# My brilliant career

Regardless of how successful we are in our careers, we all go through developmental transitions that affect how we feel about our lives and our work. Kaye Avery presents a case for attending to the personal development needs of employees.

The old understanding of career development came from the idea that when people were clear about their interests and skills, they could then be directed to find the work that best suited them and do well in it. Since the early days, a lot of research has gone into the theory and science of career development and this now needs to be integrated into our workforce for it to be well resourced and directed.

As most of us have experienced, career development is neither a linear process, nor is it separate from life—it is a chaotic process that is dependent on organisational conditions and life experience, together with the developmental stages and transitions individuals go through. The degree of a person's self-efficacy and healthy self-concept makes a huge difference to their ability to have influence and career confidence.

## Careering through life

Some people I work with are uncomfortable with the idea of having a career. They say "All I need is to keep working so that the bills are paid and the family have the lifestyle they deserve," and, "I just want to be more satisfied with my work". I explain that *career* basically means 'to journey', to 'career along'. It is a dynamic and highly mobile process of developing self through life and work.

By comparison, the more-career-minded high achievers are harder to please, especially in our flatter organisations where there are fewer opportunities. They want places to play where their brilliance can continue to develop. For them, status is often less important than personal development and being able to make the contribution they were born to make.

When people come to me for help with their career, they are usually looking for me to direct them towards what suits their set of skills and experience. Then, as their story unfolds, what I mostly find is that their self-concept has been adjusted or affected by some external event. Their old 'me-that-I-was' no longer fits with a changing sense of purpose or meaning, nor with a sense of the 'me-that-I-am-becoming'.

Organisational career development is a broad and dynamic concept which, when properly undertaken, requires a structural framework and process that positively impacts on the development of the employee's self-concept, their capabilities, competence and confidence.

When career development is done well, the employee integrates their growing sense of self with a renewed sense of what is possible. This increases personal and career clarity and steps toward potential contributions are made.

We all go through developmental transitions that affect us, regardless of how well connected or successful we are in our careers. These transitions are usually an internal response to an externally-triggered event—and sometimes they are purely self-driven.

They are often predictable at certain ages or stages (eg, when constrained by parenthood, at midlife, or when transitioning to retirement) and generally require a process that involves deconstruction and letting go of certain life structures, self perceptions or perceived limitations. Most often people experience a time of liminality (or having a sense of being stuck on the threshold of change and not knowing which way to go) and then a reconstruction time when steps are taken and things fall into place.

A lot of people find the evolutionary transitions that happen at certain stages of their lives confusing and deeply unsettling. Symptoms can include illness, absenteeism, poor performance at work, a lack of sleep and irritability. The temptation is to seek therapy or counselling.

Questioning career relevance is usually the chosen pathway to dealing with the problem and the issue is most likely to be a developmental one.

In my view, effective career development is wholly dependent on the integration of an employee's personal development needs. A new or clearer sense of self is a powerful motivator to adjust, accelerate or change careers and improve performance.

## Feeling valued

For organisations to have a highly engaged workforce, among other things, employees need to feel that their whole-person development is valued and that they can engage in meaningful conversations that incorporate personal and career development with someone who will 'champion' their life-cause.

The key thrust of corporate existence is performance, and this seems to subordinate personal development (except at a leadership level where leadership development is required to be transformative). This is unfortunate as it contributes to the perpetuation of attrition as people find their evolving development needs and changing values are no longer aligned with their role or their organisation.

Few organisations seem able to create structures that recognise and support the on-going holistic development of their employees and as a result risk damaging employee engagement.

If more organisations and institutions fully integrated the development needs of their employees they would improve organisational culture, retention and performance. Imagine what New Zealand could do if more of our organisations enabled the fullest possible expression of human potential!

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