

The Dallas Morning News

Sunday, January 14, 2001

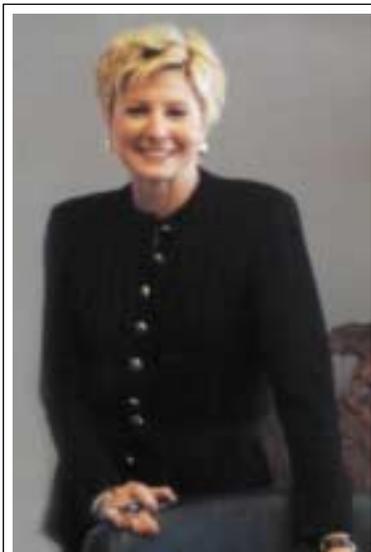
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Business

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Strategist specializes in finding best fit for execs



“Careers don’t just happen,” says career strategist Karyl Innis

By Cheryl Hall /
The Dallas Morning News

Karyl Innis deals with so many “Smart Buts” she’s trademarking the phrase.

The career strategist and CEO of Dallas-based The Innis Co. is routinely asked by employers to shave the rough edges off promising management talent.

“A corporate executive will say, ‘Karyl, I’ve got an employee who’s so bright and so smart, but...’ After that there’s always something like, ‘Nobody will work with him because he leaves bodies in

his wake’ or ‘Nobody knows she’s in the same room because she won’t open her mouth.’”

Once, these “Smart Buts” would have been shunted aside to let more suitable protégés pass them by. But today’s tight labor market has employers scrambling for executive talent and trying to coax the most from the employees they have.

With fewer sages to mentor younger employees, companies are turning to outside consultants such as Ms. Innis for that guiding light. Her career management company, which also has offices in Houston and Santa Fe, brought in \$5 million in revenue last year from corporate clients such as Bank of America, TXU Electric and Gas and Motorola Inc.

“Companies are shoehorning people into executive slots. They force-fit people who aren’t ready and then get disastrous results,” says Ms. Innis, sitting in her 17th-floor offices in One Galleria Tower. “Our coaching bridges the gap between who people are and who they need to be.”

Her company’s expertise is “career transitions.” In the 1990s, that was a euphemism for helping fired executives downsized out of their jobs. And although that still accounts for more than half of her business, recasting workers into new internal roles is her company’s fastest-growing segment.

This month, J.P. Morgan Chase, AT&T Corp. and Pizza Hut are testing a new workshop on building successful careers.

In a nutshell, Ms. Innis tells people to know what they want and how to figure out where to find it.

“Careers don’t just happen. They don’t just fall into your lap,” says Ms. Innis. “We spend a lot of time building clarity around what people really want. There are still those who want a corporation to take care of them—create, cast and define them. The new rule is you cast and define yourself.”

Lessons Learned

Karyl Innis’ career has been her learning laboratory for what she preaches today.

Wichita-born and a product of Kansas State University with a master’s degree in adult development, Ms. Innis went to work at Motorola in suburban Chicago in 1974.

Her starting salary of \$13,800 a year was higher than most women could get at the time, because the guy setting the job’s pay grade misread Karyl for Karl.

“My boss introduced me to him, and he almost fell through the floor because he was clearly intending to see a young man,” she recalls with a laugh.

Her first task as part of the human resources department was to develop programs to help assembly-line supervisors communicate and manage. She rose quickly, and her training responsibility soon included everyone from those on the factory floor to those in the executive ranks.

Her personal career epiphany came while she was developing a program for high-potential employees. She asked the up-and-comers to graph their lifelines from their first days in business to their ultimate career destinations in the future. When she did the exercise herself, she realized there were vast years ahead of her that were void of specific goals.

“I recognized how vague my plans were other than I wanted to own my own business,” she recalls.

Ms. Innis stepped out of her comfort zone in 1976 when she became manager of staffing, which meant she was responsible for hiring more than 10,000 professional, administrative and factory workers at Motorola’s Chicago facility each year.

It was a particularly daunting job since this was before computers or databases. She actually bought the communication division’s first fax machine to correspond with the advertising agency handling the classified ads.

This stint also introduced her to Smart Buts—people who didn’t get the job or promotion.

“They were bright and smart, but they weren’t right for it,” she says. “They were head down, pencil up and worked diligently, but they weren’t able to express their contributions or worth even to their immediate bosses. It wasn’t that they were undervalued. They were valued in a silo,” she says, moving her hands vertically. “Their supervisors couldn’t see how their skills could apply outside that.”

In 1978, she transferred to Motorola’s Fort Worth facility in the

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middle of a crippling ice storm. "The weather was worse than Chicago. The moving van got stuck in Denton, and I'm thinking, 'What have I done?'" she remembers.

But when her boss asked her to move again, she balked.

"Under the old rules, you clicked your heels like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz and said, 'Yes, sir.' Everyone acknowledged that it was a career killer to pass up a relocation."

But Ms. Innis had something else in mind—that career lifeline that she'd drawn with the goal of running her own business.

She jumped into the brand-new field of outplacement with the largest national company at the time, Drake Beam Morin, starting out as workshop trainer and then as vice president of business development in 1986.

Lucky for her, outplacement was about to become a growth industry.

By 1988, Texas was in the full throes of economic chaos. Ms. Innis was hired as a managing partner to create an outplacement division, Enterchange Southwest, for a publicly held holding company in Atlanta.

Early Success

One of her most stunning coups came that same year on a cold call.

NCNB Corp. (now Bank of America) had just bought FirstRepublic, and she figured the Charlotte-based company was a prime target for outplacement help.

"I was convinced this was an opportunity to create a relationship with a person new in town who wasn't married to any other service provider," she says. "I was also certain we could provide a service to NCNB to ease their move into a market that wasn't crazy about having them

"So she ferreted out the guy in charge of the transition, calling him early one morning before his secretary got in. The next day, he gave her an extremely ticklish test assignment counseling a high-level executive who had been laid off.

"I felt it was an honor to help both sides. That's the trick in outplacement," she says. "The corporation needs the service, and the individual deeply needs the help.

"A dozen years later, The Innis Co. handles outplacement nationwide for the now-massive Bank of America organization. A major chunk of business comes Ms. Innis' way each time it buys another bank.

But the relationship has blossomed into much more than helping executives exit stage left, says Susan Raheer, senior change consultant at Bank of America in Dallas, who works with Ms. Innis on initiatives aimed at nurturing employee careers.

"A lot of consultants have information," Ms. Raheer says. "Karyl distinguishes herself by taking information and turning it into tools that act as a clear blueprint for career building with measurable results."

Test of Will

In 1993, Ms. Innis went through a messy corporate "divorce" with the parent owner of Enterchange Southwest when it tried to sell the Dallas-based division out from under her. She wouldn't agree to continue her employment contract under new ownership, but the holding company had her career held hostage with a signed noncompete clause.

"That was a very dark time and difficult negotiation for me, because for five years I had worked very hard to build equity in the company," she says. Eventually she forfeited about \$1 million in equity in exchange for ownership of the division, which she renamed The Innis Co.

For the next five years, her business rocked along at about the \$2 million level, which frankly was an achievement. The economy was back at full throttle, and most outplacement companies were falling by the wayside.

But holding her own doesn't suit this high-octane woman's aggressive style.

In 1998, Ms. Innis decided to concentrate on management seminars and executive coaching. She expects this segment to account for half of her company's anticipated \$7 million in 2001 revenue.

Ms. Innis talks a lot about new rules to the old game.

Rule No. 1 is that all-important defining what you want to achieve.

Then have a plan and write it down. "So many people say, 'I wish, I thought, I could,' rather than turning that dream into a plan," she says. "Writing it down is an act of commitment that makes it a goal in a tangible form."

You also need to know who you are and what you bring to the job, she says. "Most people get stopped in their tracks when they're asked, 'What five attributes do you have that make a business difference and add value to your role?'"

Carol Nichols, senior vice president of Chase in charge of statewide business banking, was coached one-on-one by Ms. Innis two years ago and discovered in a "blinding flash of the obvious" that she needed to pinpoint her strengths so that she could build on them.

"Before that, when I was asked, 'How are you so successful?' I probably said, 'I've been lucky.' That's a cop-out answer. It doesn't help anyone. The reason I am successful is I'm good at building effective relationships, and I interact well with people at all levels of the organization."

Ms. Innis contends that people also must realistically assess their shortcomings.

"There's an arrogance in not knowing how you affect others," Ms. Innis says. "That's where our Smart Buts most often fall down. They are so focused on task, task, task and producing good results that they don't realize the style they've adopted is affecting people in a highly negative way."

• Cheryl Hall is business columnist for The Dallas Morning News. Ideas at Work is intended as a forum for ideas and opinions of interest.