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Creative restlessness can take you to the top

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am a young professional in the financial industry who gets bored easily. I like new challenges, but when jobs are repetitive, I make mistakes.

This is not new. I've always been impatient with routine. But now I work in a structured organization in which the recent hires are expected to do the grunt work before they get promoted.

I don't mind, but I'm not good at these detail-oriented jobs, where my mistakes make me look careless when I'm the opposite. How do I get through this so I can move up?

--Young and Restless

Dear Restless,

You obviously know your weak points. Now focus on your strengths and seek out an environment that shows them off. If nitpicky jobs bore you but you present well and have good people skills, target a job in which you can escape your cubicle and get an opportunity to generate ideas. Find an outlet where your ideas -- and not your spelling mistakes -- count.

This doesn't necessarily mean you have to look for a new employer or go out on your own just yet. It does mean talking to your manager about where you're most likely to do well in the organization.

If there's flexibility, he or she can move you to where you will be most productive -- in marketing, for example, where new ideas are prized.

It also means linking up with someone -- a member of the support staff, a colleague or both -- who has the opposite profile: anal about details but not as keen about novelty and risk.

That's how two flighty but creative dynamos -- David Neeleman, chief executive officer of JetBlue Airways, and Paul Orfalea, the founder of Kinko's -- harnessed their restless energy.

In their biographies and when speaking to the press, each has been frank about having attention-deficit disorder (ADD), an inherited syndrome that affects 5 per cent of adults, making them inattentive and impulsive throughout their lives.

For these two, ADD was behind many of their mistakes, but it also fostered an appetite for risk, and it jump-started successful business ventures.

Mr. Neeleman credits his ADD for his best ideas. It's no surprise that someone who often forgot his airline ticket thought up a way to travel without one, he says.

Despite universal scoffing, Mr. Neeleman pushed through the idea of electronic tickets, a convenience we now take for granted. His electronic reservations system made him \$22-million when he sold it to Hewlett-Packard Co. in 1999, smoothing over travel planning for the rest of us in the process.

Like you, Mr. Neeleman and Mr. Orfalea chafed under their first, highly structured jobs and succeeded only when they could try out their entrepreneurial ideas. Finding well-organized sidekicks was essential.

This was especially true for Mr. Orfalea, whose madly-off-in-all-directions style required a huge coterie of managers and employees -- he calls them co-workers -- who could follow up on his big ideas.

In *Copy This!*, his new biography written with Ann Marsh, Mr. Orfalea is refreshingly candid about the inevitability of making mistakes and about his natural comfort with ambiguity.

Talking to him about his experiences was like conversing in a whirlwind, but one message came through loud and clear: Without taking risks and tolerating anxiety, he wouldn't have succeeded.

"I was 100 per cent across-the-street frightened that I was going to wipe myself out," he said of his 30 years at Kinko's. "Of course I was fraught with anxiety. But I was resilient. When everything goes perfectly you're not resilient. And you won't see the opportunities right in front of your nose."

Without a consult with a psychologist, there's no way to know whether you have a true attention deficit disorder or just a mismatch between your personality and work environment.

Either way, you have to tweak your work situation so that it's a better fit. Your goals should be engineering a more entrepreneurial role and finding at least one highly organized confederate at your workplace.

Smaller, more concrete tricks include breaking big tasks down into chunks, taking frequent breaks for a change of scene, and scheduling e-mail and phone interruptions as well as regular exercise, so that your worrying doesn't eat you alive.

Still, success stories such as Mr. Orfalea's make it clear that there is no one right path. "I had to figure out my own way to do it. I had to create my own world," he said.

Dear Susan,

I like my work, but a new manager in the department has introduced a series of "team-building" initiatives.

There is now a point system where one's team spirit counts as part of one's performance in the annual review. You get points for coming in on time, participating in charity drives and attending the office social events, among other things.

This annoys me. Should I say something?

--Who's Counting?

Dear Counting,

You're right that this new system is a wrong-headed approach to team-building. The process should have everything to do with good will, not score-keeping.

This I learned from a trip to Stratford last week. Shakespeare might seem a bit lofty as a team-building exercise, but watching William Hutt play Prospero in *The Tempest* made something clear about newly arrived leaders like your manager: They can be desperate to exert control when they find themselves in a new environment.

But if they're not challenged too vigorously, eventually they'll relax. In your manager's case, don't object to her project now. It's too unwieldy and intrusive to sustain, and in the long run you won't have to say much.

Letting teams coalesce and self-regulate is another approach, and it's one I encountered at a lunchtime stop in Brantford, Ont., on my way to the Stratford Festival.

Right smack in the middle of a neighbourhood of grand Victorian houses is S.C. Johnson & Son's Canadian subsidiary, which looks more like a tony private high school than an industrial plant. Behind its modern façade, self-regulating teams manufacture such household products as Windex, Saran Wrap and Ziploc bags.

The teams reorganize the assembly line for seasonal products on their own steam and select and train their own new recruits, I later learned.

Team members decide who does what, rotate tasks on the line and choose their own leaders. As the employees select and integrate new members, they develop a sense of cohesion and joint responsibility.

Nothing's perfect, of course. But the company's -- and the surrounding town's -- improving fortunes seem like a better way to raise morale than trying to impose it from on high.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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