

WHAT MAKES A CAREER?

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Contrary to popular opinion, career development is not about getting a gig. Surprised? I certainly was, when I first began to learn about the professional field of career development counseling. It seemed obvious to me, at first, that the word “career” must have something to do with “job”—until I looked the word up in the dictionary. The first words given for career are “course” or “passage,” but in order to understand the real meaning, you must go far deeper and strike at the core of our thinking.

Most of our day-to-day thinking is goal-oriented; we are automatically socialized to think in these terms. We are taught that goal-setting is healthy for us as individuals and for society. Goal-orientation allows us to measure our progress. There is a lot of literature out there on how to set goals and feel accomplished. Goal-orientation is used in nearly every field, from sports to corporate finance. Speaking of sports: can you imagine any one of those athletes in the recent Salt Lake City Winter Olympics succeeding without some degree of goal-orientation?

There are several words closely associated with the word “goal.” Product, achievement, destination, and accomplishment are just a few. Are you looking forward to your graduation with anticipation and a sense of pride? If so,

that's a perfect example of goal-oriented thinking.

Goal-oriented thinking is popular in our culture because it can be measured quantifiably. Our teachers, employers, and even our potential in-laws evaluate us by the quality of our goals, and our success in achieving them. So naturally, we are conditioned to think in terms of goals; they bring focus and a sense of purpose to our lives.

However, here is something that may surprise you: *goal-orientation is the antithesis of the thinking required for developing your career.* How so? Goal-orientation focuses on a destination. When that destination is reached, there is a sense of pride and accomplishment. But after the achievement, there is often a sense of emptiness—along with the perennial “now what?” Have you ever spent months preparing for a performance, only to feel a sense of vacancy afterwards? That is because the goal is no longer present. The only way some people know how to fill that vacancy is to set a new goal, thus perpetuating the cycle. Now take a moment and imagine what will happen after your graduation. Is it possible that you might ask, “Now what?”

The problem with goal-oriented thinking is that true career development—the kind that makes you feel like you are the director and not the actor in your life—cannot happen when you think in terms of goals. That's because a goal is a destination, not a path. Remember that career means “course” or

“passage.” When you focus on a goal, you miss the most important aspect of career development—making the most out of the journey.

People who think about the *course* of their life maximize their day-to-day experiences. They look for opportunities to create conditions that allow them to integrate all of their interests and abilities. Because goals can be limiting, path-oriented thinkers prefer thinking about current experiences rather than future opportunities. To illustrate the difference between them, imagine that you are on a team that will attempt a climb up the north face of Mount Everest. The project has been two years in the planning. You are standing outside your tent at Base Camp 1 on the eve before the first official climbing day. A cold Himalayan wind is buffeting you, but you don't seem to mind; your childhood dream is about to become a reality. As you stand there, your mind drifts to your two principal team leaders, Greg and Pam. You trust these two climbers with your life, and you have enjoyed working with them for these past two years.

Greg and Pam express very different feelings about the climb. For Greg, the climb is a lifetime goal that, if he is successful in accomplishing, will give him boasting rights for the rest of his life. He has been the determining force behind the project all the way. His will to succeed pulled the project through several moments of doubt; when the Nepal government refused the team's request for access to the mountain, it was Greg who was on the phone for weeks, looking for anyone who might influence Nepal officials. His persistence paid off. You know that in a bind on the mountain, Greg will never give up. Greg often jokes, “Winning isn't everything; it's the *only* thing.” It's a motto that has enabled him to succeed in nearly every endeavor.

Pam, on the other hand, is the organizational and motivational spirit behind this project. This is her brainchild; she has been working on this project long before you were asked to join. Everyone on the administrative team, ground support, corporate headquarters, and the Nepal government knows her personally and relishes her enthusiasm. Something about the project brings out the best in her. She truly enjoys working in this capacity and lives each day as though it were the best day of her life. Through her work on this project, she has received several job offers, which she is considering. Pam's motto is: “It isn't who wins; it's how you play the game.”

What will each of them take away from this experience? You imagine that Pam will remember everything about the project, from the very first day of planning. Pam remembers everything

if you asked her, she could probably tell you what you ate for dinner after your last climb together. She is remarkable that way. Her life is as she wants it; you sense that she isn't waiting for someone to give her a green light.

Greg is different. You imagine that he probably won't remember much of these past two years. But he will undoubtedly remember the very moment his foot touched the top of the peak. Other moments will be hazy; that's just the way he is. You also imagine that, even if the climb is successful, Greg won't seem satisfied. He seems to always be searching for something; you sense that, behind his wit, he just isn't quite happy enough with his life.

Is there some nugget of wisdom hidden in this comparison between Greg and Pam? If you haven't figured it out yet, it is Pam who enjoys the *process* of the project. She has learned how to live in the moment rather than for the moment. In so doing, she has become an asset to those around her who relish working with her. This project is her source of inspiration and motivation, allowing her to do what she most enjoys doing. Her overwhelming popularity as an organizer for expeditions has brought her several job offers. And as a bonus, she gets to climb Mount Everest—but whether she makes it to the top or not is irrelevant to her. She knows that the journey has enabled her to combine and exercise her main talents—planning, organizing, and climbing.

You can avoid years of frustration by focusing now on how to *create a journey* that will allow you to combine all of your talents and interests. People who create their own paths become the directors of their careers and lives; they are in a position to choose the types of paths they wish to travel.

When you graduate, there will undoubtedly be holes in your schedule. You will be waiting for auditions, for reviews of your work, for the phone to ring. As you wait, ask yourself these important questions: “Am I being the actor in my career, or the director?” “Am I creating this path or am I expecting other people to create it for me?” “Am I thinking about how to accomplish my goals, or am I thinking about how to make the most of my life right now?” “Is there anything I could be doing that would put me in the driver's seat of my career?”

When you live for the destination, your life will have long periods of waiting between destinations. When you live for the path, your life will feel as though every moment is integrated and you are doing exactly what you want to be doing. It's never too late (or too early) to start the journey of a lifetime.

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