

Being “Part of the Story” – a reflection as we begin a new year

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First Transitions opened its Oak Brook office and headquarters in 1988. With a few years of experience in the career transition field when it opened, you could say that I am an “old-timer” in this industry. There are very few individuals who have been actively involved in working with individuals to help them understand themselves, their potential and their action plans around their jobs, job searches and lives for this long.

Perhaps personal happiness and just an ongoing need to reflect on this privilege caused a particular verbal reaction that I innately uttered recently. When asked, “Why do you enjoy this work so much?” I replied, “Because we get to be part of the story”. I went on to say that recognizing that every person with whom we work is their own unique self. There is no other person exactly like them and their life story is theirs and theirs alone. Many have similar experiences or careers, but no two have the same storyline for their lives or how they have arrived at this particular juncture. Supporting this thinking, psychologists have studied the stories of children growing up in the same family, in the same household, yet they provide remarkably different accounts of the events and relationships that occurred under the same roof.

Whoever the individual and whatever their background and experience, I enjoy the story. Everybody has one and they are all different. Unlike Christopher Booker’s 2004 book, “The Seven Basic Plots”, in which he provides compelling evidence that there are just seven basic movie plots, for every human being there is a remarkable story; and no one on earth has one exactly like it. With 325 million Americans and a world population of 7.5 billion, there are an unbelievable number of stories being played out.

Perhaps it is why First Transitions adopted the idea that we call career transition services the “DNA” process. There are no “cookie cutter” approaches for our individual career transition participants. We are proud of the fact that we are “old school”. To me “old school” in our industry means going back to the 1980s when much of the career transition industry was being shaped. The process in the industry at that time, and always with First Transitions, is “hands on” individual attention to create unique career plans and job searches based on the unique characteristics of each individual. To me the personal rewards of this business come from learning the individual’s story up to this moment in a person’s life, and becoming part of the story.

The impetus behind this reflection came in an email I received after I had sent a note of personal gratitude to friends and professional colleagues. Here is the unexpected response:

“You have no idea how you have positively impacted my life personally and professionally. Over 20 years ago, you helped me gain confidence in myself when my job was eliminated and I felt that I wasn’t valued.

I am so thankful to have gone through the transition process at First Transitions because it significantly impacted my career and personal life. I can say that I have shared these lessons a million times with others. Some of the things I learned from the First Transitions school:

- I am not worthless if I get laid off
- Don't ever define yourself by your job
- Keep a balanced perspective with work and personal on what's truly important in life – your loved ones
- Don't take yourself so seriously – or others for that matter
- You can learn a lot about someone by what they display in their office (this has been so helpful in every interview I have had)
- Embrace change and take risk to try something new because God gives you whatever you can handle
- Ask the right questions to find out about a company/department/culture/manager's management style
- Laugh at yourself
- Even when you reach the pinnacle of your career remain down to earth and willing to help others at their lowest hours. Not only did you do this for me, but you talked to my brother after his house was lost in a fire and two weeks later he was laid off with a 3-year-old and a six-month pregnant wife. And you did this for no fee! Extending your services and sharing how the transition process would help him allowed him to gain confidence at such a stressful time in his life. It is very empowering to have someone you just met help you realize that losing your job isn't the end of the world and you have abundant skills and qualities that make you marketable.

I have never said this to you before, but your job must be so rewarding because no matter what stress you have going on in your life, you are still so committed to improving the lives of others.”

Needless to say, those are words I didn't expect to hear. Not every individual with whom we are privileged to work engages in the career transition process like this individual. Years ago, I wrote to a high school English teacher and a college Economics professor who had impacted my life in such positive ways. Now I know how they must have felt. I learned a great deal from this note; we don't really know who or how we are making impressions and/or teaching individuals; negatively or positively, but we do know; making an ongoing effort to positively affect individuals will impact some individuals. To be a positive influence on individuals with whom we connect, we need to have self-awareness of the messaging we are creating in our words and actions.

Earning respect, confidence and trust of every career transition participant is a goal for our staff. Once we have been able to gain the trust, we can become “part of the story”. And what an amazing privilege it is; realizing that we have been part of over 20,000 stories and counting.