



Is Your Career Lacking Direction?

Ever wondered if or how a career coach can help you?

Read on, as Paul Steven's using real life examples gives you insights into 'How a Career Coach Works'

A day of work

It is Wednesday morning, close to 8.30 am. In a few minutes I will be greeting a new client, Sandra. Her doctor has referred her to me. It will be the beginning of another journey that will involve me in the life of another person. Later in the morning, Ted is due to return for his third consultation and report on progress with the homework I set him. He phoned earlier in the week to say how emotionally exhausted he felt; yet he was sure that logic and clarity over the future direction of his career were emerging.

Joseph is due at midday. The employer with whom he had worked for fifteen years fired him three weeks ago. Well, not actually fired in a strict legal sense: together with ten other colleagues, he was made redundant on a Friday afternoon and was required to leave his employer's premises the same day. Economic conditions within his employer's industry, not his work performance, had led to his dismissal. His wife, having noticed a rapid lowering in his morale, rang last week to seek advice on how to encourage her husband to visit me. "He is so proud that to seek such help will be viewed as weakness," she said. This is a common plea and there were a number of tactics that I was able to recommend. They worked and Joseph booked in.

The day will conclude with Elizabeth. She has established a pattern of meeting with me each half year after work to discuss her current situation, her successes and failures and the current threats to her well being at work. She will come well prepared with an agenda of concerns and plans of action for each that will be a basis for our discussion.

All today's clients are on a journey, each at a different point along the path to finding a resolution of career related matters that are causing varying degrees of vexation and stress. The effect of these problems is not restricted to the individuals. Their loved ones, and in some cases their employers, are anxious for positive solutions to their particular career dilemmas.

As the person takes a journey of self-exploration, I coach clients how to evaluate their options and implement their choices. This approach is not only an intellectual one. It incorporates the emotional, cognitive and psychological processes that involve the total person and the environment in which they live. I provide structures for thinking and remembering in a way that prevents the client from dwelling unnecessarily on negative experiences. I am conscious as I work that while I use this 'standard' framework, my focus is on helping them find their uniqueness as an individual. These inventories of this uniqueness are crucial to finding meaning in their work.



'... Who You Really Are...'

So many times have I heard comments such as: 'It isn't possible to have a job you really love.' 'You work because you have to.' 'You don't work because you love it.' 'It is expecting too much out of life to have an occupation with which you are in love.' Each time, I feel sad: sad that the person has this viewpoint, that so much of their working lives must be a burden to them, that a major part is not a personal growth experience. I do acknowledge, however, that it is hard to achieve a more positive viewpoint when faced with a difficult economic environment and when the people you are close to believe that work is just a way of earning money the maximum amount of money, given one's qualifications and skills, to provide sufficient income and flexibility to lead one's chosen lifestyle. With these forces external to the client it is often difficult to guide the client to concentrate on their own view of self as a basis of their determinations

This inward view of ourselves gives us our personal perspective on the world around us. The events occurring in the outside world, whether work, family or other happenings, are interpreted by the current state of our inner world or view of self. Some call this inner world our self-concept. Just as events are occurring outside us—a continual series of changes—so to our inner world is changing. Our view of these external events, therefore, changes as our sense of self-changes and we modify our inward view as these changes take place.

The true nature of career, i.e. its meaning for our inner world, may not be the same for those who observe us, whether they are our loved ones, boss, coaches, employment consultants or relatives. If we are promoted at work, others are likely to view it as an indicator of success. Inwardly we may view it as costing dearly for our desire to have more time for personal projects. Being retrenched may appear to others as a setback while our inner self may feel relief that we no longer work in a particular work situation.

Our career, even further, our life, is the outcome of our inner self's responses to the interaction between these external and internal forces. The choices, decisions and emotional investments we make in work and family shape the overall nature of our living. Because neither our environment nor we stays still, changes in both influences alter and sometimes disturb our viewpoint. Both major and trivial changes can disrupt the balance. A new accommodation needs to be made. A redefinition of self and our external world is required to restore comfort to our living and sureness that the actions we take are really right for us. New assessments, an expanded awareness of strengths, skills, preferences and value systems need to be made. Hence for each client their career is a sequence of alternating stable and transitional phases.

How are clients helped to restore the balance between their inner world and the interacting forces with these external events? Most come to a career coach after they have looked outside themselves for the answer. Many applied rapidly for jobs; enrolled in new courses after losing out on promotion; went off on holidays with redundancy pay in the hope that the answer to what they should do would occur while away.



Our perspective on what has occurred in our external world influences the way we set about mending shattered inner states. Often, clients' dominant concern is to react as they think the observers of their behaviour think they should. They have tended to worry more about them than about redefining themselves.

Most of this redefinition has to be done alone. The internal 'homework' needs to be done. It can be a lonely period. A period of turbulence and a mental tug-of-war between inclinations, logic, rationality, escapism, emotions, responsibilities and perspectives of the expectations of others. A veritable maze of conflicts and a jigsaw of confusions. Emotional equilibrium can be wobbly and self-confidence and feelings of self-regard can be on a roller-coaster ride. One moment level and collected, the next a whirlwind of contradictions and apprehension.

The search for satisfaction

Tarhang Tulku, educated in the Buddhist traditions of Tibet, writes, "Working willingly, with our full energy and enthusiasm, is our way of contributing to life. Working in this way is working with skilful means." How do we help our clients find these skilful means? We know that work can be a rich source of personal growth, a continual opportunity to learn more about ourselves, to develop positive and healthy relationships and be a contributing citizen in our community. A satisfying worklife enhances our appreciation of being alive. People who have attained this draw on every part of their being, bringing their minds, their hearts, and their senses into full play — the integrated self.

I help clients in their search for this worklife satisfaction by coaching them in how to identify the richness of their range of skills, the power of connecting with their particular motivations, the exploration of their desired new learning, extending their appreciation of the breadth of opportunity within the world of work, and providing discrete and safe companionship during this exploration.

Many clients are receptive to exploring themselves in depth. My task is not to take the client out of their world and into mine. I honour the uniqueness of each client. When the client articulates a need of help with a deeper dimension I am eager to respond and regard it as a privilege. I know that this route will cause many changes in the clients' life beyond the immediacy of resolving their current career issue.

Nature of self-search

When a client requests help with their self-search as a prelude to change in their career direction they often get going with a will and pour out verbally or in writings intimacies of thought, of pain and confusions, eager to resolve what has been bothering them for a long time. Their search for meaning starts with eagerness but also with apprehension. They must find it themselves though I can chaperone them along the way. As a career coach I view my work as a helper to their own healing.

The journey of self-search/self-discovery is an act of self-love. Others may criticise the process as being selfish, self-centered, but unless the search for what and how one has become today is undertaken a person will not know how to be fruitfully self-less. Self-discovery helps us find out who we are today and a firmer foundation for planning the future.



What is essence does this self-search process do? It helps people redefine their personal definition of success. That people find their greatest satisfaction in work that they can perform successfully is no new notion. What is more widely acknowledged is that valid success is not an extrinsic value. It is not in the trappings of wealth, fancy office facilities or marquee of employer-provided vehicle. It lies within the view of inner self. The feelings of wholeness when work reflects whom we want to be. When our set of intrinsic values is in congruence with our work and our behaviours reflect our true selves.

Values are the manifestation of our deeper self. When change occurs in our outer self — the circumstances around us — we are less confused on how to react when we know our values clearly. Without a clear view of our values the “delicate ecology of human happiness” as Martin R. Kratz writes work in our lives is jeopardised. Attitudes to work can be chosen just as the values by which we want to live can be.

Workplace cultures

Other people at work are often the concern of my clients. Working in relation to one another we are continually tested and are prone to feelings of envy, resentment, and spite. A sense of our own values can help us cope with this and react with forgiveness, understanding, and tolerance when adverse behaviours are experienced. Being generative rather than destructive or mean. We can transcend pettiness and personal setbacks and fall back on our own form of self-resiliency anchored by our values. The opinion of others whilst important does not need to govern our self-esteem. What gets in the way of developing our sense of our true self where we work is the unrelenting busyness. The process of reflecting is a critical part of our self-identification and its development. Without it we can be caught in an external world of the never empty in-tray; of few connections to the place of our work role in a larger order of things. It takes self-discipline, willingness, time and courage to put aside time to pause and allow time to reflect.

A structure for help

It is easy to become a perpetual student of self and worklife options. However, for most of my clients, the need to make career and life direction decision is thrust upon them, with little luxury of time in which to decide how to act or evaluate alternatives. They often need to make compromises in such situations. Do the best they can in the data gathering process and then implement what appears expedient. A procedure, or sequence, for data gathering is necessary to prevent hasty decisions and so reduce the likelihood of a career action that doesn't produce the desired results.

An approach that reduces risks is structured analysis—a method by which clients can gather and record data, extract trends, themes and key factors in an orderly manner. This approach is well suited to developing an understanding of how to make important life decisions and plans. It requires that you first pay considerable attention to assessing who you are today and how you have developed over a period of time. A saying that initially can sound trite is actually valid: the answer to your future lies in your past. This longitudinal approach enables the client to trace the influence of their past on their present. This provides insights into the motivations and activities that have led to how they feel and act in their worklife today, but also provides important clues for future directions for career growth.



Stimulus questions

I have my clients complete 'stimulus questions', a series, or sets, of questionnaires which break down the process of gathering data for each stage of career review, decision making, planning and implementation. Stimulus questions enable clients to gather data about what is relevant to their career decision-making and discard what is not. They are asked in a carefully determined order and provoke reflections, analysis and opinion forming. They help make coherent sense of the myriad of facts and events in life to date. Responses to each set of stimulus questions contribute to the various stages of data gathering essential to risk-reducing career planning.

Some clients experience difficulty with self-search exercises of this nature. They may want a speedy resolution to their problem, a quick fix. Some will not experiment adequately with such questionnaires before concluding that they do not need them or that this method is unappealing. Reluctance to commit personal thoughts in writing—even private notes—will deter others.

Those who take to the stimulus questions method acquire the value of feeling more in charge of their career direction and, as they progress through them, their self-confidence inevitably rises. They become confident that their diligence will bring the results they deserve for undertaking the effort. Their motivation to see the task through to a satisfying conclusion usually soars.

Unless there is a real commitment to change or to take the actions necessary to achieve an improvement in worklife, neither the stimulus questions nor the biographical review method is useful. Another barrier is trying to make critical life management or major career decisions after only small amounts of data gathering. Skimping on the task, avoiding responding to stimulus questions that require deep thought, making connections, and decisiveness will not produce adequate results. It may take many weeks of strenuous effort before effective decisions and workable plans can be formulated.

This amount of effort can itself be a deterrent. The motivation to change current circumstances needs to be strong, like giving up smoking! It demands self-discipline, fortitude and patience to be thorough through the data-gathering stages. The process is self-evaluative. It requires courage to see ourselves as we really are and like the result.

The job title I've created for this type of career coaching is the Sadness to Joy Facilitator! It's not in the Government-compiled *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* but, if required to describe it, my explanation would be along the following lines. The provision of support services to people with worklife problems to be solved by means of a rational step-by-step approach used flexibly.



About the Author

Paul Stevens, B.Bus., founded The Centre for Worklife Counselling in Sydney in 1979 following a 21 year career in Human Resources Management and The Worklife Network - a national and international affiliation of adult career specialists - in 1986. He wrote his first published contribution to adult career development in 1981, Win That Job!, closely followed by Stop Postponing the Rest of Your Life. Over 35 further titles, booklets and career assessment instruments have been published since, the latest being A Passion for Work: Our Lifelong Affair and My Third Age: Work & Life Choices. Paul's is a Fellow of the Career Development Association of Australia (CDAA) and has been awarded their highest honour Life Membership. Paul Stevens is a regular contributor and author for Six Figures.

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