



The Curse of Capability

By Linda Murray

Have you ever had a time in your life when you felt off track? You might have even been experiencing great success and everyone around you was complimentary of your achievements. ... but something was missing for you. It's that moment when you stop and realise that you are living a life for other people. You have a good role; you are very capable at what you do; there's great opportunity ahead of you, yet you know it is not everything you want it to be. You are probably aware that you are not using all your skills and you are certainly not jumping out of bed each day bounding into the office oozing enthusiasm. This is all very symptomatic of the "Curse of Capability".

These days, there is so much talk in the business world about being capable. Executives have huge expectations, both quantifiable and qualifiable, to be on a journey of continual improvement. This could be the constant need to up-skill in order to achieve more in your career, and it could be building proficiency to maximise productivity, efficiency and to get more done. Building capability could also mean collecting experience to add hands-on

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experience to academic qualifications. This is all great and absolutely essential in order to achieve commercial greatness. So how could this possibly be a curse?

Well here's the thing. Too often I come across executives who have put ticks in all the above boxes and are genuinely successful. But they are not happy or fulfilled doing what they are doing. Commonly the reason for this is that their capability gets recognised by others who entice them on a



journey that is not one the individual would have chosen. In other words, people acknowledge your great capability and invite you to be on their team. Unless you know exactly where you want to go in your professional life, you don't have the filter to identify whether it is the best next professional step for yourself. It may be a great opportunity, but is it actually getting you closer to your professional goals?

Let me give you an example. Take Jane Smith. Jane is a really smart woman. She is very personable and everyone seems to connect with her really easily. As a result, Jane has a very impressive personal and

professional network. She is well educated and has a good commercial acumen. She is very efficient and comes up with clever solutions to most problems. Jane is a great asset to any team. Wouldn't you want Jane on your team if an opportunity arose? Most people would answer with a definitive "Yes"! This is because Jane is capable.

So, what is the “Curse of Capability”?

The curse aspect comes in because although Jane is very capable, she's never really identified



“Awareness allows choice, which creates action”

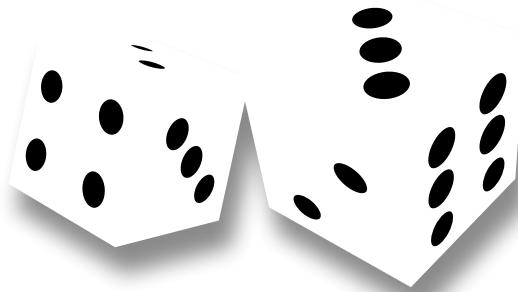
exactly what her vision is – she has not needed to because there has always been an abundance of opportunities at her fingertips. Jane has not ever needed to sit down and define her professional goals and therefore create the path to achieve that. Jane has always had plenty of job opportunities and has taken the best offer put in front of her at the time. The result of this is that 20 years into her career, Jane has ended up at a destination that is not the perfect destination for her. She can perform her role well but it doesn't light her up. It probably does not play to all Jane's strengths but that does not matter to Jane's organisation because she is a capable 'doer' and gets the job done well. Essentially, Jane

has invested 20 years of her professional life fulfilling other people's agendas. They have not intentionally taken advantage of Jane. They themselves have performance indicators to meet certain criteria and Jane is a great asset to their team. Can you relate to Jane's situation?

The ramifications of the Curse of Capability

The challenge is that it becomes easier to say “Yes” to opportunities than it is to take stock and evaluate what it is you want to achieve in life. Then one day you realise “I hate my job”. You are very capable at completing tasks and achieving results, but you do not feel challenged and fulfilled by your role. Quite often a role is ‘sold’ to you for its complexity because the last person found it a great challenge. Yet your capability means that what was challenging to someone else, quickly starts to feel like an admin role, leaving you unsatisfied. Quite often we hear people like Jane saying they are “bored”. They actually have plenty to do, but the boredom stems from the lack of fulfilment and therefore engagement.

Business, and work within a business, is like a game. You need to understand the rules in order to play. You also need to recognise there are boundaries built into the game. Smart game play is identifying where the opportunities are, when to take risks and what are the payoffs of taking those risks. It also helps to know how others are playing the game so you can maximise your own opportunities. The game that I liken the Curse of Capability to is 'Snakes & Ladders'. The objective of Snakes & Ladders is to reach the finish of the game faster than the other player(s). If you land on a ladder, enjoy the shortcut up the board. Land on a snake and your success is hindered by sliding backwards many positions on the board. It's almost no surprise we talk about being “on the corporate ladder” – the fast track to



the finish line. The apprehension kicks in when we are on a ladder and even though we might recognise it's not quite the right ladder, the fear of getting off it feels too great. There is an element of safety when we are on the ladder. Once you are off the ladder and on the board rolling the dice (making decisions) there is a risk of landing on a snake (making a poor decision) and ending in a worse position. The point is ladders are rigid and unbending. Sometimes, you need to acknowledge you aren't on the best ladder for you (which is probably the right ladder for someone else's agenda), and it is time to choose a new game plan. When you realise you are off track and not fulfilled by what you are doing, even if you are very good at it, it is time to reflect and reconnect with what matters to you.

How do we overcome the Curse of Capability?

The first step is awareness. Awareness allows choice, which creates action. Mindfulness that you could be achieving more or be more fulfilled and engaged is the crucial first stage. If you can relate to Jane's situation and the Snakes & Ladders metaphor rings true for you, you probably have good awareness of your current reality.

The next step is to choose whether you want to get off the ladder and seek a better path or destiny for yourself. How important is your own professional satisfaction? You are already incredibly capable. Imagine what you could achieve with that capability

if you were working in a role that really excited you, played to your strengths and was aligned with your values? Greatness happens beyond our comfort zone. You did not become capable by just doing what was easy. You worked at building new skills; you persevered when others stopped. Many people are challenged by change, but when the pleasure of a change is greater than the perceived fear, change becomes easy. Sometimes we are so close to a situation (in this case, our own dissatisfaction), that we lose sight of the alternative. The most efficient way to clarify what you really want is to seek the support of a person who understands your situation but is not emotionally attached to it. A professional coach is the best expert in this situation.

A coach will help you identify the patterns that have led to your situation and the reasons in which it serves you to stay on the ladder. If it did not serve you, you would not be there, right? The important part is to connect with what your life could look like if you were aligned and engaged with your role and where it is you want to reach. So many people have never taken the time to get clear on their professional goals and destination. Yet, when was the last time you got into your car with no destination in mind? If you did, you would drive around aimlessly, not arrive anywhere in particular, and ultimately either get bored or run out of petrol. So why do we do it with our lives? That sensation of feeling unfulfilled is your personal petrol tank starting to run low. "I hate my job" is your petrol light coming on and we want to avoid that at all costs.

Once you are clear on your vision for success and what you want to achieve. It becomes much easier to identify the path to get there. Coaching will also help you understand your values – what it is that really makes you tick. Obviously this is essential when you are trying to identify what fulfills you. Once you have these areas aligned, it is time to test whether you have the correct vehicle (on

“... change goes from being scary and unknown, to planned, structured and exciting”

the right ladder) to reach your desired destination. Seeking the support and expertise of a coach will help you to articulate a role that is the best fit for you and your destination. From this, you can work with your coach to identify what is the best course of action for you to achieve that. When you are in the hands of an expert, change goes from being scary and unknown, to planned, structured and exciting. You will feel an instant sense of reinvigoration and engagement with your own destiny; something that has probably been cast to the side. The

other powerful aspect of working with a coach is accountability. Knowing that you have someone on your ‘team’ who is checking in with you and can support you during the challenging times. As we identified above, greatness happens beyond your comfort zone. Having a coach by your side to guide you when you are beyond your comfort zone massively accelerates the process to success.

If you are aware that you are not living to your full professional potential and are not feeling 100% engaged with your role, it is time to take action. Be brave and roll the dice. It is never too late to get greater clarity on the best journey for you to achieve the professional success you know deep down that you have within you. Leverage your capability to your own benefit and everyone around you wins too. Doing so with a coach by your side will give you *clarity* on your destination, *certainty* around the steps you need to take, and the *confidence* to get out there and start living the best life you can.



Linda Murray is an Executive Coach, Speaker, Mentor, Facilitator and Trainer, who specialises in working with professional women, helping them to perform at their peak, while still having “a life”.



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