
STAGE ONE

DEFINING THE RIGHT JOB

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Chapter 1

Imagine Career Possibilities

Secret: The major obstacle to your dream job is in your head.

The primary obstacle to a successful job search lies within, in limited and limiting self-perceptions about your career. A positive mind-set about your career possibilities is essential to finding a top job. Most executives perceive job search obstacles as external: a poor economy, the resistance of employers and search consultants to putting an executive into a different job or industry, an underdeveloped network. This is wrong. The biggest obstacle to a successful career move is internal—a failure of imagination. Change your beliefs to change your future.

How do you go from the top to more? First, dispense with the idea that the process begins with “doing,” at least in the traditional sense of taking action. Finding inspiration and passion is a psychological and spiritual journey. It requires getting rid of the primary obstacles that block us from achieving our dreams. Those obstacles are in the most unexpected place: the stories we tell.

Collective Explanations

Sometimes, limiting stories are widely shared. Have you ever noticed that when people say “The truth is . . .” what follows is always some kind of limitation or obstacle? “The truth is” restricts what is or could be. “The truth is . . . there are just no opportunities for advertising executives these days.” “The truth is . . . the only way to

get ahead in high tech is to be utterly ruthless and use others to advance your own career.” “The truth is . . . good guys finish last.”

Evidence for this limiting point of view abounds. Dramatic stories about people losing jobs and finding nothing to replace them sell newspapers. Horror stories about bad bosses and bad markets fill magazines and talk shows. An embittered friend, neighbor, or relative eagerly shares the scars of a particularly bad work experience. A burned-out colleague opts for early retirement and quits the game altogether. Self-help books use scare tactics to sell the one right way to avoid career disaster.

The point is that these “truth”-ful explanations are collective versions of stories about limitations and obstacles. They have the effect of discouraging effort and preventing achievement and success.

Individual Success and Failure Stories

The stories that limit us are both individual and collective: Stories about the way the world is are one form of limiting belief; stories about our own successes and failures are another.

The stories we tell can empower or disempower us. People who attribute their successes to their own efforts or abilities—things they can control—strive harder and longer, feel greater pride in their achievements, and find greater success. Those who attribute their failures (or successes) to outside influences such as luck or the situation have a diminished sense of power and less motivation to strive or persist because things that dictate successful and unsuccessful outcomes are beyond their control.

The empowering and disempowering stories we tell are an appropriate place to begin the journey to find a dream job. We drag around our pasts in the form of justifications, excuses, and baggage that explains how we got where we are and why we cannot go further, be more, or enjoy more than we do. When our future is limited by our past and its stories, it can be no bigger or richer than the limited possibilities of that past.

Listen to a story about a client of mine whose experiences illustrate this.

The Pre-CEO Story: The Story of George

I knew within 10 minutes of meeting George that he had all the makings of the CEO he aspired to be. He was smart, articulate, optimistic, polished, driven but calm. He had excellent interpersonal skills and well-honed financial and operating expertise. He had a great sense of humor. His complaint? He was 44 and had not been CEO.

As George saw it, he had made choices in favor of his family, not his career. He had chosen to raise his children in a small town. He had selected a position that required minimal commute time. And most important, he had chosen to spend time with his wife and young children. He was glad for the time he had spent with his family but worried that his greatest career ambitions had been thwarted.

Halfway through our meeting, George began to reiterate the reasons he hadn't been a CEO yet, when I interrupted him, saying, "Drop the story, George. You had good reasons for the decisions you made. You won't have that time again with your wife and kids. Now you're ready to make new decisions. Drop the story. It isn't serving you."

My words startled him, but he instantly knew that repeating this story was actually sapping his energy and focus and keeping him from realizing his dreams.

Dropping the story and focusing on how to identify and find his dream job put him very quickly into a new industry he longed to join and on a fast track to the CEO he has now become.

Prior success may create its own limiting story. George's success led him to conclude that the best of his career was behind him, that he had had his one big shot at success and missed it. His story about how his focus on his family had cost him the chance to realize his

career dreams threatened to keep his dreams permanently out of reach. These stories supported inaction and were in danger of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies.

Identify Your Stories

Many highly successful executive clients seek help, feeling dispirited, burned out, fed up, trapped. Their sights are limited and their energy and enthusiasm sapped. Many doubt their considerable abilities.

The prospect of fulfilling and enjoyable work seems remote. Inspiring work seems unattainable. They'd settle for work that isn't, as they've variously described it, "soulless," "mind-numbing," or "gut-wrenching." That's not good enough, and that's not what this book is about.

You cannot go straight from despair or dissatisfaction to inspiration. Finding your dream job is a process, similar to clearing a site before laying the foundation. You must clear the mental underbrush of limiting stories about your career before you can envision your own possibilities.

What stories do you tell yourself and others about your own successes and failures? How do these interpretations of the past limit your aspirations, inspirations, and efforts? Do you have a story about not being good enough to succeed, so that eventually and inevitably you screw things up after an initial success? Do you have a story about your being a plodder whose success is entirely due to working harder than anyone else? Is your story about how you peaked at 16, in a haze of student leadership and popularity contests? What are you getting out of these stories? What are the stories costing you?

Behavior is controlled by its consequences. You wouldn't continue to tell your stories if they weren't eliciting some positive results, even if you are not consciously aware of those results. What positive outcomes are provided by telling the stories? Sympathy or admiration for your struggles? A way to avoid the risks or efforts

necessary to pursue your dreams? A sense of self-worth and conviction of your loyalty to others? There are many positive rewards as well as costs attached to your stories; becoming aware of them is an important step toward letting go of your stories.

For example, the story about being a hardworking plodder may mean that others appreciate you for your superhuman efforts: “Isn’t Cynthia incredible? She works harder and cares more about her work product than anyone else.” The respect and appreciation may make you feel superior, but at the cost of exhaustion and burnout.

The first step is to recognize the stories you tell about yourself. This is a challenge because stories often hide in plain sight. They define your perception of reality; they are the lens through which you see the world. That’s why it’s critical to expose them for what they are: interpretations of reality rather than reality.

You cannot rid yourself of beliefs or stories that are holding you back if you aren’t conscious of what they are. The next sections provide you with three simple worksheets to identify and eliminate your stories.

Develop Your List of Stories

The first step in this process is to identify your stories. How do you explain your successes and failures? Luck? Effort? Ability? Circumstance? A positive attitude? Is your fast-track career based on outperforming the competition? A series of lucky breaks? Are you a perfectionist who cannot tolerate the compromises others make to produce shoddy work? Did you pay the price with a competitive boss who was threatened by you and maneuvered your ouster? Look for themes that emerge from your explanations of moves throughout your career.

See how George completed the List of Stories Worksheet. In the pre-CEO story, George’s explanation was “I missed my big chance in my career and I will never get it back.” To record your own stories, turn to the back of the book. Blank copies of all worksheets

List of Stories Worksheet

- **Story #1:** You get one shot at the C-suite: I missed my big career chance and I'll never get it back.
 - **Story #2:** You can't have a big career and a happy family.
 - **Story #3:** Forty-four is too old to become CEO.
 - **Story #4:**
 - **Story #5:**
 - **Story #6:**
 - **Story #7:**
 - **Story #8:**
 - **Story #9:**
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and exercises throughout the book are in Appendix F so you can copy and use them.

Let Go of Your Stories

It's one thing to identify the stories that have colored your views of yourself and what is possible in your life and career. But how do you let go of them? Is it really so simple to identify the costs and benefits and an action step to drop the story? People spend years in therapy working on these issues.

This book is not about psychotherapy. It's about choice and commitment. You have a choice about how you view things. You can choose to ignore the stories, or you can choose to continue to support them.

It all boils down to making a choice and affirming that choice again and again. You cannot change the past, but you can learn from it. Most important, you can make a different choice today. That's really all any of us has: the choices we make today. You know where your stories have gotten you. Are you ready to try a different path?

Complete the Cost/Benefit Analysis Worksheet in Appendix F to evaluate the stories you identified in the List of Stories Worksheet, as well as what you will do to let go of this story. Don't rush to complete this exercise because the stories are often so entrenched that we aren't aware of their profound impact on us and our work choices and possibilities. Taking time to understand the stories and their positive and negative consequences will help you move on. The Cost/Benefit Analysis Worksheet at the bottom of the page depicts George's answers.

Recognizing that your interpretations of the past are stories that often limit you can provide access to a whole new world of possibilities you can imagine and pursue.

Breaking Free of the Past: The Story of Todd

In a seminar he was attending, Todd engaged in a lengthy and heated exchange with the leader. Todd explained that his entire life had been scarred by a demanding father. His father imposed such unrealistic expectations that Todd, who was smart and Ivy

Cost/Benefit Analysis Worksheet

Story	Costs	Benefits	Steps to Give It Up
One shot at C-suite: missed my big chance	Despair, scarcity mentality	Avoid hard work of job search	Remind self it's just a story; start work on resume and career plan; focus on <i>this</i> shot at C-suite
Big career and happy family incompatible	Regret at choice, resentment toward family	Self-sacrificing good guy: gave up my dreams for family	Focus on present, not past, and on choices to maximize career satisfaction today
44 is too old to be CEO	Feelings of discouragement and powerlessness	Avoid risk of competition for what I want	Look at stats on CEO ages, talk to recruiters

League-educated, had never been able to get or keep a good job, much less an inspiring one, because his father always made him feel like a failure.

As a specific example of his father's reign of terror, Todd described how his father had taught him to read at an early age, making him repeat sentences again and again until he got them right. The leader listened carefully to this story and pointed out the difference between what really happened—the objective facts—and the interpretations or stories Todd had made up about what happened. The leader said, "Another way to look at that story is 'My father loved me so much he spent time making sure I learned to read correctly.' How would it feel to have lived a life inside that story instead of the one you chose?"

Todd's story about his father led him to conclude, "I'm not good enough." What possible benefit or reward was he getting from a story that made him so unhappy? First, he didn't have to put himself out there to compete for opportunities he believed he could never win. Second, people felt sorry for him and paid attention to his "poor me" stories. The costs? Satisfying work and lucrative compensation are obvious costs, as well as a sense of vitality.

Your next step is to determine the costs and benefits of your own stories. Then determine if you want to let go of them. If you do, decide on the steps you will take. Often the appropriate first step is to consciously refrain from repeating the same tired stories to yourself or others. Both empowering and disempowering stories can have a big impact on your future rather than simply recounting your past.

Envisioning Your Possibilities

Once you strip away the limiting beliefs, anything is possible. Todd's letting go of the story of the critical father led him to satisfying work in political publishing; George's letting go of the story of why he hadn't been a CEO initiated a process that led to the CEO's office.

You have many more possibilities for your career than you now realize. The goal of this book is to help you recognize your possibil-

ities and realize them. The first step is to find a possibility for your career that inspires you to action. This inspiration—a rediscovered source of joy and excitement in your work—is what will motivate the steps you take to reach your goal. A possibility creates something exciting to move toward rather than something to escape from. A possibility transforms the necessary steps to reach your goal from work into progress. There's a world of difference between the two.

Possibilities Exercise

How do you start thinking about possibilities? One way is to think of times when you were inspired by your work or other activities. Think of three times you were engaged in work that lit you up, turned you on. Describe why the work was important to you, what talents and expertise it called on, and what objectives—personal and professional—you met. What are the common themes in these three experiences? Are they the goals of the work, the kind of people you worked with, your role, the setting (an airport, forest, boardroom, or manufacturing plant), or some other factor?

Use the blank Possibilities Worksheet in Appendix F to get you started. Record each activity you enjoyed, along with what it was you particularly enjoyed about it. Continue the exploration by identifying and recording additional stories about activities and projects you enjoyed throughout your life. Specifically, consider:

- Three work projects you engaged in as an adult
- Two favorite volunteer or extracurricular projects or activities you did as an adult or adolescent
- Two examples of things you loved to do and did well as an adolescent
- Two examples of things you loved to do and did well up to age 13

Use the themes you uncover in doing this exercise to point you toward your own possibility. Once you have completed the worksheet,

Possibilities Worksheet	
Event or Activity	Why Did You Enjoy It?
Work #1: Opening new hospital	Opportunity to build something from scratch
Work #2: Develop new inpatient service	Creating something new, serving customers better
Work #3:	
Extracurricular #1: Leading task force to evaluate and redefine board role for theater company	Reinventing board role and improving board's effectiveness: like to improve things
Extracurricular #2:	
Adolescent #1: Senior class officer	Leadership role, making things happen
Adolescent #2:	
Childhood #1:	
Childhood #2:	

look for common themes in the examples. Do you now have a clearer vision of your inspiring possibility?

Reimagining a Career: The Story of Mary

Mary is a health care executive. She was frustrated by the current health care environment and its focus on cost containment rather than development and customer service. She saw little of interest in the health care arena and was eager to move out of the industry in which she had spent more than 20 years.

To focus her new career search, Mary identified past work experiences she had enjoyed: two start-up business projects; leading a

local theater board task force to reexamine and reinvent the role of the board in fund-raising, administration, and repertory choices for the theater company; and serving as an officer of her high school class.

The Possibilities Worksheet depicts Mary's responses. The three exciting pieces of work had given her a long-forgotten experience of enthusiasm and delight. She realized that building something was critical to an inspiring career possibility for her future. And her high school example reminded her of her long-standing enjoyment of leadership roles and the ability to make things happen.

Before exploring how to turn possibilities into specific targets instead of fanciful ideas, we will examine important factors that affect the search for your dream job: the psychological obstacles that may be getting in the way of finding your dream job, the all-important element of personal career satisfaction, and the very definition of what that dream job is.