

Proving Your Real Value

by David J. Bowman

A friend of mine phoned me in a panic recently; he'd just been fired from his job at a law firm as part of a merger and restructuring. As we talked, his emotions began to overtake him and he jumped from subject to subject, sometimes swearing, sometimes nearly in tears.

"I've been here more than 10 years," he said. "How can they do this to me and my family? What can I do to save this job? I don't know where I'll go, or how I'll pay the bills."

I listened patiently. Being a career consultant, that's what I do at times like this. I suggested we meet at a near-by coffee shop. Upon arriving, he was so emotionally charged he could hardly steady his coffee cup.

After he vented for several more minutes, I asked him who he felt was to blame for his dilemma. He pointed to the merger, some senior partners in the law firm (he was sure they didn't like him) and his boss, who probably "sold him out" when it came to choosing who would stay and who would go.

I said, "Wait a minute. You've been at your firm for 10 years and you haven't figured out the politics of the place? Don't you understand that in any consolidation or restructuring, it's the folks that can prove they've provided real value to the firm that will stay? The others will go." He mumbled something about not knowing what real value means.

About two weeks later, after some career counseling, he asked me to elaborate on what I'd meant by proving he'd provided real value in his firm. I told him it means individuals must assess themselves and their jobs on a regular basis in three essential areas, and then act on their findings.

1. Assess your job skills. Are they state-of-the-art? Take a really honest look at them in relation to what's now needed in your job and firm. How are you with computers and various software? How about your written and verbal communication skills? How are your marketing, financial, administrative, organizational and problem-solving skills? If you manage people, how's your leadership – in terms of motivation, conflict resolution, and coaching and mentoring?

Your self-benchmarking should start with your co-workers. How do your skills compare with theirs? Then look at others in your network with similar job descriptions, such as friends in other firms, as well as those in trade associations. What skills do they have that you don't? What kind of feedback have they been getting about their skills? And how do they measure and prove their real value in their organizations?

If you find you need improvement, you have several paths to follow: Find a mentor in the organization to teach you; team with others who are strong where you're weak (and vice versa) and teach each other; go back to school part-time – at local universities and high schools. There are many inexpensive night and weekend classes in all sorts of subjects (and the organization may even pay for them).

2. Assess the importance of your job to the organization. Where is your job in terms of the organization's big picture, and where should it be? Does everyone come to you for advice and answers, or does everyone wonder what you do? Is your work internally focused, or do you interact with clients and other external individuals and organizations (it had better be the latter)? What would happen to revenues and profits if your job were eliminated (now, there's a real value issue!)?

If you find that you and your job aren't very important to the efficient functioning and core business of your organization, you'd better transfer to another job that is important, perhaps in a growing department. Or even move to another organization.

3. Assess how valuable your experience is to the organization. How easily can you be replaced? Could someone half your age – and at half your salary – do your job as well or better? Is your network of contacts so extensive and useful that the organization would suffer greatly without them? Are you so skillful at management that a replacement simply could not realize similar results? How much has your experience contributed to cost reductions or revenue and profit increases? Is a client's loyalty to you or to the organization? Can you show an increase in customer satisfaction either internally or externally? Have you developed a loyal, efficient staff?

Often, experience can determine who will interact best with a client or who will represent the organization, especially when strong relationships are important. It's a good idea to ask for testimonials from satisfied, even delighted, customers and other key contacts. How have you and your work made a difference for them?

My lawyer friend finally got it; now he understands the meaning of providing and proving real value in an organization. He saw that the fault for his dismissal was his, since he had not assessed himself or his job in that way. He now realizes that had he done so, and then done something about his finding, he might still be at that law firm. On the other hand, he's certainly going to make sure he can provide and prove his real value at this next job.

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