

Conduct a “personalized” SWOT: Align yourself for professional growth

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Most of us struggle with too many choices, not too few. If you are reading this article, you already know you have talents, skills and abilities you are not engaging to the fullest. We all are veterans at assessing a situation and choosing one alternative of several to meet customer, workplace or personal objectives. Here we will focus on the choices that really enhance your personal effectiveness.

As an employee, we have responsibilities critical to the success of our organization. How we do our job, share information and include others in decision making are strong multipliers of our personal effectiveness. Some of us prefer the Lone Ranger approach to getting results; others perform better in the teamwork model of the Fantastic Four or Three Musketeers. Business literature is full of successful careers employing either approach. The secret is that they don't keep their success secret.

There is another alternative that meets the more complex needs of current business challenges. To increase personal effectiveness, you must first assess where you stand within your organization. How can you be more personally effective? From there you can impact others more effectively to the benefit of your organization.

How do you exhibit your effectiveness to yourself and to others? Do you hide accomplishments out of a sense of humility? Many of us were taught this “aw, shucks, Ma'am” approach as children, only to find that it does not serve us well in the marketplace. No one can carry our message of accomplishment better than we can. If others need to know we are valuable, it is up to us to show that value. So, how do we demonstrate our value without irritating others? After all, today's complex problems require cooperation rather than competition. So, while we must plan our personal actions effectively, we must assure that others are included in our plans.

Getting the job done well has a social component as well as a technical component. Success is a “fit”, just like a good pair of running shoes. Think of someone you work with who has lots of talent, but just doesn't “fit” into what is going on around them? Their effectiveness is inhibited by the weight of their personal characteristics. What about their behavior makes you aware that there is a conflict between their actions and how the organization works best?

The concept of fitting in is not new. We ran into it when we first started school, or looked for a comfortable group of friends. Human beings are social creatures. We cluster together with those who look like us, dress like us, talk like us, even smell like us. Yes, there is a strong drive in the media to be socially diverse and to respect differences. This is a good thing in our global economic environment. Just because our ancestors 40,000 years ago ganged together to protect their cave from the tribe two river crossings away doesn't mean that survival requirements have not changed.

Technology, communication, literacy and political advances have all changed the world in huge ways since Homo sapiens came on the scene. The GEICO ads featuring affronted cavemen captured the heart of TV viewers like few marketing campaigns. The reality of the situation, however, is that people DO notice when we fit well in a situation or whether we are in some way discordant. As humans, we are hardwired to trust what looks and acts like “our crowd”.

If we want to be noticed in the workplace in a positive way, we need to contribute in ways that are comfortable to our leaders and our peers. The fairy tales of the weird scientist who is discovered and carried through the lunch room on the shoulders of senior management are just that; fairy tales. To show our value to the organization we need to be seen and heard. People listen best when they are not threatened; when their defenses are down; when they are comfortable with who is speaking. We simply cannot effectively go-it-alone.

How do we know whether our actions in the workplace create an environment of comfort and trust? What is the company culture? How do things get done in the company? Who has power to get things done? What gets people promoted or recognized? What is the pattern of dress, of speaking, of presenting information and ideas? Rarely are the answers to these questions written in the company manual. As the saying goes “the best way to describe the culture of an organization is that it’s like pornography. You can’t really describe it or define it, but you know it when you see it.”

We are not stupid. If we are not as far ahead in our career or recognized enough in the workplace, we probably have a good idea why. We may not like what we are thinking, but chances are our intuition is pointing us in the right direction. It comes back to choices again. The vision we have of ourselves is in some way in conflict with the vision of the “successful” person in the job we want. If we are not in alignment with the organization and fellow employees, we will not be successful. Not many of us are independently wealthy or the top boss in the company. These folks get to set the company culture. Since most of us are not in that situation, we may want to look more closely at how we can work effectively with a minimum of conflict. There is a tool used in industry to identify and resolve organizational conflict. The tool works just as well for individual conflict. An honest self-assessment of where we stand will greatly improve our performance as well as personal satisfaction.

Your Personal Vision SWOT

A useful tool for investigating any conflict between your personal vision and that of your organization is the traditional SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) exercise. A personal “SWOT-on-steroids” provides a structured way to look at the positive and negative drivers that influence your ability to gather, analyze and synthesize observations that come to you in the course of your daily activities. How you make decisions from incoming information is critical for choosing the right alternatives for your future within the company.

Schedule at least 30 minutes when you can shut the door and turn off the phones to conduct your personal vision SWOT. Lay out 4 sheets of clean paper on the desk and write your personal vision first and then your company vision underneath it on each piece of paper. Next, label one

paper each: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Quickly write down all the good things about how your personal vision supports or is supported by the company vision on the paper marked “Strengths”. What about how you work, speak, dress, write, socialize, communicate, or even disagree fits well within your workplace. Don’t take more than five minutes to do this. Next, on the paper marked “Weaknesses” write down in five minutes as many inconsistencies or risks apparent between your personal vision and that of the company. Face these self-reflective issues as honestly as you can. The insight that you gain will be well worth your efforts. Your vision and performance will be more focused and effective.

Now, switch gears just a bit for the last two pages. Opportunities and Threats are external forces where Strengths and Weaknesses are personal and internal. For the page marked “Opportunities” write down as many changes you can see in the future of your company or organization that will positively impact your personal vision of your career. Again, keep to the five minute limit. You can do this multiple times, if you feel there are other thoughts just outside your grasp. Finally, take the last five minutes for the “Threats” page. What do you see coming down the corporate pike that will negatively impact, or delay the advancement of your personal career vision?

Once you have written on each of the four pages, sit up and take a deep breath. Do not attempt to resolve or even research anything you have written for at least 24 hours. Trust your subconscious to sort the ideas out a little before you make any decisions on priority setting or whether action is required at all. Schedule time to revisit your SWOT writings within the next 72 hours.

At this second session identify which areas have the most benefit and the most risk for your career. Choose whether you wish to approach your actions or personal behaviors in the company to maximize the benefits to your personal career vision, or whether it is more appropriate to minimize the risks. Usually, if the company is tracking well to its vision and market, you will have more time to focus on the benefits to your career. When the company needs your direct energies to short circuit industry or market threats, the best approach is to focus clearly on corporate performance and, at best, minimize any damage the required actions may cause to your personal future. Hopefully, you are in a position to address a little of each. Your performance is a balance of these organizational and personal needs.

Let Your Light Shine

Look at the items you have identified on your personal SWOT. Consider your personal values and identify any observed weaknesses or threats that, if addressed, would cause you to go against your values. Strike these off your list unless you are willing to change that personal value. For example, if your company culture includes stopping at the bar on the way home from work and you don’t drink, this is probably not a good item for you to consider changing as a way to gain stronger acceptance in the workplace.

Identify the top three areas in each of the four categories that are within your control or influence. One may be as simple as the way you dress. Others may be a stretch that, while painful, will prove your worth to your company.

Be a partner, not an obstruction. In the past, companies were able to prosper with a few decision makers at the top, today's complex opportunities and solutions require a leader who can gain consensus without losing focus. An honest self-assessment is worth its weight in gold. Use your personal SWOT analysis to amplify your personal talents.

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