

The Downside of 'Musical Chairs'

By Jim Mathis

Seth Godin, a noted author, entrepreneur, marketer and speaker, made a reference to the children's game, "musical chairs," in his blog recently. His writing brought back memories of the many times I participated in this activity as a boy.

If you are not familiar with musical chairs, it is a children's game where you walk around a group of chairs as music plays. When the music stops, everyone grabs a chair and sits. The catch is there is always one less chair than there are players. The person that ends up without a chair is eliminated from the game.

The most practical lesson I learned while playing musical chairs is that if you do not want to always be scrambling for the last chair, it would be good if you could bring your own. At least that is what we should be doing in the workplace. By "bringing your own chair," I mean determining to be creative, finding your own voice, and doing your own thing - identifying and pursuing what you are best at doing, and feel most enthused and even passionate about doing.

Fighting for a chair seems like fun when you are 10 years old, but not so much when you are 50. I know too many people who have spent too many years scrambling for a decreasing number of chairs. In many industries we have seen this with downsizing, as companies economize by decreasing staff. Even for entrepreneurs the "musical chairs syndrome" might be felt as changes in the market and technology turn once-thriving businesses into struggling enterprises barely clinging to survival.

So how can we go about "bringing our own chair," when places and opportunities for employment are declining? For me, I always found the demand for someone with photographic expertise. As years have passed, I have also developed skills in restoring old photographs, transforming aging, faded photos into fresh, revitalized images from the past. I have had similar experiences in music, my other passion. These have been my "chairs."

The question to ask yourself is, "What is my chair?" What are the distinctive skills, gifts and experiences you possess that separate you from others where you work - or could enable you to carve a new career niche of your own? I believe the Bible offers some relevant principles we should consider:

We are unique, both professionally and personally. Even at companies where many of the same types of people are employed, everyone comes with a unique background, personality, interests, talents and life experiences. We must consider

how to leverage those God-given qualities either to make us valued staff members, or how we can use them to do something on our own that we would give us much joy and fulfillment. "For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made..." (Psalm 139:13-14).

We have been specially prepared for the work we do. Have you ever wondered why you have a natural bent toward some kinds of work - and not toward others? The Bible said this is due in part to God's intentions for each of us individually. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Did you ever play musical chairs as a child? Describe how it felt to be the one left out, without a chair to sit on.
2. Have you ever been in a situation where you worked when it seems like you were being forced to play a business version of musical chairs? Maybe you are even feeling like an unwilling participant right now. If so, what has that experience been like?
3. When you read that God created you and has uniquely prepared you for performing a very special work, what are your thoughts? Do you believe that is true - why or why not?
4. Thinking about not only your skills and work experience, but also your interests - the things that make you feel excited about doing - what are the "chairs" that you bring to the workplace?

If you would like to look at or discuss other portions of the Bible that relate to this topic, consider the following brief sampling of passages:

Proverbs 12:24, 21:5, 22:29; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Colossians 3:17,23; 2 Timothy 3:17