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Bringing Work to Life

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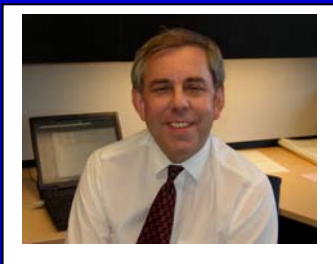
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Welcome

Welcome to the latest issue of Bringing Work to Life. In the last three issues we explored:

- Confronting one of our fears as leaders in “Facing Our Greatest Fears: Public Speaking”
(http://www.elsdon.com/sept__oct__2004.htm)
- Bringing meaning to our work lives, the benefits to each of us and to our organizations, in “May You Live All the Days of Your Life”
(http://www.elsdon.com/august_2004.htm)
- Seven key aspects of the organizational and business drivers for workforce development in “Opening the Door for Workforce Development”
(http://www.elsdon.com/july_2004.htm).

This month we explore an important worklife survival skill in “Finding a Fit”

Worklife Survival: Finding a Fit

“This was one my best work experiences. We had a great team; we moved right past our competition, I was learning constantly. What a contribution we made!” Contrast these words with the following: “If only I had looked deeply into the organization three years ago, before I joined, I wouldn’t have accepted their offer. These last three years at work were awful. I was glad to leave the organization. Thank goodness that is over.” You may find both examples in your past work experience. In one case you were energized, fulfilled, realizing your potential. In the other case you were anxious and frustrated. Why the difference? What can we do to find that place of meaning, fulfillment and contribution?

On the surface this might seem simple. Know yourself, understand the organizations you join, make sure there is a fit and jump right in. It sounds easy. But we stumble frequently, so that simplicity is misleading. Here are some tips to help find a right fit and avoid those bad experiences. To find a right fit we need to

supporting organizations enhance effectiveness through revitalized workforce relationships and leadership practices. Prior to establishing his practice, Ron held senior leadership positions at diverse organizations.

Ron is also author of *Affiliation in the Workplace: Value Creation in the New Organization* (2003), a book describing leadership approaches to integrate the needs of the individual with the needs of the organization for the benefit of both. Ron holds a Ph.D. from Cambridge University in Chemical Engineering, an M.A. from John F. Kennedy University in Career Development and a first class honors degree from Leeds University in Chemical Engineering. With his co-author he was awarded the Walker Prize by the Human Resource Planning Society for the paper that best advances state-of-the-art thinking or practices in human resources.

know what actually goes on in an organization – the real scoop, not the public posture. The first step is to be clear about our own values and what kind of environment works well for us. There are assessment tools available, such as Values Driven Work and Career Anchors, which can help with this. We can also review our past work experiences and from those experiences identify the kinds of environment that fit well and those that don't. Once we are clear about our own values then we can look for a match with a prospective organization.

How do we find out what is really going on in that organization? We can start by looking at how the organization presents itself, for example in the annual report or other publications. However, while this may give some clues it can be misleading. The serious corporate misdeeds over the past few years show how easy it is to present a façade. Indeed most organizations claim to value employees in the annual report, few deliver. One more effective approach is to apply the principles of behavioral interviewing to probe the organization. This is a reverse of the behavioral interview we use to assess job candidates. It is based on the understanding that the best predictor of future performance is past behavior. So an interviewer using this approach with job candidates probes for examples of past behaviors in key areas. We can do the same with an organization. Here's how it works when probing for organizational values.

We take our key personal values developed from assessments or life experiences and probe for examples in the organization of a fit or disconnect. This may sound a bit fuzzy. So let's give it some structure and put into that structure questions we might use to probe for organizational behaviors. We can use four broad values categories to frame the culture and values in an organization (or you can create your own). These are the four: leadership style, workforce relationships, strategic focus and pace, and organizational flexibility. We can then create more specific aspects within each of the four and create questions to probe for related behaviors. Some examples follow.

- Leadership style
 - How decisions are made – for example, independently, by consensus, or by pecking order
 - Tell me about the last major decision made in the group. How did you go about it?
 - How information is shared – openly or on a need-to-know basis
 - What was the last quarter's financial performance? How did you learn about it?
 - How recognition is practiced
 - What was the last significant accomplishment by someone in the group? How was it celebrated?
 - Whether the organization is more formal or informal
 - When did you last see the CEO in the cafeteria?
- Workforce relationships
 - How people relate to each other – cooperatively, competitively, or collaboratively

- Tell me about an example of a recent conflict with someone from another department. What happened and how was it resolved?
 - How people relax and have fun
 - Tell me about the best social event at work this year.
 - How individual development is valued
 - How were you supported in your personal development by the organization last year?
- Strategic focus and pace
 - How innovation and efficiency are integrated
 - What was the last new business idea that came up in the group? What happened to it?
 - Exploring the external and internal focus
 - What was the last significant problem with a customer? How was it addressed?
 - How much time are you spending in internal meetings this week?
 - Balancing short term and long term needs
 - What targets do you have for the group three to five years out?
 - When was your last crash project? What happened?
- Organizational flexibility
 - How easy is it to move
 - When was the last time someone in the group came from another part of the organization? How did that happen?
 - How the organization supports family obligations
 - When was the last time you had to take time for a family commitment? What happened?
 - How open is the organization to change
 - When did you last propose a significant change to your responsibilities or approach? What happened?

Let's look at an example. Jennifer is a senior director of human resources. She is exploring a potential move to an organization closer to home. In reflecting on her past work experiences Jennifer concludes that she fits well into an organization that particularly values:

- Her participation in decision making
- Open sharing of information
- A relaxed atmosphere
- Continued personal learning

- Generation of new ideas
- Time flexibility to address family needs

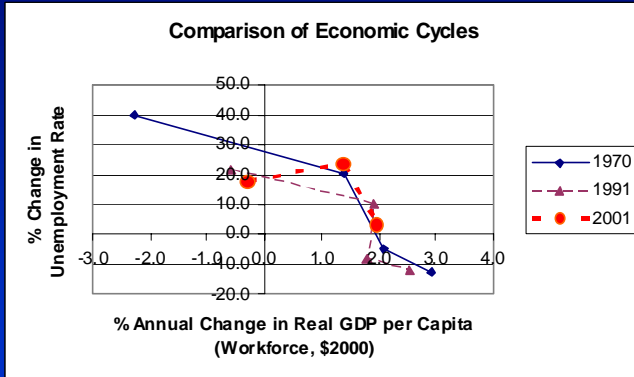
As Jennifer prepares for her interview, in addition to reviewing how her capabilities and accomplishments might meet the needs of the organization, she also develops questions to probe for the organization's values in these areas that she has decided are particularly important to her. These questions probe for examples of decision-making processes, information sharing, degree of informality, support for individual development, receptivity to new ideas and time flexibility. As a result the interview enables Jennifer and her interviewer to gain a clearer understanding of each other. They can strengthen the basis for their respective decisions and increase the likelihood of a successful match or acknowledge a lack of fit.

This is important because while it is possible to bridge skill gaps, for example through training, it is not possible to bridge gaps in core values. We can avoid the anguish of a poor fit that can create tensions inside and outside the workplace and derail a career. Instead we can move closer to expressing our full potential within an organization that values and appreciates our contribution. Try this approach next time you are interviewing or when you are conducting informational interviews. Finding that right fit is central to "letting the beauty we love be what we do" (Rumi).

The Employment Scene

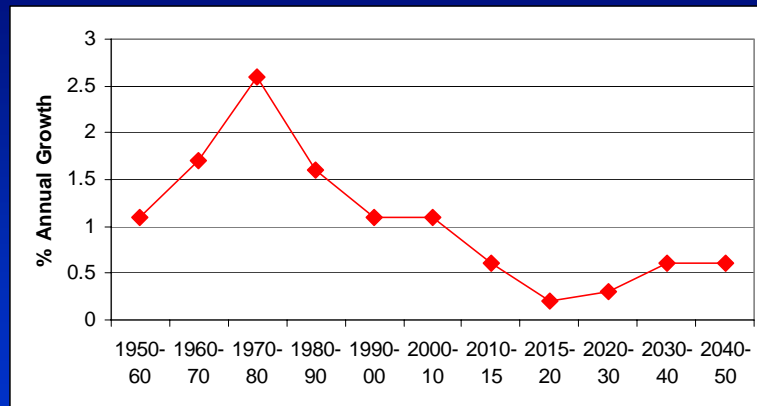
It was Leonard Cohen who sang: "Love the country, hate the scene." And for many that might capture the current employment situation. With stellar productivity growth in the U.S., much talk about offshoring and a continued sluggish employment recovery we might ask if the U.S. economy has undergone a fundamental restructuring. Are the heady days of the late 90s when the unemployment rate was down to around 4% likely to return? Today the unemployment rate is at about 5.4%. Has the link between economic growth and employment fundamentally changed? In *Affiliation in the Workplace* (Praeger, 2003) we showed a strong historical correlation between changes in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and changes in unemployment rate. Strong economic growth translated to strong declines in unemployment rate and vice versa. How is that holding up currently? The following chart shows recovery from the economic recessions in 1970, 1991 and 2001. (The recession in the early 80s took a different form and is not comparable.)

Tightening Labor Market



From this chart we see each of the three recoveries following a similar pattern. Moving from the left of the chart to the right, there is at first a slight reduction in the rate of change of unemployment in the 1970 and 1991 recoveries. This abruptly shifts as we move further to the right as economic growth picks up and there is a sudden and dramatic shift in unemployment rates. Particularly significant is that the 2001 recovery tracks the pattern of the two earlier recoveries in the third year. The line is displaced slightly upward on the graph by the third year indicating slower employment recovery. However, the similar patterns suggest that restructuring is relatively minor. When we couple the employment trend with a demographic trend of slowing birthrates and lower participation in the workforce as the population ages (as shown in the following chart), we can expect future labor shortages.

U.S. Labor Force Growth Will Decline Substantially



Source: Monthly Labor Review



This underlines the critical importance of building a strong bond of connection and affiliation within an organization. Such a bond is built through leadership practices that honor each person as an individual, that support options and choices, that integrate both the need for organizational performance and individual development and that foster cooperation and collaboration.

Quote

“Reaching goals is fine for an annual plan. Only reaching one’s potential is fine for a life.”

Max DePree, Leadership Jazz:

Upcoming Elsdon Organizational Renewal (EOR) Events

- Building Affiliation: Workforce Leadership in Action. HR Southwest Concurrent Session.
([HR Southwest, http://www.hrsouthwest.com](http://www.hrsouthwest.com))
 - October 7, 2004, Fort Worth Convention Center, TX
- Becoming Career Fit in Turbulent Times. Project Management Institute - SF Bay Area Chapter Meeting Presentation
([Project Management Institute SFBAC - San Francisco Bay Area Chapter, http://www.pmi-sfbac.org/index.phtml?menu=other_page&menu2=51](http://www.pmi-sfbac.org/index.phtml?menu=other_page&menu2=51))
 - October 21, 2004, Courtyard Marriott, San Francisco, CA
- Global Issues Forum. International Career Development Conference (ICDC) Panel Discussion
([International Career Development Conference - Career Assistance. http://www.careerccc.com](http://www.careerccc.com))
 - October 27, 2004, Sacramento Convention Center, CA
- Opening the Organizational Door for Career Development. International Career Development Conference (ICDC) Concurrent Session
([International Career Development Conference - Career Assistance. http://www.careerccc.com](http://www.careerccc.com))
 - October 29, 2004, Sacramento Convention Center, CA
- Building Employee Commitment in a Growing Economy. 56th Annual California Groundwater Association Convention and Trade Show Concurrent Session
([California Groundwater Association Events, http://www.groundh2o.org/events/events.html](http://www.groundh2o.org/events/events.html))
 - November 6, 2004, Silver Legacy Resort and Casino, Reno, NV

- Staying Career Fit. San Francisco State University
 - November 11, 2004, San Francisco State University

About EOR: Our Value Contribution

We enhance your workforce, leadership and organization by:

- Using proprietary approaches to understand workforce and leadership challenges
- Creating tailored action plans and solutions to strengthen workforce and leadership practices
- Building individual capabilities and contributions

We enable you to focus on external results and building value, confident that your organization and leadership are operating at peak effectiveness.

Our Mission

To support your organization by enhancing **performance, productivity and effectiveness** through revitalized workforce relationships and leadership practices.

Our Approach and Values

We tailor our engagements to the needs of each organization with a process designed to surface critical issues, identify root causes, build effective solutions, monitor progress and implement.

With a scope that ranges from system and organizational interventions to work with individuals, our focus is on the heart of the relationship among the individual, the organization and the community. We believe that organizational and community prosperity are built on enabling each person to fulfill his or her potential.

Our Services

We work with individuals and groups in your organization to drive performance and development for both the short and long term. As result people will choose to work in your organization and will prosper there.

We bring solutions when you need to:

- Reverse declining revenues and performance
- Revitalize your workforce
- Stem the loss of key talent
- Redirect your organization to new areas
- Stop losing customers or market share
- Penetrate new markets

- Combat aggressive competitors
- Handle major change
- Break down communication barriers
- Energize your leadership team
- Successfully build on an acquisition or merger

Our proprietary services include:

- State-of-the-art tools to take the pulse of your organization and then move to action
 - Web enabled systems
 - Experts to gather and analyze information, moving your organization to action
- Individual leadership coaching to give you world class leadership capabilities
 - Leaders who know themselves and their aspirations, build their capabilities and become catalysts developing others
- Workshops to build interpersonal skills in your organization so that:
 - Communication is timely, concise, accurate and personal
 - People listen to each other
 - Negotiations are quick and effective
 - Differences create rather than destroy value
 - Teams move forward, get results and quickly commercialize new products and services
 - People understand and link their motivations to your organizational needs
 - Your teams understand what it takes to create a committed, energized workforce
 - People use their time well
- Systems that make it easy to drive performance and build capabilities by:
 - Linking objectives throughout the organization
 - Strengthening key competencies
 - Making sure you have the bench strength where and when you need it
 - Giving people tools to take charge of their own careers, development and have a major long term influence on your organization
- Proprietary simulation and modeling techniques that let you explore how to maximize the value of your workforce
 - Move from guessing what might happen to looking in depth at the financial impact of different approaches

