
Becoming

In retrospect, I can see connecting threads from working first as a chemical engineer to presently providing career counseling and organizational consulting. It's a stretch though and it certainly wouldn't have been an obvious future path in those early days. The process of becoming in a work sense evolved through many new beginnings along the way. It included good times and doing good, and it involved challenges and missteps. Bill Bridges calls those points where shifts occur in our lives, transitions. Internal responses to external changes, described by the three stages of an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning. These new beginnings added together are our becoming. Carl Rogers in *On Becoming a Person* observes "Life ... is always in process of becoming." In this article, we look at what this means for our work lives.

We can explore this evolution, this becoming, by considering three aspects - building self-understanding, personal development, and advocacy for the common good. These aspects reflect an awareness of the need to honor ourselves, to honor organizations that we create or with which we affiliate, and to honor our communities. Let us look at each of the three aspects of becoming in turn, starting with self-understanding.

Much of our formal learning focuses on content knowledge in disciplines or crafts. This is an essential foundation for our contributions; indeed, investing our time wisely in such content learning is important in building expertise and credibility. This is our marketable capability, our core area, and it can take many and varied forms, from the creative, to the practical, to the analytical. There are also other aspects in addition to content knowledge that are important in allowing us to take control of our path forward. Self-understanding is central to this. Components of self-understanding include values, personality preferences, interests, skills, and learning from past experiences (approaches to gaining insights into self-understanding are described in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*.)

This sense of self-understanding is like a compass that helps guide our decisions and direction based on personal purpose. Personal purpose forms a cornerstone for our career path. For example, is that path for personal fulfillment, financial reward, mitigating risk of unemployment, giving back, or creating a legacy? Or perhaps it is a combination of one or more of these aspects or something else entirely. We may find that the primary purpose shifts over the course of our work life, with, for example, creating a legacy more prominent at later stages. Clarifying this sense of purpose affects the emphasis and structure of our career path. In my case that emphasis evolved from using technical knowledge in a large organization, through business and leadership roles, to founding organizations in the career and workforce development fields, with volunteer activities sprinkled throughout. Moving ever closer to that sense of vocation described by Frederick Buchner as "the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

Let us now look at the second aspect of becoming in a work setting, that of personal development. It was one of those cold, late winter days in Chicago in 1978. About twenty of us filed rather sheepishly into a hotel conference room. We were there for a three-day workshop on public speaking for engineers. A root canal paled in comparison to the prospect of this experience. My supervisor at the time encouraged me to go. He recognized the need, though probably not the extent of my fear about public speaking. That lack of confidence started many

years earlier in elementary school in England and was reinforced by the English equivalent of high school. I had reached the erroneous conclusion by that winter day in Chicago that public speaking was a gift given to only a few at birth and the rest of us, particularly me, would never be able to do it. However, I was willing to give it one last, painful try. Three days later, after what was a transformative workshop experience, I was able, for the first time in my life, to approach the prospect of public speaking not with terror but with the knowledge that this was possible and might even be enjoyable. This transformation was no mean feat and a great credit to the workshop facilitator, Jeremiah Goldstein. This is a good example of developing a skill that might have seemed out of reach but was actually close at hand. And that is true for much of our on-going development, for as someone once observed “we have gone from a four-year degree to a forty-year degree.” Development always means individual growth. Examples include building the skills and characteristics for a nontraditional, entrepreneurial path described in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*, building leadership attributes described in *Affiliation in the Workplace*, or addressing approaches needed to prosper in an organizational setting described in *Building Workforce Strength* (for example, the chapter by Michele DeRosa and Cynthia Brinkman Doyle, “Acknowledging and Addressing Components of Career Fitness”).

The third aspect of becoming is that of advocacy for the common good. As described in *Business Behaving Well*, since the 1980s our earlier foundation of social good in the United States has been eroding, threatening the economic and social fabric of our society. Our economy almost collapsed because of rising inequality and a move to take from the many, including future generations, to benefit a few wealthy individuals. There is a physics experiment that involves connecting two soap bubbles of different sizes by a tube and then opening a valve between them to see what happens. It turns out that the larger bubble grows at the expense of the smaller—the very thing that happens in our society if we allow special interests and those with economic power to define our economic path. That path leads only to greater inequality. The larger bubble gets bigger. And now we face dire threats in the United States from a regime dedicated to enriching only those already wealthy, and to compromising our healthcare, diversity, environment, and sense of community. Now, particularly, advocacy is needed from each of us built on:

- Staying informed about emerging social, business, and workplace issues so we can decide where to best commit our time and energy.
- Influencing public policy by supporting candidates who speak to the needs of all in our society, not just the wealthy and powerful, and engaging in legislative campaigns and direct action in this regard.
- Becoming well informed about organizations and their approach to social responsibility so that, based on their performance, we can decide to engage or not, whether as employee, contractor, supplier, investor, or customer.

There is much to this sense of becoming. In Carl Rogers’ words “This process of the good life is not, I am convinced, a life for the faint-hearted ... It involves the courage to be.”

Parts of this article are extracted from, or based on concepts from, *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path* (Praeger, 2014), *Business Behaving Well* (Potomac Books, Inc., 2013), *Building Workforce Strength* (Praeger, 2010), and *Affiliation in the Workplace* (Praeger, 2003).