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How Core Values And Family Of Origin Impact Your Career

It is impossible to overestimate the profound impact that your core values and family of origin messages have on your career

By Anne H. Whitaker

If you have been following this series on how to have a more fulfilling career and life by creating a Personal Vision, I hope you have taken time over the past several months to examine the first four Critical Success Factors¹ of your life: Your Stage of Adult Development, Abilities, Skills, and Interests. If you are a first-time reader, you can “catch up” by taking a look at the previous articles in addition to this one. (See TCL, Volume 2 [Number 1](#), [Number 2](#), [Number 3](#), [Number 4](#), and [Number 5](#).)
Our Values Give Our Lives An Overall Sense Of Purpose And Direction

In this segment, we move on to your Values and your Family of Origin—the fifth and sixth Factors in creating your Personal Vision. Examining these factors will help you sort through what it is you really want to have in your life and your career, rather than doing what others want you to do or what you have been taught you should do. It is an essential step in crafting your personal definition of success.

Let's start with your Values. Every person has their own set of personal values, whether or not they are consciously aware of them. Our values are what we think is important in life, what is worth doing, and they give our lives an overall sense of purpose and direction. They come from a variety of sources. Our parents are a major influence on our values during our childhood. We are also influenced by any church or religious affiliations we have, as well as our neighbors, friends, and teachers.

Most People Have Only A General Sense Of What Is Most Important To Them

Some values shift and change as we grow in years and experience. Others stay the same throughout our lifetime—usually a set of 6 to 10 “core values.” It is these values that determine what is really important to you as an individual. Core values can become even more important as you reach your 40s and 50s, which is when most people start to realize that their lives are finite and question if what they are doing has any real meaning.

Do you know what your core values are? These are your strongest values—what you hold most near and dear to your heart and feel is most meaningful in life. If you are not able to articulate them on the spot, you are not alone. Most people are unable to answer that question and have only a general sense of what is most important to them. The majority of people are so focused on the urgent, caught in the stress cycle, and striving to meet the values of others that they are disconnected from their own. So what about you? You may have chosen to be a lawyer because of your values. Common values shared by law school graduates include recognition, autonomy, variety, intellectual challenge, and helping others². What are your values now and are you able to live them in your current career? If your current career conflicts with your core values, it is probably causing you frustration, dissatisfaction, and internal conflict.

Do You Know What Your Core Values Are?

To identify your core values, I suggest the following exercise. As with all of the exercises I have recommended before, you will need to stop, look inside yourself, and focus your attention there. Consider it a gift to yourself. Instead of just getting up and going to work, doing what you need to do to get through the day, give yourself permission to stop and focus on what you feel is really worthwhile and valuable. Ask yourself what it is that you want to contribute. What impact do you want to have? Where do you want to make a difference, in your life, your family’s lives, your community, your profession, your world? A good way to get started is to look at a list of personal values and select the ones that are most important to you. You can find a list on the Internet or email me and I will be happy to send you one. Don’t worry about how many you select at this point—this is just step one.

A quick note about money, which people sometimes list as a value. Money is not a core value—it is a means to obtaining a value. If you have money on your list, ask yourself what money means for you. For example, one of my clients realized that money meant being able to provide for his family and obtain financial security—those were the real or underlying values for him. For another person, money can mean freedom and independence.

If Your Work Incorporates Your Values, You Will Be Happier And More Engaged, Even If The Work Itself Is Difficult

Once you have gone through a values list and made your selections, go back and narrow it down to your top ten. Then out of those ten, imagine that you are only allowed to have five values. Which five would you give up? Cross them off. You are now left with your core values. Go back and prioritize them from 1 – 5, with 1 being the most important value. If you have difficulty deciding, try asking yourself which of the five you would give

up if you had to, and make that number 5. Repeat the question for the remaining four until you are left with just one—your top value.

Once you are clear about your primary values, it's time to see how your current life reflects those values. How do you actually spend your time on a daily basis? Do your life, your work, and your relationships help fulfill your personal values? A value, no matter how near and dear to your heart, does not become real unless you take action and make time for it in your life. For example, having "health" as a top value may be important to you in theory, but if you are not exercising, eating healthy and doing other things that will take care of your health, you experience a real disconnection between your values and your life. This causes stress, which increases over time, whether you are 45 or 25. Also, if your work clashes with your values, you may still do a good job but you probably will not feel good about it. On the other hand, if your work incorporates your values, you will be happier and more engaged, even if the work itself is difficult. Your mind and heart will be connected with what you are doing daily.

Let's examine how your current life fulfills your personal values. Look at your top ten values and ask how much time, focus and energy you are giving each one on a regular basis. If the answer is "not much," you have a lot of company. Many of the lawyers I work with have been doing things through the years that have distanced themselves from what really matters to them. As Howard Figler, author of *The Complete Job-Search Handbook* said, "Values are the emotional salary of work and some people aren't even drawing a paycheck." The good news is that you can do something about it and start to bring your values and priorities back into your life. It will make all the difference in the way you feel about what you do.

Closing Deals For Corporate Clients Was No Longer Fulfilling For Joan

To give you an example, let's look at Joan. When I first met Joan, she was practicing law at a large law firm, where she had been for ten years. She was by everyone else's standards a great success. She was a partner, had great clients, was making a lot of money, and enjoyed the people with whom she worked. However, she had a growing sense that something was missing. She couldn't put her finger on what it was, but she felt that the work she was doing did not have any real meaning for her any more.

After taking some time to examine her values, Joan realized that her core values were not being met in her current position. She had originally gone to law school to help those who are less fortunate but had gotten swept up in the traditional path and had ended up in a corporate practice. Closing deals for her corporate clients was no longer fulfilling, and after assessing her values she knew why. She looked at other career opportunities that would connect with her values and decided to join the legal department of a nonprofit organization. She felt she would be able to make a bigger difference in the world and find work more fulfilling.

Like Joan, you can use your values as a guiding rod when evaluating other opportunities. If your current situation doesn't allow you to honor your core values, and there is no way to change that, then it's time to consider alternatives that would. Even if you aren't ready to make a change and want to stay where you are, you can begin to implement one or more of your core values in your life immediately by keeping them in mind and letting them guide you in your daily choices. I often recommend that my clients keep their "top five values" list someplace where they can see it often, and then

evaluate what they say “yes” and “no” to by filtering the choice through their values list. It helps with the big decisions as well as the smaller ones.

Family Of Origin: The Powerful Impact It Has On Our Career Plans

Closely connected with your values is your Family of Origin, or the family in which you were born and raised. Family has a powerful influence on us—on our personalities, our sense of what is right and wrong, our perspective on work, and our choices. Much of what we learned in our family is unconscious and so you probably aren’t even aware of the degree of their influence and the messages you were given. Assessing what things you learned in your family, what makes you who you are, and what role you were expected to play is an important step in figuring out what messages are yours, what come from your family, which you want to keep, and which are no longer useful to you. It is another important, critical step in forming your own Personal Vision for your life.

How do you do this? By completing a family genogram and gathering information about your parents and ancestors. Start by drawing a family tree that includes places for you and your siblings at the bottom and traces back three generations of your family to your great grandparents, both maternal and paternal. Looking back is often a way to see and understand unspoken or covert messages about roles, patterns, and expectations in the family. Make sure to note the people who are either unknown or not talked about—they are just as important sometimes as the ones who have been remembered. Then, as best you can, determine the following things:

- The person’s work—could be work for pay or non-paying work—and whatever their abilities and skills were.
- Based on your observations and experiences, your sense of how good a fit there was between their responsibilities and satisfaction.

What are the recurring career choices or themes in the family? Example: Great grandfather—doctor; grandfather—minister; father—Director of Social Services. The theme here would be “helping professionals.”

- The message to you might be “It is important to care for others.”
- How are career choices different for men and women in your family?
- How has the family viewed education? Are there any significant changes in the levels of education received by family members? How does education change from generation to generation?
- What skills or talents do you see in several generations of your family?
- What are the messages around success? How is it defined in the family? Example: money, social status, quality of work, quality of life, etc.
- What are the work values of your family of origin? How do they compare with yours?

Our Parents Impact How We Handle Various Aspects Of Life Including Work, Success, Failure, Setbacks, And Work/Life Balance

Once you have completed the genogram, focus on your parents to learn more about their influence. Our parents had a particularly strong impact on how we learned to approach change, make decisions, and handle various aspects of life including work, success,

failure, setbacks, and work/life balance. Most of us don't know the extent of their impact on who we are and the choices we make unless we have taken time to examine it objectively. The first step is to take a look at who your parents are as people, aside from their role as your parents. It will broaden your perspective about how you are the same and different as they are, and will lead to new choices about how you want to live your life.

In addition to asking your parents the questions listed previously to help you complete the genogram, find out more information about what their goals, values, and skills were, and how they approached the major turning points in their lives (see [Issue 3](#) for more about Turning Points). The following are some of the questions you might want to ask them, separately:

- What was going on at the age of ____ (start with 17-18, the age of the first Turning Point)
- What did you want to do with your life?
- How did you decide what to do immediately after high school? Why?
- What did your parents think about your choices?
- What came easily for you? What was difficult?
- What were the challenges you encountered? What did you do?
- Did you ever wish you had done it differently? How? Why?
- Now continue to go forward through each of the turning points until you reach the one closest to their age. Ask questions about what their life was like, the choices they made, why they made them the way they did, and how they felt about them.

Do you see any similarities between their lives, messages, and goals and yours? Do you see yourself in your father or mother? Which influences are the “keepers” and which ones are you better off discarding because they are not really yours?

What Joan Discovered From Her Family Of Origin; How It Helped Her Career

Let's return to Joan. She realized after examining her family of origin that she was a lot like her father. He had been a lawyer and left to become a minister when she was 12 years old and he was 39. Like him, she felt the need to make a difference in the world and connect with her values in a different way than her law firm practice was allowing her to do. This reinforced her decision to work with a nonprofit. She also learned that her mother, who had never had a career and had devoted her life to raising her children, had originally wanted to be a doctor. She shared with Joan that after she got married and became pregnant she abandoned that dream because she did not think she could do both. She had raised Joan to believe that a woman needed to choose between a career and a family. Her mother also shared that she regretted giving up her career dreams instead of exploring alternatives. Joan realized she had adopted her mother's “all or nothing” perspective about family and career and, even more importantly, that she did not want that to be her life. Once she had that awareness, she began considering the possibility of having children, an option she had completely ruled out before. Understanding her parents' influences on her helped her clarify what she did and did not want—an important key to having her life and her career her way.

In the next issue, we will look at the final two factors in developing a Personal Vision: Personal Style and Goals. For now, take some time to figure out what is most important to you in your life. What are your core values, and what messages and lessons do you want to keep from your family? Turn down the voices around you and tune into your own. If you don't do it for yourself, who will?

RESOURCES

BOOKS

1. McDonald, Bob, Ph.D., and Hutcheson, Don, E., [*Don't Waste Your Talent: The 8 Critical Steps To Discovering What You Do Best*](#), The Highlands Company, 2005.
2. Arron, Deborah , [*What Can You Do With A Law Degree? A Lawyer's Guide to Career Alternatives Inside, Outside & Around the Law*](#) , 1999, Niche Press.

ASSESSMENTS

The [Highlands Ability Battery](#)—By means of objective, hands-on work samples, this assessment helps individuals to understand their natural talents and abilities.