

Differentiating Success



In the November issue when I wrote on the topic, "Understanding Career Development", I emphasised on the fact that organisations cannot guarantee a career but what can be guaranteed is the opportunity to pursue one.

In this issue, as we begin a new year, I thought it is appropriate to share with you the findings of a study, which I executed for a multinational financial services organisation in 1993, among their gulf distribution outlets, to identify what differentiated successful managers from their peers, and to use the key differentiators as a guide in the future selection and recruitment process.

Since this is the time of the year when one makes new year resolutions, you might

want to resolve to practise some of these “differentiators” in pursuing your career, rather than resolve to kick smoking or give up on hard liquor, or in the ease of females to go on a diet for a Pamela Anderson figure.

Our “success” group consisted of management team or executive committee members and their one downs who were ranked in 1992 and 1993 (two years consecutively), as the top ten percenters or the next twenty percenters in the performance of their jobs.

The following differentiated these successful managers from their peers

Self-starters/proactive from the very first job with the bank

Although they appeared to have less guidance from their very first supervisor and did not have well structured, interesting jobs. These managers turned this situation into an opportunity to demonstrate their autonomy, self-initiative and leadership. For example they look to aspects of the job itself for feedback on how they were performing. They demonstrated tenacity, staying in their first jobs significantly longer than others (average two years Vs: one year). We inferred that they gained a deeper learning from the longer time in the job, and demonstrated leadership situations where their supervisors were not available, for whatever reason. The move from the first to the second job for the successful was mostly a case when they moved into the supervisor’s position. We saw this as evidence that leadership and self-initiative had been demonstrated and rewarded with greater responsibility

Gravitate toward/focus on people who are ‘Providers’ early

The successful Managers were found constantly interacting with supervisors and senior management from the start of their career with the bank. They sought out jobs that would give them exposure to senior decision makers and avoided jobs with supervisors whom they thought wouldn’t help them develop and advance. The successful were more likely to mention people as a reason to stay on in the bank than cite poor supervisors as a reason to leave the bank. They sought more exposure to mentors and role models. The “less successful in contrast, focussed more on peers they would work and feel comfortable with.

Good relationship and network builders

The successful also appeared to be better at actually building solid networks and

relationships. Evidence of this, included being tapped by others for future assignments more often and reporting more help in future assignments, from former supervisors, peers, mentors etc. They also reported receiving more respect and fair treatment from management levels above their own supervisors.

Balance between task and people

It must be stressed that the successful not only effectively developed relationships and networks but also established track records for getting the job done. The successful can be characterised as balancing focus on tasks and achievements with a healthy focus on people. Most successful managers (56%) mention people relations and interpersonal skills as the top response. They additionally described experiences regarding how to get the job done well.

Both broad-minded and focussed on career decisions

Successful managers were broad minded in that they were open to jobs, in which they weren't necessarily competent, good or compatible because they thought they would gain something from the job. They were open to the unfamiliar and untested, as well as jobs not apparently unrelated to the functional discipline/career path that would provide certain desired competencies. (ie., branch manager opting for the Head of Finance job to gain exposure to senior management, even though it meant losing contact with customers and profit centre).

External focus

A unifying thread linking all successful managers is the notion that they were very much outwardly focussed. The successful are not focussed on themselves even at the start of their careers with the bank, when it is quite common for a new manager to be very selfconscious and focussing more on how he/she is feeling, being accepted, integrating etc. They didn't appear to be complainers, were not overly concerned with how they were feeling, reacting, being treated, or not being invited to cocktails etc. They were not focussed on themselves.

The findings suggested that those successful usually had a strong external focus, such as focussing on the intrinsic qualities of work such as degree of challenge, autonomy, creativity, responsibility etc.

Strategic, long-term view of career

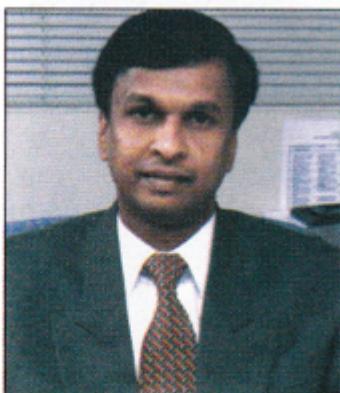
Successful managers indicated a long-term view of their career. They spoke about how particular jobs would fit or help their career in the long term more often than the less successful did.

Conclusion

Do you consider yourself successful? If so, see if any of the above differentiators are common to you.

Do you consider yourself less successful? If so, can you resolve differentiators? to begin practising these

Unfortunately in most organisations in Sri Lanka, successful managers are not allowed to practise traits that helped them succeed, due to the politicising of the environment by the less successful, and due to their fear of losing out. Politicking then becomes the trait of the less successful to survive in a fast-paced outfit. The only person in an organisation who can create an equal playing field is the Chief Executive Officer.



Sunil Dissanayake is a Human Resources Management & Development specialist. This article has been developed from his personal experiences in his professional career. **BT**