

Why Women are Willing to Work Hard, but Need a Moral Purpose

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Working Hard and Still Being Overlooked

A recent client, Beth, is a high energy, very intelligent, hardworking individual with a tendency to rely on external means (such as spreadsheets, extensive lists, charts and graphs, etc.) to keep herself in the mode of constant activity. She spent much of her time at work investigating every possible scenario that could go wrong in a given situation in order to ensure all her flanks were covered by creating tangible evidence that she is busy doing real work. Her image of herself is based on being the “go to” person with all the answers, and solid reasons for what issues remain unanswered or unfulfilled. She is also a person of high moral integrity, with unimpeachable values of honesty, trust, loyalty, and family. She had been with her previous employer for almost 13 years, however, recently began to feel overlooked by management, despite her hard work, and her excellent performance reviews.

Her self-esteem was beginning to flag, and it was becoming harder for her to continue to perform at her highest levels. In addition, Beth began to question the moral value system of the company when she was repeatedly asked to falsely report various events that took place on her assigned program. In addition, Beth felt she was being placed in a position of compromise when she witnessed inaccurate information being presented to the customer, and unrealistic promises were made which Beth knew the company could not deliver. Furthermore, violations of the company's own policies and procedures for proper conduct were regularly ignored without consequence to the perpetrators, and Beth felt that this among the other issues, was directly in violation of her own personal value system.

She began to realize working for this company was no longer an option for her, but she felt trapped and also expressed a sense of loyalty to her immediate supervisor and others with whom she had developed close relationships over the years. After so many years, her identity and sense of self was derived from working at that company, whether or not she experienced happiness there. Beth began her coaching engagement many months prior to actually making her move to leave the company, and through the coaching sessions learned that in order to be more successful and gain more self-satisfaction in her work life, she had to improve her ability to separate what was realistic and what she could and could not control. Her goal for our coaching partnership was to apply that learning in finding another source of employment, and to carry the new self-awareness into her new job scenario.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Play – The Humanistic Theory

It occurred to me that Beth was operating up and down the scale of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; specifically, within the area of self-esteem and self-actualization. With her esteem and sense of self tied to a company she no longer desired to be a part of, many issues of confidence, achievement and respect came to the forefront through the seven or eight sessions we completed. Beth felt her ability to problem solve was strong, but not fully developed in her environment; she felt a degree of gender discrimination, since she was not advancing as fast as her contemporaries (men), and her sense of morality was compromised by the actions and behaviors she witnessed that were counter to her personal value system. Furthermore, her sense of safety of employment and morality was in jeopardy, as she struggled with bringing the violations and bad behavior to the attention of management, as usually these types of reports reflected badly on the person making the report instead of those involved. Beth also expressed a strong desire to work in an area that met more of her personal values in so far as the company's purpose was to better the human condition. For this reason, she specifically targeted a healthcare company as her employer of choice.

To better coach Beth, I chose the Humanistic Theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs because of its focus on moving through the various levels of specific human needs in order to achieve true self-actualization. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943, 1954) stated that human motivation is based on people seeking fulfillment and change through personal growth. According to Maslow, "What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself." And, "Human life will never be understood unless its highest aspirations are taken into account. Growth, self-actualization, the striving toward health, the quest for identity and autonomy, the yearning for excellence ... must by now be accepted beyond question as a widespread and perhaps universal human tendency ..." Later, Maslow included the concept of "self-transcendence" in his Hierarchy theory, which he defined as helping others reach their own self-actualization.

In Beth's case, she may have been able to achieve some degree of self-actualization in some areas of her life, such as family and friends, personal health, significant other, fun and recreation, etc., but her career aspirations held her back from being self-actualized at work. This model fits with her desire for greater career satisfaction, including her need to be a contributor to the betterment of other people through support of healthy lifestyles, improvement in medical care, and charitable works. Beth's desire to engage with a company, which also contributed to the well-being of others, was met by her potential employment at the health care company. In addition, Beth expressed that her personality was that of an introvert who acts as an extrovert. She articulated her desire to integrate her extroverted self with her introverted self through gaining more confidence, additional courage to act upon her values, and authentic connections to others (networking opportunities) who could help her achieve her

goals. This model aligns well with Beth's style of learning and awareness, as she works to achieve greater spontaneity in her work behavior and grows to appreciate and accept her new self-awareness and knowledge in what is realistic for her and what she can control.

When Your Client is Naturally Self-Reflective, Coaching is Easier

My rationale for choosing this model with Beth in this coaching scenario is that Beth is a naturally self-reflective person and can readily implement change when presented with an intellectual model with which to work. Beth also "talks to think" and can bring herself through the various levels of change with little prompting or reframing. She is willing and open to exploration of her self-perceptions, and willing to discuss where her strengths and weaknesses lie in the framework of personal growth and development. For example, she mentions the irony of her comfort with being alone with just a book to keep her company, even though her persona presents a very people-oriented, outgoing and gregarious nature; she is able to laugh at herself, so using humor within the coaching framework is effective with her.

For instance, she often humorously portrayed herself as a "hermit" buried in her cubicle, eating her yogurt all alone at lunchtime. Moreover, Beth has learned to be appreciative of other people's contributions, but often downplays her own. Now, she is learning to notice when she is appreciated, and what the conditions were that led to that appreciative state. Coaching with Beth is fast paced, and her mind often picks up quickly on any coaching questions or suggestions for additional insights of her own, as well as numerous "Ah Ha!" moments. As a coachee, she is malleable, open and eager to move forward with the changes to bring her to a higher level of self-awareness and understanding. Because Beth is enthusiastic and open, I felt that using this model would propel her further toward her goals. She completed her homework assignments with vigor and enthusiasm and reflected on the helpfulness of each one as she experienced small changes and new consciousness and mindfulness on a week-to-week basis. She had great confidence in my ability to coach her and many times complimented me for encouraging her to stretch herself further than she ever had before.

Visioning and Reflecting and Self-Validation: She's the "Little Engine That Could".

With Maslow's model, it made sense to use a number of visioning and reflection questions for Beth. When she observed that she had put in place several new behaviors on her new job, she also reflected that she felt that some of her old habits might begin to creep back in, and she feared she might push her new self-awareness into the background, I asked her "What is the learning for you here?" She was able to articulate that self-validation (*The*

Little Engine That Could) helped her gain the courage and underscored the confidence she needed to damp down the self-doubts and fears she had in her previous job. She was happy to “create a space for reflection” and that the “sheer task of articulating her thoughts” were able to help her to “put her thoughts in order and be systematic in her thinking”. Clearly, Beth strives for acceptance of her new self and treasures the opportunity to explore and experiment with strategies and tactics to keep her self-awareness on track.

Meet Your Future Self, It’s Not That Scary to Take a Risk.

We also worked with a tool, a worksheet called “Meet Your Future Self” which asks 22 questions about what a person’s future self would be like, from “What clothes would you be wearing?” to “What is the essence of your future self?” These questions were effective in allowing Beth to envision herself in a future state in which she has reached her goals of satisfaction in most areas of her life, including her work life; where she is doing productive work for the betterment of humanity, and is engaged in the company’s charitable work events as an active contributor, thus evening out her “wheel of life” to a more integrated self. In earlier sessions, we discussed some of her “mindful moments”, when she revealed her fear of taking risks, and worrying that if she took risks, “something bad would happen”.

She realized that taking risks was part of the growth process and that her “Ah Ha!” moment was when she realized that risk taking was “not as scary as she thought”. She reflected that she had had opportunities at her previous job, but her fear of risk had deterred her from moving forward with them. With her new awareness, she wants to ensure she carries her determination to conquer fear of risk naturally at her new job, since she now has the unique opportunity to begin anew. When I asked her what support she might need, she remarked that she needed to stay positive and focused; that she works on it every day and that she is consistent in her messaging about herself. She stated that she needs to feel her confidence grow on an emotional level in order to keep it consistent.

She realized that she needed to “give to herself, feed herself emotionally, and to remind herself that she is “capable, worthy, and positive”. She stated that being committed to ascertain her goals and following up with the coaching makes it real for her, not just an unspoken concept. We also worked on a “speedy priority finder” which helped Beth put her various goals in perspective. She was able to again create a tangible guide for herself outlining what was most important to her and what she could do if she had no limits. Being the introspective person that she is, Beth responded that she would become a great philanthropist, and would have the means to help the world become cured of diseases and other ills. This vision aligns with Beth’s overall desire to work in an industry that reflects her personal value system, and engages in corporate works of charity to benefit those who do

not have the means to stay healthy, one of Maslow's basic needs, the need for ease of bodily functions and homeostasis.

The Client's Long View, with Assistance from Maslow.

In a brief exposure to this model, it's most useful in considering the long perspective of each client. It's best to sense if the client is happy or not, by various means of questioning, intuition, and observation of body language word choice, etc. Beth seemed to fit in comfortably with this model in that she is such a reflective individual and very eager to benefit from the coaching experience. Beth sees the world through her sense of self, therefore, focusing on her vision of herself and helping her to gain self-awareness was a step in bringing her to Maslow's self-actualization stage.

Maslow's Hierarchy as a Growth Tool.

I have used this model with other clients as well, and with interviews with client's supervisors and colleagues. Often, people have the impression that self-awareness or self-actualization is an isolated process, and they can feel like failures if they can't envision themselves achieving their own definitions of success. I like to use the model as a growth tool itself, as an athlete can be self-actualized on the playing field in his sport, but not self-actualized in his personal, family or work life. It's a good way to explain that life is a continuum, and sometimes you are at a high point, but maybe due to circumstances you can't control, you topple off that high specific high point. But there is always another high point to be reached, and maybe the last one wasn't intended to be permanent, so another must be envisioned, and then achieved. With Beth, she realizes that becoming the person she wants to be; confident, courageous, creative, and accepting; is achievable when taking the right steps to make the changes she desires; to grow within a company with a value system that reflects her own, and supports the well-being of the rest of the world.

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Mary O'Sullivan has over 30 years' experience in the aerospace and defense industry. In each of her roles, she acted as a change agent, moving teams and individuals from status quo to new ways of thinking, through offering solutions focused on changing behaviors and fostering growth. In addition, Mary holds a permanent teaching certificate in the State of New York for secondary education and taught high school English for 10 years in the Syracuse, NY area. Today, she dedicates herself to helping good leaders get even better through positive behavior change.