

Career Development Inside Organizations During Tough Times

By Caitlin Williams

With national headlines screaming the news of unrelenting workplace changes and mind-boggling numbers of layoffs across all industries, it is no wonder that both employers and employees are confused about who should be doing what to advance an employee's career inside an organization. Some workers even wonder if career development and advancement inside their company is a reality anymore. And many companies appear reluctant to commit resources toward developing workers' careers in a time of so much uncertainty.

Still, smart employees can engage in several activities that keep them on their cutting edge - and smart companies can partner with them to help employees grow their careers. After all, smart companies know that, as the economy stabilizes, their future success will depend on the employees they have been able to keep and nurture.

The following "rules" of career development in a tough economy are ones that we, as career development professionals, can share with the increasing number of clients who show up at our office door expressing high levels of career angst and job security worries. Use these rules to talk with your clients about what's next for them, to help them gain back a sense of control, and to push their thinking about new ways to grow their careers inside their workplaces, even in these challenging times. The rules speak directly to workers - adapt them in whatever ways work for the clients you counsel and coach.

Rule #1: Stop complaining about how much things have changed. Workplace change is old news and tirades against it only keep workers from watching for new opportunities. Suggest that your clients keep in mind the description of our world - and our workplace - that Edie Weiner, a prominent futurist, recently noted (2008). As she put it, we're in a period of "betweenity" - not quite on solid ground, but rather on our way from one place to another. Smart workers understand this - and they have chosen to master the art of "double vision" - closely watching the immediate situations and challenges facing their company, while also looking ahead to the trends that will shape their company in the months ahead.

Rule #2: Think of your career as a verb, not a noun. Workers and those looking for work have heard a hundred times that "career development is your responsibility." Yet, once an individual is hired into an organization, this recommendation is often forgotten. Active, responsible, initiating job seekers turn into passive employees, who begin to focus on the "job" as something they have acquired, rather than on the "career" as an activity they need to continually refine. To avoid the "job" trap, encourage workers to spend their first months on the job getting the lay of the land, while keeping questions like these in mind: *What is my new organization's culture? What is most important to my boss? What's most important to my boss's boss? How does my job contribute to my company's bottom line?*

Rule #3: Understand how your organization gets its work done. This one requires initiative because formal organizational charts no longer tell the story; neither do job descriptions or job titles. Questions we can suggest that workers consider: *Who are the people that make things happen here? Who are the team leaders that get the exciting projects? How do employees get on these particular teams? How can I position myself to be on one of these teams?*

Rule #4: Be crystal clear about your strengths - but do not stop there. It is up to employees to figure

out how their strengths help their organization's productivity, position in the marketplace and bottom line. Remind your clients to step forward in interactions with their team and their boss to make their strengths and their specific contributions known; and make certain they use language that translates their contributions into actions their company values.

Rule #5: Forget the "corporate ladder". It probably doesn't exist anymore, and anyway, the ladder is too limited and narrow in terms of the opportunities it can offer. In place of the ladder, help them think of the "corporate lattice." Beverly Kaye (2002) had it right when she said "up is not the only way." Often our clients aren't sure what the alternatives are if they want to keep growing. Brainstorm with them to consider other options.

Rule #6: Be clear about how you want to grow. Organizations understand that to keep their talent from walking out the door, they have to entice workers to stay, and often that enticement is the promise of skill building and development. But *workers, themselves*, are the ones that have to figure out what skills they want to build and which opportunities they consider developmental. If an employee doesn't know himself or herself well, there is no way any organization is going to spend time trying to figure out the best ways to help workers discover strengths.

Rule #7: Remember who owns your career - you! As Tim Hall said back in 1996, "jobs may come and jobs may go, but your career belongs to you" (Brown,1996, p. 25). That statement is equally true today, especially for workers inside an organization. The team they have been on may disband, their organization may go through a merger, or the department they work in may experience a downsizing. Workers' ability to maintain control of their career, especially in situations like the ones we are currently facing, will keep them employable - if not employed. Consider Bill Bridges' (!997) recommendation - keep an eye out for the work that needs doing and the clients that need to be served. Urge your clients to hone this "career ownership" mindset and they are more likely to be nimble enough to find another spot in their organization - or in another one - if their current job becomes at risk.

One of our key responsibilities is to help educate workers and job seekers to understand, at a deep level, that the rules of career development within organizations have changed. Though most people may easily agree with this statement on the surface, fewer truly understand the implications of these changes, when it comes to their own career. Old beliefs and expectations are difficult to set aside. That is why it is imperative for us, as career development specialists, to help workers make the transition to this new workplace reality by offering them specific strategies for thriving in their careers inside today's workplace. Another remark of Edie Weiner from the annual meeting of the World Future Society (2008) says it well: "as the music changes, so must the dance," We can help our clients master the steps to this new dance by encouraging them to hone the skills they need to succeed inside today's organizations.

References

Bridges, W. (1997). *Creating you & co.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Brown, T. (1996, September). Pursuing the protean employee. *Management Review*, 86, 24-25.

Kaye, B. (2002). *Up is not the only way.* Mountain View, CA: CPP, Inc.

Weiner, E. (2008). *Worldfuture 2008: Creating the future through new eyes.* Opening plenary session at the annual meeting of the World Future Society, Washington, DC.

Caitlin Williams, Ph.D. *is a career development consultant and coach in San Jose, California. She teaches in the master's program in Counseling Psychology at San Jose State University and she also is Associate editor of Career Convergence's Organizations department. She can be reached at caitlin@DrCaitlinWilliams.com.*