

# More than you can chew?

Learn to set your own “internal adjustment meter” properly



**BY KAREN KELLOWAY**

I highly suspect that Lu is suffering from career burnout, but he isn't your typical employee. Still, twice a day Lu performs at Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park. Earlier this year under the hot Florida sun, my son and I joined the audience that watched him emerge from his shaded spot among the water lilies to take his position in front of a trainer for his noontime feeding.

“Lu used to be a movie star,” the trainer said through the microphone hooked around her ear. She threw a quartered cantaloupe in the air as Lu made a colossal effort to catch it in his large mouth. “But Lu didn't follow directions well. He was considered stubborn, so he retired early from the movies and has lived here ever since.”

The trainer continued to shell out quartered and halved melons from her bucket as she waited patiently for Lu to open wide. “Lu of course doesn't need us to cut up his fruit like this,” she added. “He can easily eat a watermelon whole. We just cut them up to make the show more entertaining.” At that point I swear I saw Lu roll his eyes.

Why am I using a 6,000 pound hippo to illustrate my point? Because it does show what happens when a “star” employee gets caught up in the trap of being coaxed into taking on more and more work just because they're good at it. Then weeks or even days later, they've moved from feeling energized to drained.

When I was researching my book, *Nail It! Six Steps to Transform Your Career*, I came across this quote by Peter Drucker that seemed to address this career conundrum: “A person's strengths and the way that person performs rarely conflict; the two are complementary. But there is sometimes a conflict between a person's values and his or her strengths. What one does well—even very well and successfully—may not fit with one's value system.”

Think about that: just because you're good at something doesn't mean it aligns with what you value. I find this a fascinating and relevant take on career burnout. You can see how we get into a hamster wheel of relentless forward motion and yet don't feel satisfied with the output. We owe it to ourselves to get aligned.

Recently, I was delighted to hear Chris Power, CEO of Capital Health, talk about this topic at a recent conference. Power referenced the leadership program her orga-

nization has undertaken and the impact it's having on integrating employees' passions into their daily roles and responsibilities.

One story I particularly liked was of a mailroom clerk who loves to paint. Power spoke to her about how she could integrate painting into her daily responsibilities. When the employee realized that painting didn't fit into her mailroom duties, she started spending some of her lunch breaks painting with veterans in a long-term care facility. This volunteer activity heightened her enthusiasm for her regular work, and she showed up more motivated. Power is a CEO who gets the importance of aligning an employee's personal values with the organization.

What do you value? What's most important to you? Are your values being honored and respected at work? This isn't always easy to decipher. One of my clients, a busy executive with a young family, was having a hard time articulating how her core value of “family” could be present in her career. The feeling that she was choosing work over family frustrated her; it was beginning to diminish her career enjoyment.

While working through this issue, she realized that she had to be more specific in letting others know how to support her. When she was on deadline and feeling productive at work, she needed her family's support so she could work the extra time to meet the deadline. On the flip side, she had to take control of her schedule so if she wanted to take her son to the library on a Friday afternoon, she had her colleagues' support. She named what she needed so she could make value-based decisions.

We all have the responsibility to check in and see if we're living our values. Some call it a gut feeling; others call it intuition. If it's not happening, it keeps you up at night. It creates tension in your stomach when you've agreed to something you wish you hadn't. It's when you experience something at work that doesn't align with your values. It's your “internal alignment detector.” We're much more content in our career if we pay attention to it. It's something to think about the next time you feel yourself biting off more than you want to chew. 🍷

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