

May 2009

## Do you know where you're going to?

A somewhat syrupy song from the 1970s went "Do you know where you're going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you? Where are you going to... do you know?"

### Well, do you know?

Business conditions continue to deteriorate but the road that runs from downturn to downsizing doesn't have to continue on to deterioration and devastation. So allow us to ask you an important question – one just as important to your success as trimming the fat, reorienting to changing markets, implementing new business strategies, and revitalising customer networks:



### Is your workforce confident, coherent and cohesive? Or is it demoralised, disengaged and disempowered?

In the current economy, there is a tendency to think that employees should feel lucky to have a job and work harder than ever to prove their worth. Recent surveys prove otherwise. LHH Global Partner, Masteryworks, reports recent US surveys show:

- 87% of employees are less likely to recommend their organisations as a good place to work;
- 81% say customer service has declined;
- 77% believe more errors and mistakes are being made;
- 64% say their colleagues' productivity has reduced; and
- 61% feel their organisation's prospects have declined.

Over the past year, employee engagement levels have apparently declined in every category measured - a resounding call to action for managers in every business that hopes not simply to survive, but to evolve into a leaner, fitter, more flexible, adaptable and disparate but aggregated organisation.

Career development is an essential requirement for employee engagement and talent retention and it is vital that leaders and managers:

- Communicate, interact, offer information and invite employees to share their experiences and perspectives;
- help employees articulate their value and identify areas of expertise and knowledge – those applicable in their current roles and those that might have value in a different context;
- find out how employees see their career progression, help them envisage alternative scenarios, and provide them with skills that make them opportunity-focused and job-ready;
- support the survivors who have shared in the confusion and complexity of change, experienced the fear and uncertainty, watched their colleagues leave, and taken on additional work, stress and responsibility.

An article published in *Harvard Business Review* some years ago, said the question foremost in the minds of mid-career professionals is "Am I doing what's right for me, or should I change direction?" The author, Herminia Ibarra, proposes a "test and learn" model of change which seems ideally suited to career development in the current context.

She decries a conventional "plan and implement" model of change as one where we clarify what we want to do next and use that knowledge to guide our actions, and suggests "Change actually happens the other way around. Doing comes first, knowing second." It is now widely acknowledged that we do not have one "true self" but are in fact many selves, defined by our experiences, current situations and hopes and fears for the future. Ibarra believes that "Our possible selves... are at the heart of the career change process.... That is why, working identity... is necessarily a process of experimenting, testing, and learning about our possible selves."

The only way to meet uncertainty, she says, is to resist the tug of a comfort zone (which paradoxically, is often no longer comfortable!), and make alternative careers more real and possible, by:

**Crafting experiments.** In approaching career change, our biggest mistake is to delay the first step until a destination has been determined. The test and learn option allows new working identities to evolve by trying out new activities and roles on a small scale – e.g., through part-time work, volunteering, a sabbatical or new training - before committing to a major transition.

**Shifting connections.** We must network outside our usual circles, to develop contacts who can open doors to new worlds and identify guides who can help us see and grow into our new working identities.

**Making sense.** We need to recognise or create catalysts for change, make meaning of our experiences and use it to tell the story of who we are becoming. "Arranging life events into a coherent story is one of the subtlest, yet most demanding, challenges of career reinvention", providing an answer to the oft-asked questions "Tell me about yourself" and "Why would you want to do that?"

The working identity approach invites us to learn by doing, to act *and* reflect. It suggests there is more to be gained from exploratory career day trips than might eventuate from a carefully planned for major journey. As Ibarra says:



"Your working identity is an amalgam of the kind of work you want to do, the relationships and organisations that form part of your work life, and the story you tell about why you do what you do and how you arrived at that point. Reshaping that identity, therefore, is a matter of making adjustments to all three of those aspects over time. The adjustments happen tentatively and incrementally, so the process can seem disorderly. In fact, it is a logical process of testing, discovering and adapting that can be learned by almost anyone seeking professional renewal."

"Most of my advances were by mistake. You uncover what is when you get rid of what isn't." [Buckminster Fuller]

### Through My Eyes: a story of organisational change through the eyes of different participants

#### **A Wife**

My husband came home from work today very happy. He rang me at the end of his shift to say he had good news and would tell me about it when he got home. I wondered if it was about the plant; they had been talking about closing it, maybe it would stay opened and he could continue to work there.

At first I thought he was joking when he came in and changed out of his work uniform. He said the big bosses had called everyone from his shift together in the canteen and said they are closing the plant in 6 months! If we watch the TV tonight it will even be on the news. How could he be happy about this? He had worked so hard for this company for 30 years - even did overtime and extra shifts when they asked. What will he do now?



But he was happy. He said that their Supervisor and someone from personnel spoke to him after the announcement and explained that after 30 years he would get a very good pay-out of money, including his long service leave and sick leave. Then another person, a consultant, met him and told him about some training he would get to help him find another job. He thinks if he gets another job soon then we can buy another property or maybe pay off our mortgage.

It all sounds very nice, but what if this doesn't happen? What if we use up all our money and still no job? Or worse, what if it is enough money to pay off the mortgage and he stays home all the time? Things were fine the way they were. I'm not so sure about all of this....



21st April 2009: Less than 50% of companies realise they have to notify Centrelink if they retrench 15 or more employees.

The Fair Work Bill comes into place on July 1st and failure to notify Centrelink will create a risk of a fine up to \$3300.

**More information to follow in June.**