

Picking the Right Work Environment for You

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I wrote recently about how important it is to begin to distinguish between what you're good at and what you're good at and get pleasure out of in order to have a great experience of work.

For example, I have great administrative skills. My mind seems naturally inclined to be able to put tasks in an efficient order, I pay attention to detail well, I concentrate easily on the task at hand, I can easily see underlying patterns that help me to group like items in a way that makes sense. But because I get very little pleasure out of using those skills that I'm good at, I'm actually quite terrible at administration. I find it boring and tedious. There is no challenge in it for me. And in the good old days when administrative work was the largest part of my work day, I had a dreadful time. I hated going to work, my bosses weren't exactly delighted to see me either, I got mediocre performance reviews and I thought that I was a pretty limited person destined to have work feel like a feat of endurance.

And then quite by accident I discovered a job that drew on other skills I had, skills that I hadn't paid much attention to previously because they weren't valued in the work environments I had sought out. And my experience of work, myself and others began to transform quite dramatically. Literally within an 18-month period I began to get glowing performance reviews with accompanying salary bonuses, I began to look forward to going to work every day, I began to see my bosses as colleagues who valued my contribution, and I began to think of an exciting future where I could not only anticipate work as pleasure but where I could feel like I was in charge of my destiny.

In retrospect, I've come to realize that not only did I find work that called upon me to use skills that I thoroughly enjoyed using (problem solving, decision making, communicating) but the dynamics of the work environment I'd inadvertently selected closely aligned with what I'd always hoped workplaces could be, but had disappointingly discovered weren't. I had also stumbled upon creating a match between my preferences for working and those of the work environment. And in the intervening years as I've coached hundreds of people, I've come to realize that this match is another critical factor in creating a positive work experience for yourself.

Let me give you an example, I love to work in an environment where I have a lot of room to try different things out, to create my own processes, to decide for myself just how things should go. But for the longest time I chose work in environments where none of that was valued. The workplaces I chose were ones that valued doing things in the way that someone else had decided was the right way, where following a prescribed pathway was desired, where carrying out someone else's decisions to the letter was expected.

Is it any wonder that I always felt like a fish out of water, like a trouble-maker, like someone who just didn't fit in?

What's your story? Have you found the right work environment for you right off the bat? I suspect not or you wouldn't be reading this article. People who have found the work environment that aligns with their own personal preferences tend not to search the Internet looking for something, anything that will help them make the pain stop. They tend to be the people who look at you in absolute puzzlement, not being able to fathom just what your problem really is.

So if you haven't found the right work environment that matches or aligns with your preferences what can you do about it? Well, there are actually a number of things you can do. The first is to begin to let yourself identify exactly what your preferences are. And don't be surprised when you start to do this if a little voice doesn't surface inside your head saying things like "Oh stop this nonsense. Just get a grip on yourself." Or "You know, if you weren't so self centered you'd just adjust" or maybe even "Come on, dummy. What gives you the right to expect to enjoy work anyhow? Millions before you have done just fine by just putting their head down, keeping their mouths shut and sticking with it."

I believe that we all have the right to enjoy our work and to look forward to going to work almost every day. Your first question to yourself might be "Do I believe that I have the right to have work be a pleasurable experience?" If you find yourself struggling with that one, you may find that you need the services of a coach.

But let's say that you're okay with the idea of work and pleasure co-existing in the same sentence. What else? What next?

Start by creating a list of 20 successes you've had in your life. If you've read other articles I've written you'll know that I get almost all of my career transition and career coaching clients to complete this exercise. These need to be specific instances such as "ace-ing the math exam I dreaded in grade 5" or "finishing my first proposal" or "learning how to tie my shoelaces" rather than "being a good parent". You don't need to write the whole story out, just give it a short name that captures the essence of the story for you.

Once you have your list of 20 success stories, begin to reflect on them and let yourself notice the conditions that existed that resulted in your success. Let's work with a 5 story example to get a sense of what I mean:

- 1) Took a singing course
- 2) Found a new art teacher
- 3) Finished my overdue tax filing
- 4) Learned new accounting software
- 5) 'Stood my ground'

Here are the background conditions or context for each of these successes (which are my own, by the way):

- 1) I was a bit bored with life; I was pretty nervous about singing in public
- 2) My technique is stagnating and was no longer exciting to me and I think I'm finally ready to accept a new teacher into my life after my beloved Jerry who died a couple of years ago
- 3) Time to face the music; time to do one of the things I most dislike doing
- 4) Need to make the tax preparation as painless as possible
- 5) Needed to place boundaries around client expectations of support I wasn't prepared to provide. Needed to discover within myself the willingness to put my priorities first.

As I reflect on this second list, what I notice is that life had become a bit too predictable for my liking. These successes are a reminder to me that I need a lot of innovation and 'newness' in my life to feel happy and content. If I were thinking about a different kind of job, what I'd begin to connect with is the fact that I need a work environment where 'new' is prized, where creative, artistically oriented solutions are welcomed and where there are opportunities to learn both new subject matter and processes. I'd begin to clip ads in the career section of the newspaper, keeping track of the kind of work environments they promise as a way of researching what possibilities exist.

After a few weeks of clipping ads I'd perhaps have begun to notice:

- that companies in start up might be good places for me because the work is non-repetitive and not very predictable,
- jobs in marketing or promotion might feel fulfilling because they require creativity and frequently work on a project basis so they too are somewhat unpredictable,
- and that regardless of their work focus, I'd enjoy working in companies who support their employees with on-going training and development.

For many of you, while you can prepare your list of successes, the analysis of the implications of them may seem way too vague a process right now. If that is your case, you might find that completing a Myers Briggs Personality Profile will be useful to help you highlight your workplace preferences. Alternatively, studying the NLP Meta Programs will get you to a similar place. Reading books like "What Color is Your Parachute" or "Finding Your Perfect Work" can be extremely helpful.

The most important thing, however, is to begin to recognize that if you aren't happy in your job, if you aren't doing very well in your job, or if you chronically feel like a fish out of water where you work, the problem is not likely you! At least not with you in that there is something fundamentally wrong with you. There's a darned good chance that you have simply not yet matched your workplace preferences with those of your employer. Now, you can try to get your employer to change their workplace but I doubt you'll have a lot of success. Or you can get honest with yourself about what your needs are and go

out and find a place to work that aligns with your needs and preferences. (If you're thinking at this point 'ya well, I don't want to change jobs' it is unlikely that you'll ever have the right work environment. You must be willing to change something if you want a difference experience of work!)

I fondly remember a young client who took great pride in taking the time to be well informed and well prepared before providing an answer to anyone. He came to me in despair after having lost his 4th job in a row. What he hadn't been paying attention to was that he was choosing work in high production environments where the rule of the day was to resolve customer issues in as short a time as possible. This young man was definitely in the wrong place for his preferences. He is now re-training himself for a career in research, a career where carefully checked and double-checked facts are seen as a strength rather than wasting valuable time.

I also think about Sam who had a long and successful career in an engineering corporation before he was downsized. He decided to start his own business and ended up starting three successive ventures that failed miserably. He is now happily ensconced in another engineering corporation where he takes great pleasure from an environment that is highly structured and highly predictable. The entrepreneurial world simply wasn't for him; it was too filled with uncertainty and lacked the sense of order that he'd found so soothing in an organization with a procedure for everything.

Begin to pay attention to what it is that makes you tick, that gets the juice flowing in your veins. Once you have clarity about that then give yourself permission to seek out a company or a department within a company that offers a work environment that matches your own preferences. You'll be amazed at how much fun work can become and just how satisfying the experience of work can become.

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