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Michael Becket makes an in-depth analysis
of a group that seeks to liberate the inner man or woman

Joining the path of fulfilment after reaching a crossroads

One of the classic mistakes in management: a senior and highly successful researcher at Sterling Drug was promoted to a senior administrative job. The inevitable result was that the company lost an effective scientist, gained a less than ideal manager and reduced one of its top people to abject misery.

Eventually he went to the Crystal Barkley Corporation, which prides itself on teaching every peg to find itself the most comfortable hole, no matter how unusual its shape. This all happened some time ago before Kodak bought the company, but in many ways the case was fairly usual and has been repeated since.

Many men in their forties suddenly find themselves in positions that make them unhappy — though for most it is probably male menopause prompting lacerating questions such as "What have I done with my life?". Even without that, however, senior executives start asking themselves how they got edged into that corner and whether they wanted to continue labouring like that for the rest of their working lives.

They have been pursuing money and jobs that brought money, but only because that provided a pretty handy measure of success. Few executives are given to philosophical introspection and ever stop to consider how high on their list of wants money really came.

Of course, it depends how much of it they have to start with. By the time Nella Barkley, who started the corporation that does this work, comes to deal with them, the managers asked to order their priorities usually place money quite a long way down the list, well behind things like the chance to use their abilities, recognition of their work and so on.

When things start approaching a crisis point because the stress becomes debilitating, they go for help. That happened with the scientist, who was getting so detached from his work he almost completely lost the ability to communicate with his colleagues or subordinates and was getting seriously depressed.

Generally it is the company that pays for the analysis process — overcoming a great misgiving that once the senior executive discovers what his true great aim in life is, he will merely leave the company and pursue it.

'Gradually he became more delighted with his skills and became more attractive'

It is a natural-enough worry because "it is just like a bad marriage — everybody assumes at first they have to get out", says Nella Barkley. She reassures employers, however, that generally it does not work out like that and they underestimate the strength of the golden handcuffs.

Perhaps it is just as well the cost comes out of corporate coffers because examination is not a cheap or quick process — a five-day session can cost \$1,600 to \$3,600 — but the employer of the scientist thought highly enough of the man to help him out of his problems, so it paid.

Ms Barkley says the system starts by asking people to tell the story of 12 past incidents — things they have done and enjoyed. It might be the brief spell in youth organising a Scout camp, or the continuing fascination with making models of ships and aircraft, or the love of operatic festivals in Provence, or keeping track of the prices of chateau-bottled clarets, or standing in for the personnel director on holiday.

There is almost no end to the things that turn out to have fond memories for people. With a bit of goading and discussion, this process brings out what people enjoy doing and what they are good at — usually, but not always the same.

An example of where the two diverge is Ms Barkley herself, who says she is very good at raising venture capital or money for charities but actually hates doing it.

That set of preferences in turn produces a list of dozens of skills. As the process goes on, these are "clustered" to about a dozen key capacities.

In the case of this scientist, the occupation that emerged most prominently was his enthusiasm for local politics; among other things he was involved in local social services, was standing for election to his school board of governors and was campaigning for a variety of environmental issues.

The second half of the process is discovering personal goals. This entails a similarly lengthy procedure to discover their true ambitions or the sort of things they want to achieve.

As part of this discussion the interviewers gauge the enthusiasm by probing to see how much work and research the individual is prepared to put into making that target a realistic proposition. That may entail doing market research and sorting out precisely what need there is for the sort of supply they now contemplate.

Sometimes the answer to these preferences needs coaxing. No solution is suggested, much less imposed because people have to produce the ideas or they will not be committed to them or have the energy to carry them through.

"We have to bite our tongues because sometimes the evidence is so obvious" but all interviewers can do is to keep focusing the person on the information they can see, even if he cannot. "People don't change their mindset straightaway — they need time to accept that their recreational skills can also be useful at work," Ms Barkley says.

So it never occurred to the scientist at first that he was using skills and capabilities that might be just as applicable during working hours and had not even bothered to tell anyone at work what he did outside the company.

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Some people take longer to make up their minds about what they really want. They have been thinking in such a totally different way that they need to be jolted into a new perspective.

Questions such as "We are giving you \$10m — now what are you going to do for the rest of your life?" prod people into concentrating on what their real preferences are.

After that the problem is to match the talents with the targets. In the case of the scientist it was easy — but still took a long time. Slowly, bit by bit, the realisation came to him that his



Nella Barkley: 'We have to bite our tongues sometimes because the evidence is so obvious'

enjoyment of political life and his skills could be used for his employer.

In a similar way, a researcher at AT&T found he was growing stale and wanted to go back to college to lecture instead. A course of self-investigation produced new job training in a high-tech spin-off that kept him within the business but got him doing just the sort of teaching he wanted.

A woman deeply unhappy with continuing in the — admittedly, very profitable — rat race of the New York financial institutions finally decided what she really wanted was to go to opera festivals in Provence. So she moved over there, made a television programme on the music and acted as radio and newspaper correspondent on the subject.

With the Sterling scientist, the first step was to make him realise there was more to him and to life than research or his present dis-

liked job. "Gradually he became more delighted with his skills and with himself, and he became more attractive," Nella Barkley says.

He had lost "that sour face and that don't-mess-with-me look and said people were nice to him. It wasn't very surprising — he was being nicer to them."

After a long time it finally occurred to him he could be a lobbyist for the company. That used his savouring of political negotiation and campaigning, helped him abandon the hated administrative chores, and produced something valuable for his employer.

He dealt with regulators, with Congress and with other political and quasi-political organisations and not only loved, it but was extremely effective.