



# advantage

## HOW DO YOU SELECT THE RIGHT COACH? COACHING (PART 4)

By Ray Redburn, Ph.D.

What key questions should you ask to select a great coach? When you want a coach for yourself or another key person in your organization, what are the essential things to discover about a candidate? Once you have decided that coaching is the answer, there are several ways to proceed. Asking the right questions can help ensure the results you want. Whether the coach is for you or another key person in your organization, these pointers can save you time, money and considerable grief. More importantly, they ensure that you will select a coach who is a good fit and can deliver the results you want for the client and your organization. What follows is a short list of the essentials to ask about when you talk with prospective coaches.

- **Interview your candidates for coach.**

Coaching, as we've noted in previous articles, is typically a much shorter process than therapy. Still, coaching will be a significant investment of your key contributor's time and your organization's resources. Approach the selection of a coach like any important business decision – *how can we get the most value from our investment?* This is the operative question underlying the many pointers that follow.

- **How can you get a quick read on the coach as a person?**

If possible, interview each coach at *their* office. This gives you plenty of information about each of the candidates. It will help you determine which is most professional in their *talk and walk*. It will give you good information about their ability to coach people to win in your organization. If that visit is not possible or practical, you should conduct thorough telephone interviews with several candidates. Posing the following questions to your would-be coaches will allow you to rate the quality of the various candidates for your particular need, and make an informed choice in the end.

- **What is the key word to look for?**

Remember the truism about success in a retail business:

**Question:** *What are the three most important factors for retail business success?*

**Answer:** #1 Location, #2 Location, #3 Location.

In key-person coaching for success at work, there is one overriding success factor: the coach must be tuned in to organizational realities and have the ability to support a client to function more easily and effectively in your organization's life. Ask each candidate to talk about what they believe is important in coaching for success. The "right" answer from your prospective coach is: #1 Organization Focus, #2 Organization Focus, #3 Organization Focus.

- **How long does the prospective coach typically work with a client?**

This question helps you project what the cost of their work will be. (Caution: the cost factor should be explored last – see below). The candidate's response to this question may also give you a sense of how well they've mastered the field of coaching.

- **What results do they typically get with their clients?**

How they answer this question will also tell you a great deal. Listen for how much they focus on the degree of improvement or benefit for their previous coaching clients, and whether they are also sensitive to the needs of the organization. This helps you determine whether the coach is tuned in to the obvious fact that you are calling them to help an individual become a greater contributor in your organization. Sadly, many well-known coaches are not focused on this aspect. Instead, their focus is solely on helping the individual meet *their* needs.

- **What is the candidate's organizational working experience?**

What is their own experience working in organizations? What kind of organizations have they worked for and how long? What roles did they play? Especially important here is whether they've had experience *managing* others. Many people have apparently good credentials: years of coaching experience, good education and training (e.g. psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, etc.), or even extensive experience as a consultant to organizations, but they may never, themselves, have worked in organizations or may have fled them in haste to work alone.

When your coaching need is to help an executive or someone who is having difficulty dealing with management, or even with organizational politics, the coach cannot be truly helpful without personal experience in understanding organizational dynamics. Many coaches have had little experience working in mainstream business or government organizations. Their work has often been in clinics or a solo practice, limiting their ability to help you.

- **What is their coaching experience?**

How long have they been coaching? How many years have they been coaching full time? Who have they worked with (what organizations)? Do they possess any special types of industry or organizational experience? You want to be sure you are getting a real pro, not someone who recently decided that coaching looked attractive as a career direction.

- **What happens after coaching is over?**

How do they handle the post-coaching phase? This is probably the most important of the three phases of coaching, which are: 1) Pre-coaching – preparing the client for a successful coaching experience; 2) Coaching – the actual work with the coach; and, 3) Post-coaching – after the coaching is completed. What is done to ensure ongoing success and support for the new and improved behaviors?

As you explore this question, you'll gain additional insight into how much the candidate is focused on achieving a winning result for both the prospective client and his/her organization. It will also help you determine whether the coach has a clue about how to effect real-time behavior change in a client and sustain it over time in the pressured real world of work.

- **What is the coach's training and education?**

Have they had formal training in coaching, or merely hung out a shingle or shifted over to coaching from a mental health background? Do they have any special skills or abilities that they bring to the coaching arena?

- **What references can they provide?**

Because of the sensitive nature of coaching, getting references from an individual client can be tricky, but getting them from organizations is more straightforward. You should be able to contact client organizations for which the coach has worked and receive good feedback (with the coach's permission, of course). If you can't, move on.

- **Coach's own learning.**

Like your own field of work, a dynamic area like coaching requires considerable continuing learning and education. You want to know how the coach is doing this. How is that coach continuing to learn, beyond working with clients?

- **What professional support does the coach get?**

Supervision is a long-established practice in the coaching-related fields of counseling and therapy. The practitioner talks about challenging cases with their own supervisor and is guided in identifying key issues and further developing their tools and techniques.

- **How do they charge for their services?**

Cost is a consideration, but will not necessarily help you in finding the right coach for your situation. Looking at the real cost of coaching, or not coaching, will help you better understand that point. Consider the cost of a key contributor's continuing under-performance. Our clients have identified instances where avoiding just one year of under-performance or misperformance offsets the cost of coaching. The lost opportunity cost of the time of the person benefiting from coaching is also one to be considered. Taken together with all the other factors above, the fee of the coach should be the last factor you consider.

Concerned about offending a prospective coach? You shouldn't be! A good coach will appreciate that you're really doing your homework. They may even compliment you for asking the right questions.

Any coach who seems irritated or at all resistant to your queries about their work, should send up flags of concern. That would be the point in the interview to say, "Thank you for your time!" and cross them off your list.

Pose these questions to your several coach candidates, analyze the various responses and make your selection. You've now greatly enhanced the odds that you'll select the best coach.

If you're looking for a coach for yourself or for a staff member you believe may benefit from this type of assistance, we would recommend our very own Ray Redburn, Ph.D. Ray has been coaching key contributors in business, healthcare, education and government organizations for over 20 years. He provides in-person and telephone coaching to busy executives and other key people in organizations

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## WOMEN IN BUSINESS

*By Deborah Jeffries, PHR*

In honor of International Women in Business Week, celebrated this month, we thought we would share some interesting statistics about women in business and the wonderful contributions they make to our economy in the U.S.

Thirty-three percent of the organizations in America are owned and operated by women. There are 27.5 million employees on their payrolls. These are impressive numbers, but only 11% of the Fortune 500 boardrooms have seats available for women. Not acknowledged in some traditional corporate structures, women choose to start their own companies.

Research shows that women start businesses for freedom while men start them for the thrill of the chase. Although most women are attracted to entrepreneurship for positive reasons, many believe that this freedom is for the desire to create their own schedule, design their own workspace, to choose who to do business with, and the desire for greater challenges and more flexibility. This points to an area of concern, for some, that women do not grow their businesses because their focus is not on money, but rather on lifestyle.

In the United States, woman-owned businesses are the fastest growing business segment. The National Foundation for Women Business Owners reports that a new woman-owned business opens every 11 seconds. There are an estimated 3.5 million woman-owned, home-based businesses providing full or part-time employment to 14 million people.

As of this year, there are an estimated 6.2 million majority-owned, privately held woman-owned firms in the U.S., generating \$1.15 trillion in sales. Nationwide, nearly 9,000 majority-owned, privately held woman-owned firms have 100 or more employees.

States with the highest rates of business ownership, both among women and overall, are clustered in the Mountain and Northeast regions of the U.S. The ten states with the highest rates of woman business ownership are: Alaska, Colorado, Montana, Vermont, Wyoming, Oregon, Utah, Idaho, Maine, and New Mexico. More than one of every 18 women in the U.S. is a business owner, comprising 5.7% of the U.S. adult population.

Woman-owned firms continue to start up in every industry. Yet, some industries show greater than average start-up activity. In total, one-third (33.6%) of woman-owned firms are less than four-years old. Over the past years, the industries with the greatest share of new woman-owned firms are: health services (45% of woman-owned firms are less than four years old); retail trade-general merchandise stores (44.4%); finance and insurance (37.5%); engineering/accounting/research services (36.4%); and business services (36.2%). Woman-owned firms continue to diversify into all industries. Construction, manufacturing, and transportation have seen the largest increases recently in the number of woman-owned firms, although services and retail still make up the largest share.

A new generation of women has emerged – women who have started their businesses within the past 10 years have more managerial experience, education, and the same overall business revenue and employment profiles as women who have been in business 20 years or more. They are more similar to their male cohorts in these respects, and are also more growth-oriented than women who have been in business longer.

Every firm is more than just statistics about growth, number of employees, and revenue figures. Women-owned companies demonstrate that equality of opportunity exists, that hard work by anyone can be the beginning of success, that dreams can come true. Women are increasingly looking at entrepreneurship as a way of achieving personal and professional status and, on the way, they are building organizations that contribute to communities and the economy. We congratulate each woman who has begun a business and we wish them continued success in their endeavors.

## WORKPLACE TRENDS

A new survey on workplace demographic trends by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) finds that the changing face of the U.S. workplace is impacting organizations and will have a more significant impact in the near future.

The **SHRM® 2002 Workplace Demographic Trends Survey** is based on the responses of 450 human resources professionals. The survey asked respondents about the impact on their workplace of a workforce that is aging, more ethnically diverse, increasingly composed of non-traditional families and in which women are entering more traditionally male-dominated jobs.

The majority of human resources professionals (67%) reported currently seeing some level of impact on the workplace, and nearly all (94%) predict some level of impact in the next five years.

“The survey was conducted to see how shifts in society at large are affecting employers,” said SHRM Director of Research, Debra Cohen, Ph.D., SPHR. “Employers will need to make changes to accommodate the needs of the workforce of the future. Some of the old rules will no longer apply and businesses will need to adapt to succeed.”

When asked what they see as the key trends that will impact their businesses, society, and the HR profession in the next six to twelve months, respondents indicated that health care costs, as well as issues related to diversity, training, and the aging population were of most concern.

Respondents indicated they are already seeing changes in their workplaces due to an aging population: 82% saw an increase in health insurance costs and 58% saw an increase in the need for retirement planning. More than half (57%) reported an increase in the need for training or retraining employees or in the occurrence of employee stress (54%).

Many respondents reported seeing changes with regard to an increasingly diverse population. Half (52%) said they see a need for tolerance of employees of different backgrounds and 41% saw a need for diversity training.

With women comprising nearly half of the workforce, 66% of the HR professionals responding noted the need for flexibility regarding various family issues. Another 44% reported both an increase in the need for reduced work hours and increased use of flextime.

Census figures show that “non-traditional families” are growing, with married couples with children accounting for less than a quarter of U.S. households. Many employers are noticing changes as a result of this shift in family structure. More than half of respondents (54%) noted an increase in the need for awareness of different types of families and their issues. Forty-four percent and 32% respectively saw an increase in absenteeism and also in resentment among child-free employees.

“There is great potential for employers who can attract and retain a diverse population,” said Cohen. “HR professionals can play an important role in helping employers mold their corporate culture to embrace and take advantage of the demographic shifts.”

It is important that each organization consider what impact this shifting means to them, and how they want to plan and adjust to it.

## ASSURING A SUSTAINABLE DIVERSITY INITIATIVE

October is National Diversity Awareness Month. The following suggestions are provided by Karen Stinson, CEO, ProGroup, Inc., to boost your internal initiatives.

10. Whenever you have the opportunity, insist on a multicultural pool of qualified candidates. Others are watching your lead.
9. Set measurable diversity goals for your area and hold everyone accountable. Reward and critique accordingly.
8. Get employees on board with diversity information, awareness and skills before they are held accountable for acting appropriately. Don't skip steps.
7. Clearly state your definitions of diversity and emphasize that they include everyone.
6. Know the difference between EEO/AA and diversity, and keep them separate.
5. Be able to pass the “Elevator Test.” This means that if you get on an elevator at the ground floor and someone asks you, “Why are we doing a diversity initiative?” you can clearly and concisely state the answer by the time you reach the third floor.
4. Be aware of your own attitudes, biases, and preferences, and how they impact your actions when doing your own work. Check the impact that your attitudes, biases and preferences have on your decisions before you take action.
3. Commit enough money and other necessary support to the initiative to keep it going and sustainable, even in challenging times.
2. Include diversity as a vital part of achieving your business goals and objectives.
1. Model your commitment to creating an inclusive environment every day in every way. If others don't, call them on it.

## TRAINING TIPS

*By Susan Jeffries*

**Handling Hostile Audiences.** Hecklers, loudmouths, know-it-alls...call them what you will, but each of them can wreak havoc on a training program. What do you do when your audience is out of control and you feel like calling in the National Guard? Following are a few steps that may help:

- Keep your composure, even if rotten tomatoes are being thrown. Stay calm and collected at all times – losing your cool will only encourage the behavior.
- Let people vent, but don't allow any one individual to take control of the dialogue. Part of your role as the presenter is to be the leader, the one in control of the program.
- If you're interrupted, kindly ask the individual to hold his or her comments until you are finished with yours.
- If an individual is responsible for the disruption, respond only to that individual, not the entire audience. Appeal to his or her sense of fair play and indicate that their disturbance is preventing you from sharing important information with others.
- If all else fails and the situation becomes too tense to continue with the program, take a short break. Speak directly with those responsible and ask for their cooperation. If refused, threaten as nicely as possible to eject the disrupters from the program. Chances are that they are making the program miserable for the others in the audience as well.

**Which Is Best – Group or Individual Training?** Following are a few factors that organizations should consider when deciding which type of training – group or individual – to use.

### **Group:**

- ☐ The same information needs to be presented to several individuals.
- ☐ Time is limited.
- ☐ There are budgetary restrictions.
- ☐ An outside trainer will present the information.

### **Individual:**

- ☐ Only one individual needs training.
- ☐ There is no time limit in which to complete the training.
- ☐ The information to be presented is sensitive or specific to a particular situation or person (i.e. sexual harassment).
- ☐ Highly specialized training is required.

## GUIDING EMPLOYERS AROUND POLITICS

With November right around the corner, and 2002 being an election year, we thought we would provide a few do's and don'ts for employers.

- An employer **CANNOT** require an employee to be registered with a specific party as a condition of employment, nor can the employer take political affiliation into account when making any employment decision.
- An employer **CANNOT** require an employee to vote as a condition of employment, nor can the employer take voting history into account when making any employment decision.
- An employer **CANNOT** require contributions to any candidate, ballot measure or PAC as a condition of employment, nor can the employer take political contribution history into account when making any employment decision.
- An employer **CAN** ask employees whether or not they are registered to vote.
- An employer **CAN** give voter registration cards to employees who are not registered to vote.
- An employer **CAN** provide the stamp to mail in a voter registration card (this is a better alternative than asking for the card back and turning it in for the employee).
- An employer **CAN** adopt a voting leave policy for its employees.



- An employer **CAN** give out information about candidates, ballot measures, etc. as long as it is purely informational.
- An employer **CAN** encourage employees to vote.
- An employer **CAN** invite a candidate or ballot measure group to address its employees during a staff meeting as long as the purpose is informational only.

## BUSINESS WEBSITES

Every business, no matter the size or the industry, can use assistance and resources to answer their questions or help them become more successful. We have listed a few resources we think you might find interesting.

### **Biz Link** <http://www.bizlink.org>

This website was developed by the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County and was created to support the local, national and international business communities and those conducting business research. It provides access to many electronic and print resources associated with starting and operating a business.

### **Bplans.com** <http://www.bplans.com/>

Bplans.com offers a collection of business plans for starting and marketing your business. The site includes tools to calculate start-up costs, determine finance options, and plan a website, as well as business plan samples for a variety of businesses. The resource section offers software for writing business plans, industry reports, incorporating businesses, and other topics. Consultants are available to answer questions and offer advice.

### **CEO Express** <http://www.ceoexpress.com/>

"Connecting busy executives to information that matters" is this website's by-line. The site provides links to extensive business information via news sources on finances, health, lifestyle, weather and other topics. For a nominal membership fee, CEOExpressSelect offers site customization, financial information, email service, articles and white papers, a concierge service, scrolling news and more. They offer a two-week free trial that doesn't require credit card information.

### **Entrepreneurs' Help Page** <http://www.tannedfeet.com/index.htm>

A group of young professionals created this site to help other young or inexperienced business people with the desire to start their own business. "This website distributes basic information on legal, financial, and management issues that commonly affect (or afflict!) people who are just starting up their businesses."

### **Fed Stats** <http://www.fedstats.gov/>

This federal government website provides a central point to retrieve official statistical information from more than 70 government agencies. Search this expansive site for such topics as economic and population trends, education, health care costs, aviation safety, foreign trade, energy use, farm production, and more. State statistical data is available as well.

### **Free Management Library** <http://www.mapnp.org/library/>

The library provides free, on-line articles about business, management, and other organizational topics. It covers basic information that is necessary to plan, organize, lead, and coordinate business activities in any organization, profit or not-for-profit.

### **Global Edge** <http://globaledge.msu.edu/ibrd/ibrd.asp>

International business resources are the focus of this joint effort of the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal. Their index scores the relative freedom of 150 world economies based on trade policy, tax policy, government consumption of economic output, monetary policy, foreign investment, wage and price controls, property rights, regulation, and the size of the black market. They provide an online report of the 2002 rankings.

### **U.S. Small Business Administration** <http://www.sba.gov/>

The U.S. Small Business Administration provides financial, technical and management assistance to help Americans start, run and grow their businesses. It is the nation's largest single financial backer of small businesses and also plays a major role in the government's disaster relief efforts by making low-interest recovery loans to both homeowners and businesses. The website offers an online library of reports, forms, laws, programs, records, shareware, directories, loan information, and other resources for small business. Pro-Net is an electronic gateway of procurement information via a search engine that provides a one-stop-procurement-shop.

In keeping with this month's theme, here are some websites for women in business:

**Womanowned.com** <http://www.womanowned.com/>

This website provides information on multiple topics ranging from starting a business to how to write a grant, get loans, insurance, office needs, etc. The site is divided into products, networking and information areas. Basic membership is free.

**SBA Online Women's Business Center** <http://www.onlinewbc.gov/>

The Office of Women's Business Ownership (OWBO) promotes the growth of women-owned businesses and offers programs that address business training, technical assistance, and access to credit, capital, federal contracts, and international trade opportunities. There are OWBO representatives in every SBA district office, providing a nationwide network of mentoring opportunities to help women at every stage of developing and expanding a successful business.

**WomenBiz.gov** <http://www.womenbiz.gov>

A gateway for women-owned businesses, this website provides information about selling to the federal government. It is organized into five specific stages containing key information useful for a woman business owner, beginning or experienced, about the federal government as a customer and whether working with the federal government is the right step for the business.

**National Association of Women Business Owners** <http://www.nawbo.org/>

This national organization represents the interests of women entrepreneurs in all types of businesses. Various levels of memberships are available to sole proprietors, partners and corporate owners/managers. There are over 75 U.S. chapters and the organization is affiliated with Les Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises Mondiales (World Association of Women Entrepreneurs) representing 35 countries. Membership provides resources to help women entrepreneurs develop business skills, exchange information, network and, through corporate agreements, discounts on a variety of business services.

## DIVERSITY RESOURCE DIRECTORY

The Oregon State Council of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has released its fourth edition of this valuable directory that assists HR professionals in Oregon to identify ideas and opportunities for workplace diversity through recruitment. This Diversity Resource Directory references more than 220 resources on local, regional and national levels. The information is presented in three sections: Priority Considerations, Member Assistance and Resources. Section One includes a prioritized listing of significant issues facing the typical human resources professional in the Northwest. Section Two is a list of professionals willing to assist in the development of a Diversity mission statement, strategy or program. Section Three is a detailed listing of resources in education, community organizations, professional and business organizations, networking contacts and publications, as well as websites.

The 40+ page, spiral-bound Diversity Resource Directory is appropriate for any Northwest employer. It is available through the Oregon State Council for \$30 plus \$3.95 shipping. For more information, answers to your questions, or to purchase a directory, please contact Deborah Jeffries, PHR, at 503/885-9815, fax 503/885-8614 or via e-mail at: [djeffries@hrnorthwest.com](mailto:djeffries@hrnorthwest.com).

## RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

What would it look like if everyone in the world took one day to remember the astonishing importance and difference kindness can make in our lives? November 10-16, 2002 is known as Random Acts of Kindness Week, and November 13<sup>th</sup> is World Kindness Day. Of course the goal is not to restrict kindness to just one day or a week, but rather to get individuals to think about the power of kindness in their lives so it will have a ripple effect and the movement of kindness can be an everyday attitude.

If you would like to celebrate this week in your workplace there are resources and products available. You can contact the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation at 800-660-2811, send an e-mail to them at [RAKDAY@aol.com](mailto:RAKDAY@aol.com) or visit their website at [www.actsofkindness.org](http://www.actsofkindness.org).

We at HR Northwest would like all of you to share your Random Acts of Kindness, whether it was kindness offered to you or by you. Please e-mail your stories to Deborah Jeffries at [djeffries@hrnorthwest.com](mailto:djeffries@hrnorthwest.com). All names will be confidential unless you give permission otherwise. The stories will be featured in an upcoming issue so we can all share and continue the movement of kindness.

## HRN HAPPENINGS

Please join us in congratulating staff members who celebrated anniversaries in the third quarter of the year. They include:

<b>Rick Coffey, SPHR</b>	<b>13 years</b>
<b>Lon Southard, SPHR</b>	<b>3 years</b>
<b>David Clark</b>	<b>3 years</b>
<b>Melissa Packard</b>	<b>3 years</b>
<b>Connie Roberts, PHR</b>	<b>2 years</b>

For those of you who have not heard through the grapevine, we have a new member of our HRN family. Colby James Lynch, son of our Professional Consultant, **Stacey Lynch**, was born on August 9th and weighed 6 lbs., 13 oz. A real cutie!!

## THOUGHTS TO THINK ABOUT

"I gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which I must stop and look fear in the face...I say to myself, I've lived through this and can take the next thing that comes along...We must do the things we think we cannot do."

- Eleanor Roosevelt

"I never notice what has been done. I only see what remains to be done."

- Madam Curie

"Opportunities are usually disguised by hard work, so most people don't recognize them."

- Ann Landers

"I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do."

- Helen Keller

"We fought hard. We gave it our best. We did what was right. And we made a difference."

- Geraldine Ferraro

"I've never sought success in order to get fame and money; it's the talent and the passion that count in success."

- Ingrid Bergman

"This became a credo of mine...attempt the impossible in order to improve your work."

- Bette Davis

## HR NORTHWEST CALENDAR

Open up your daytimers, computer calendars and palm pilots. The following is a look at upcoming events, special days and other diverse and fun activities you will want to be aware of and get scheduled. To register for our workshops, please call any of our offices, send an e-mail to Susan Jeffries at [sjeffries@hrnorthwest.com](mailto:sjeffries@hrnorthwest.com), or just register online at [www.hrnorthwest.com](http://www.hrnorthwest.com) under Consulting services.

### OCTOBER

National Diversity Awareness, National Disability Employment Awareness, National Domestic Violence Awareness, National Breast Cancer Awareness.

October 1-6	Customer Service Week
October 6-12	Get Organized Week
October 9	Bring Your Teddy Bear To Work Day
<b>October 8, 15 &amp; 22</b>	<b>HRN Workshop - Puget Sound Beginning Supervision I-III 8:30 - 12 noon each day</b>
October 16	National Boss's Day
<b>October 17-18</b>	<b>HRN Offices Closed – Business Retreat</b>
October 21	Business Women's Week
October 27	Daylight Savings Time Ends
	Mother-in-Law's Day
October 31	Happy Halloween!

### NOVEMBER

<b>November 7</b>	<b>HRN Workshop - Portland Violence in the Workplace 8:30 - 12 noon</b>
<b>November 12</b>	<b>HRN Workshop - Puget Sound Introduction to Safety Programs 8:30 - 12 noon</b>
November 12	HRN-sponsored Women in Business Event Oregon Convention Center Tickets \$35 by calling 503-274-8733
<b>November 13</b>	<b>HRN Workshop - Willamette Valley Keys to Successful Supervision 8:30 - 12 noon</b>
<b>November 14</b>	<b>HRN Breakfast Briefing - Puget Sound Compensation Trends 7:30 - 9:30</b>





## ON MY SOAPBOX

Do you ever have those flashes of insight about yourself that are as effective as several hours of therapy (not that I would know, but I think that it is how it is supposed to work)? I experienced one this morning so it seemed a fitting subject for this month's writing assignment.

I was putting away some pictures in the room I fondly describe as my library. I love that room since it contains so many of my treasures – books, family pictures, remembrances of trips and special events, etc. Once I completed my small organizing task, I began to shift some things from one place to a better place. You know what I mean; a small task that turns into something bigger, not at all planned. I was finding a place of prominence for a picture of the whole family taken at Christmas a few years ago. I knew just where I wanted it. To make room for the picture, I moved a small brass plate that used to reside in a trophy I received in college for winning a multi-state speech contest. As I moved it, the brass plate slipped from my fingers and fell down behind the built-in cabinet.

I stood there for a moment considering what just happened and realizing that I would never get it out. The lip of the cabinet against the wall is about four inches. It is snug to the wall and fully attached in who knows how many places and ways.

I was astonished by my emotional response to that minor mistake. I tried to rationalize it. The tiny brass plate wasn't placed so that anyone else could see it easily. It wasn't as though that slip took the award away from me. It commemorated an event of more than 30 years ago. I have rarely told others about that event, and I can still tell that story if I choose. I never even used the plate as a visual aid when describing that day, etc. And yet, no matter how many ways I tried to make the incident okay, I felt myself on the verge of tears that a small piece of metal was no longer there in its resting place.

I thought how foolish to be so sentimental. I chastised myself for being material-oriented. I reminded myself that what was important was that I could remember that day when so many others have lost the ability to relive special times. But my sense of sadness persisted. I simply couldn't shake it.

As I thought more, I realized that this loss was about how I saw myself. There are certain things I believe about me; certain things that I have learned or done that are the building blocks of who I think I am. My speech background in high school and college is one of those. This small plaque was the only representation I had of that life experience. Strange or foolish as it sounds, in my mind, that moment of fumbling fingers took away a touchstone of what makes me who I am.

Even after all the presentations and speeches I have made, and the compliments I have received, the thing that held high value for me, and told me I was really good at public speaking was this small brass plate with my name and the words "First Place." And most interesting, until I lost it behind that cabinet, I didn't even know that I saw it that way!

I am now considering what other things might be similar. What other things are precious to me because they represent something I believe about me? So I ask you that question – what do you have that is representational of you? What are the tangible items of special accomplishments or characteristics that are your link to your past or how you see yourself? It is important that we be aware so that we can take care of those special icons. You don't want to have a momentary blunder that leads to this discovery.

- Judy Clark, President



Providing Customized HR Services That Matter Most

Please feel free to visit our website:

[www.hrnorthwest.com](http://www.hrnorthwest.com)