

The Silver Fish for Unobtrusive Service

by Caroline Evans

At my school, there was always an annual prize-giving ceremony – typical of most schools – delivering prizes for the best exam results, sporting achievements, or excellence in music and the arts. However, there was one prize awarded in our final year, that struck me as rather odd: ‘The Silver Fish for Unobtrusive Service’. It was certainly a magnificent piece of silverware but no one knew of its existence until the ceremony itself and few pupils recognised the winner; who was a quiet, well-behaved and unassuming girl.

On the one hand, it was lovely to acknowledge someone who clearly didn’t seek the limelight but, on the other, we were all thinking: what a waste of her potential! Why wasn’t she better promoted or more self-promoting? Or did she know about the prize and that to win it she needed to stay in the shadows? I still sometimes wonder where is she now? Is she still doing great work behind the scenes, perhaps in a corridor of power somewhere? Or did the ‘Silver Fish’ accolade give her the confidence to step to the front of the stage of her life and out of the shadows? Or, was her experience of early school hall celebrity too much for her, causing her to disappear into the background for ever?

It made me think that this is very much a ‘now’ dilemma. What if any one of us fell into the category of a potential ‘Silver Fish’ recipient and was most comfortable being unobtrusive? In this world of being encouraged to leverage our personal brand, we may ask ourselves how do we find the right balance? I have known and worked with a large number of company secretaries and governance professionals over the past couple of decades. Historically, the perception – and in many cases the reality – of their personality is deemed somewhat ‘introverted’; excellent at delivering meticulous service, whilst allowing others to take the floor and the glory.

However, in recent years, so many company secretaries have stepped into the limelight and have been proactively demonstrating through contribution and action, their value as technical experts and sounding boards to the Chair and board members. They are taking centre stage in increasing numbers to be speakers and advisors in their own right, whilst still maintaining the discretion and service qualities that are at the core of their role.

This shift in position, in many ways, reflects the way the world is changing. The new mantra for the boardroom is ‘purpose over profit’, inspiring shared effort for the common good over personal gain. But how do these company secretaries – and the rest of us – get that balance right and personalised? Many people very much need to be recognised and be appreciated. Not the show-offs but those who are validated by, and who thrive and grow on, positive feedback. Equally, there are others who are happier to stay in the background and view their success from the safety of anonymity. I suppose it’s a bit like the divide between people who love to host their own birthday parties and those of us who find being in the spotlight rather awkward and embarrassing.

It made me think of how many company secretaries had ridden the sea of changes over the years and had successfully made the shift by carving a new shape to their career, or simply to their existing remit. Maybe you recognise yourself or others in the following examples?

One such individual – a technology graduate – found himself in a local government department that offered the opportunity to study for the ICSA qualification. This qualification led to a junior company secretary position in the private sector, but the culture was rigid and the remit purely administrative. Wind forward a few years and a bold move into a much more expansive role brought his tech know-how back into play alongside his governance expertise; giving him a voice, a USP and much greater profile across the business.

Another new graduate, when told that they were not “tough enough” for a trainee position, took this as a challenge to prove her doubters wrong. Not only did she show her metal in this role, she went onto build a new business unit, which in turn drew her to the attention of another employer. This resulted in a new enhanced career opportunity, which she was now confident enough to accept with alacrity.

Another, whilst acknowledged as an academic and technical expert, was ignored in the wider context of being a member of the senior team. Investing in a personal mentoring programme provided her with the resilience to tolerate the situation long enough to take control of her future and move on. She is now a business commentator and freelance consultant.

These stories are as individual as the people themselves. The prompt in each case is different but came about through seeking support from line managers, peer groups and mentors. Only recently I read an article entitled: **“Work is not just about ‘output’ but shared endeavour”**. The focus of the article was on homeworking from a business perspective and that “the virtual workplace was no substitute for real people gathering and being creative”. I firmly believe that personal career creativity is as important as commercial creativity.

Some are born to love the limelight and some are thrust into it – as it was for the ‘Silver Fish’ award winner – but I feel that it is how you respond on a personal as well as a professional level that matters most. Be brave, open up, be authentic and speak from the heart – and, in so doing, optimise your potential for success.

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