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Ask Jill
By Jill Kanter

Mid-Career Boredom—A Time To Vision

Dear Jill,

I've had my own graphic design firm for about six years. It took a while to build our client base, but the past four years have been very strong. Even though I'm always busy, I've been feeling increasingly bored. Things are going so well, I don't want to rock the boat. I'm wondering if I'm expecting too much—is this just what happens to people at mid-career?

Thanks for your thoughts on this.
Barbara

Dear Barbara,

I've worked with many clients who've experienced similar feelings—although not all have achieved the same business success. It's very common for people to assess their career choices during middle-age—and very healthy. Many career professionals consider this the most exciting time in our careers, when we have enough self-knowledge to identify more fulfilling possibilities and enough self-confidence to pursue them.

It's always beneficial to acknowledge our feelings, and yours seem to be signaling the need for change. It's your job now to find out specifically what your boredom is trying to tell you. I'd suggest you begin with a simple visioning exercise to learn more about your heart's desires. Here are some steps to guide you:

- Schedule at least a half-day away from the office, and go somewhere beautiful—a nurturing environment.
- When you arrive, find a quiet place and take some time to relax and connect with yourself. Then use pen and paper to list key categories that relate to your business and personal life. For example:

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Personal:

- Your favorite non-work activities
- Your new interests
- Your time with family and friends
- Your vacations

- Then sit back and close your eyes. Imagine that it's a year from now, and you're feeling very good about things—every aspect of your work and personal life is going beautifully. Allow yourself to experience all the happiness and fulfillment this brings.
- When you're ready, open your eyes and begin to write a description of how each category on your list appears in this ideal future (e.g., Your clients: "We have five major clients in large, successful organizations with great design budgets. They want to be creative and are willing to take risks. They truly partner with us and respect our expertise. They have great relationships with their own senior management, and involve us in decision making with top executives. It's a joy to work with these people..." etc.).
- After you finish describing each category, take time to slowly read through the vision you've created of your ideal future.

This exercise should give you valuable hints on positive changes that you'd like to make. You also can work with a management consultant or career professional to assist you in further self-assessment and decision making. It's definitely possible to experience greater fulfillment, Barbara, and you certainly deserve it!

Supporting An Overwhelmed Client

Dear Jill,

I'm in a frustrating position. My client is on temporary leave, and won't return for three more months. He's left decision making to one of his directs, a young guy who seems very overwhelmed. We have critical project deadlines to meet, and it's been difficult to get him to make decisions. I think that he has the knowledge, but there's too much on his plate. How can I keep things moving?

*Thanks,
Laurie*

Dear Laurie,

In a situation like this, you really have two objectives: to successfully meet project goals and to build a positive relationship with your "temporary" client. It's not just that these two go hand in hand (although they usually do), but we live in an increasingly "small world"—if this gentleman reappears in your future, you want him to remember you positively.

When someone is feeling overwhelmed, he's often experiencing fear, insecurity and even low self-esteem. You need to convey three things to this client: that you think well of him, that you're on his side, and that you'll do whatever it takes to make him successful. You want to be someone who he actually looks forward to meeting with, no matter how busy he is. Here are a few suggestions:

- Offer to meet with him at the end of day, when he's likely to be more relaxed and able to focus.
- Begin your meeting by taking time to ask how he is, and how things are going. Be a great listener—genuinely empathetic and supportive. You'll naturally feel more patient with him as you better understand what he's experiencing.

- After you've established a positive rapport, briefly share what decisions need to be made in the meeting. If he resists, explain why timely decision making is important in terms that are highly meaningful to him. For instance, if he's concerned about providing an accurate update to senior executives, help him understand how holding off on a decision will interfere with this.
- Help him to feel competent and confident in his abilities—remind him of wise decisions he's made in the past and their positive impact on the project.
- Make it very easy for him to make a good decision—provide a brief summary of key data, pro's and con's, and also your own thoughts, as appropriate.
- Before leaving, provide positive feedback on his performance in his temporary role—particularly on behaviors you want to reinforce for the good of your project!

While you can't *make* this client step up to the plate, you can be the best partner possible, and always know that he was very lucky to work with you!

If you have a question about a leadership or team issue in the workplace, please write to AskJill@womenandbiz.com.

Jill Kanter is a management consultant, speaker and writer with expertise in leadership development, team effectiveness and organizational change. She brings a strong practical approach and highly developed intuition to projects incorporating executive coaching, team development, workplace improvement and career empowerment.

Jill has worked extensively with clients in large, dynamic organizations in the financial services, hospital, healthcare, telecommunications and high-tech industries, as well as institutions of higher education and a variety of non-profits. She founded her firm in 1990, after earning her Ed.M. from Harvard University. You can reach Jill at 617-469-0100 or jdk@jillkanter.com. For more information about Jill Kanter, visit her website at www.jillkanter.com.

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