

# CAREER DEVELOPMENT TODAY— How Would You Describe It? *Part 2*

In Part 1, I talked about why describing or defining Career Development is an important first step in better understanding today's career ground rules and the playing field. Our career view, which is based on our personal experiences and the positive and negative challenges we've faced in work and life, and how we communicate this view through our attitude and actions, influences our career success.

Our challenge is to process our losses and those emotions (our "baggage") associated with the tough career experiences (check out the exercise at the end of Part 1 for some help). Then begin to look at this adversity or any adversity for that matter, and your career as an opportunity to improve, stretch, learn new skills, and build character. Our work role becomes more of a business partnership with our employer, one where we take advantage of every opportunity to learn and grow, know the business, trends, our discipline, anticipate and embrace changes, and build relationships, our social capital. All the while we must recognize that in today's environment the only security rests within each of us (not the organization or our boss, though those relationships are important), in our abilities to learn, grow, develop our skills and ourselves, and pursue education and training opportunities. That's a pretty positive summary and message from Part 1. It's a message that sounds good but presents a formidable challenge for any one of us.

Let's begin Part 2 of "How to Describe Career Development Today" where we left off last time, and further explore this principle or definition of Career Development "...a lifelong process of self-directed learning and personal growth integrating work and life experiences, education and training which leads to work contributions, rewards and self-fulfillment."

I also left you with these thoughts: *"What's unique or different about this principle?" "How does this 'life' piece fit in?" "How can we take these words on paper, create energy and make something happen in our work and life?"*

I regularly ask these three questions of the new hire employee groups I meet with and refer to these questions in most every class that I teach. Now, let's explore them to better understand this view of career development.

## ***What's unique or different about this principle?***

The fact that we can describe Career Development as a "lifelong process" was initially different for me. Earlier in my career I was used to viewing it as the next promotion or "ladder" opportunity with the Arabian American Oil Company (Saudi Aramco) where I spent 12 years managing international career development and training programs. I realized much later that my career was this lifelong series of opportunities and challenges, promotions and setbacks, where I have in recent years moved laterally or even stepped back to better position myself for the next opportunity or to create better balance in my work and life.

We accumulate our experiences from position to position, organization to organization, and we develop and grow our skills and talents. No one can ever take those experiences from us. It is what makes us each unique, and this is something we must take advantage of as we market ourselves in our resumes, interviews and networking. I'll weave this important theme into several future career articles.

The "self-directed" nature of career learning and development in this definition is certainly not new in today's environment. You and I have to take ownership of and manage our development. The question is *how*? The answer we'll talk about in another article to follow, *"What Does it Mean to Take Ownership of Your Career - 7 Key Responsibilities."*

### ***How do our "life experiences" fit in to this principle?***

We have traditionally thought of Career Development as work and education/training attached to that "great ladder in the sky." But most employees are quick to respond to this question, and to the direct relationship between life experiences (our family relationships, friends, hobbies, interests, community/professional affiliations) and our work. There is, of course, this delicate balance between the demands of today's work and family pressures. If work is "out of sync" then it affects our family and relationships. The reverse is also true. Further, we also develop and use many talents and skills throughout our life experience hobbies, personal relationships, church and community involvement. Many of these skills are transferable to our work, yet we're not able to recognize this nor are we comfortable giving ourselves credit for these experiences. We take them for granted.

Let me give you a wonderful example of this. A friend of mine, a very talented Software Engineer with over 12 years experience, was participating in a series of career management classes that I was teaching. He realized that after completing several self-assessment instruments and exercises there was some equally strong interests and attitudes towards working the "people side" of the business and not just the technical, software side. After some discussion, it was clear why he was wrestling with these exercises. I learned that he had the equivalence of a Masters degree in Theology, was a leader in his church and community teaching, coaching and counseling young adults. My friend was performing great "people work" in his life/community experiences while during the workweek he was solving complex technical software/systems issues. Through his networking, he became aware of a management position that used all of his combined talents. I then helped him build a resume that reflected both his technical expertise and the teaching and leadership skills and roles he played in the community.

The hiring manager recognized the value of these skills, and my friend was promoted into a People Management role supporting the Engineering Line organization in areas related to strategic "people issues" such as career management, staffing, employee performance and merit reviews. What a win-win for both the employee and the organization, and a validation of how we must recognize the value of "life experiences" and this relationship to our Career Development.

## ***How can we use this career development principle, these words on paper, create energy and make something happen in our work and life?***

Very simply, using this view or definition, I'm challenging employees to take ownership of their career development by identifying short- and long-term goals in their work, life and education/training. Aligning these goals with our own personal desires, needs and skills (self-fulfillment) and the needs of their organization in a win-win partnership is truly what it's all about. I'll talk further about building this "Career Action Plan" and even share some employee examples, at a later date.

Now armed with a better understanding of this definition or principle of Career Development that I challenge you to use, let's take a look at the last hurdle in better understanding what Career Development looks like today.

### ***Moving from the "Career Ladder" to the "Career Lattice"***

I've referred to the dismantling of this thing a few times, that "great career ladder in the sky" that our parents talked about and was reinforced through our education and early careers (particularly if you're a baby boomer like me); you know, where you only move up (up was the only way to go). We would hang on for dear life, sometimes fall off, step back, but generally keep pushing forward. It was also a kind of "silo mentality" or view of Career Development which also dictated that once you were in a certain department, organization, or let's say, an engineering discipline, then that is where you would stay. The quicker you moved up the ladder and the higher you moved, obviously, the brighter and more valuable you were. Now, we all know that's not necessarily the case. Nevertheless, the expertise was believed to exist at the top of the ladder: the boss had all of the answers, and the system took much of the responsibility for pushing employees to the next rung.\*

Let's face it, could any business succeed in today's rapidly changing teaming environment of flattened organizations and greater manager "spans of control," with this "old ladder thinking?" Not to say that the ladder doesn't exist, because it does today, particularly in most technical organizations, but it looks different.

The concept of a "career lattice" may not be new to you, but it's this new view or thinking about Career Development that opens up all kinds of opportunities for us. Rather than this traditional hierarchical or "silo" career ladder view, companies and employees alike must respond to these tremendous technology, economic and marketplace changes with this "lattice thinking," whereby the system becomes more collaborative, work is a series of partnerships or relationships, particularly in strong teaming environments. In a perfect "lattice" environment--and this is our challenge--independence and flexibility are fostered, career mobility is encouraged for more workers, and movement is at an angle: up, down or from side to side. Organization structure supports different paths across divisions, businesses and functions where career choices are based on skills, interests, organization/customer needs, individual and team initiatives, with rewards based on learning and contributions. \*

For example, as an engineer with a background in software graphics, you have options to move to a product software systems design role, maybe then a team lead in software

test, into a project lead in product development or a technical lead in new business pursuits. I've also worked with hardware engineers who successfully transitioned into software engineering roles, manufacturing engineers and program managers who moved into marketing roles, leaders who stepped back to spend more time with their family...and the list goes on.

As we both know, the determining factor is the company environment in which we work, and some organizations are much further along than others, while some will never make it.

### ***Some final thoughts...***

Regardless, as employees in today's work environment, you and I must understand these principles or strategies, view our own development in this light, and influence, as best we can, our work environment in a positive way. There is a psychology of career development, this attitude or view of ourselves and our work life that is, in my opinion, far more important than any resume, interview or career strategy today. Our career view, which is based on our personal experiences and the positive and negative challenges we've faced in work and life, and how we communicate this view through our attitude and actions, influences our career success.

As I said at the onset, with a better understanding of today's ground rules, the playing field, the ball being in our court, our opportunities and chances for success are greater. That's the way you and I want it.

\* Excerpts from "We Are All Self-Employed," by Cliff Hakim, 1994.