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Leaders—Alive at Work!

By Dan Kennedy

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

— Harold Thurman Whitman, *Philosopher/Theologian*

A recent issue of Time Magazine reported on the unprecedented number of white-collar folks who are now out of work. It also noted that instead of seeing the end of their jobs as a tragedy, many of the displaced are seeing the change as an opportunity and are deciding to take on work that they really love, even though it might involve making less money.

A former PR executive was quoted as saying, “You meet success after success and move up and up, and before you know it, you’re stuck in a job you don’t love and life is over.” He dusted off an old dream of becoming a policeman, and is now in training with the NYPD.

Whether they’re still employed, or they’ve been laid off, why should we encourage those we serve to pursue work they’ll love, and risk the possibility of making less money?

For the money. Ironically, some studies indicate that when people do work that fits them well, they’re more likely to make better wages over time than those who don’t.

To succeed. Fortune Magazine once published a cover story on the keys to achieving career success. At the top of the list? “Love what you do.” Think about it. When you love what you do, you do better work, plus you’re more likely to get along well with co-workers and customers. Do what you love and you’re predisposed to do well!

To be healthier. Several medical studies have linked health quality to work satisfaction. Millions of people are holding onto jobs that they can’t stand because they want the health insurance. However, as Barbara Bailey Reinhold notes in *Toxic Work*, “research indicates that career dissatisfaction is more likely than anything else to make them need to use it.”



I host a radio program devoted to inspiring and informing people about how to do work they love. I have interviewed many people for the show who have made the switch to work that really matters to them. One such person who learned many lessons along the way is Jon Guy.

Jon was a top financial executive for one of the Midwest’s largest corporations. He had helped build his division such that revenues were five times what they had been five years earlier.

Still, after 22 years with the company, Jon knew he was bored and wanted to do something else, possibly in the company’s human resources group.

In the eyes of the company, however, he was a “finance guy,” and didn’t fit the HR mold. When the company asked him to take on some new finance-related responsibilities, he knew he didn’t want it. He didn’t care anymore. So, he negotiated a severance package and left.

Jon’s story offers several insights into how to help others make the transition to work that really matters to them, even if that work means bringing home a smaller paycheck. His lessons jibe with what many experts say, as well. Here is what we can tell our clients:

- **Admit that you want it.** Get clear that you want to pursue your passion, even if you aren’t sure what it is, yet. That was Jon’s catalyst for leaving his employer. At the time, all

he had was a vague idea of what he wanted to do next. He thought that maybe somehow bringing baseball to inner city youth was an idea worth looking into.

- **Take your time.** Don’t rush such an important process. Jon spent the first several months after leaving his old company exploring his idea. But the more he looked into it, the more he saw how much non-profit and governmental red tape and politics would ultimately sink such a project, so he decided to move on and to keep looking.

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- **Create a bridge.** If need be, get work that will act as a financial bridge from your old work to what's next. Although Jon had money from his severance, he did some consulting during this time. His work had the hallmarks of any good bridge job. It was relatively easy work that offered him flexible hours, exposure to different people, and, of course, an income. Most important, it gave him time to explore his options.
- **Get support.** No one makes significant changes alone. After several months of trying to figure things out on his own, Jon decided to take advantage of his former employer's offer of outplacement services, and he began using a career coach. That gave him someone he could talk to, generate ideas with, and someone who would encourage his search for the work he'd love to do. It was important to get his family's support as well, and he did.
- **Research everything, starting with you.** Values have been called the emotional paycheck of work. Discover yours. During this time, Jon got very clear about his core values. He was also clear that a big part of what he wanted his life to be about was serving the underdog. (His idea of baseball for inner city kids reflected that direction.) With this information in hand Jon began researching all relevant options.
- **Persistence pays.** Someone has said that the sin isn't in failing, but in quitting. Amen to that. Over seven months after leaving his former employer, Jon was referred to a non-profit agency called the American Refugee Committee (ARC). Their mission? To promote the survival, health, and well-being of refugees, displaced persons, and those at risk. In other words, to help the world's underdogs! They needed a new Major Gift Officer and thought Jon was their man.
- **Be ready for change.** And perhaps for some push-back. Jon felt he had at last found his new career. But it would require accepting a salary equal

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to a third of his old pay. At first, his wife, an artist and stay-at-home mother, was concerned. She felt the lifestyle they and their two teenagers had was about to be put at serious risk. But as they talked it through, they began to see this as an opportunity to turn from a life of unconscious consumption to one of conscious spending. In the end, they decided money shouldn't stand in the way of Jon's happi-

ness.

- **Get ready to come alive!** As of this writing, Jon has been at ARC for two months, and he loves it there. His litmus test for career satisfaction has always been how he feels when he tells people what he does for a living. He's now eager to tell others about his work and his organization.

His family has noticed the difference, too. Jon's wife says he is behaving like the man she married — a man with a zest for living. Even his kids are okay with a more modest lifestyle. And Jon's 16 year old daughter says her dad's experience has taught her a lesson. No matter what it takes, when she is ready to start her first career, it will be one that lights her up and engages her, just like her father's career enlivens him. Now, that's a legacy.

To help anyone pursue wonderful work for themselves, we need to believe that it's both possible to attain, and worth the effort. We also need to love our own work because when we do, we act as an example to our clients; we show them that being truly engaged in one's work is more than a pipe dream.

And like our clients, when we have found our own best work, our lives and the lives of those closest to us will be all the richer for it. ☺

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