



## THE EXISTENTIAL EXECUTIVE

### Leadership and Career Development – What is success?

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My young son has captured with original words the most significant and contrasting periods of my adult and professional life.

'Holi-work' was used to describe my life when based in Shanghai and traveling extensively in China. That was a life spent passing through airports and, I suppose, passing through his life. He delivered the word in a somewhat accusing manner over breakfast one Sunday morning when I was once again off to the airport and not back until Saturday night. Despite my protests about this hectic life being no holiday he perceptively saw through the pretence - hence his description that it was all about 'holi-work'. He was right.

Many other seeds had to be sown before I began to understand that such a life had both benefits and limitations. The benefits included a very generous expatriate package, which could always be used to justify the continuation of business as usual. In addition, influence, power, career advancement, position, security, identity, money and pride were also significant benefits, but not so easily admitted or expressed. However, the seeds kept growing and after another six years of highly fulfilling career advancement and passing through airports [a period which my wife reminds me also involved another international relocation, three house moves, two new schools and a third child!] the realisation finally sprouted that something was missing.

### EXISTENTIAL PERIOD

This was the beginning of my 'existential period'. On my 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday I was on a plane flying home to Singapore from London when I realised that I had now worked more than half my life with one company. These had been 22 very fulfilling, enjoyable and well rewarded years. Not long after there was the Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy in New York and together with a number of other evolving themes and issues I began to deeply think about what I really wanted out of life and what contribution I could make. Such thoughts are always at the back of the mind but it seemed to me, at that age and stage in life that the decision was to either leave, or commit to another twenty years with the company. I decided to leave. Thus, I had absolute clarity at that stage about what I would not do for the next twenty years, but no clear idea about what I would do. Hence the 'existential period'.

Jean-Paul Satre in *Nausea* describes this state perfectly;

"I take a few steps and I stop. I savour this total oblivion into which I have fallen. I am between two towns. One knows nothing of me, the other knows me no longer."

So I found myself between two towns. What I did have was a list of the 27 things I wanted to do before I died, so I started to do them. These provided me with challenges, adventures and opportunities for new learning. The list also included setting up my own business, but first of all I

wanted to experience life 'between two towns'. So it was that 2002 became a year of transition, something of a sabbatical, or as my now ten-year-old son described it to his inquisitive school friends – 'Daddy's mid-life retirement'.

He was right.

## MID-LIFE RETIREMENT

In my early career as a personnel manager at a factory in northern England I used to speculate about pioneering a policy of retiring for ten years in mid-life and then returning to work until age 80. Never would I have predicted that I would become my own experiment for mid-life retirement. Or, as my wife so succinctly puts it, 'How to transition overnight from highly paid executive to unemployed husband and father of three.' This raises a very important aspect of the transition, which is the impact upon the family.

For me and the children the benefits were immediate and obvious as we could spend time and have adventures together. It is not always so easy for the partner. Not only is there the high level of uncertainty for the future but also the unplanned and unrehearsed impact upon family dynamics. In one low moment my wife expressed the feeling that she had become redundant as I was purloining her customary role within the family. This takes a lot of working out.

Family and friends were very understanding and supportive of the change, which I am sure would have been different in previous times when the status and identity of the family were more dependent on the career you had. However, there was some sense that I was being indulgent. Perhaps, but is it any more indulgent than committing oneself to the type of career that I had chosen. I have always been intrigued by some wisdom from the Dalai Lama, that you should, 'Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it'.

What I do acknowledge is that it has been a great privilege to have the opportunity to experience mid-life retirement, as without the support of family and the preparedness to absorb the financial risks, it is not an option. I know of many others who speculate with the idea of making significant change but decide not to. In my new role as 'Mum' at school concerts and sports events a number of women have asked me to speak with their husbands about taking such a step, until they have second thoughts about the financial and emotional risks involved. After a moments reflection they ask me not to talk with their husbands!

In addition to time with the family another great benefit of this life-change has been the opportunity to seek out coaches and mentors, make new friends and renew neglected friendships.

## COACHES, MENTORS & FRIENDS

I do admire people who can maintain deep friendships and build broad networks whilst still delivering at a high level within their role. My experience has been that it is very easy to become introspective within any organization, particularly a big international company. I had fallen into this trap and I have enjoyed broadening my horizons in the past year. The results and benefits have been immense and operate at many levels. I would not have got to the top of Kilimanjaro without the support of new friends and excellent guides. In developing and building my new business, Hemisphere Consulting Pte. Ltd., professional coaching from Peter Tobin at 'Thomson DBM' has been an invaluable stimulus to my thoughts, plans and motivation. Such achievements would not have been possible or as enjoyable without the contribution of both free and fee based advice, guidance and coaching.

## TRANSITION

Now I understand why the armed forces invest so much time and resources in helping service personnel adjust to civilian life. As a human resource leader who has lived and worked in the UK, China and Singapore I was very conscious of how comprehensive and valuable the company benefit package and infrastructure was, particularly for expatriates. However, despite my many years of reminding people about this nothing quite prepares you for the shock of leaving the mother company, particularly when the parting takes place in a foreign country. In our case, living in Singapore we

found that setting up a new company and becoming 'Permanent Residents' was a remarkably smooth and efficient process costing very little money. However, arranging and having to pay for ones own housing, health insurance, life assurance, car, international schools and pension benefits is a rude awakening after a secure and supportive corporate life. Breaking the umbilical code is an apt analogy. Despite these hurdles the real experience and learning resulting from career and life transition is not about adjusting to new systems and planning the finances. It is about the emotions and the feelings experienced, which need to be recognised and harnessed. I only became fully conscious of what my twenty years of 'holi-work' had represented for me when I had decided to give it up. There was a pivotal moment just before I decided to leave when I reasoned that all logic pointed to staying and committing myself to another twenty years in the same company. Then I realized that I had been logical long enough, now was the time to follow my heart, my instincts and to experience an existential adventure.

It has been fascinating to understand and compare the emotions and feelings attached to the holi-work and mid-life retirement periods.

Holi-work  
[Corporate life]

Pride  
Belonging  
Identity  
Security  
\$\$ Reward & recognition  
Achievement  
Position / power / status  
Dependency & safety

Mid-life retirement  
[Transition]

Exciting  
Independence  
Space  
Entrepreneurial  
Personal fulfillment  
Challenged  
Self expression  
Freedom & risk

Neither set of feelings is better than the other and neither do I present them as opposites or as mutually exclusive. I hope that in the future and in my own business I can nurture an environment, which stimulates the growth of pride, belonging, identity, reward and recognition.

LESSONS & LEARNING

There are no prescriptive lessons. All I can do is share my own experience. I do not for one moment present my journey as a route-map for others. Each person and family unit must decide for themselves, within the realms of what they determine is possible, what path to follow or perhaps to experiment with. Therefore, I draw no conclusions for others.

My experience is that a significant change has been a stimulus and a source of new learning. It has been an opportunity and a privilege to spend time with the children. It has not been about a turning away from a business life or disillusionment with the modern world. I had a wonderful corporate career and I have great respect for the company that gave me such opportunities and reward. Thus, I have no regrets about my holi-work period. Indeed, returning to corporate life is an option for the future. That is one of many options now available to me, few of which had even occurred to me two years ago.

I do therefore encourage people to think through what their desired future is – what they want to experience, contribute and achieve in their career and in life. To what extent do they need or want to take control. What are their expectations and how can they meet or even surpass them? Usually a person decides to further develop within their current career path and their commitment and performance to this career will be improved as a consequence.

Career change is often not voluntary – forced job loss, whether it be for economic, health or other reasons, often generates another set of feelings and emotions which are even more of a challenge to harness positively, such as resentment, loss of self-respect, wounded pride, hurt and shock. These will be easier to harness if thought has already been put into what the desired future is and what the potential range of options are.

## FUTURE GROWTH – PERSONAL & BUSINESS

Personally I have always found life experience and interaction with people the primary sources of stimulation and growth. By moving into open space, between two towns as Satre would express it, the experiences and stimuli have multiplied. I have found travel, literature [particularly Conrad, Hemingway, Oondatje, Coetzee, Garcia Marquez] and biographies a valuable source of ideas, wisdom and perspective.

Most rewarding has been the discovery of how genuinely interested and supportive people are in helping you with the transition. Family, friends and mentors have been complemented by professional coaches. My view on this is that all input is welcome so long as you always remember to develop your own perspective and retain full responsibility.

My personal and business mission is to help people in business to surpass expectations. I emphasise that this is also a business mission as I am clear about the benefits that flow to businesses from addressing both the specific performance and broader personal development needs of their people. I describe this as 'People Strategies for Business'

The particular services that I provide are leadership coaching, people development programmes and facilitating the alignment of business and people strategies, policies and practices.

What about my sage – my ten-year-old son – and his perceptive words of wisdom. After twenty years of holi-work and one year of mid-life retirement, what now?

He was listening to a CD last week with the lyric, "What is the meaning of life?" He thought that was a strange question and asked me if I knew the answer. I put the question back to him. His reply was, "Growth". [He would also like a Ferrari !]

He was right, again.

What is success for you?

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