

THE NUANCES OF WORK

How Subtleties Drive Success

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

TOMORROW

My friend Carol is eighty-two-years young, a former social worker, and someone I regularly turn to for wisdom and insight. Over lunch, I asked her, “In a word, what do you think is the real job of an American president?”

Carol’s eyes gleamed as she responded, “Tomorrow.”

“Can you explain?”

“Tomorrow is what inspired my generation during World War II. While the men served their country, we women built airplanes, went to work in factories and volunteered for the Red Cross. We were called the Greatest Generation because we stood up for our beliefs. And we learned how to look in two directions: we did our jobs, keeping one eye on the present and the other on the future. That’s what you need to do if you’re going to lead effectively.”

For weeks afterwards, I caught whiffs of Carol’s thoughts as I talked to my clients. Her idea of “doing your job with one eye on the present and the other on the future” was an uplifting message. Yet it takes grit to make this your credo and put it into action.

“For over two years, I’ve been hyper-focused, tackling a pile of urgent problems,” said Roman who’d spent the last five years as global operations manager at a hydraulics company.

“Many of these problems were handed down from my predecessor: back orders, customers waiting for repairs, and staff untrained to meet those challenges.”

“What does that mean for you?”

“I’m doing too much of the daily work myself as I compensate for my team and its marginal skill level. The truth is, I’m chomping on the bit to move into a more strategic role and concentrate on our long-term growth.”

“What do you see as your biggest obstacle?” I asked.

“Time. Right now I’m clocking 70-hour weeks just to concentrate on short-term shareholder gain. Finding a moment to think ahead is impossible because I’m under so much pressure to provide instant profits while fielding urgent customer demands.”

“Have you discussed this situation with your boss?”

“In the past six months, I have made many suggestions, but the top brass doesn’t want to hear them. They seem wedded to the status quo yet as I see it, they are missing the opportunity to restructure the company so we can start attracting new customers and expand our markets.”

“What would you say are your main skills?”

“I’m good at envisioning possibilities; I don’t need all the facts to move ahead. When it comes to innovation, leaders like Bill George have shown me that although data is important, opportunity will pass you by if you don’t trust your gut and embrace your vision.”

The former CEO of Medtronic, and the author of *True North* and *Authentic Leadership*, Bill George is now a professor at Harvard Business School. He’s served as a role model for several of my clients.

“What else did you learn from him?”

“Bill believes that trust—of your own ideas, your staff and your core creative team goes a long way. He led with his values and built a company that was visionary and responsive to the markets. We just don’t have that kind of leadership here.”

“Sounds like you’ve assessed your situation pretty thoroughly.”

Roman nodded. “I admit my youthful impatience; I’m edging up to 37 and I’m not willing to listen to excuses, especially since I’ve showed my willingness to work hard and come up with workable solutions.”

“Have you considered breaking down your requests into micro-steps? That’s a way to educate the skeptics and show the decision makers the path toward the future. But it might mean a year or two before you see results.”

“That’s too much time! I’m fired up to make the system better and I’m itching to grow personally.”

After our talk, Roman decided to find a corporate culture that would allow him to address today’s deliverables and tomorrow’s possibilities. Though Roman was in his 30s, I’ve found that this ability to hold two perspectives

is valuable to people at all stages of life, and at different points in their careers.

In fact, the advice I gave him is suitable for anyone who is searching for a sense of balance and for greater satisfaction on the job:

Get specific – State exactly what you want to achieve. Include the values and competencies that you want to develop.

Focus on learning – Don’t judge yourself, but open your heart and mind to new skills that will help you grow and build your knowledge base.

Realistically persevere – Embrace the ups and downs of your journey. Know that worthy goals take time to achieve, that much depends upon finding like-minded colleagues and associates, and that overcoming obstacles is a necessary prelude to success.

To find work that’s good for today and good for tomorrow, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I taken enough time to understand the nuances of leadership at my company?
- Can I find an advocate and/or mentor to discuss my values and bring them to fruition?
- How can I learn from others who are engaged in successful innovation?
- What opportunities do I have to create a “sustainable future?”
- Is it time to explore other work cultures that will allow me to balance today’s concerns with a strong vision for tomorrow?

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