

## **Preparing Clients for Work in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)**

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A considerable amount of new work generated in Canada emerges from small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These organizations start with sometimes one, two or three employees and grow to dozens or several hundred employees. To feel what the environment of SME's can be like, consider the following scenario. Terry is a graphic artist who was let go during a downsizing exercise by an large organization. Terry began a one-person "design house," doing graphics and layout work on contract for a number of organizations. As time went on, Terry became sufficiently busy that it was possible (and necessary) to hire another graphic designer. Terry hired Kim, who had recently been "downsized" as well. Terry and Kim worked well together and generated enough business to justify another employee, an office manager. Terry hired Pat, who took care of all office duties, from reception to invoicing to bookkeeping. Hiring Pat enabled Terry to focus on marketing efforts, and soon the firm required a full-time layout person.

This brief scenario provides enough information to begin asking some interesting questions that pertain to the career development of the people in Terry's firm, including Terry:

- When did Terry have time to take courses on supervision, management and/or leadership?
- How much time has Terry (or Kim or anybody else in the firm) had to read books or attend seminars on feedback, coaching, performance appraisals and employee selection?
- How likely is it that Terry has systematically thought about the growth and development of the firm's people?

I believe that career development practitioners (myself included) tend to have a "default" way of thinking about organizations, one that assumes that organizations are systematically created with careful thought and effort put into the recruitment, selection, orientation, training, development and functioning of staff. I also believe that as firms such as Terry's become increasingly common, we need to challenge our assumptions about organizations if we are to effectively assist our clients with transitions. Further, it strikes me that by carefully examining SMEs and their shortcomings from a people-development perspective, we might more easily see how large organizations are not exempt from the types of problems Terry's employees are likely to face.

Given these beliefs, I have outlined below (a) some of the significant assumptions I hold about organizations when I slip into "default" mode, (b) the likely realities in SMEs that counteract these assumptions and (c) some safeguard preparations we can help our clients make in preparing to working in SMEs or any organization. For the most part, the descriptions are self-evident and therefore little explanation is provided. In some cases, a rationale for my thinking is provided in italics. Readers who find my notes too cryptic are encouraged to contact me for clarification at

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<b>Assumption</b>	<b>Likely Reality in SME</b>	<b>Safeguard Preparation</b>
New employees receive orientations	New employees are introduced to their role and immediate coworkers	Teach clients how to conduct their own orientations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- history of firm</li> <li>- vision/mission of firm</li> <li>- scope of firm's business</li> <li>- key outputs of firm</li> <li>- key outputs of employee's role</li> </ul> <i>Effective orientations are critical because they help employees understand the business of the organization; the reason it exists. Without this understanding, employees cannot make effective or influential decisions.</i>
New employees are supervised	New employees likely receive little supervision	Teach clients self-supervision strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how to ask for feedback</li> <li>- self-measurement strategies/tools</li> <li>- self-analysis</li> </ul>
When supervised, new employees are supervised by trained, skilled supervisors	"Supervisors" are co-workers who have simply been there longer	See above

Assumption	Likely Reality in SME	Safeguard Preparation
Roles are clearly described	Roles are an eclectic set of duties that others are not getting done	Teach clients role definition skills: - “short-form” Life-Role Analysis or other methods - able to identify outcomes, activities and skills/ knowledge  Teach clients role creation strategies: - internal “job development” or role enhancement - value-add strategies
Training for roles is clearly identified; formal learning structures exist	Training is on-the-job or not provided	Teach clients learning strategies: - needs analysis - barrier removal - learning environment development - learning-on-the-job - obtaining feedback - coaching skills
Feedback on performance is provided	Feedback is random and/or rare	Teach clients how to: - solicit feedback - create measurement tools - do self-performance appraisals - conduct “value analyses” of their roles ( <i>i.e.</i> , determine the things they do that add value to the organization, things they do that do not add value, things they do for the organization that adds value to their own lives, and things they do for the organization that do not add value to their own lives)

<b>Assumption</b>	<b>Likely Reality in SME</b>	<b>Safeguard Preparation</b>
Succession planning is taken care of	Little thought has been given to succession	Teach clients exit strategies - develop your own successor
Firm is motivated by profit vs. sustainability	Firm is motivated by sustainability vs. profit <i>In many SMEs, the CEO is also an employee, an employee who created a company primarily to obtain work. The CEO/employee is often more motivated by personal security than by growth and profit.</i>	Teach clients win-win thinking (not “us” vs “them” thinking)  Teach clients how money is made <i>I am consistently amazed by the lack of understanding of business by the average Canadian. This lack of understanding leads to poor decisions by employees, resentment by employers and employees and feelings of exploitation on both sides.</i>
Worker is anonymous	Workers <i>are</i> the organization	Prepare clients with an attitude of ownership
Wage system is well conceived	Wages are relatively arbitrary	Teach clients: - value analysis - negotiation skills
Work activity is structured	Work structure is created by the worker	Teach clients: - value management - time management - organizational skills
Work aids/tools are provided	No work aids/tools are provided	Teach clients how to create work aids/tools
Firm looks after career growth	Firm has not thought that far ahead	Prepare clients for continuous career building