



The Dynamics of Success



Research findings and the implications for coaching

Key Words

Life outcomes and satisfaction; success; life goals and tactics; the dynamics of the “flourishing life”; implications for the future of coaching; assessment; 360 feedback as a reality check

“Success is not the place one arrives, but rather the spirit with which one undertakes and continues the journey.”

Alex Noble

Life Dynamics was launched in 2003 as an on line self-assessment tool to map out the drivers of life success. It was designed for the kind of executive coaching which goes beyond improvements in immediate performance or next-step promotion, coaching to put work priorities and career goals within an overall life context. Life Dynamics also supports the development programmes which do more than “tick the competency box” but tackle fundamental issues of personal values and life mastery, programmes that share Peter Drucker’s insight.

This digest summarises our research findings, and highlights tools - self assessment and 360 feedback - to support the coaching approach that recognises the importance of the individual and their life context.

“Until you figure out what success means to you personally and to your organisation, leadership is an almost pointless conversation.”

Peter Drucker

- how satisfied are individuals with their lives?
- which life goals and tactics are associated with positive life outcomes?
- what are the drivers of the “flourishing life”, that “life well lived” that is achieving the highest levels of satisfaction?
- and highlights the applications for coaching professionals

What is the “good life”?

The ancient Greeks discussed this issue at great length. For Aristotle, “the life lived well” lies in moderation and the “Golden Mean”, that appeal to calibrate our behaviour between extremes, which applies wisdom, virtue and the practice of good habits to find the “middle way”.

This analysis seems to be meeting short shrift in the 21st century, at least judging from the prevailing mood within the self improvement industry. For Keith Ferrazzi, *“balance is bullshit”*, and life success lies in passionate focus around the “one thing”. Or, as Felix Dennis in “How to Get Rich” more directly puts it: *“Tunnel vision helps. Being a bit of a shit helps.”* Felix Dennis, in his refreshingly candid book, points out that his advice will help you become extremely rich, but demands “blood, sweat and tears”, and will probably make you miserable.

Classic “success thinking” emphasises “big dreams and practical goals”. Think big thoughts about what is possible, create a vision of what this looks like, and then set specific goals to achieve this vision. Does it work?.

Focus is powerful; it helps us make life choices. Plans, goals and targets are highly effective in directing our time and effort around what is important. But what if we don’t know what we want? Or, if what we think we want won’t make us happy, fulfilled and authentic in the long run? Goals help us attain our aims, but they can also be blinkers, blinding us to the unexpected and to new life possibilities. Is **purposive drift*** a better life strategy? In purposive drift, we accept that life can’t be lived like a project plan. Instead we need to keep an open mind to life and its changing possibilities, to the fact that what we thought was important is now becoming trivial, and alert to what is and isn’t working in our lives.

* <http://www.changethis.com/31.06.PurposiveDrift>

Living successfully: the agenda



Success comes in all sorts and shapes, and we need a vocabulary to clarify meanings:

“Ordinary success”: here success “is the distance between one's origins and one's final achievement.” Ordinary contains the connotation of mediocrity. It isn't intended to, but to indicate that kind of life success that reflects the distance between the start and the end-point. The outcome may not be particularly spectacular, but if it is progress, it is success. This seems to be success as the social convention of: health, reasonable wealth, a bit of upward mobility, and a degree of happiness.

Exceptional success is outstanding attainment in one sphere of life. It might be the creativity of a pioneering genius, the work of artistic brilliance, the career success of promotion to CEO of a multi-national, or the achievement of the founder of a charity who has battled hard to put new legislation on the statute books. But it is success in only one realm of life. Other aspects of life might be disastrous.

Ultimate success: this is enduring and long-lasting success based on the Greek notion of the “good life”, a life of happiness, insight and virtue, and a way of living that is fulfilling and authentic. Marcus Buckingham suggests a definition of success: *“making the greatest possible impact over the longest period of time.”* It may be vague but it makes an important point. The criteria used to evaluate success must go beyond short-term factors to incorporate something more fundamental and sustainable*.

* Jerry Porras of Built to Last fame, in his recent book, Success Built to Last, 2007 highlights the themes that make for enduring rather than temporary life success. See also Marshall Goldsmith What Got You Here Won't Get You There, 2007

Living successfully: the agenda



What is unlikely is that the drivers of ordinary success will be the same as those that shape exceptional success, or build the ultimate success of the “good life”.

The drivers and dynamics across these three different success outcomes will be different.

And the focus of coaching - its aims and processes - will also be different.

Life Dynamics addresses three questions:

- what is success for me?
- which goals are important to me?
- which tactics are helping or hindering in making progress in life?

Since its launch, Life Dynamics has been utilised in one-to-one coaching, team based interventions and in personal and leadership development programmes. The data set now incorporates a diverse range of individuals and groups:

- the owners of small-medium sized businesses, planning a way forward, for them personally as well as for the future of their firms
- professionals in the IT industry reviewing their career options
- academics in the Higher Education sector, aspiring to top leadership positions
- senior managers in financial services grappling with the importance of values in leadership life
- and a miscellany of individuals, in one way or another, taking part in personal development programmes.

“Success...is the ability to reach your personal objectives in the shortest time, with the least effort and with the fewest mistakes. The goals you set for yourself and the strategies you choose become your blueprint or plan. Strategies are like recipes: choose the right ingredients, mix them in the correct proportions.”

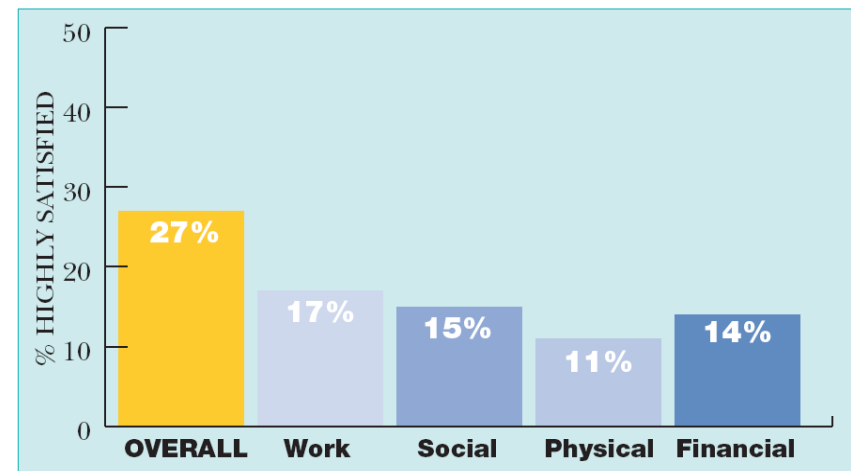
Charles J Givens

How satisfied are individuals with their lives?

Overall satisfaction with life was evaluated, as well as specific measures of satisfaction with work, social life, physical well being and financial attainment. “Satisfaction” levels were largely high across all domains, but satisfaction is not “flourishing”*.

Around 30% of individuals seem to be flourishing, reporting extremely high levels of satisfaction with overall life. Levels of exceptional satisfaction fall for the specific domains of work, social life, physical health and financial status. Here, less than 20% indicate the highest levels of satisfaction.

Satisfied but not flourishing is the conclusion. And overall life satisfaction is unlikely to be driven by achievement in any one sphere of life. Instead it will be shaped by outcomes and interactions across different life domains.



* Flourishing is that concept, emerging out of the positive psychology movement, which emphasises the sense of “a life well lived” and the drivers of a fulfilling, rewarding and authentic life. (C Keyes & J Haidt, Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well Lived, 2003 for an excellent overview of current topics in this field.)

From “surviving to thriving”



This pattern opens up the opportunity for coaching professionals to create a dialogue about the achievement of outstanding life outcomes, not just fixing a current work problem or preparing for the next promotion. It also requires an insight into the dynamics that trigger the transition from the zone of “doing OK” to that zone of exceptional engagement and success in life*.

This is not to imply that each and every coaching assignment is an exercise in the “meaning of life”. But it does indicate the need to clarify:

- what is the coachee’s view of success, and what is your role in shaping this?
- the life goals of the coachee and what is important to them
- perceptions of the current life situation and what is and isn’t helping
- what is possible and achievable within the scope of the coaching assignment

* There has been an outburst of publications in the “happiness research industry”, for example, Richard Layard’s Happiness: Lessons from a New Science, The Secrets of Happiness by Richard Scoch, and the brilliant Stumbling on Happiness by Daniel Gilbert.

The “Six S’s” of Success

The Life Dynamics assessment incorporates an analysis of Life Goals. This framework provides a comprehensive but economical description of what is valued and important in life. It highlights six overarching themes, each with their distinctive life gains and opportunities, as well as hazards and risks.

“Success is goals and all else is commentary.”

Lloyd Conant

“Goal obsession is the force at play when we get so wrapped up in achieving our goal that we do it at the expense of a larger mission.”

Marshall Goldsmith

Life Goals:

Satisfaction: seeing life as fundamentally about the drive for happiness and the attainment of a life of contentment; an easy going and light-hearted approach which enjoys life on a day-to-day basis, taking pleasure from the “nice” things in life

Security: a concern to provide stability, personally and for family which anticipates and manages life’s uncertainties and risks; planning systematically for the future to make short-term sacrifices for longer-term goals

Status: the recognition of the fundamental competitive nature of life which drives you to attain prestige and influence; the desire to stand out as distinctive and special and make an exceptional impact on others

Search: seeing life as a journey to be experienced and as an adventure in personal growth and development; the refusal to accept simplistic answers but a commitment to question and challenge to gain a full understanding of the complexity of life’s dilemmas

Social Responsibility: the recognition that life can only lived with and through others; a sense of duty to discharge obligations towards others and the commitment to make a positive impact on others and to make improvements which benefit everyone

Spirituality: an idealism which is committed to living a life within a “moral compass” and operating around authentic values; a sense of the mysterious in life which sees beyond immediate day-to-day pressures to connect with a bigger purpose in life

The results:

The most striking finding was that those individuals indicating **greater overall satisfaction in life tended to have “more balance” across all six goals**. Extremities within the overall profile of the six themes predicted lower life satisfaction.

And, overall life satisfaction isn't helped through the goals of **Status** and **Security**. **These correlated negatively** with the global measure of satisfaction. Status and Security as life goals have their virtues in driving aspects of life achievement and success, that restlessness to compete and strive for the long-term and refuses to take it easy to rely on past achievements. They may be a factor in “exceptional success”, but they have their downside. They don't seem to make for life satisfaction.

The goal of **Satisfaction** correlates negatively with **work well being**. Presumably the kind of life goal that puts relaxation, enjoyment, fun and comfort at the top of the life wish list, doesn't make for that kind of ethic that finds work all that fulfilling. A challenge for organisations grappling with the work-life balance and the importance of employee engagement. Neither does the goal of **Security**. Higher needs for Security are associated with **lower levels of satisfaction in the work place**. This could work in two different ways. Work success could drive positive feelings and greater motivation about work activities (and future earnings) and reduce security needs. Alternatively, the importance of Security makes it difficult to gain satisfaction from work. Organisational change creates too much uncertainty to relax and enjoy the moment.

Status as we have seen doesn't make for overall satisfaction in life. Neither does it make for positive attitudes towards **physical well being**. Is this the caricature of the “Type A” individual, striving for competitive success, neglecting their well being, experiencing stress and with a risk of burn out?

The impact of tactics on life outcomes



If Life Goals represent the “ends” of life and what is valued and important to individuals, Life Tactics are the “means”: the manoeuvres to advance life aims. Life Tactics are the insights, talents, skills and savvy that individuals draw on in making life progress. Life Tactics identifies five overall groupings, with a breakdown to measure fifteen tactics in total.

“Success is best achieved when you are clear about the goal but flexible about the process of getting there.”
 B Tracy

MAXIMISING INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE	Easy Going Intimacy Power of Charm Staying Connected
DIRECTING PERSONAL TIME	Applying the 80-20 Law Disciplined Life Patterns Making it Stick
DEPLOYING PROBLEM SOLVING POWER	Devil in the Detail Exploring the New Clarity of Simplicity
DEALING WITH LIFE REALITIES	Managing Money Constructive Conflict Strength from Adversity
MANAGING THE EMOTIONAL STUFF	Conducting a Reality Check Thick Skin Response Recharging the Batteries

The impact of tactics on life outcomes



A tactical trio: three tactics that consistently predict life satisfaction

Strength from Adversity is the tactical trump card, predicting higher levels of overall life satisfaction as well as satisfaction with work, physical well being and financial standing. Adversity is a vital element of life experience. Undoubtedly, it is difficult, and at times, awful, but the experience provides an outlook on life that is an important predictor of overall well being. *"Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents, which, in prosperous circumstances, would have lain dormant."*

Thick Skin Response also does pretty well as a life tactic, correlating with the metrics of work, physical and financial well being. As Konrad Adenauer observed: *"a thick skin is a gift from God."* The capacity to tolerate criticism and rejection seems to be an important life asset. Where the more sensitive and fragile tread warily, Thick Skin Response provides "emotional armour" to overcome set backs and disappointments and keep going.

Clarity of Simplicity also emerges as an important tactic. It correlates positively with work and financial well being. Cutting to the chase to eliminate unnecessary complexity and zero in on the key issues is no bad thing in getting on top of work demands or of maintaining control over financial matters. Clarity of Simplicity recognises that *"in critical and baffling situations, it is always best to return to first principle and simple action."* In a world of information overload, Clarity of Simplicity seems to be an increasingly important life tactic.

Additional tactical themes



If this trio represent the most consistent and significant indicators of positive life outcomes, some other tactical themes emerged:

Recharging the Batteries drives perceptions of physical well being. This is probably obvious and intuitive. But it emphasises the need for rest and recreation in maintaining high levels of physical zest. Importantly, this is a tactic not in abundant evidence in our sample. There is a high proportion of individuals caught up in a gruelling schedule of work activity who are finding it difficult to switch off, recover and regain their energies; and it's affecting their physical well being. **Managing Money** also emerges as a negative predictor of physical zest.

Devil in the Detail is a negative indicator of work well being. Too much analysis presumably makes for that combination of perfectionism, poor delegation and long hours that isn't conducive to work enjoyment.

Disciplined Life Patterns correlates positively with satisfaction with social well being. Here an organised approach to managing the “social diary”, rather than a reliance on a more freewheeling and spontaneous style, seems to make for a better and more enjoyable social life. But **Exploring the New** doesn't seem to help social well being too much. Is this the kind of curiosity and intellectual assertiveness with the potential to be disruptive of ongoing social relationships? Or is that those individuals interested in new ideas just don't “get out too much” and their social life suffers?

What underpins moderate life outcomes may be different to those driving outstanding life outcomes

Generalisations are difficult, but necessary. Generalisations ignore the complexity of the uniqueness of each individual, their distinctive talents and energies and life circumstances. We are all different and each of us can succeed in different ways and by different means. *“The shoe that fits one person pinches another. There is no recipe for living that suits all cases.”* But generalisations are necessary. Generalisations begin to pinpoint some “universal laws”, in this case, the principles of life success.

“Flourishing individuals are filled with emotional vitality and they function positively in the private and social realms of their lives...they are truly living.”

C Keyes & J Haidt

Ordinary success probably stems from a permutation of favourable life circumstances, a degree of competency that matches vocational choice, reasonable levels of conscientiousness, and the avoidance of stupid life decisions*.

Exceptional success seems to arise out of a laser-like focus on one dimension in life, phenomenally high levels of motivation, application and perseverance, and the deployment of probably two to three exceptionally well developed tactics. Thick Skin Response for example seems to be a powerful tactic in financial success. And, a slice of luck obviously helps.

Ultimate success: 

* www.darwinawards.com for the ways in which individuals can make stupid decisions.

Flourishing in life: goals



For life goals, **Social Responsibility** enters the picture as a life goal to move towards the flourishing life. The engagement with others, with the immediate community as well as wider society, enhances overall satisfaction levels. “No person is an island” and those flourishing in life understand this fact.

And **Status** and **Security** - themes we have previously observed - don't support the “flourishing life”. Status and Security are important stepping-stones in life progress, and their absence would constrain life's development and achievements. But a constant focus on these goals will at some point “catch up” and the downsides of these goals hold back momentum towards “the life well lived”.

From the analysis of Tactics, **Strength from Adversity**, emerges again. Not only does it contribute to life satisfaction, it positively enhances outstanding levels of overall life well being. Other tactics incorporate the upside and downside of the “double-edged sword”. For Strength from Adversity there seems no reverse.

Staying Connected kicks in for the flourishing life. This is the tactic that finds it easy to establish relationships and keep in touch. Staying Connected builds “a personal social community”, a network of friends, acquaintances and a wider matrix of contacts that can support, advise and challenge based on ongoing trust.

Recharging the Batteries emerged as a driver of satisfaction with physical well being. And it surfaces as an important element in the flourishing life. This, like Strength from Adversity, is one in which there seems no downside. “Time out” to relax, recover and reflect is important in the flourishing life.

Devil in the Detail. The “flourishing life” won’t be achieved in the detail. No doubt, there will be individuals whose whole life purpose, fulfilment and enjoyment centres on the detail. But in the long run, the flourishing life won’t be one of spreadsheet analysis, proofreading documents or the critical scrutiny of legal documents*.

* This point seems to support the finding that lawyers, despite their financial success, are one of the unhappiest professional groups. “Why Are Lawyers so Unhappy”, in Martin Seligman’s “Authentic Happiness”

The Flourishing Life: a summary



Play a long game. Short term decisions may play well for immediate success. But they may also disrupt momentum towards what is of long-term importance and value. *“The chief cause of failure and unhappiness is trading what you want most for what you want at the moment.”* The flourishing life manages the trade-offs between the immediate and the future, and doesn’t lose sight of what matters in the long-term.

Balance of life goals. The flourishing life won’t be achieved through an exclusive focus on the “one thing”, but through a recognition of the full spectrum of life goals. The “Golden Mean” isn’t a life of blandness; it is a rewarding life of balance, incorporating personal ambitions *and* attention to the needs of others, work-a-day practical priorities *and* the transcendent, comfort and security *and* challenge and risk.

Build wisdom. Knowledge, technical proficiency and expertise are important elements in success. But it will be wisdom that will differentiate exceptional from ultimate success. This is the kind of life wisdom that knows which goals matter and which tactics to apply to achieve them. Wisdom, for example, knows that Status and Security are important in life progress, but can’t be the exclusive focus in life.

A mature perspective on failure. Failure at some point is inevitable for the individual who strives to attain something worthwhile. The response to failure is what makes the difference. This is probably why **Strength from Adversity** and **Thick Skin Response** emerged as such consistent predictors of life well being.

Self insight for tactical effectiveness. Building on current tactical strengths is probably better advice than attempting to fix any tactical limitations. But some shortcomings can’t be ignored. Strategies need to be deployed to compensate for and minimise the impact of any limitations. Maybe this is why **Staying Connected** and **Recharging the Batteries** emerge as important tactics within the flourishing life. Staying Connected provides that social support to access the collective intelligence of others. Recharging the Batteries is a key tactic because it re-establishes energy and motivation in a heavy work schedule with other competing life demands.

Implications and applications for coaching



An alternative to the “usual suspects”

Life Dynamics emerges as a powerful tool to inform coaching and other leadership development activities. There is no shortage of personality measures (MBTI, OPQ, 16PF, Firo B, etc). Useful as they are in mapping out operating preferences to begin a dialogue about options for personal change, they are suffering from over-exposure. Individuals are looking for new insights to help rethink priorities and plan practical steps in their development, not to be reminded again of their psychological type.

Life Dynamics offers a fresh perspective, and one more focused on the practicalities of the drivers of life success, to provide coaches with another approach.

Supporting Coaching

Intuition is critical within the coaching process. But “blink” thinking can also reinforce initial preconceptions and assumptions about the individual and their expectations of the coaching process and its outcomes. Intuition in combination within a structured assessment framework is more powerful in exploring coaching options and priorities.

a tool to clarify the coaching agenda



a diagnostic to identify opportunities and risks



evaluation to track progress



Implications and applications for coaching



A tool to clarify the coaching agenda

The last decade has seen a remarkable expansion in coaching provision, from highly specialist coaching targeted at specific issues (e.g. public speaking) through to more broad based executive coaching, and this differentiation of offerings is set to continue. The point is not to turn each and every assignment into a search for life meaning and fulfilment with clients, but to draw on a tool that can be used at the early stages of a coaching process to clarify how the client sees the world, their view of goals and what is and isn't helping them forward.

As a minimum, Life Dynamics - the assessment of perceptions of life outcomes, goals and tactics – covers the coaching bases. And, at best, Life Dynamics ensures that the immediate focus of coaching is integrated within broader life goals.

A diagnostic to identify opportunities and risks within the coaching process

Life Dynamics highlights those tactical strengths that can be drawn on easily to make progress, as well as any potential constraints that threaten to constrain momentum. Which resources are readily accessible; and which will be more difficult to access? The profile can be used to zero in on those coaching interventions with a higher prospect of success. A comprehensive directory of practical insights, tools, and techniques to support development planning accompanies the Life Dynamics assessment*.

Evaluation to track progress

What impact does coaching make? There are different metrics of evaluation, short and long-term, business outcomes and stakeholder perceptions, as well as the perceptions of the coachee. This isn't just the "how was it for you?" factor, important though that is. It is also looking at perceptions of life progress. Life Dynamics provides an opportunity for clients to take stock, six, twelve months after the conclusion of the formal engagement.

* www.lifedynamicsdirectory.com

Life Dynamics, a “reality check” and 360° feedback



Conducting a Reality Check is an important life tactic, but from our analysis, not one in abundance; less than 10% of our sample report this as a tactical strength. Maybe this shouldn't be a surprise. We have a formidable array of mechanisms to block and filter information that might challenge our current beliefs to maintain positive feelings about ourselves. It is these mechanisms that explain, for example, why we: overestimate our talents and skills (80% of professionals rate themselves in the top 20% of their peer group); attribute our successes to our personal efforts and talents, and our failings, to bad luck and external factors; and exaggerate our own contribution to success and play down the efforts of others.

Most of the time this “positive illusion” works to our advantage. But not if we're failing to pick up information that might help our progress or when it stops us getting that feedback that indicates we are not making the kind of impact we think we are.

“Ninety per cent of the world's woes come from people not knowing themselves, their abilities, their frailties, and even their real virtues.”

Sidney J Harris

Life Dynamics, a “reality check” and 360° feedback



Based on over 10 years experience in the design and implementation of 360° feedback systems to support performance management and leadership development, in 2006 we finalised the piloting of the Life Dynamics 360° instrument.

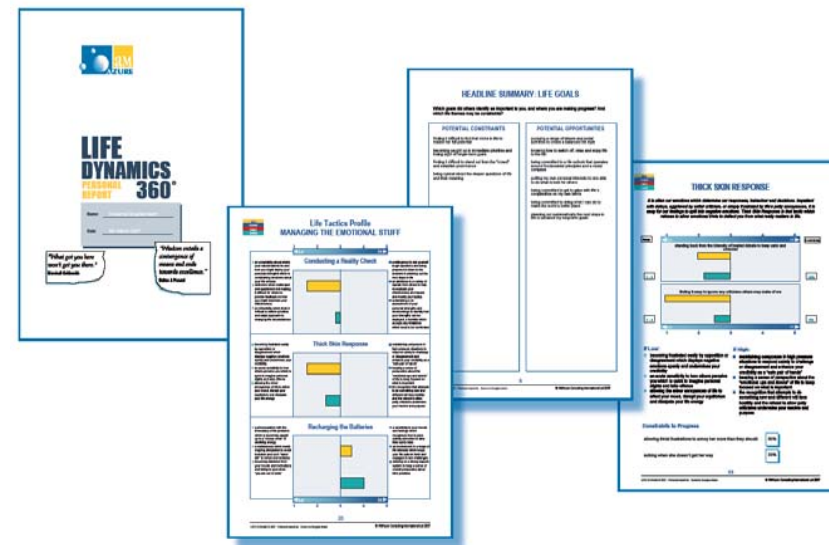
The 360° feedback tool, complements the self assessment version, drawing on the perceptions of others, as an important reality check. The on line system allows users to:

- nominate any permutation of feedbackers (from work colleagues, friends, family)
- complete their own self assessment
- track completion activity from their feedbackers (but not access individual feedback; this is confidential)

The results provide a headline summary of the key themes, as well as a detailed analysis of Life Goals and Tactics.

“There are only two people who can tell you the truth about yourself: an enemy who has lost their temper and a friend who loves you dearly.”

Antisthenes



AM Azure Consulting Ltd works with a broad portfolio of clients in the design and implementation of on line services in recruitment and selection; management assessment, development and career management; performance management; and talent and succession management.

If you are interested in the Life Dynamics assessments, call us on:

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- **we're professionals but we're not pompous.** We are at the edge of the latest research and thinking in the field of people management, but we're not precious about the "one thing". We have some good ideas to help your organisation perform even better, but we know that you may have some better ones, but want support in making them work. We don't impose the "solution".
- **we design but we also implement.** Our content, design and technology can build cost effective solutions quickly. Over-engineered consultancy solutions don't interest us, and they are bad for organisations. Our consultancy experience of "real world" implementation will move things forward from initial concept to results rapidly.
- **we start things to build momentum but we also follow through.** Results come from the discipline of "making it stick", of evaluation, learning and continual improvement. And we maintain ongoing relationships with our clients to keep achieving positive outcomes.