



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

May 2012 – Issue 46

Chairperson's Corner

The Journey Continues....

By Olga Jacobs

In the February issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I shared the personal growth journey that I was beginning. Well, it turns out my story isn't so interesting...I got a total of three responses to my column! (Now you see why I don't tweet...I'd have three followers...and that is assuming the three responders use Twitter!).

And one of the responses I received doesn't count as I had asked that actuary to preview my column, so I already had his feedback. The second response was that my upcoming journey sounded like fun. I don't know about fun. I have read that human nature is that we all like to talk about ourselves (uh...I'm doing it now!) but to journey into one's own psyche for self-assessment – not something I was looking forward to. Writing about my boys and their travel ice hockey teams, well, on that topic you can't shut me up. However, I thank this reader for picking up on my attempt to convey a spirit of adventure and humor.

But, alas, the third and final response ... It was good. The actuary told me I was "brave". THANK YOU. I had bared my soul and failure to those who work with me, those who work for me, and those who have never heard of me. He also told me that I should think about balancing my next move with the other "non-work" parts of my life. Good thought and hold that thought ... I'm going to write about that in an upcoming column. And the pièce de résistance ...he passed on some open job requisitions. I loved that! How thoughtful! (The beauty of networking!)

I don't know what I was expecting. I had temporarily forgotten that I write for *The Stepping Stone* and not *People* magazine and I'm just Olga, not Oprah. I am an actuary writing to other actuaries for goodness' sake. Thanks for keeping me grounded!

So any feeling of overshare went away ... you ain't reading this anyway. I'm planning to go to the SOA

Health Meeting and if you start looking at me funny, I'll blame it on this column.

As I wrote in my last column, my journey for personal growth entailed many possible roads, one being to assess my strengths and weaknesses. I had once read that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. I consider myself an old actuarial dog given that I've put in almost 25 years in the profession, so if I can't change myself, are there attributes that are strengths for me that I can use to my advantage and succeed? Can I identify them and find an actuarial role that required those attributes to succeed?

I read an article in *Harvard Business Review* by Scott Edinger called "Become an Extraordinary Leader."¹

His opening paragraph hit home with me, but let me paraphrase it with a different analogy:

When you have your performance review, do you:

- (a) *zero in on the few negatives and say "what's the matter here"?*
- or*
- (b) *focus on the many positives and say "great job, keep this up"?*

I am in the first category. I obsess about the negative. If one created a list of 100 things about Olga and 99 were positive and one was negative, I'd spend the rest of the year obsessing about that one negative. I'd never give myself the pat on the back that 99 percent of the review was awesome.

So, let me borrow verbatim from Mr. Edinger. Here are his three ways to work on developing your strengths:

1. ***Developing strengths requires a different approach than fixing weaknesses. We analyzed tens of thousands of leaders to determine which strengths set them apart as leaders, and***

Olga Jacobs, FSA, MAAA,
is vice president & actuary,
UnitedHealthcare.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Working on weaknesses is a drag. It's drudgery bordering on misery to move from slightly below average to slightly above.

what we found is that leadership behaviors and competencies tend to cluster together in consistent patterns.

Extraordinary leaders with strong technical skills are frequently also good at developing others, building relationships, and communicating powerfully, for instance. Extraordinary leaders known for exceptional integrity also tend to be decisive, assertive, and optimistic. While assertiveness doesn't make you more honest, it can magnify that trait. That's called an interaction effect.

In the same way that Michael Phelps might improve as a swimmer, not through swimming more laps but by developing complementary strengths such as weight training, running, and other cross-training activities, people can improve leadership strengths by straightforward development of strongly correlated companion skills and behaviors.

- 2. It works because it follows your interests.** *Working on weaknesses is a drag. It's drudgery bordering on misery to move from slightly below average to slightly above.*

One of my weaker areas of leadership has always been finance. Over the last decade I've put a great deal of painful effort into moving from below average in this area to reasonable competence. Reasonable I say, because while it's no longer a problem area for me, it will likely never be an area of strength either, and I work with many colleagues who run circles around me in this regard and always will. I find great enjoyment, on the other hand, in creating strategy, developing our clients and others on my team, putting teams on the right track, and leading growth. These happen to be among my strongest areas of performance.

- 3. Don't worry about too much of a good thing.** *Have you ever worked with a leader who possessed too much character? Was too strategic? Overly effective in interpersonal relationships? I doubt it.*

There are times when leaders can become one-dimensional in their application of a strength

area — driving so hard for a result, for instance, that they fail to consider their impact on others. But that failing is not a result of overly developing strength. It's a lack of attention to related leadership characteristics.

The answer is not to reduce focus on results but rather to increase attention to companion skills like giving clear feedback, developing the talents of direct reports, and providing recognition. To return to Michael Phelps, no one would suggest he stop trying to improve as a swimmer, just that he won't get there merely by doing more and more.

After reading that I needed to find out objectively what my strengths were. I was working with a fellow MPD Council member on the SOA 2012 Health Meeting session "Improving Yourself and Your Team through Strengths." In that session a Gallup strengths coach will discuss why it is important for you to know your strengths – and why understanding the strengths of those you lead is essential to maximizing your leadership. So, I went to the store and bought *Strengths Finder 2.0* by Tom Rath. I took the test and found out that I am not an actuary! AGHH!

OK, step back! The book identifies 34 themes and after taking the quiz, it tells you your top five. I won't list all 34 themes but this one popped out at me:

Analytical! The book writes that someone with a strong analytical theme should "choose work in which you are paid to analyze data, find patterns, or organize ideas. For example, you might excel in.... RISK MANAGEMENT.

Analytical was not one of my top five themes. Why am I telling you this, my future employers?

My top theme was WOO...Winning Others Over. My report said "people who are especially talented in the WOO theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a

connection with another person.” People identified as WOO are friendly and enjoy socializing. The book said as a WOO I should choose a job in which I can interact with many people over the course of a day. And I should join local organizations and volunteer for committees (ding..ding...ding...SOA Volunteer!!) . I think the test and the results were spot on. This is me.

I won't go into my other top themes or the rest of the 34, but let me say that I found the exercise useful and truthful. I highly recommend the book and if you are going to the SOA 2012 Health Meeting, please attend the Strengths session.

As for my journey, the next step is to look at available opportunities and find one that requires my top themes...I need a position where I can WOO. ●

Woo Hoo.
Thanks for reading!
Olga

END NOTES

¹ http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/10/become_extraordinary.html