

The background is a complex, multi-colored patchwork quilt. Each square piece features a different pattern or texture, including floral motifs, geometric shapes, abstract designs, and nature-inspired elements like leaves and musical notes. The color palette is rich and varied, encompassing earthy tones like browns, oranges, and yellows, as well as cooler shades like blues, greens, and purples. The overall effect is one of intricate detail and vibrant diversity.

Piece

A woman's work is never done. But by applying the image of a patchwork quilt, work-life balance can be achieved. Hetty Einzig reveals a simple metaphor for a whole-systems approach in the workplace

work

When I was a teenager I made patchwork quilt cushion covers. I enjoyed playing with

fabrics, the textures, patterns and colours. It was a peaceful break from essay deadlines and angst-ridden teen friendships, and I was a natural maker of things.

But what fascinated me, and still does, was the creation of something whole from disparate parts – from bits and pieces. It was the relationship between the different colours and patterns, the juxtapositions and counterpoints, and finally the emergence of something new, whole and unforeseen that I found satisfying.

Over the past few years I have become interested in the patchwork quilt as a metaphor and with the idea of what I call “emergent creativity” – particularly in my work as a coach with women at senior levels in demanding jobs. I think of Marcel Proust's words: “The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes.”

Images change minds, and consequently behaviour. For example, many people credit the

start of real environmental awareness with those first images of Earth taken from space – once seen we could never think about our world in the same way again.

When I offer the image of the patchwork quilt to a coaching client, I am not suggesting she changes what she is doing but how she thinks about herself, her life and work and her assumptions.

Stitching time

The image of the patchwork quilt is one of diversity, integration and harmony, whereas the most common image women apply to their lives, that of juggling, expresses separateness and tension.

When we talk of “patchwork provision”, for example in terms of services, we mean a bit here and there, not linked. But a patchwork quilt brings together these scraps, bound by a consistent thread, into a coherent whole, a work of art.

Traditionally, patchwork quilts were made from scraps left over from clothes-making; by analogy we create our lives from what is. More recently, a serious craft has evolved with well-planned out elaborate designs and luxurious materials.

As metaphors, both serve us well. We need planning and structure, but we also need room to allow the unexpected to emerge. Anyone who has designed a business strategy knows that both the plan and the courage to throw it away when events demand a different response.

These are the hallmarks of emergent creativity rather than our culture’s more usual heroic model of the lone innovator with their creation born of struggle and angst.

What about the concept of the “portfolio career”? While it addresses the issue of having a variety of work activities, it implies a compartmentalising of different items. Portfolio does not emphasise the connection between projects and between work and the rest of one’s life – and increasingly both men and women are giving more, sometimes equal, status to their family, community, voluntary or other activities outside their paid work.

What appeals about the patchwork quilt is that it suggests how we might rethink the shaping of our life and work, not just lament the inadequacies. The quilt demands active engagement from each of us to reflect on our work, to

perceive the patterns, to understand them, value them and then make choices in light of this.

The threads that bind

Seeing our life as a creative act encourages us to take stock, to seek and make meaning and to make active choices about what we do – which pieces of fabric we want in our quilt. This can lead us to demand more of work: structures that reinforce this new view, such as flexible work practices, and the accountability that demonstrates a value-led business. Once embedded, new mindsets have a chance of seeding and propagating.

What if, instead of seeing an impossible number of balls to juggle, we were to conceive of each activity as a small creative act? Collecting the children from school, cooking a meal, meeting a colleague, completing a report. If each action is approached with a sense of significance, it becomes significant.

The key is the linking thread. For my early teen efforts I used purple silk thread, chosen for its colour, smoothness and strength. Discovering this keynote theme, the thread that binds the pieces together, is a crucial first step for women in perceiving their quilt.

Rather than dwell on how hard our lives are, the quilt image helps us to see our lives – including the inadequacies, mistakes and failures – as a creative process leading to an existence with sense and purpose. It puts us in the position of artist or craftsperson rather than being tossed and turned by fate or the demands of others.

The underpinning of coaching is to raise awareness and evoke personal responsibility. The patchwork quilt obliges us to act with attention and care.

When coaching, I often find myself helping clients to look back at their working lives and recognise

Case study: legal ease

Patricia, a lawyer, sought coaching to help her move from what she felt was a *cul de sac* at work into something more satisfying. As well as her legal work, she had participated in a number of committees, was involved in the firm’s continuous professional development programme, had contributed to a couple of major social justice charities, had a daughter and had creative pursuits. Many of these activities were at a point of completion. I was reminded of the patchwork quilt.

Her concern was that she was involved in too much and had over-diversified – following her heart to the detriment of her career. The warning from a disapproving senior male partner that she “should stick at one thing if she wanted to be successful and make senior partnership” had made an impression. What should she focus on going forward? Should she leave the firm since she felt bored and at a dead end, or stick with it for status and advancement? What about her daughter, who was growing up fast?

Talking with her about the patchwork quilt metaphor, it became clearer to her how things fitted together, what the major themes were in her life, what she loved doing and what she wanted more of. This was not a quick fix – it didn’t allay the anxiety she felt about not sticking to the single career trajectory model. But the image gave her a different way of conceptualising her life and, importantly, a different pattern – one of equal potency, to set against the male career pattern. She could use this to plan her next steps in a creative rather than reactive way.

the emergent strategy – creating their quilt through hindsight, the better to move forward with purpose. They are encouraged to see that what appeared before as fragmentary, discontinuous or contradictory now finds its echo, its complement or counterpoint, in an element from a different sphere.

Strong foundation

The quilt's backing cloth acts as the sturdy support for this complex medley of colour. In work, to be creative we need a supportive framework that enables us to extemporise, and a sense of our ground to provide the foundation from which to take risks. Our backing provides continuity and security, the re-enforcing structures so often neglected in business change programmes.

As we start to view our lives with a patterning mindset we perceive the themes, the continuous thread, the high points of bright colour and the counterpoints, as well as noting how all the smaller pieces have their place in the overall scheme.

A key point about the patchwork quilt is the interdependence of all the elements. No one piece would draw notice on its own. It is the interplay between the shapes and fabrics and their arrangement that matters. As in all systems theories, move one piece, emphasise one colour, rearrange the pattern and everything is changed.

We still prize independence in our culture. But the best businesses,

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Learning points

- There is a link between the need for businesses to attract and appoint more women to decision-making positions and to move from silo thinking to interconnected thinking and behaviours.
- Coaches and businesses must help women to apply interconnected thinking.
- This process involves recognition of “emergent” and “heroic” creativity.
- When mindsets shift, behaviours will develop naturally – the patchwork quilt is an image that captures the new mindset.

the strongest families, don't and couldn't work like that. If everyone did their own thing without regard for the skills, expertise, needs and wishes of others, the business would soon founder. In the patchwork quilt each piece has a discrete identity but all work together to create something more than the sum of its parts – staff working across departmental/functional silos, thinking systemically, making connections, seeing the patterns and the bigger organisational picture, not just their piece of turf.

It seems to me that at work and in a world just beginning to realise the destruction we have caused through the single-minded pursuit of individual goals, we are badly in need of a discourse that emphasises our common ground.

While we continue to see the elements of our lives as discrete, and ourselves as separate from each other and from the world we live in, then personal burnout, alienation and loneliness will continue as a norm and the abuse of others, the common good and our natural world will remain commonplace.

What does this mean for working women? One cannot claim cause and effect but if the workplace continues to promote a heroic culture that encourages divisive competitiveness, many women will continue to leave or withdraw from the echelons of power, and business will continue to be the poorer for it.

We live in a visual world. I believe change will happen faster

and deeper via the pictures and metaphors we seed and the stories they generate than through political debate or academic treatise. The images we need today are of integration, not muscular independence, of connectedness, not separation, if we are to address the way we work as women – and as a species.

The patchwork quilt is one image that can be added to the rich collection needed to create the new story we need to tell ourselves. It is a story of creative endeavour that gives greater value to the emergent. Traditionally, coaches help clients to solve problems. I would encourage coaches to extend their reach and consider the role they can serve with their clients in “midwifing” these transformations.

Further info

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