



# Defining Moment:

A Career Coaching Conversation

By Michael Woodward

As an organizational psychologist, part of my focus is working one-on-one with managers and executives on self-development. This often entails skill building, dealing with tough personalities, and career guidance. Recently, I sat down with a new client who wanted to discuss making a career change. The issue she was grappling with was the fact that she just didn't feel a passion for her job. Although hard working and successful, she just didn't have a personal connection to her work. At the end of the day, her work didn't have strong meaning for her and just wasn't reflective of her as a person.

My client's dilemma is certainly not an uncommon one. Just as most of us, she had made a career decision right out of college. A decision that would shape her professional growth and define her as an adult. Making the decision about a career pursuit is one of the most defining decisions we make as adults. Our career determines who we spend most of our time with and the environment where we spend that time. Our chosen career also has implications on social status, the money we make, and the place we live.

There is no doubt that a career decision is a key defining moment in all of our lives. Whether you like it or not, your career is most often what defines who you are to the outside world. Whether at a party, social event, networking function or class reunion, the first thing you will typically get asked is "what do you do?" Many of us are forced to answer this question on a daily basis. The answer you give is what the questioner uses to form their impression of you. Your

career choice will dictate the answer to this question for many years to come. Just about every person you meet will ask this question and make a judgment based on your answer. A judgment based on the choice of vocation you made.

As HR managers and practitioners you may often find yourself having to counsel employees on career decisions. They may come to you grappling with how to get that promotion or whether or not they should transfer to another department. Sometimes, they may even be struggling with whether or not to move on. HR is about the people side of business. Your role as a modern HR practitioner is to contribute to business success through people management. Whether it's hiring, training or directing career paths, HR is responsible for ensuring the right people are in the right place. So, when faced with the challenge of having to coach an employee on their future direction, there are some techniques for guiding the conversation. Below are some of these techniques to keep in mind:

## FIRST, ASK QUESTIONS:

Whenever anyone asks me to describe what I do, the first thing I say is always "my job is to ask questions." Whether I'm working with a coaching client or developing a new hiring process the majority of my time is spent asking questions. The questions I ask are not only designed to help me learn, but also to help my clients learn. I find that when you push someone to articulate their thinking and get it out in the open, they are better able to grasp what it is that is on their mind. Simply put, when someone verbalizes their thoughts

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they become more tangible.

When asking questions, always take a step back. Never start off by diving into the specifics of their current situation. Their desire for a change is likely a superficial issue. The reality of what is driving the need for a change may be entirely different. Keep in mind, when you start off with too narrow of a focus, you put limitations on the conversation. These limitations may keep you from discovering the true issue. Start off by talking about interests. Use questions like: Where do your interests lie? What are your strengths? What excites you?

In his book, *QBC: The Question Behind the Question*, John Miller notes that good questions create accountability. Your job as an HR

practitioner is to facilitate accountability in your employees. It is imperative that your employees take ownership of their own careers. Taking ownership requires facing reality. Facing reality requires introspection.

#### DEMAND INTROSPECTION:

Successful people are highly self-aware. The path to self-awareness is introspection. You have to be willing to look in the mirror and face the good and the bad. The key is learning how to leverage the good and manage the bad. We all spend so much time trying to either keep up or get ahead that we forget where we are actually going? And, we forget why! Asking questions is certainly a good first step. The next

step is having the employee spend some time thinking.

When considering a job change or new career path there is a lot at stake. This is why it is imperative that you encourage the employee to sit down and reflect on their values, philosophies, interests and strengths. As I mentioned above, don't start with the problem at hand. That is just the presenting problem. Try to help him or her dig into the real issue. Encourage the employee to spend some time alone reflecting on who they are and where they see themselves going. Remember, your job is not to give answers, rather it is to facilitate introspection.

#### FOCUS ON STRENGTHS:

In her book, *Toxic Work*, Barbara Reinhold talks about neglected aptitudes. By neglected aptitudes, she means those natural abilities that we possess, but do not use. Often times, neglected aptitudes result from a lack of opportunity. Dr. Reinhold describes that “when aptitudes are not used, they begin to itch, making you bored, dissatisfied and restless.”

When an employee is in a job that does not allow them to feature their strengths, they are not likely to be highly engaged. All organizations have talented people, the issue is whether or not their talents match the organization's needs and are being appropriately leveraged. Get your employees to think and talk about their strengths. A struggling employee may have great talent, they just may not have the opportunity to use it.

#### OUT-COUNCIL WHEN NEEDED:

It's OK. Be realistic! If your organization can't meet the needs of a particular employee and, in turn, that employee is not contributing at an appropriate level, it is time to move on. Sometimes in life, our role is to set others free. Don't be afraid to talk to an employee about moving on. If after asking questions and encouraging introspection the employee is still struggling, you may want to explore other options. Consider asking questions like: In light of your expressed interests, does working here make sense for you? Are you happy? Where do you think you could best leverage your strengths?

The last thing you want to do is fool someone into wanting to stay when the fit just isn't there. If the fit isn't there, it just isn't there. There is no sense in perpetuating a bad relationship. End it and move on.

All-in-all, our decision to pursue a career is a key defining moment in our lives. It is one that has implications on how we live and how we are viewed by others. For many of us, this key defining moment may not define us as well as we had hoped. When this revelation occurs, we seek to redefine ourselves. As HR practitioners you may be faced with employees who have arrived at this crossroad and are struggling to get through it. The ideas expressed above are some general tips to help you in having these conversations. At the end of the day, HR is about people. As HR practitioners, one of your responsibilities is getting the right people in the right position, so as to maximize success. Having career conversations with struggling employees is an important part of meeting this responsibility. ♦



#### Author Bio:

Mike “Woody” Woodward is the President of Human Capital Integrated (HCI), a management and human resources consulting firm specializing in integrating the selection, development, and management of talent. Trained in the field of industrial and organizational psychology, Mike has worked with large private companies, non-profits and major Federal agencies. Prior to founding HCI, Mike served as a consultant with PricewaterhouseCoopers and a project manager with IBM Global Business Services.

For More information about HCI, log onto [www.humancapitalintegrated.com](http://www.humancapitalintegrated.com)

or contact Mike Woodward directly at: [mike@humancapitalintegrated.com](mailto:mike@humancapitalintegrated.com)