

The Long View

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Elaine Biech has almost 30 years of training and consulting expertise in helping organizations work through large-scale change. She is the author of numerous books and articles, and specializes in assisting people to work as teams to maximize their effectiveness.

Q. You have given advice to trainers in your online column for more than four years—what are the most common questions posed to you?

New consultants are interested in one thing and that is “How much can I charge?” In the past it has been a big secret, but about 10 years ago I started talking about how much I charge and what kind of things go into it.

It’s not what you’re worth; it’s what your clients are willing to pay for your skills, service, and knowledge. The factors that go into that are how long you have been in the industry, name recognition, your area of specialty, and the clients: Which industry are you working for? Pharmaceuticals are high-paying; education is low-paying. Are you working for for-profits or not-for-profits, large companies, or small companies? All of those factor into the price.

The second question people ask me most often is: How do I market myself? That’s what I hear again and again. To some extent, you have to know yourself; you have to analyze where you are today, where you want to be, and where your clients are. You can take a very personal marketing approach, which I use, or a broader marketing approach.

I never laugh at people’s questions, no matter how unusual they are, but sometimes I laugh at people who think that the world can’t live without what they’re doing. I have mentored probably a couple hundred people over the years, and I sometimes shake my head at people and think: “Somebody else has thought of this long before you did, you just put a new spin on it.”

Q. What was your worst job, and what lesson did you take away from it?

I worked in a plastic wastebasket manufacturing plant to get myself through school. I was on the midnight shift, so I had to come in at 11:30 when everybody else was going to bed. I’m not sure I learned anything from it except that I did not want to work in a factory.

The best lesson I got from a job, though, was realizing that I am not a very good employee. I like to be in charge, be creative, and think way out there. I realized I needed to get my own business.

Q. Where do you see change management going in the future? What role will workplace learning and performance professionals play in that evolution?

Change is here to stay. Think about something as simple as purchasing a telephone, television, or camera—by the time you have researched your purchase, you have waited

too long. What ever you learned is outdated by the time you buy it because there's already something new around the corner.

For all those changes that are being made in our personal and work lives, there is an organization that is behind it. In the 90s, Peter Senge defined a learning organization as one that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. That's where change is growing. Organizations need to be "change-ready;" they and their people need to be agile, flexible, and adaptable to keep moving with the changes. So, if organizations are to be change-ready, they have to embrace learning. As a change agent, that is one of the first things you have to do—recognize that learning is first and foremost in all of this and we have to make sure our organizations are encouraging it.

Q. We hear you love shoes. How do you choose which pair to wear?

I do love shoes, and for lots of different reasons. I started wearing uniquely colored shoes probably in third grade. I remember one year getting four or five different pairs of different colored tennis shoes.

I don't count how many pairs of shoes I own; I think it might be scary if I did. Suffice to say that I have at least 40 different shades of pink shoes alone. I like things that go together well, both in my work and personal life. I like order, so I think shoes should match the clothes I wear.

My shoes are very ordered; I have a pink, blue, and green section. That's how I decide what I am going to wear every day, by picking the shoes first and matching the outfit to that. My husband tells people that when I fill up a closet full of shoes, we just buy another house to put more shoes in it.

Q. You also have an affinity to real estate—why does it interest you so much?

Real estate is another hobby of mine—kind of like collecting shoes, I collect pieces of land. Since I grew up on a working dairy farm in Wisconsin, land has always been a natural investment for me.

When it came time to figure out my retirement plan, I realized that I knew nothing about Wall Street or investing, but I knew a lot about land. I have a real knack for identifying spots where growth is going to happen, and have been pretty successful with it—at least enough so that I can maybe retire some day.

The interesting thing is that my father, a carpenter, would tell me not to buy every single thing I ever bought. All he could see was all the work that needed to be done, and I just saw all the possibilities. It's kind of like my work; I see far out there and what could be. How we get there is irrelevant; I just go straight to "Wouldn't this be great?"