estate investment firm. “I appreciate the physical characteristics of all the properties,” she explained, “and I also have a talent for simplifying deals and presenting ideas to investors. I use my drawings to tell a story to potential backers. This is my way of showing them that a project is both aesthetically and financially sound.”

Petra did not fall prey to “either-or thinking” when examining her skill set. She consciously inserted an “and” between her creative and financial talents and found a job where she could use both.

My greatest joy comes from creative feedback—another form of observation. Over the years, I’ve written four books and countless articles about rethinking work. Each time I’ve asked a small group of trusted colleagues to read a draft and make comments. My requests: What would you tell a friend about this source and if so, why? What, in your opinion are the pluses in this story? What could use improvement? What are the top two things that you would like to change?

When I got my very first draft back, the comments looked like birdshot splattered across each page and this triggered a grade-school fear of criticism. But I learned to welcome and study these remarks. Many of my careful readers not only commented on the content but offered emotional support. Val Andrews, The Nuances of Work editor, sharpened my pen as this newsletter was launched, encouraging me to make each column tighter. Her advice: “There’s a lot of heart in this publication, Cliff, and some great advice. Make it a fast read and people will use your exercises to jump start their day.”

To awaken or strengthen your powers of observation, ask yourself:

- When I go to a museum or plan any pleasurable activity outside of work—what energizes and excites me? How can I incorporate these experiences on the job?
- What part of my job has grown stale? What am I particularly tired of doing over and over again?
- Where is the “juice”—the place when I’m content and totally focused and feel totally alive?
- What steps can I take to strengthen my relationships with coworkers and colleagues? Do I need to listen better to improve my management style? Give feedback in a more constructive manner? How can I show others that I appreciate the nuances of their work?

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