

Workplace Ambiguity

The BA and the CEO

A dark new presence has arrived in our lives and its wreaking havoc, particularly in the workplace. It's called Ambiguity. Each year it claims more and more scalps as employees desperately search for ways to overcome this duplicitous omnipresent force. Make no mistake. Ambiguity is not your friend. The first casualties are usually the novice and ill prepared. If somebody asks if you're comfortable with ambiguity, ask for more information. Don't get ambushed by ambiguity. Bring it out from the shadows and get to know it before answering this loaded question.

Ambiguity can be found tucked away in position descriptions but it starts well before you get into the office. It starts in the classifieds. Getting past the double talk from snake oil merchants is easy. Strip away the guff about an exciting career opportunity in a leading organisation enjoying continued success...yada yada yada and what's left is the brief. That is, the job. But often, titles are misleading and offer little insight into the scope of the role or its level of authority. Remuneration is a good reference point but is often omitted in the advertisement. So, the next time you're asked if you're comfortable with ambiguity, think before you speak. It's not a yes or no answer. You must have context to join the dots.

Nasty surprises are easily avoided by wrapping your arms around the ambiguity cancer early. Many job seekers jump straight into a reply without giving any thought to the question. In an effort to demonstrate a flexible "can do" attitude, they unwittingly line themselves up for dramas down the track. By the time the ink has

dried on the contract, the new recruit is up to their armpits fending off crocodiles in a political quagmire. Hardly an exciting opportunity for an ambitious self-starter. The onus rests with the employee to mitigate ambiguity risk. Play the percentages and don't test the water depth with both feet.

Today's cut and thrust workplace is manic and often adversarial. People have come to expect a certain level of dysfunction in the office due to competing interests, conflicting agendas, artificial deadlines, and personal bias. It's virtually seen as the new normal. Throw into the mix some alpha personalities and whammo; you're staring down the Gun Boat barrel of diplomacy.

Every now and again, you'll be asked to stay back or to work weekends. You may be asked to take one for the team or get some other curve ball to deal with. Self-preservation and the need for another pay cheque usually motivate employee compliance. However, be very careful. A good gesture is rarely acknowledged for what it is and could become your new baseline. In other words, it becomes expected that you'll continue to deliver these acts of good will ad infinitum. Ambiguity thrives in situations like this and is typically used by people with hidden agendas. Boundaries and parameters are essential to contain ambiguity. Otherwise it'll spread like wildfire and in the process, incinerate your career.

When an organisation shifts focus and moves the goal posts, the ripple effect of the change must also be recognised. Imagine a Green Grocer that used to sell only apples now adds oranges to the range. Changes need to be made in system software and

supply chain to reflect the change. The scorecard needs to be amended to reflect this new reality.

The same principles should apply with an organisations people and the key performance indicators (KPI) used to measure individual success. If employee A inherits the tasks of employee B, the company needs to amend A's KPI's to reflect the changed scope of role. If not, the hapless employee risks becoming overwhelmed with the additional workload and inevitably things don't get done or done poorly. The downward spiral quickly gathers pace as cracks begin to appear in the employee/employer relationship. From being cordial, they become curt, then cold and finally confrontational as the employee is managed out of the business.

Clarity is a curse for ambiguity. If somebody said they were comfortable with ambiguity, can we assume they're uncomfortable with clarity? It depends. It depends on perspective. On one hand, ambiguity benefits the employer through broad, far reaching position descriptions or by advertising jobs that mislead the job seeker. On the other hand, clarity has clear advantages for the employee. If expectations are made clear, stakeholders are well informed and timelines agreed upon, there is very little risk of getting snookered by a corporate sociopath. Be clear. The more a company promotes itself as open and transparent, the more opaque it becomes.

So when a friend asked me to explain what a Business Analyst (BA) did and what the role of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was, I responded with "It depends."

Some job titles make clear its function. Occupations such as a truck driver, mechanical engineer, fire fighter and neurosurgeon are roles that need little introduction. There's meaning in the title. However it's not that simple for the BA and the CEO.

In the job market today, there appears to be a greater emphasis on title and its perceived peer value. Employers and recruitment firms have responded by giving job titles a makeover. There is greater inferred status by calling a Graduate Accountant role a "recently qualified Business Analyst" There's more appeal advertising an Assistant Accountant role, as a "Business Analyst ready to take the next step"

Trying to describe what a typical Business analyst does is difficult because there's not a one size fits all definition. With so many variants and "flavours" it's like asking how long is a piece of string?...actually, How Long is a Chinaman but I digress.

Generally, BA roles are part of the Finance function within large corporations. Some roles are less analytical and little more than clerical processing while other roles demand a deeper knowledge of the macro business environment. Some BA roles focus on cost reduction programs, process review or documenting training needs. Or there's the BA that produces financial and management reports highlighting variances to budget and forecast.

So that's the long answer. The short answer to, "What does a Business Analyst do?"

It's the ability to ask the question and question the answer. Business Analysts provide

collaborative financial support to all functions across the organisation. The real value of a Business Analyst becomes evident when they're able to analyse and interpret the data that management need to support decision making.

Another title with a heap of ambiguity is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Many variables need to be considered when scoping out a CEO mandate. The size of the company, entity type and industry sector are just a few of the factors to consider. Once the macro variables have been identified, the focus can move into specifics like skill sets, qualifications and relevant experience.

Historically, a greater percentage of CEO's were cut from the Sales or Marketing stream or had risen through the ranks of the company. The effectiveness of a CEO boiled down to industry connections. It was their ability to open doors and influence people making who made the news or made the laws. CEO's of today are increasingly coming from a financial background. They're not necessarily more financially astute than their predecessors but merely representative of the changing focus towards qualifications and compliance. Their ability to network and rub shoulders with the "heavy hitters" is still just as important as it ever was.

Listed below are six character traits the CEO must have to be effective. Irrespective of company size or profile I believe the CEO is better served by aiming to be competent across all the attributes rather than favouring one over another. Quite simply, the upside of being outstanding on one doesn't compensate for the downside of being deficient in another.

You've probably heard of Six Sigma or Edward DeBono's The Six Thinking Hats but you've probably never heard of the planetBudge All Six Senses (ASS) test.

The CEO needs ASS to be effective in their role.

The All Six Senses are:

1. Strategic (Direction)
2. Persuasion and negotiation (Sell the strategy)
3. Empower people (In line with strategy)
4. Confidence (Belief in Self and Company)
5. Decisiveness
6. Vision (Ability to see Opportunity / Predict Roadblocks)

The extent to which the CEO gets involved in the minutia of daily company business will depend upon the size of the business. Financial competence is a given however it's important not to get bogged down in the detail. The CEO should have an Information Systems appreciation to embrace its potential yet mindful of its constraints. In other words the CEO understands there's no silver bullet with information and communication technology.

But what separates the CEO from the rest of us that only have five senses?

Vision. Number six on the list. The nature of the CEO role will vary contingent upon the variables outlined above. However, one thing will never change. Effective people management and a sound strategy will provide the stability necessary for a successful tenure. The absence of either will accelerate failure.

Sometimes clear cut process won't get the job done, be it a BA or CEO position.

Sometimes different approaches are needed to challenge conventional paradigms.

Critical thinking, non-verbal and abstract reasoning are tools to help overcome ambiguity. Context fills the void left by ambiguity.

So there you have it. When someone asks if you're comfortable with ambiguity, you know what to say.....Oui. Ceteris Paribus, all things being equal.

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