

Designing Your Career, Essentially

I was once talking with a capable individual who appeared to be doing well in his career. As I listened to his story in more depth we both realized he was living what we came to call "a parallel life." Parallel lines, as we recall from elementary school, are "Two lines that never meet." The challenge for him was not that he was totally wasting his time. He was following a good path but he was not pursuing the path he felt was his essential mission.

One thing that struck me about the experience was how much progress people could make if they just had the space to think about it. This stands in contrast to a client who responded to one of my questions by saying, "Oh Greg, I am too busy living to think about life!" His off-the-cuff comment named a trap all of us fall into sometimes. In just one example, it is easy to become so consumed *in* our careers we fail to really think *about* our careers.

To avoid this trap, I suggest carving out a couple of hours in the next couple of days to follow these simple steps for reflecting on and essentializing your career (updated from a previous post). Think of these as Spring Cleaning for your career.

Step 1: Review the last 3 months. Review the three months, week by week. Make a list of where you spent your time: include your major accomplishments, projects and responsibilities. No need to overcomplicate this.

Step 2: Ask, "What is the news?" Look over your list and reflect on what is *really* going on. Think like a journalist and ask yourself: Why does this matter? What are the trends here? What happens if these trends continue?

Step 3: Ask "What would I do in my career if I could do *anything*?" Just brainstorm with no voice of criticism to hold you back. Just write out all the ideas that come to mind.

As Resa Brown has written, "Passion is not a mistress that can be kept. It knows no boundaries, no containment. It does not discriminate between young and old. It flaunts itself in confidence. It rejects prejudice and fear. It cannot be silenced. It cannot be stopped. It just cannot."

Step 4: Go back and spend a bit more time on Step 3. Too often we begin our career planning with our second best option in mind. We have a sense of what we would most love to do but we *immediately* push it aside. Why? Typically because "it is not realistic" which is code for, "I can't make money doing this." In this economy—in any economy—I understand why making money is critical. However, sometimes we pass by legitimate career paths because we set them aside too quickly.

Step 5: Write down six objectives for the next 3 months. Make a list of the top six items you would like to accomplish in your career this next quarter and place them in priority order.

Step 6: Cross off the bottom five. Once you're back to the whirlwind of work you'll benefit from having a single "true north" career objective for the quarter.

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Step 7: Make an action plan for the next couple of weeks. Make a list of some quick wins you'd like to have in place over the next 1-2 weeks.

Step 8: Decide what you will say no to. Make a list of the "good" things that will keep you from achieving your one "great" career objective. Think about how to delete, defer or delegate these other tasks. As Michael Porter said, "Strategy is about making choices, tradeoffs. It is about deliberately choosing to be different." Choosing to say yes to everything and everyone is not, by definition, strategy.

Many years ago I followed this process and, without exaggeration, it changed the course of my life. The insight I gained led me to quit law school, leave England and move to America and start down the path as a teacher and author. You're reading this because of that choice. It remains the single most important career decision of my life.

Two hours spent wisely over the next couple of days could easily improve the quality of your life over the 8760 hours of the next year--and perhaps far beyond. After all, *if we don't design our careers, someone else will.*

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