What are the top three career-development traps and have they got you yet, asks **Michael Brown**

CAUGHT IN THE CAREER TRAP

What does it take to build a successful career? There's no right answer of course, but based on my work with nearly 10,000 people over 20 years in training rooms around the world, I'd hazard a guess that a typical employee's answer to this would include: being clear about what is important, building good relationships, and making good use of time.

Hard to disagree with that, I'd say. The trouble is, far too many people fall into the three traps which I come across most often, all of which limit people's potential and damage their effectiveness. The traps are:

▸ Working towards **objectives** which are poorly formed (or not formed at all, or are not even objectives).

▸ Not having (or making) the time to build **trusting relationships**.

▸ Wasting ridiculous amounts of time in inefficient and irrelevant **meetings**.

Let's take the lid off each of these.

Objectives

People who are clear about what they are supposed to be doing and what's important tend to do well in their careers. This involves being assertive and asking for clarity when necessary, having regular reviews with their line managers and seeking coaching and support when it is needed, and above all else seeing the formulation of objectives as something they can influence so that they can harness their own potential by playing to their strengths.

All too often the objective-setting process is seen by line managers as an annual chore in which they cascade out a mini version of their own objectives (which are often better described as targets – an altogether different thing).

The recipient is basically told what their objectives are, and all too often fails to engage in a discussion in which something more meaningful is produced. The 'child' in this parental exchange gets told what to do and leaves the room as quickly as possible so she can get on with it.

Trust

The second trap is to ignore the importance of trust, particularly with key players who can influence career growth (line managers being the most obvious example).

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer,[1] trust is at an all-time low both in and out of work, and the absence of it leads to weak collaboration , silo working and, worst of all, conflict avoidance. This leads to issues not being resolved and time and energy going into self-protection.

As Stephen Covey tells us, "As trust goes down, speed goes down and costs go up."[2]

Employees who recognise the importance of trust think carefully about their stakeholders and work out where they need to invest time (because that is what trust-building takes, unfortunately) in developing open relationships.

They know that to build trust you have to be prepared to take risks (because your openness may not be reciprocated by the other person), and you have to be prepared to be vulnerable. Not everyone is prepared to do that, and it may feel safer to keep a low profile.

I see this for myself in my leadership development workshops, where telling a story involving personal disclosure seems to have become increasingly difficult for people.

Meetings

The third trap people fall into is the meetings they attend. I have hard data on this, because I have asked thousands of people over the years how much of their working week they believe they spend doing what they think they

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should be doing, and doing it well.

The scary answer to this, across all sectors and geographies, is 40%. For the rest of the week (yes, three days every week) they are wasting time or doing things inefficiently.

When I ask what is the greatest source of time wasting it is *always* meetings: badly run meetings (eg with no agendas, no timekeeping, no objectives, wrong people, no minutes, no actions, no reviews of actions, and so on and so on …), or meetings which they should have had

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the courage to turn down but didn't because they are conflict avoiders.

When I suggest to people that they ask for an agenda before accepting a meeting invitation, they look at me as if I have gone mad. And when I suggest that turning down a meeting invitation is an act of leadership which any sane manager would welcome, they don't just think I'm mad, they know it.

What I find most scary about these traps is that people don't even realise they've slipped into them. As someone once said to me, "We've fallen asleep at the wheel." Only too true, sadly.

The pressure people are under these days is so intense that they lose sight of the basics. It's only when someone rude like me comes along and throws a metaphorical bucket of cold water over them that they wake up and see their dysfunctionality for what it is.

Thankfully it doesn't require some new skillset to rectify; just a bit of determination and some planning. **TJ**

Michael Brown is the author of My Job Isn't Working! *To save 20% on your copy, see reader offer (left).*

References
1 http://bit.ly/2jJnb1Z
2 http://bit.ly/2KlFnVz

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