

Career Rx

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Interdependence

On July 20, 1959 Neil Armstrong descended the ladder from the landing craft named the Eagle and became the first man to set foot on the moon. Was this a personal victory for Neil Armstrong? There were tens of thousands of people at NASA working on the project. It was the result of the cumulative support of at least 6 administrations starting with FDR and ending with Nixon. Over 530 million people watched and prayed as Armstrong took his one small step.

The Apollo 11 program was the culmination of a program that propelled the ascent of humanity beyond what anyone would have dreamed possible just years earlier. The achievements were shared by all humanity. There were some personal victories along the way, but the actual achievement was the result of contributions from millions of taxpayers, funding the efforts of thousands of creative people working alternately inductively and deductively to produce the most interdependent victory of all time. Even the competing Russian space program bolstered the moon shot through competition and the leapfrogging of discoveries.

The achievements of the Apollo program are just one example of the achievements of a specialized society working towards cooperative goals. There are plenty of other examples of interdependent achievements. Other examples include the elimination of small pox in the US in 1949 and the rest of the world in 1967, and the restoration focus on the ozone layer in 1978.

Human beings are uniquely capable of building social structures that support shared goals. These structures can apply to a small team working on an office holiday party or a larger enterprise aimed at ending hunger in the developing world. What all successful teams have in common is interdependent thinking.

...for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom."

Martin Luther King Jr., I have a dream

What is interdependence? Interdependence can be defined as an enterprise relying on mutual assistance, support, cooperation, or interaction among constituent parts or members.

Interdependence is not dependence on others for personal or professional needs and it is not independence from others in terms of judgment or insight. Interdependence involves working together to achieve goals that are greater than those that could be achieved individually.

"Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of man as self-sufficiency. Man is a social being. Without interrelation with society he cannot realize his oneness with the universe or suppress his egotism. His social interdependence enables him to test his faith and to prove himself on the touchstone of reality."

Mahatma Gandhi

When used effectively, interdependent relationships generate a wealth of internal energy among participants and result in highly positive work environments and outcomes. Many people have had some experiences where they were part of a synergistic relationship. They often try to regain the feeling of being part of a high performance team. Interdependence is a difficult condition to attain. Mutual trust at a very deep level is a prerequisite. Shared goals are another important characteristic. The challenge from a management perspective is that these characteristics need to be organic and genuine. There are many programs out there from wilderness survival training to progressive golf outings that attempt to achieve these balances. The part of the equation that is often missed by these programs is that interpersonal trust cannot be engineered or magically conjured. It has to be built slowly over time. You can say that you trust someone until they give you reason not to, but the question remains as to what you trust them to do or

not to do. Speaking freely and having the proxy of those with whom you work is a difficult level of confidence to achieve.

There are disciplines that can make a person more likely to find themselves in interdependent relationships. One discipline is to know who you are; what are your core principles? What are the unshakable truths that you hold dear? How do you react in familiar situations? What are your real goals? Self awareness is the first step in building relationships with others.

Another characteristic that helps find these relationships is to look carefully for the answers to these same questions in others. Taking a general interest in who others are and how they think, without being judgmental is a goal worth achieving. Being a good listener is part of this discipline.

Building trust is discipline that requires constant attention.

People will begin to trust you when they feel that they understand you but the requirement goes much deeper. Building up a firm level of trust is done by acting with integrity on a broad range of large and small things over time are how trust is built.

"Independent thinking alone is not suited to interdependent reality. Independent people who do not have the maturity to think and act interdependently may be good individual producers, but they won't be good leaders or team players. They're not coming from the paradigm of interdependence necessary to succeed in marriage, family, or organizational reality."

Stephen Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

If the groundwork is in place, the environment becomes relatively unimportant. I have seen teams work effectively and achieve synergies in settings that are not at all conducive to them. This is not to say that building obstacles to communications will help, because they will certainly not. But the power of relationships is a force of attraction that will overcome many inconveniences.

There is often a progression in people towards interdependence as they grow. A great example of this can be found in the career of Bill Gates. As a student, he was very independent. His first assaults on IBM were personal achievements which enabled him to grow his company into an empire. Initially, Microsoft competed fiercely with its competitors. The inclusion of Internet Explorer into the Windows operating system is just one example of this. In recent years, Bill abandoned his long term heroic position with Microsoft to find a more satisfying position working cooperatively to help the world's neediest people. He certainly knew great success and even some synergy with Microsoft, but somewhere along the way he came to the realization that there are harder and more worthwhile challenges that need to be addressed and to approach these problems, one needs to work in an interdependent universe.

"We cannot build our own future without helping others to build theirs."

Bill Clinton

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Lisa's extensive human resources and coaching experience with Fortune 500 companies, small enterprises, medium-sized firms, and non-profit organizations gives her the unique ability to bring together wide-ranging perspectives on career transitions, executive and leadership development. She has consulted with a wide variety of sectors — consumer goods, financial services, healthcare, media and entertainment, pharmaceutical and life sciences, publishing, professional services, technology, and non-profit. Lisa has a passion for motivational speaking, conducts career forums, and provides executive and career coaching.

Lisa's greatest strength is that she enables individuals and organizations to see themselves in new ways, freeing them to achieve their goals. Lisa can be reached at Lisa@ChenofskySinger.com.