

Taking Off the Cruel Shoes

By: Marti Benjamin, MBA

Professional Certified Coach | Certified Career Management Coach

I had a pair of shoes that looked terrific sitting on the shoe rack in my closet. They were a perfect match for several things I love to wear so I kept them for a long time, even though I seldom wore them. From time to time I would sit down and try them on, feeling them hug my feet snugly and admire how stylish and smart they looked.

The problem arose when I tried to wear those shoes for more than a brief moment. The snug fit soon turned into a cruel pinch, making it painful to walk normally. And yet, I kept those shoes for five years, trying them on occasionally and even wearing them out of the house when I would forget how miserable I'd been the last time. I resisted getting rid of them because they were more than a pair of shoes to me—they were a connection to someone special.

I acquired those cruel shoes from my sister. When she tried them on in her favorite shoe store, she thought they were snug but workable. Soon she discovered that what felt snug became unbearable after a few minutes, just as I experienced when I tried to wear them. We both convinced ourselves that they would stretch the tiny bit necessary to be comfortable, if we could just get through that initial agony. They didn't, but I kept trying because they reminded me of my sister whenever I looked at them or thought about our shared experience. Before I could bring myself to get rid of the shoes, I had to understand that they were a visible symbol of my connection with my sister and recognize that the connection existed whether the shoes stayed in my closet or went to the community garage sale where, hopefully, someone would find them to be a perfect fit.

I notice that attachment to something that no longer fits (or in my case, never did) with many people today as they examine their career choices. For many, the work they expected would always be there has been replaced by technology or sent offshore; for others, the work is still there but the fit is no longer comfortable. And for some, what once seemed like a rewarding profession has begun to feel like drudgery and the simple act of going to work everyday becomes painful, much like wearing my cruel shoes.

The days of choosing a career direction as a young adult, preparing for it through education and experience and living happily ever after are disappearing for most workers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average worker will have three distinct careers in his/her work life and for those just entering the world of work in this decade, it is likely they will change careers five or six times before retirement.

In this new world of career management, how does one respond when the chosen career no longer fits, either because of personal preferences or because the market has changed? The first step is to determine whether the career can stretch into a better fit. Perhaps there is another way to use those well-honed career skills and accomplishments in another position, role or company. Begin with a thorough examination of what's working and what's not. Are there small adjustments that can change the fit sufficiently?

If making the current career into a better fit is impossible and a new career direction is needed, a good place to start the exploration is with your personal strengths, those traits that

have served you well in your previous work. Think about the most rewarding times in your career. What were you doing? With what type of people, data and things were you interacting. What made the work rewarding for you, beyond the compensation?

Identifying and labeling personal strengths is difficult for most of us. We are too close to be truly objective and we often imagine that we have strengths we want to have, whether there is any real evidence of them or not. (Like trying to fit those too-tight shoes.) There are career assessment tools that objectively identify strengths and motivations; armed with that information, finding a good fit is easier and faster than a trial-and-error approach.

If your current career choice is pinching you uncomfortably, look for new applications of your skills and talents and develop a plan for launching your transition. Your work life is much too important to be anything but great!

Marti Benjamin is a Professional Certified Coach and a Certified Career Management Coach. She is the president of Business Energetix—Success Coaching providing business, career and team coaching, using her talents to help business leaders find the work they love and then make it work for them. Contact her at Marti@BusinessEnergetix.com or 775.337.0661.