

The StraightTalk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Career-Building Part One: Creating Careers That Count

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In a world that presents both a greater variety of work and more global competitors to do it, aligning the right skills with the right job is essential to long-term success. As a result, the relationship between employers and employees is changing radically. What was once a contract based on mutual loyalty is now a contract based on mutual relevance.

Today, employees measure an employer's value by its ability to contribute to an employee's skills in ways that enhance his marketability. Employers define an employee's value by how effectively her contributions strengthen their competitive advantage.

This evolving contract has far-reaching implications for individuals and organizations alike, particularly regarding responsibility for career-building. For individuals, the need to intentionally and strategically build their careers to ensure access to meaningful work opportunities has never been greater and will only grow in the future.

For organizations, optimizing their ability to attract and further develop people who offer highly specialized skills and strong leadership abilities is becoming increasingly critical. This issue of the StraightTalk Coach will

explore career-building's impact on individuals; the next will consider how it affects organizations.

What is Career-Building?

Career-building means actively creating opportunities to do work that improves your functional knowledge, leadership skills, satisfaction and marketability by allowing you to make consistently more significant contributions to your employer's success.

The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them.

- George Bernard Shaw

We have written extensively about organizations' need to create value by constantly accelerating the pace of learning and innovation. Career-building is the individual equivalent in which people keep learning and

changing to deliver more important results. It can take place in a variety of contexts: your current organization, a new organization or frequently in several organizations simultaneously.

Career-building requires repeatedly working through the following process:

1. Build on your strengths. You must recognize your unique talents before you can generate new opportunities to improve them to make a greater difference. It is equally important to recognize and respect your limitations so you know when to collaborate with others to optimize results.

2. Commit to continuous improvement. Most people's abilities dull if they are not constantly honed. Strive to accelerate your pace of learning and reinvention with an emphasis on sharpening your difference-makers through deeper and broader expertise. Aggressively seek lateral assignments that allow you to stretch and grow these difference-makers; research reveals that most innovative solutions are generated by working across adjacent disciplines.

3. Create alliances. Affiliating with other leaders offers numerous benefits. First, it may open doors to assignments that expand and build your unique talents. Second, alliances may offer

insight and perspective to help enlarge, intensify or better leverage your knowledge for greater creativity and improved performance.

4. Adapt or die. The trend toward increasingly matrixed organizations has created a medley of in-sourced, out-sourced and joint venture teams that transcend traditional boundaries. StraightTalk, collaboration and adjusting to and learning from others are non-negotiable prerequisites for participation in any of these teams.

5. Prepare for the future. Successful career-building requires ensuring that your difference-makers remain highly relevant, so ask for and act on frequent customer/employer feedback. People too often ask questions that clarify what has or has not worked in the past; this generally supports only catching or keeping up with customers' needs. Instead, look to the future with questions such as "What new challenges are you facing?" and "What emerging trends will affect your business?"

This career-building cycle is an excellent first step in creating meaningful work opportunities that enhance your marketability and satisfaction. The next is constantly enhancing your difference-makers and applying them effectively to become a leading practitioner.

The Leading Practitioner Model

The combination of less hierarchical organizations and more complex challenges is creating a new breed of talent ± leading practitioners.

These are individuals who offer equally strong leadership skills and functional excellence. That is, they deliver outstanding expertise while operating in varied, intensely collaborative roles in which they lead on some projects and follow on others, working with other leading practitioners to drive an organization's success. The leading practitioners most critical to an organization's success may even

emerge as its top management team.

Leading practitioners are and will continue to be highly sought-after by employers; they will also have greater opportunities to learn, grow and make more valuable contributions.

How can you become a leading practitioner? Start by answering the following questions:

1. What are your top three to five talents? What are your most significant limitations? For what do people turn to you, especially during a crisis or new challenge? What are your unique and most differentiating abilities ± those you can honestly say are better than almost anyone else's?

The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.

~ Vince Lombardi

2. Where can you have the greatest impact? Aligning your talents and style with an organization's culture and strategic objectives is essential. For example, a troubleshooter cannot contribute without a significant problem to solve. Pursue situations in which your top difference-makers are essential to advancing an organization's strategic objectives; avoid or decline those in which they are not. Lack of cultural fit is a key obstacle to success.

3. What changes can you make for whom? How much can you improve customer/end-user experiences, and by doing so, raise their satisfaction and your own? Think of the answer as your "Value proposition" ± and the key to creating a career that counts.

4. Who can help optimize your talents to make a difference? What alliances with superiors, peers, subordinates, customers, suppliers and/or investors will allow you to best apply your talents? With whom do you need to cooperate effectively to compete successfully? Consider creating a "Kitchen cabinet" of people whose expertise spans various disciplines and can help you broaden, fine-tune and leverage your know-how.

5. How can you accelerate the pace of learning to constantly improve your contributions? Opportunities abound to learn from work, alliances, competitors and adjacent disciplines; take advantage of them to build on your unique strengths and address your limitations. Map out the range of topics you should explore. Seize every opportunity to ask customers and end users what is working well. What could be improved? What could work differently? How would those changes affect you?

Career-Building in Action

Think of career-building as strategic planning for your career and develop an operating plan to implement it. Then reevaluate and revise both plans frequently. The more often you work through the career-building and leading practitioner process, the more creative and effective you will be in structuring meaningful work opportunities that enhance your skills, contributions and relevance ± and thus, your demand among potential employers.

Your career will evolve whether you build it or not; standing still is the greatest risk. In a market where relevance is becoming the currency with which individuals and organizations negotiate, creative career-building is the key to your success. You can intentionally develop your skills and relevance to enhance your appeal ± or you can wait to see where the market takes you. The choice is yours. **HK**

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