

# Career Planning – A Psychodramatic Approach

by Vivienne Thomson

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Good career planning is about claiming and designing a course or progress through life. It assumes that we have a choice about how to pass our time. It also assumes that we can select from a variety of jobs to suit our needs and wants and create the lifestyle we desire.

I believe that each person's identity stems from a central psychodramatic role which they crave to express in the world. Career planning is the process of identifying this central drive and finding a means of expressing it legitimately in a social setting. As many of us spend a significant amount of our lives at work, the setting for this expression is often through a job.

The work of a career counsellor is as a psychodrama director to the protagonist, where the focus of the drama is the person's passage through life.

I developed my approach to career planning as a result of influential experiences in my own career and the assimilation of psychodramatic theory. Clients report a high

level of satisfaction with this approach and over 95 per cent achieve their desired outcomes.

## **Impetus for this Approach**

The first event that influenced my approach to career planning was receiving advice from my father at age fourteen. He said, 'Find out what you enjoy doing and then find a way to get paid to do it'. This awakened in me a feeling of capability, potency and the possibility of satisfaction. My father instilled in me a valuing of life as an enjoyable and fulfilling experience requiring creative endeavour. From then on I was convinced that whatever work activity people were engaged in, it should be deeply and personally satisfying.

The second experience occurred during a public presentation on career planning. During this session the leader presented four categories of personality and asked a range of questions to determine which category best matched us individually. Then we were asked

a series of questions designed to ascertain our preferences, thereby assessing our suitability for particular careers by means of a numerical scale.

I liked problem-solving, analysis, and organisation. My numerical rating in these, combined with my personality type, indicated I was suitable for careers in firefighting, teaching and law enforcement. While these results may be true, I decided that this approach was shallow. It didn't take adequate account of my innate desires, and it boxed me in to a narrow range of options.

On the basis of these experiences, I felt there was value in conducting some research of my own into methods of determining one's career. This involved experimentation and exploration with a number of friends and colleagues who were interested and willing to partake in such a project.

### **An Expanded Notion of Career Planning**

The potential of many individuals remains largely unrealised, given traditional perceptions of work, a limited role repertoire and low self-esteem. Typically career planning focuses on acquiring a particular job or getting the right complement of competencies to meet an organisation's need as advertised in the situations vacant.

To me such an approach misses the point. In my approach I assume that each person has a fundamental desire to feel worthwhile, to contribute to society and to satisfy their own particular creative urges. Moreno describes the catharsis which occurs when compatible professional roles enable an extension of one's private roles. Often these private roles are not recognised in traditional settings or cannot be achieved through following predetermined career legacies or logical pathways.

A psychodramatic approach to career planning opens up possibilities for an individual to express psychodramatic roles central to their personality.

I consider every individual as a creative being

who has a dream or vision for themselves. If I am able to relate to a person and their dreams I may be able to assist them realise those dreams; not necessarily the achievement of a particular finished form but the purposeful pursuit of becoming. I can engage with a person warming up to their own self-development.

This approach relates to Moreno's vision that '...the spontaneous creative matrix can be made the central focus of man's world not only as the underlying source but on the very surface of his actual living'. (J. L. Moreno, *Psychodrama Vol 1*, 1977, p109.)

### **Premises of Career Planning**

I use the following premises in my own approach to career planning:

- ❖ Given a choice, people will choose to use time in a manner that is personally satisfying to them.
- ❖ People are usually more interested in and become more highly skilled at doing what they enjoy.
- ❖ Being employed is highly valued in our society.
- ❖ The patterns of functioning that individuals learn early in their lives affect their future work options.
- ❖ Life patterns are established according to a person's values and these must be considered when making decisions about a career as they inevitably influence their lifestyle.
- ❖ People require outside stimuli to maintain the process of self-assessment and self-development and this may be provided through career planning.
- ❖ The career planning process primarily requires creative exploration without censure or limitation. A specific plan can be generated from the resulting general ideas.
- ❖ Planning provides a structure that encourages choice and supports choices that will enrich the individual's life, and thereby enhances the lives of others.

- ❖ Career planning is ongoing and requires periodic attention to confirm or change decisions made about a person's employment.
- ❖ Personal and professional development is enhanced by a person's ability to set realistic goals.

### Structure of a Career Planning Session

Most approaches to career planning cover the following steps:

- ❖ Carrying out an audit of the person's skills
- ❖ Identifying their motivations, values and goals
- ❖ Describing their ideal job
- ❖ Completing an analysis of the gap between where they are and where they want to be
- ❖ Carrying out a job search.

In contrast to approaches that focus on securing the next job based on a skills audit, I regard career planning as an opportunity for social atom repair and spontaneity training. Typically I conduct a career planning session for about 2½ hours. It takes the form of an interview, often using concretisation and soliloquy, or enactment. The session is divided into four parts which focus on the past, present and future and return to the present.

In the first part we explore the patterning of the person's life so far. This identifies their resources (such as their experiences, qualifications, possessions, funds), their role development and their personal and social context which must be taken into account if the resulting career plan is to be workable.

In the second part we make an assessment of the person's present job to identify whether the job currently held, or a modification of it, is a viable option for the future. This assessment identifies overdeveloped and underdeveloped roles. It also focuses on their sociometric context at work.

If they experience a significant degree of satisfaction overall it may be possible to make minor adjustments to the person's current situation. However, if they experience major

areas of dissatisfaction, it is likely their job cannot be modified sufficiently to meet their needs.

The third part is a future projection undertaken without reference to the past or present situation. This requires the career counsellor to enter the client's world with complete subjectivity. There is no room for judgement, criticism or disbelief. The more specific a person can be, either in describing or enacting their desired situation, the more tangible and realistic the career plan becomes.

The technique of soliloquy is very effective in facilitating the client's expression of what is essential to them. I record verbatim as they set the scene of their dream life. Catharsis often occurs when they hear their soliloquy read back.

I record salient parts of the information presented in all phases of the interview. The client's picture of the future is then rigorously tested for its viability. This examination usually identifies specific actions required of the client which they then plan and undertake according to a schedule they set.

Such actions might include skills training, gaining qualifications, informing and including people with whom they have significant relationships, broadening their experience or acquiring specific possessions. I present them a challenge to test their resolve in applying themselves to achieving their plan. I tell them that everything they do should take them one step closer to realising their dream – and that if it doesn't, it is a distraction. I also insist they set a date for reviewing their career plan with someone they trust to confide in.

The fourth and final part shifts the focus back from future to current time. It requires the career consultant to bridge the worlds of subjectivity and objectivity. At this stage it is necessary for the career counsellor to reflect back to the client where they will require further information, guidance, or development. Also reflected are those aspects of their functioning which are well developed and adequate to achieve the desired outcome.

### Philosophical and Psychodramatic Principles Used

Each person's course or progress through life is very personal, directed by their essential being; it is a social expression of a centrally organising progressive psychodramatic role.

*I believe that a person suffers personality and health deterioration if they do not achieve a high level of compatibility between their professional and private roles, or where there is insufficient reciprocity in their work setting.*

I have seen this many times in clients as they develop illnesses. Some literally becoming diminished, their bodies unable to provide support in response to the internal discord they experience at work.

Each individual has a dream, largely unspoken and unrevealed, of who they are and how they wish to exist in the world. To warm up to this, the person must experience themselves free from the constraints of their past and present circumstance. At this point the career counsellor is the preparatory agent, assisting the client to become acquainted with their innermost self.

The aim in working psychodramatically is expansion in the degree of freedom a person experiences at work. Often, simply naming the person's central psychodramatic role provides a source of self-belief and esteem that strengthens their commitment and will to create or pursue their dream.

Career planning is not about creating a fantasy world. A psychodramatic approach requires examination of the person's social and cultural atom, analysis of their role repertoire, sociometry and situation. The career counsellor must relate to the client's progressive role system and role clusters to identify a central role from which stems a potential professional identity.

Most clients come already warmed up to action. The effect of the career counselling is to make their dream more concrete. It anchors the dream in a set of achievable actions that will prepare them for the enactment that is to come.

In the process of realising their dream, the client inevitably comes up against obstacles in themselves. They may require role training or spontaneity training. They may need to establish relationships or put themselves in different contexts in order to develop their functioning and readiness.

### In Summary

Using a psychodramatic approach to career planning enables the career counsellor an expanded view of the client and their desire for self-expression in the world. The career planning session serves as a warm-up for the client's enactment of a central progressive psychodramatic role and assists in identifying suitable contexts in which this may occur. The work of the career counsellor is as auxiliary and therapeutic guide to the client and can be highly successful as a means for achieving the client's desired outcome.

My experience of this approach is that it is liberating and that it is a profound experience for both client and counsellor. I liken it to the experience of being doubled – in which the protagonist feels validated at the deepest level – and in which the auxiliary broadens their experience in a way that is uplifting and inspiring.

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