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A Psychoanalytic Approach to Career Assessment

Author's note: Three columns on identifying and pursuing your work-life goals, prompted a large response. I received several emails, phone calls and letters asking me about the array of work-life interventions. Specifically, they wanted to know the difference between: career coaching, psychoanalytic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Also, readers wanted to know, how they might assess whether any of these sorts of work-life interventions might be helpful to them and if so, which ones.

How does a person assess whether they need help clarifying and resolving work-life issues? And, after deciding that help might be useful, how does a person know what sort of intervention to seek? An important starting point is to identify the work-life conflict. In general, people struggle with three work-life conflicts.

- [What do I want to do with my life?](#)
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- [How do I galvanize myself to get started?](#)

For some people, answering these questions is straightforward. They know themselves well. They know their likes and dislikes and their strengths and limitations. They know what they want and their self-esteem is solid enough that they are able to tenaciously pursue their work-life goals. Others may have less clarity or less confidence. But, they may be able to make use of the plethora of books on this topic or the support of family and friends in their efforts to clarify the answers to these questions. Yet, not everyone can answer these questions for themselves. In fact, some people never find an enjoyable and rewarding career. And, some never achieve their financial goals. This is unfortunate in that, for the most part, with the right kind of help, career conflicts can be resolved.

How does one assess whether help is warranted and if so, what type?

How then, should those people who find themselves thwarted, go about assessing whether and what sort of help is warranted?

My own bias is to encourage anyone in that situation to seek a psychoanalytically-informed, career assessment. This type of evaluation is devoted to understanding the meaning of the career conflict. That is, what function, or purpose, does the career conflict serve? At first blush, to most people, this may seem like an odd question. However, the fact is that when any of us have a conflict, we derive some benefits (often, unconscious) from it. For example, the man whose work-a-holism causes him to lose his marriage may be very sad about that loss. However, simultaneously, (often, unconsciously) he may be very frightened of intimacy. Thus, his workaholism may allow him to avoid closeness. The task of the psychoanalytically-informed career assessment is to begin to understand the career conflict in a broader context. That is, the goal of the career assessment, is, in part, to understand how the career conflict protects the individual.

A psychoanalytically-informed assessment asks, what are the origins of this conflict? It attempts to understand the individual in the broader context of their historical and current life situation. With regard to history it asks, what was this individual's early experience like in the world of school, work and home? What sorts of attitudes, views and feelings did their parents convey about the world of school and the world of work? What views did they convey about the world of money?

With regard to the current situation, who are the key people in the individual's life and what impact will the individual's career decisions have on these relationships? What did/do the individual's parents and siblings do, occupationally? Does the individual view them as successful? Does the individual view themselves as successful? How might the individual's career "success" or "failure" effect these significant people? Are they a source of support or are the conflict about the individual's attempt to resolve these difficulties.

A psychoanalytically-informed career assessment explores whether, and if so, how, the individual's career difficulty is recapitulated in other areas of the individual's life. For example, does the person who has difficulties committing to a career also have difficulties committing to relationships?

The answers to these questions will inform a recommendation as to whether career coaching, psychoanalytic psychotherapy or psychoanalysis is warranted. What are each of these interventions and under what circumstances might they be useful?

The best way to know which sort of help is appropriate in a given situation is to seek evaluation with a professional who is knowledgeable about, and trained in, career coaching, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.

What credentials should the work-life consultant have?

There are a wide range of professionals, with a diversity of backgrounds, who do career coaching. Many of these professionals can be quite helpful. However, in pursuing a psychoanalytically-informed, career assessment, it is important to seek a professional who is knowledgeable about and qualified to conduct career coaching, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. In this way, the professional can carefully consider the potential usefulness of each of these interventions for the individual.

What is Career Coaching?

Most people, who seek out work-life consultation, are hoping for a short-term, focused, intervention that will allow them to quickly address their concern and get on with the task at hand: that is, the identification and pursuit of the career goal. And, for many people, this type of intervention can be incredibly helpful.

Career coaching, conducted individually or in a group, entails supportive relationships in which the individual is helped to establish and pursue concrete, measurable, behavioral goals. The coach and/or the group members function as a supporting cast encouraging the individual and helping them to devise and implement effective strategies for pursuing their goals. Each week the individual makes a commitment to take small steps toward the identification or pursuit of the career goal.

While this approach can be valuable for many people, particularly those who have not had much exposure or modeling as to how to go about pursuing work-life goals, it is not useful for everyone. Take, for example, the individual who has read

numerous career books, attempted career exercises, taken a battery of a career tests but remains stymied. The fact that none of the self-help efforts have proved effective is a warning sign that career coaching is not likely to be comprehensive enough to help that type of individual. In fact, it can be enormously frustrating, particularly in a group, where the individual witnesses others progress, but finds themselves unable to change. For this type of individual, career coaching is not helpful because the true conflicts are outside of their awareness. A deeper approach aimed at bringing the conflict into awareness, where it can be resolved, is more likely to prove effective. Ideally, people in this situation, should seek a psychoanalytically-informed, assessment to evaluate whether psychoanalytic psychotherapy or psychoanalysis might be effective in helping them to fulfil their personal and professional goals.

What is psychoanalytic psychotherapy?

Psychoanalytic psychotherapy is devoted to helping the individual to deepen their self-understanding. Typically, psychoanalytic psychotherapy meets once, twice or three times a week over a period of many months or years. Individuals are asked to share their thoughts, feelings and views and to reflect on their early and current life. Increased self-examination leads to a greater awareness of the obstacles that have prevented them from pursuing their goals. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy attempts to address a primary struggle but does not undertake the broader and more complex task of attempting fundamental personality or character change. And, while for many people it can be very helpful, for others it does not afford the necessary intensity to truly allow the kind of self-exploration that will lead to bedrock change.

What is psychoanalysis?

Psychoanalysis is a highly potent form of intensive psychotherapy. The goal of psychoanalysis is to help the individual to deepen their self-understanding, to become more self-aware and to make enduring personality changes. For example, analysis can be very useful in overcoming longstanding difficulties with identifying and pursuing work-life goals, depression, anxiety, commitment, authority figures, love relationships, work inhibition, decision making, identity, intimacy, assertion, low self-esteem, writer's block and self-expression as well as other persistent maladaptive behavior patterns.

Analysis usually meets four or five times a week over a period of several years with the aim of facilitating lasting, personality change.

How does analysis work?

The goal of psychoanalysis is: "to make the unconscious conscious". That is, to help the individual to become aware of motivations underlying their thoughts, feelings and behaviors that have previously been obscure.

Individuals are asked to share as much as they can about their internal world. Self-exploration is encouraged in many ways. The individual is encouraged to say anything that comes to mind, without regard to social convention, this is called, "free association". Dreams, said by Freud to be the "royal road to the unconscious" provide another portal of entry into the unconscious. Dreams can be a very useful tool in bringing into awareness ones unconscious motivations and feelings. The analyst's role is to clarify and to interpret, not to render judgement.

Who are the analysts and how are they trained?

Psychoanalysts come from many varied academic backgrounds including, clinical psychology, educational psychology, psychiatry, social work, nursing and pastoral care. After earning formal degrees, within a university setting, and becoming licensed, these therapists typically pursue postgraduate training and practice as therapists for many years, seeing patients in intensive psychotherapy, before entering analytic training. Thus, analysts are the most highly trained groups of mental health professionals.

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Dr. Lynn Friedman works with professionals and professionals-in-the-making to help them to achieve work-life satisfaction

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