

Indispensable

Are you an expendable or an indispensable member of your organisation? Do you know how to become indispensable? Do you realise you can? There's no need to ask if you know the difference between being indispensable and expendable? Of course, you understand the consequences of being expendable.

In *This Side of Paradise*, Scott Fitzgerald's romantic and witty novel, he captures what he learned from his father '...although no one is truly indispensable, the pursuit of wisdom enriched by knowledge and skill with a *sense of giving back* (emphasis added) may allow oneself to become nearly indispensable'. Fitzgerald expressed his idea thus:

'He found something that he wanted, had always wanted and always would want – not to be admired, as he had feared; not to be loved, as he had made himself believe; but to be necessary to people, to be indispensable...'

Is anyone ever indispensable?

Today's post shows how to work on being indispensable to your organisation, irrespective of the position you hold. It is possible for anyone to make themselves (nearly) indispensable. Here's how to think about it.

There are three levels of contribution to an organisation an individual can make.

indispensable *Level 1* is to apply your skills and experience to the job you hold; in other words meet the minimum criteria and competencies set out in your position description (PD). You can think of this as your 'ticket to the game'. Doing this gets you through the door each morning and earns your monthly salary. It keeps you out of trouble as a useful, but expendable cog in the wheel.

Level 2 is to add financial value above and beyond what you PD requires. For example, if you are in sales, at Level 2 you are doing more financially than meeting your sales budget, e.g. finding and growing the most profitable customers. Or if you are in operations, at level 2 you are successfully cutting costs using innovative methods or reducing working capital requirements by smarter inventory management. Level 2 is necessary, but not sufficient to being indispensable.

Level 3 adds a special further dimension to levels 1 and 2. In other words, to be indispensable you have to deliver at levels 1 and 2 *and more*. Level 3 is ineffable; you know it when you see it in someone. Level 3 behaviours and attitudes are those often described as 'proprietary' where you feel, think and act like an owner. Where you deeply believe that your success and the organisation's success are one and the same. Where you are truly aligned. When you unflinchingly serve the organisation in good times and bad. When people talk about you as being irreplaceable.

1 + 2 + 3 = Indispensable

Being indispensable means always behaving at all three levels, that is 1 + 2 + 3 = Indispensable. It's additive, 1 and 2 are conditions precedent to 3.

Indispensability is *not* achieved by hard work, a 'can do' attitude and displays of loyalty to the organisation.

Being indispensable reaches beyond fulfilling the **social contract** with your organisation, making an earnest contribution, adding value in a variety of ways, and being loyal and fully engaged. It is about truly giving of your self, heart, body, mind to a cause, and higher purpose of your organisation's *raison d'être*.

This is not easily faked, nor is it easily replaceable.

When you are indispensable, it is as if you and the organisation are one interdependent unit.

adjective | in-dis-pens-able | \in-di-'spen(t)-sə-bəl\

Tale of two individuals

Let's call them Sue and Jane, two middle-ranking executives working in the same organisation, both of whom I know well.

Sue is completely reliable, always delivers as briefed, responds very competently to delegations from her boss, has been steadily improving her productivity, and is receptive when given constructive feedback on her blind spots. When Jane was reviewed recently she was told her performance met the expectations defined in her PD. She was good, but the ratings fell short of great. When Jane asked why some of her scores were 4, rather than 5, she was told: Yes, she was competent. Yes, she produced good work. And she was reasonably low maintenance. But 'something' was missing. That 'something' is hard to define, but it is strongly sensed.

And, not surprisingly, when the company down-sized, Sue was amongst those made redundant. She was expendable.

Jane, on the other hand, always goes the extra mile without being asked, takes novel initiatives when she sees the opportunity to do something better, faster or cheaper for the company. Jane proffers unsolicited suggestions that are 'on the money', not designed simply to impress. She anticipates feedback and is almost always correct in her interpretation of how she performs. Jane is willing to do the most menial and complex of tasks; nothing is beneath her. When her boss discusses Jane with me he uses phrases like '*Jane acts like a partner*' and '*She puts the business first*'. They see her as invaluable and at times have difficulty in putting their finger exactly on what Jane has that sets her apart – what makes her indispensable.

In the same redundancy round that cost Sue her job Jane was promoted to fill a vacancy two rungs above her current position. Jane was indispensable.

Make yourself indispensable

Becoming indispensable can be learned. Study the pen picture I painted of Jane above. What can you learn? Where are the gaps in your alignment with your organisation? Have you reflected deeply on your values and those of the organisation? Do they feel like one and the same? If not, you will have great difficulty in becoming indispensable.

It's OK not to want to be indispensable. But there are consequences for you, those of being expendable when times get tough or someone better comes along and can fill your place.

On the other hand genuinely feeling 'this is my place, this is where I belong, this is where I can make the biggest difference, and where I can do the best for myself and the organisation' is what makes you indispensable.

More on related topics

If you want to delve into other aspects of this topic I recommend read this earlier post of mine:

- + [The social contract is dead](#) by Margaret Beaton
- + [Indispensable by Monday](#) by Larry Myler
- + [Linchpins are everywhere](#) by Seth Godin