This is not my journey

I spent some of my Christmas break thinking about work styles: what worked last year, what didn't, and what I could do to improve my own. I've got it down to just two things: "this is not my journey" and "do what the boss asks for".

People often talk of their jobs (and themselves) as something that they do now, as in at one particular point in time. That's a little like saying "I'm in seat 29C" instead of "I'm flying from New York to Japan and when I get there I'm going to try out the heated toilet seats" when someone asks you where you are. We are all on journeys - sometimes literally, but always on journeys through time, careers, relationships. And if you want to think about your career, a journey is a useful idea.

So last year I got really frustrated because I ended up doing lots of things that needed to be done, leaving little time for the things I loved (and am good at). And at the same time, I watched people around me refusing to do those things, but doing so much better in their careers and the respect they gained for what they did. "This is not my journey" came out of that. The big thing that I realised was that the people who were doing well were playing by big-company rules, and I was still working as though I was in a startup or community organisation.

Startups are different. Over the years I've started companies, helped start companies and communities, been in small companies that grew, worked in government agencies and 90,000-strong multinationals. And I've noticed two transition points: around 5 and 120 people. With 5 people, you're completely flat, and to be honest, also flat-out: everyone does what needs to be done without "but I don't do that", and although you may have "roles", you're generally just working as a team. That's often the founding team: once they start hiring, the concept of staff happens, and it takes leadership not to divide into 'founders' and 'others'. Communities tend to run this way too, with everyone pitching in and helping where they can. Up to about 120 people, companies are "small", with everyone knowing each other and helping each other out where they can. But at about 120 people, divisions start: you can remember the names of about 100-120 people, but beyond that new people become faces unless they're directly working with you. At this point, people have defined job roles and a limited group of connections in the organisation, and there are just too many things that need to be done to be able to do them informally any more. And at this point (or sooner), big company rules start to apply. And can be basically summarised as "do what the boss asks for" and "do what's on your journey".

"Do what the boss asks for" is obvious when you have a defined boss - in the small flat organisation (no defined "bosses") it doesn't make sense, but it's absolutely the path to happiness under big-company rules (with negotiation about what's a fair workload etc of course). It's a simple sorting question for any new task: "is this what the boss asked for?".

"Do what's on your journey" covers what you do with the interstitial time: the times when you've done what the boss asked for (or just plain need a short break from it) and are filling-in with small

jobs, training courses etc. It's about doing the things that grow you as a person, in the directions that you want to grow and become stronger, but to do this you do need a journey: a knowledge of who you are, what you want to be, what you want to be able to do and be known for. I spent part of Christmas working on that too. My journey is the same as it was 3, 5, 10 years ago, but now I have a clear description (thank you, social-worker sister-in-laws and "Business Model You") of where I'm going. My sorting question for this isn't "do what's on your journey" because that's a terrible way to test anything; instead it's "this is not my journey" - if I can say that about a non-boss task, then it's now not on my list.

It's already a much saner year. Apart from the odd boss-overload, my filters have kept my work down to both manageable and relevant to my career. I seem to have a bit more respect for this: when I mentioned the plan to a Wall Street friend, she said "oh, you're playing by the blokes' rules" and explained that nobody respects the person who picks up odd jobs, so perhaps that shouldn't be too much of a surprise. What has been a surprise is that in remote organisations, the switch from small to big-company rules happens at a much much smaller number of people (around 20, sometimes as low as 12), although again the larger distances, timezones and smaller bandwidths (as in you're not seeing people across the office floor, and it's hard to have watercooler conversations with everyone) should make that somewhat less surprising.