

LIFE...BY DRIFT OR DESIGN

by TERRIE LUPBERGER, MCC

One of my clients recently told me that after 27 years of marriage her husband has just asked for a divorce. Apparently he had been miserable for the last 15 of those 27 years. 'No', she didn't see any signs of his unhappiness but then again, she admitted that she's been pretty caught up in her own work for so long that maybe she didn't notice the signs. Another client, a senior manager, has been so overwhelmed with work for so long that he's gotten use to only spending about 10 hours a month with his family. It's 'not ideal' he says but there isn't much he can do about either.

I can't tell you how many people I've worked with over the years that have similar stories. Their professions and life circumstances vary widely but they are all surprised and disillusioned to find themselves in circumstances, relationships, and jobs that have little connection any more with what's really important to them. Somewhere along the course of their life they got caught in what I call the drift.

Whether leading others or leading your own life it seems to me there are two primary paths you can take. You either spend most of your time reacting to circumstances, acting mostly out of habit and at the effect of what others want of you (the drift) OR you are conscious and purposeful in designing how you spend your time, and with whom, as a reflection of what matters most to you.

OK, maybe it's not that simple or black and white, but it's a powerful way to orient yourself in both your professional and personal life.

In the drift, your life is the result of just the way you've come to do things. It's a result of a million small and not-so-small decisions that you made out of habit or fear or justifications and reasons to accommodate to the circumstances.

In the design, your life is about consciously choosing to take actions consistent with your values, your inner knowing, and your most important cares.

In the drift, you're blind to the possibilities that things could be done differently. You take your habitual choices and your ways of responding to things as the norm.

In the design you're aware that your thinking and your actions are either generating what you want or they aren't.

In the drift, you are more likely to blame your circumstances or others for why you don't have what you want.

In the design you know you have more choice than you think you do. You know you have options to design it differently and you always have the option to relate to your circumstances differently, even if you can't change them.

In the drift you have a whole lot of reasons why you have to keep doing what you're doing.

In the design you muster your courage and take risks to get results, and, even if you fail, you know you were acting out of alignment and integrity with what matters most.

The drift shows up in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Take, for example, the senior manager who is so overwhelmed with work that he doesn't have time to return emails in a timely manner. Ironically, the lack of communication with his team is the reason there are so many emails in the first place but he can't see that - he doesn't have the time. Or consider the project team that is so busy reacting to changing user requirements that they don't step back to see if the overall project plan and direction still makes sense to their customers.

I worked with the CEO of a medical research lab who had been putting up with a verbally abusive boss for 4 years. Getting her son through college was the reason that she justified not taking different actions. There's the HR Director who traveled internationally every month and was considered a superstar at work, year after year exceeding all the milestones, but was starting to wonder if there was more to life than an 80 hour work week with little energy or time left to tend to her own wants and needs outside of work.

You, yourself, may have been saying for some time that you're going to finish writing that book, or start a new business, or move to a new town, or get back to exercising - but everything else takes precedent. You've been unhappy at your current work for a while but everyone is telling you how good you have it made so you stay. You've been so busy tending to kids, or to that little voice in your head insisting you work hard so you aren't found out as an imposter, or to the demands of your boss, spouse or parents, that you've ignored your own health, well-being and aspirations.

Let's face it, we all have been taken by the drift at different times in our lives. I even think the drift can be a healthy space to hang out in for a while - taking the time to more deeply listen to what wants to emerge next in your personal or professional life. It's just that too many people don't even know they're in the drift, don't know or believe there's an alternative.

The problem with that is - and that old saying sums it up perfectly - 'if you always do what you've always done you'll always get what you've always gotten.' You see, the future exists only in the present. Let me say that again in case you missed it. The future exists only in the present. If there isn't attention on it now then you will be a product of the drift of action, not the author of them. You'll keep getting more of the same.

So, maybe it's worth your time to consider this important but undervalued exploration. Ask yourself: Are you living and leading, right now, by drift or by design? Are you conscious and intentional and designing the actions needed

to take care of what you most care about? Or, are you too busy reacting to circumstances, events, and what other people want for and from you?

It's not too late if you answered yes to the latter. It will take awareness, courage and some friendly support. But, in the end, who do you want to say authored your life?