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## Supporting a Nontraditional Career Path

Scott Adams, the creator of “Dilbert,” tells a story of his early days seeking a publisher for his work (<http://www.toonmaker.com/a-kind-word.htm>). At that time he sent a sample of his work to Jack Cassady, the cartoonist host of a PBS television program called *Funny Business*, to ask advice about how to enter the profession. He received a complimentary letter back with details about how to proceed, encouragement to seek a publisher and advice not to be discouraged by the rejection he might receive. Buoyed by this, Adams recounts how he submitted his best cartoons to *Playboy* and *The New Yorker* only to receive cold rejections. He put away his materials at this point and decided to forget about cartooning. About a year and a half later, Adams received a letter from Jack Cassady unexpectedly. In it Cassady inquired about Adams’ progress and again encouraged him to press forward. Adams recounts how this kind word touched him, since he hadn’t even replied to the first letter. He pulled his materials out of storage and prepared samples of what would later become “Dilbert” and submitted his work again. It was accepted and “Dilbert” was born, now to be read by millions. Jack Cassady’s actions were selfless here. He had nothing to gain from Adams’ support, was a busy man, and yet found time to support a struggling new artist. He demonstrated the selfless act of mentoring at its best, and as a result helped bring a new talent to the world. This one act of kindness created a ripple effect from which many benefit today.

I recall an incident from my teenage years. I had been volunteered as a member of a swimming team for an intramural event in the English equivalent of an American high school. Swimming was not my strength; in fact I was hopeless at it but had to participate. The event took place on a Saturday night in a pool with quite a few cheering (and jeering) spectators. It came to my event. Four of us were competing. It involved four laps of the pool and predictably by the end I was in last place, a full half-length behind the third-placed participant. I finally arrived at the finish point, too exhausted to even pull myself out of the pool. I was expecting a searing criticism, for that was common in that school. Then something unusual happened. The team coach, an older boy, helped pull me out of the water. He looked at me and said: “Well done, we really appreciate your efforts. Thank you.” I was too shocked by these few words of kindness to say anything, but they have remained with me for almost fifty years. I have forgotten the many small slights and put-downs, those acts that diminish rather than elevate. But I have not forgotten the brave words of that coach.

These are examples of support. Support that enables and ennobles. It comes from the same place as Carl Rogers’ unconditional positive regard. Support focuses on an individual need that may be clearly explained or alternatively may be unspoken but no less deeply felt. Support is instrumental in enabling the gifts that we all possess to become present for the world. It recognizes that our lives are interdependent and that this interdependence is a strength on which to build. Let us look at what support means in the context of a nontraditional career path, examining three potentially supportive groups: family and friends, customers, and a current employer. (As pointed out in our first quarter 2015 newsletter, by a nontraditional career path we mean one that is tailored to our individual needs and contains more than one source of income.)

*Family and friends.* Bringing family members early into a decision to pursue a nontraditional career lets them understand the rationale and be present to offer practical support and

affirmation. This might mean being available for conversations about decisions and helping make practical aspects like working from home feasible. Family and friends are those most likely to provide unconditional support. My wife's support was critical when we began our first practice, in terms of both her expertise in a complementary area of practice delivery and her patience during my earlier educational activities while I was also working full time. It was critical later, when deciding to embrace organizational consulting as an additional component. Such support is important whether the approach is instantaneous immersion, which can significantly affect others quickly, or gradual engagement, where patience and perseverance are important. Family and friends can help accelerate the pace of entry by providing affirmation, encouragement, and practical support.

*Customers.* It might seem strange to include customers when considering support. After all, isn't our relationship with a customer simply that of being a supplier? In fact, strong customer relationships speak to shared values and mutual benefit. Such customer relationships can profoundly influence the pace of entry, leading to the purchase of products or services at an early nontraditional career stage when such support is vital, and by providing encouragement. Customers can also offer valuable insights into product or service offerings during formative stages. These insights in turn accelerate the pace of entry. In starting the organizational consulting component of my nontraditional career, several customers with whom I had extended prior relationships as a supplier, were most helpful. This included purchasing services and, in one case, providing insights about launching. Customer support directly affects income generation, which accelerates growth, and is indirectly beneficial in providing product or service insights that translate into accelerated entry.

*Current employer.* Removing as many impediments as possible is important in the formative stage of a nontraditional career. Such impediments can include restrictions on the ability to operate in certain content areas or to work with certain customers. A current employer may seek to impose such restrictions if permitted by local law and if the nontraditional career direction is seen as a competitive threat. On the other hand, a supportive current employer will not limit areas of practice and will encourage use of personal intellectual capital that in turn can accelerate pace of entry. This will most likely happen when nontraditional career components do not compete with a current employer's business. I was fortunate, when moving forward with an organizational consulting practice, that this did not compete with the employer's evolving direction and therefore I was able to proceed without impediments and with support. This helped accelerate my pace of entry.

Support means giving to others. In a nontraditional career path this can include volunteer activities. In my case volunteer work, has included a number of activities over the years. Whether volunteering as an ambassador for our local food bank, assisting in national hunger surveys, making presentations on social justice issues such as universal health care, providing interview coaching at local educational institutions, providing career services at a local prison for those approaching re-entry, acting as a resource for public sector career web site review, or guiding volunteer teams delivering human resource services in nonprofit organizations, volunteer work has been a meaningful part of my nontraditional career. It allowed me to bring knowledge and skills from other areas into settings where they could be helpful, and I am grateful for these opportunities, though cognizant that I could and should have done much more.

Support brings benefit to others, to our communities and to each of us. It is one way we can assist those with economic disadvantages. It is one way we experience grace through giving and receiving.

Parts of this article are extracted from *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path: Embracing Economic Disruption*, Ron Elsdon (Praeger, 2014), and from *Affiliation in the Workplace: Value Creation in the New Organization*, Ron Elsdon (Praeger, 2003).