

Life After Your Business Life

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For many years our articles have focused on leadership, leadership development and the state of leadership within all types of organizations. Studies continue to show these to be vital topics in today's environment. We remain passionate about improving leadership in businesses of all sizes, non-profits and government organizations and will return to those issues with our next article. For this article we are taking a detour to another aspect of leadership that has no impact on an organization. What happens to a leader, at any level of the organization, when it is time to step away and retire from the organizational life that has defined the person for what seems like a lifetime?

Let's call this what it is – post leadership life. Several issues come to light. When a person is working, their job tends to define them, even taking precedence over family and outside interests. Upon retirement, that identity ceases to exist, and in the extreme, this challenges one's relevance. How does a diminished feeling of relevance impact life going forward? After retirement does anyone really care what you did in your work career other than an interesting fact about you? Does 40 years of working disappear into the mist? Those who are obliged to listen to you because of your position, or the stimulation of the work environment are no longer present in your day-to-day life. What a sudden change! How does one deal with it? How does one's family deal with it? How does a person relate or deal with their family?

During those 40 or so work years, one's focus was job and career. We are not suggesting neglect of one's family; almost on the contrary, work and career took precedent since it provided for the family. Family life continued despite focus on career demands. Even as an integral family member, when the alarm went off or the phone rang focus shifted to one's job. Similarly, in the work environment, people depend on their leader. Their livelihood and well-being is dependent on their employment and employer. As the years continued passing, the magic days of retirement started becoming a reality; the start of an imagined whole new life. When that day arrived, gold watches and letters of appreciation made the day, but once again, the reality of the whole new life was not necessarily the ideal envisioned. What happened?

We find ourselves at the stage in life where we have witnessed and experienced this transition. Experience shows that with introspection, thought and planning, the transition can be relatively smooth. With a lack of such soul searching and planning, the transition is rough.

There are many examples and stories; one that seems to highlight what we are suggesting here is a career in the military. Dean is particularly familiar with the Navy so can relate a common occurrence. Submarine life is tough. It is tough on the people operating the boats and tough on the families staying at home for months on end without a husband or a father. The carrot is 'retirement,' typically in 25 to 30 years. This is the pay-off. But at what price? Please don't take this as a gross generalization, but billboards state: the "Toughest job in the Submarine Force is being a Navy wife." This is true whether enlisted or officer.

Submarines deployed for anywhere from 3 to 6 months. Day-in-day-out Navy wives ran the household, raised the children, kept the car running, fixing things that needed fixing, etc. While there is a network for them, they still were Commanding Officer of the family, with little to no assistance from their life partner. A quick story, my submarine deployed for 3 months, returned to New London for about 5 weeks and redeployed for another 3 months. Those 5 weeks were intense refitting and preparing for the next deployment, jeopardizing available family time. As the ship was preparing to deploy for the second time, family members filled the pier next to the boat to send us off. One of our senior officers who had 4 children was the last man down before closing the hatch. His wife and a graduated line of his kids, tallest to smallest, waving good-bye to daddy left this officer in tears as he closed the hatch. By the way, this officer is now divorced. The point here is the intensity of this life, and what happens after.



In another similar case, another colleague, several years ago, was a commanding officer of a submarine. Upon retirement he settled back home only to run into a stressful home life. His wife reportedly told him that for 30 years she had done perfectly well running the house, educating the children, etc. and certainly didn't need him to order her around.

Not all are retiring military people, but there are very similar parallels. As we said earlier, people get defined by their work lives whether they want that or not. This is not a surprise since the job is what pays the bills, provides for the family and provides definition of a person – an engineer, a welder, a teacher, a carpenter, etc. We don't have to love our jobs but they still help define us.

If you planned well for your transition into retired life or not, it is going to be a major transition and maybe one of the most difficult transitions in one's life. If thrust upon a person in the form of the golden parachute before an opportunity for planning, it is even more difficult. Let's look at some thoughts on this transition.

So once the main show is over, when there is no compelling reason for anyone to follow and or listen to you, how does a person confront the following challenges?

- How to define or redefine one's identity?
- Does one's family or friends offer new relevance?
- How to develop new relationships with one's children and grandchildren?
- How to maintain relevance? Is relevance necessary, and relevant to who or what?
- Does work life still impact or influence one's identity, and should it?
- How to leverage a life's work and experience into a new and different construct?

There are some options:

- You can move onward and upward to new challenges.
- You can move onward and downward to new depths.
- You can stagnate and provide little meaningful contribution.

Upward is redefinition, viability, relevance, recognizing context, self-assessment etc. etc. Looking back at life, it's a series of starts, stops and changes. Grade school to Middle school to High school and onward. Employment is an ongoing redefinition or starts and stops. Why should that be any different in later life? We think it's cultural: society has made us believe that retirement is a goal, but the reality is living life should be the goal at all stages. In some of our leadership classes when we ask attendees to introduce themselves, one way of announcing their identity is to proudly announce how many days, months and years they have left until they retire. We query them about what they plan on doing and we get the fishing, hunting, etc. story. Those things brought enjoyment during those working years, but once the fishing and hunting run their course, what remains? The point here is rather than accepting retirement, we are suggesting another redefinition, a reassessment. We believe remaining viable is essential, however that may take form.

Downward is riddled by family strife, struggling with relevance and identity, resulting health issues etc. Onward and downward is when the heightened expectation of retirement becomes nothing more than tedium and boredom. The joys anticipated are throttled by aging. The wait to take that cruise or vacation, while possible, is not the same as it could have been 30 years earlier. Thoughts of times when viability was daily, relevance was present and one's identity was secure, are gone. Without a clear redefinition the downward spiral accelerates, resulting in health issues, which now become the topic of discussion among friends and family.

Coupled with moving downward is a lesser consequence we refer to as – Stagnation: stuck in an identity resulting in staleness. Becoming stale actually results in a gradual downward trend. An example might be guys who have to live near a military base because it's their lifeline (as they perceive it). They hold onto the past without the viability or position, but they tend to feel more secure. In reality they are in slow downward spiral, all the time thinking of the glory days while those glory days are not today's glory days. We should be proud of what we accomplished in those glory days but we need to seek the new glory days.

How do we find the new glory days? For this there is no cookie cutter answer that would apply to everyone. For some spending more meaningful time with one's spouse, children and grandchildren is sufficient satisfaction, provided they share that satisfaction. If not, there may be some talking that needs to happen. Family will always provide some relevance and as one's family grows into the next generation, that relevance will add to a better definition of one's identity and your legacy. For some this is enough satisfaction and comfort to define the new glory days.



If one experienced a key leadership role during their work life, their needs in retired life may be more intense. This doesn't necessarily mean needing to be "bossing" people, but it needs to be something meaningful to continue contributing to society in a fulfilling manner one defines through introspection. Volunteering is a great way to find the opportunity to continue contributing. Opportunities abound with places and ways to volunteer such as: soup kitchens a day or two a week; mentoring teens; volunteering to push wheelchairs at a hospital; working in your church office; pursue elected office in local government; man an information station at the nearby airport; help build with Habitat for Humanity; pet walk for your elderly neighbors or shop for them; involvement in service projects with local service organizations like the Rotary or Knights of Columbus; tutoring children who have reading or other learning issues. There are so many opportunities and so many organizations seeking volunteers.

After retirement no one really cares about what one's work career other than as an interesting fact about you.

Larry shares the following thoughts with you: I occasionally think of my work life successes and failures, but I focus on my family and my volunteer work. In the volunteer work no one cares what company or industry I worked for or what I did. They want who I am now, which was influenced by my work life, but who I am now is different from who I was then. In my work life I developed budgets and now I help develop budgets for my homeowner association. Very little in my work life, other than public speaking, prepared me for volunteering at a sculpture garden several afternoons a week. Volunteering provides me with as much, if not more, satisfaction as I had in my work life.

Conclusion

We will all face a transition to retired life. It can be a huge challenge to make that transition and we can make it a success or we can make it a life changing negative. We do believe that relevance and viability are key components of a life well lived. During the formative years the path was determined for us. We adapted and moved forward. Once we became adults things weren't so clear, and as the years pass clarity becomes more obscure. This is why introspection and thoughtful self-assessment are essential all leading to meaningful goals at time when the rules are less defined and clarity is obscured by a world of unknowns.

But it's not all that bad. All one has to do is Google "Successful people in their 80s" and see what comes up. Of course the normal people who were successful in their earlier years are first, but further examination reveals others who have made significant life changes well into their senior years. They say it's never too late.

Rather than leave this article open ended with nothing to offer, we thought we'd provide some things to think about when considering introspection.*

- Can you identify your core values and do you live your life in accordance with those values?
- Are you able to define the various aspects of your life and relate how important they are to you?
- Are you able to do a SWOT analysis on yourself, then take that information and develop a change strategy?
- Are you receptive to trying new things, doing something completely different from what you did in your work life? Perhaps finding something that might be fun?
- Identify between three and six behaviors that contribute to your effectiveness.
- Do old habits have a strong hold on you or are you able to innovate in managing life's changes and demands?
- To achieve the paradigm shift, unlearning must occur. For unlearning to occur, one must clearly understand those influencing factors that affect who you are and how you got here. Are you able to identify those influences?

* The above items are a representative sample of the types of things to think about as part of your introspection. We borrowed these items from various sources and instruments we use in our workshops. Certainly this is not a comprehensive listing, nor a formal assessment. If interested we do have various instruments that can help you work through the process.

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