Controlling Your Career Destiny: Making Things Happen for You

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Abstract

Organization members need to take the initiative to systematically control their career development to position themselves for advancement in the organization and profession. Striving to reach their full professional potential and *being their best* should be targets for organization members in pursuit of career development. The concepts of positive psychology, action learning (including elastic thinking and being a "thought leader"), reputation, and impression management will serve organization members well in their career development endeavors and help them to advance within their organization and profession.

Keywords: career development and advancement, positive psychology, action learning, and impression management

1.0 Context

Organization members need to consciously and systematically take control of their career fate if they are to position themselves in the best light for advancement within their organizations and areas of professional expertise. Organization members owe it to themselves to do all within their power to reach their full potential, advance career-wise, and enhance satisfaction in their professions by being *the best they can be*. Positive psychology and action learning, coupled with the concepts of *thought leader* and *elastic thinking,* reputation,and impression management are vehicles that will help organization members to control their professional destinies and "make things happen" for career and professional advancements.

2.0 Self-Development for Career Advancement

White (2017) identifies these questions fororganization members to answer regarding taking the initiative for their career development: (1) How can I become the person [in my profession] I want to be? (2) How can I develop myself?(3) How can I set myself up for career growth? White (2017)advocates three avenues which organization members can use to enhance their careerself-development:

1. **Self-reflection**—This enables one to gain an awareness of strengths and weaknesses in comparison to state-of-the-art standards and competencies for one's professional area. It requires honest and open "soul searching" of one's actual performance and competencies.
2. **Input from Others**—As the Johari Window Model points out, we all have "blind spots" (insights known to others, but unknown to us) regarding how we actually are viewed and performing (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2013). Regarding blind spots,Mautz (2018) states, "Leaders [organization members included] who can come to grips with their blind spots and tune into unspoken rules are skilled indeed. Both of these things fit into the broader camp of self-awareness" (p. 1). Addressing blind spots and enhancing self-awareness necessitates open and honest feedback from others received with non-defensive open minds. Organization members must ask trusted friends and co-workers: "What am I really good at doing? What are things I do that might impair my future professional growth? What are my weaknesses?

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3. **Self-assessment instruments**—Data such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DISC (abehavior assessment), LEAD (Lead Effectiveness and Adaptability Description), and StrengthsFinder 2.0 provide reference points for analysis of information for self-development (White, 2017).[1]

Ignatius and Bernstein's (2018) observations regarding people who "conquer one challenge after another" provide good advice for staff members' career development (p. 2). These people: (1) are astute about how they set goals and pursue them; (2) specify, in concrete terms,*how to get things done* to achieve goals; (3) make the process of attaining goals enjoyable; (4) have a *work-life balance* so that one complements the other, and they are motivated to be successful in each; (5) know how to evaluate their professional options on-the-job and choose among them as they pursue their vision for the near term in their position and future self in other desired positions; and (6) know how to prioritize and sequence their on-the-job efforts instead of trying to do everything at once—and none of it well (Ignatius & Bernstein, 2018). Implied in the advice of Ignatius and Bernstein (2018) is the assumption that organization members have identified career development goals and have articulated visions of what near-term advancements they desire and their long-term career aspirations.[2]

2.1 Positive Psychology[3]

How organization members view and react to themselves and others, as well as their work environment, is crucial to developing and maintaining the initiative to strive—and achieve—continuous career development and advancement. Positive psychology has much to offer organization members in these endeavors because it furnishes them with an "upbeat" spirit and motivational feelings to *stay the course* in the quest to achieve desired career outcomes.

According to Seligman (2011), who coined the term in 1998, positive psychology is the scientific study of the positive aspects of the human experience. Positive psychology focuses on strengths, thereby enabling organization members to thrive and reach their full potential at work and in their personal lives. It emphasizes positive emotions, meaningful purpose, positive relationships, authentic engagement with others, satisfaction, and general mental health well-being (Seligman, 2008). This compares to what has often been represented by the study of psychology through negative attributes of human weaknesses and general mental illness factors.

For organization members, the major aspects of positive psychology are: (a) embracing the challenges of the present job and career development endeavors with a passion and being energized to meet them successfully; (b) learning from setbacks or adversities at work and not letting them cause discouragement in continuing efforts to pursue career development goals; (c) engaging with other stakeholders in developing goals and job targets, and taking actions to complete them; (d) viewing others in the work setting as a major asset for achieving high quality and timely collaborative work; (e) focusing on building positive and meaningful relationships with all staff and stakeholders; (f) finding fulfillment and excitement in using creativity to solve problems and being more productive on the job; and (g) looking beyond oneself to help others find satisfaction and enjoyment in their work, which will ultimately benefit the work unit and organization (Bartz, 2017).

2.2 Action Learning, "Thought Leader,"and Elastic Thinking

Action learning is a unique process for an organization member to acquire and apply knowledge and skills through interacting with others to solve challenging *real world, organizational-specific problems*. Action learning is defined as "a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change" (Revans cited in Tichy and Derose, 2016, p. 275). Tichy and DeRose (2016) embellish this definition of action learning by stating that "it places people in uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations, forcing them to work with others to resolve a *live challenge* rather than a hypothetical circumstance" (p. 276).

Organization members can benefit immensely from the challenges encountered via action learning because it moves them outside of their "comfort zones" and challenges them to stretch and expand their expertise in the context of having to work collaboratively with others. Action learning prompts organization members "to learn, change, and *convert insight into action*" (Tichy& DeRose, 2016, p. 289).

Organization members need to seek opportunities to partake in action learning to expand their competencies, connect and network with others, and showcase their knowledge and skills.The action learning process affords organization members with excellent opportunities to demonstrate themselves as *thought leaders*.

Bortz (2018) describes a thought leader as "a person whose thinking shapes that of others and spurs conversations within his or her field of expertise" (p. 24). An organization member viewed as a thought leader by colleagues and other leaders in the organization earns recognition and "career currency"—an asset for professional advancement.

The thought leadership process provides an opportunity for an organization member to utilize *elastic thinking*. Attributes of elastic thinking are:

1. Letting go of *comfortable ideas* and becoming accustomed to ambiguity and contradictions.
2. Rising above conventional mindsets and reframing questions.
3. Abandoning ingrained assumptions and opening up to new paradigms.
4. Utilizing imagination to generate and integrate a wide variety of ideas.
5. Being willing to experiment (Mlodinow, 2018, p. 6).

Thinking the same way with the same assumptions and reference points does not provide the innovative thinking needed to address the fast pace of the changing environments experienced by organizations. Organization members who use elastic thinking effectively will stand out and acquire recognition needed for career advancement. They will also identify creative and innovative ways to gain unique developmental experiences to enhance their knowledge, skills, and competencies.

2.3 Reputation and Impression Management[4]

2.3.1 Reputation.

How others perceive an organization member's image can play a key role in acquiring development work assignments that "stretch" the organization member to grow and enhance his/her skills. Others' perceptions of an organization member's competencies and potential are essential to the organization member being able to position her/himself for career advancement. Reputation and impression management are two factors crucial for an organization member to master in the journey to control his/her destiny.

Reputation is the impressions others have of an organization member and what they think of her/him professionally and personally (Brown, 2016; Komisarjevsky, 2012). Building a positive reputation can be complex in that the organization member does not have complete control over its development (Men, 2011). It is important to understand that reputation is defined solely by others and not by the intentions of the organization member (Warren, 2017).

The professional reputation of an organization member is based on prior actions directly observed by others through what they communicate about their perceptions of the organization member's actions. An organization member's reputation is developed over a considerable period of time—often years. A given individual's perception of an organization member's reputation may be formed completely by communications from other people, social media, and/or traditional media rather than being based on any actual face-to-face contact with the organization member.

The importance of an organization member's reputation is noted byHogan (2007) when he states, "Affection and status are granted on the basis of reputation—people hire us, fire us, marry us, loan us money, and otherwise support us based on our reputations" (p. 8). While a reputation is often developed over the years, a single event can have a severe negative impact on it.If the organization is internally investigating an organization memberfor a possible ethics violation, people may develop a strong negative reaction that tarnishes the organization member's reputation.

Llopis (2014) recognizes the impact of a professional reputation in the context of an organization member's image by stating, "Your leadership reputation is your most important valuable asset. A strong reputation makes it easier to earn respect from your peers and to advance your career goals" (p. 1).Anorganization member's reputation is ultimately built on a foundation of character, communications, and trust. A description of these three attributes is:

1. **Character**: (a) values and how one lives these values, (b) being able to look at one's behaviors and decisions using long-term thinking to consider their impacts, and (c) commitment to goals and making sure one follows through and completes them.

2. **Communications**: (a) must be open, (b) conducted in a manner that encourages input from others, (c) builds a culture that respects the viewpoints of others, (d) promotes meaningful engagements with others, (e) authentic so that the communications match one's actions, and (f) the ability to monitor one's own responses to situations so as not to be viewed as overly emotional.
3. **Trust**: (a) elimination of ambiguity through clarity of actions and words; (b) consistency of behaviors; (c) compassion through sincerely caring about others; (d) contributions through delivering the promised results; (e) competency through staying up-to-date on best practices and using evidenced-based decision-making; (f) commitment by sticking with decisions through adversity and seeing tasks through to completion; (g) connection with people through sincerity, gratitude, and valuing others' contributions; and (h) own up to what one does not know (Sherman, 2013; Freifield, 2011; Whitehurst, 2015).

Authenticity is crucial to reputation. If organization members' behaviors are viewed as contrived, phony, or both, their reputation will be seriously damaged. At timesthere may be a fine line between an organization member putting his/her best foot forward and being viewed as disingenuous. Essential to protecting a reputation is knowing where this line is and not crossing it.

Establishing a credible reputation "takes time, patience, and a commitment to working at building your reputation" (Whitehurst, 2015, p. 2). Organization members should consider whether their influence comes from the position they hold or whether it truly comes from the respect that they have earned. If it is the former, they should start working on the latter (Whitehurst, 2015). Whitehurst (2015) offers the following advice in the context of developing a credible reputation:

1. **Don't use phrases like "the boss wants it this way" or rely onhierarchical name dropping.** While that may get things done in the short term, it can curtail discussion that could provide useful input.
2. **Publicly recognize a great effort or contribution.** This can be a simple thank youe-mail in which you copy the whole team.
3. **Proactively ask for feedback and ideas on a specific topic.** You must respond to them all but implement only the good ones. And don't just take the best ideas and move on; take every opportunity to reinforce the spirit of meritocracy by giving credit where it is due(p. 2-3).

A proactive approach to organization members developing the desired professional reputation is to pursue the concept of a *personal brand*. Brand means the exceptional positive attributes of an organization member that standsout in comparison to others. A brand is others' perceptions of who the organization member really is and for what she/he stands. In the case of a personal brand,the organization member is the only one who can truly prompt, develop, and manage the brand to evolve as desired.

2.3.2 Impression management.[5]Impression management is the process of representing oneself to others for creating the desired impression. This process includes using appearance, mannerisms, body language, and the setting to influence others with face-to-face interactions.Effective impression management creates a positive *sense of presence* for an organization member when interacting with others (Hedges, 2012).

Digital communication through vehicles such as social media also plays a crucial role in the context of impression management. Impression management is an intentional goal-directed attempt to influence others. It strives to establish a good first impression that becomes a reality to those with whom the organization member is interacting.It also includes attempting to persuade others of one's definition of the situation and the issues at hand (DeePak, 2014).Impression management is neither inherently good nor bad. Most everyone engages in impression management on a regular basis because it is innate to social interactions. Most social situations involve two or more people attempting to persuade the other(s) regarding the definition of the situation and trying to use influence to gain one'sdesiredresult.Goffman (1959)believes organization members create impressions through two types of expressions:

1. **Expressions we give.** What one says, how one poses the situation, facial expressions, and intentionally controlling body language.
2. **Expressions we give off.** Behaviors over which one is sometimes less cognizant and are viewed as being inconsistent with what is stated because body language gives a different message (Goffman, 1959). Organization members need to effectively manage the expressions which they "give off" so that verbal and nonverbal communications are congruent.

In the context of impression management, Goffman (1959) uses the concepts of front stage and back stage. *Front stage* is when the organization member is giving a "performance" while interacting with other individuals to influence them to gain support for the topic at hand. *Back stage* is not done in the presence of the person that anorganization member is trying to influence, but is expressed afterward in private. The back stage represents the organization member's true feelings or behaviors about the situation that may differ from what was expressed in the front stage. Back stage behavior is the organization member's reflections about the interaction from being on stage and expecting to behave in a particular manner (Goffman 1959).Organization members must make sure they stay positive during the front stage and save criticisms for back stage reflections.Five common impression management strategies are:

1. **Ingratiation**: (a) the art of gaining acceptance and prompting others to like oneself, usually in the context of an ulterior motive; (b) opinion conformity (agreeing with others); (c) flattery; and (d) cautiously guarding what is stated (e.g., choosing words carefully).
2. **Intimidation**: (a) arousing fear in the person[s] with whom interacting, (b)controlling, (c) using power from the position held, and (d) aggressively trying to obtain the desired result.
3. **Supplication**: attempting to gain sympathy and attention by revealing faults, tribulations, and the difficulty of the situation.
4. **Self-promotion**: (a) taking credit for events, (b) making others aware of accomplishments, and (c) presenting strengths to prove competency. (It can be disastrous if congruency does not exist between the information presented and the other person's perception of reality.)
5. **Exemplification**: (a) presenting one's moral worthiness, (b) displaying sincerity, (c) demonstrating dedication and responsibility to the issue at hand to show superiority, and (d) advocating being the "right" person for the job/task at hand (Goffman, 1959; DeePak, 2014; Bolino, Klotz, & Daniels, 2014).

3.0 Concluding Thoughts

Organization members owe it to themselves to systematically focus on their career development and professional advancement (Bartz, 2018c). Mastery and application of the skill sets associated with positive psychology, action learning, elastic thinking, "thought leadership," reputation, and impression management will significantly increase the probability of successful career development and professional advancement.

4.0 Footnotes

Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018a). Components for talent development of staff members. *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Development*, 6(1), 1-9.

This section is based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018c). Staff members self-managing their talent development. *American International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(5), 1-5.

Based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2018b). Managers effectively using positive psychology and its attributes of flow, mindfulness, mindset, optimism, and happiness. *International Journal of Education and Human Developments*, 4(4), 26-32.

Based in part on Bartz, D.E. & Brink, M. (2017). Image, professional reputation, and impression management by managers. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(5), 1-4.

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