

THE NUANCES OF WORK

How Subtleties Drive Success

Work must have life in it—vitality. —CLIFF HAKIM

CLARITY

Twenty-five years ago, a colleague sent me a note that said: “This world needs you.” Although flattered, I was also puzzled. This world needs me to do what? Before I started my career consulting and executive coaching practice Rethinking Work®, I was a teacher for the public schools, a counselor for a non-profit, restaurant manager, and executive search consultant to major corporations. By the age of thirty, I had four jobs. But I didn’t see a common thread.

In the next few months, I began to review my own work experience. I altered the question, “What do I do for a living?” adding the phrase “...no matter what my title may be...”

After thinking about the ups and the downs of my career, the joys and derailments, I came to the conclusion that whether I am counseling, speaking, writing, consulting, my purpose is to improve the lives of others. When I counsel clients, I ask questions that release their wisdom and help them find more joy and meaning in their work. I fulfill a similar purpose when I’m pursuing my hobby and cooking for my family and friends. My goal is to create meals that taste good and contribute to everyone’s pleasure and wellbeing.

I feel more energized, too, when I am in alignment with this purpose. So when I go into a slump, I step back to reflect on my activity and motives. I ask myself, Am I staying true to my

real calling, or have I gone off track? How can I get back to my real purpose, which is serving others?

Today I encourage all my clients to come up with a meaningful answer to the question: What do you do for a living no matter what your title may be?

Garati, an academic in her early 40s, recently came to me because she was working three jobs and had no sense of direction. She had started a small business with her best friend, making beaded jewelry and new orders were coming in each day. She was a Sunday school teacher, and loved to watch the children’s faces light up as she told them stories. But she spent the bulk of her time as a research coordinator at a university, keeping track of clinical trials. “I don’t love this work as much,” she said, “but it’s what I trained for with my graduate degree, and it pays the bills.”

“But how do you manage three jobs?” I asked.

“Not well. I feel really drained,” Garati confessed, “There’s no energy left over for my husband. No time for myself. And no time for leisure activities.”

Garati thought she might replace her university job “with another full-time position that she actually enjoyed.

“But that’s still three jobs, “ I said, “Even if you replace one that is marginal with one you like.”

“You’re right.” Garati agreed. “Every hour would still be soaked up by work. I guess I’m stuck.”

“Not necessarily. Let’s look at the problem a little differently. Let’s look at the nuances of your work and see if you can find some clarity.”

Over the next few days, I asked Garati to write about four work experiences that had been especially meaningful to her. Then I asked her to look for the common thread, asking “What do I do for a living no matter what my title may be?”

By our next meeting Garati’s face was more animated, and her overall demeanor had changed. “All my stories pointed to one thing,” she said, leaning forward eagerly. “I enjoy being in a leadership position where I use my creativity to create a quality product. And I’m happiest when I am encouraging other people to find and use their own talents.”

“So whether you are designing a piece of jewelry or teaching a class...what is it that you do?”

Garati responded, “I am creating a space for individual growth.”

“What about the university job? Can you do the same thing there?”

“No,” Garati said. “Most of the time, I am just tracking data. There’s no real interaction with people. I’d like to find a respectful way to leave, or at the very least, cut back my hours. That way I can focus more of my energy on my bead business and expand my role at church.”

“How will that improve your life?”

“I’ll have more energy to put more effort into marketing and we can grow the bead business. Eventually I’ll make a more money from that job. In the meantime, I’ll have to learn to live on a little less. The minister at our church once said, ‘Enough is as good as a feast.’ That will be a good thing for me to remember in the months ahead.”

To find out what makes you thrive at work, take some time to explore the following:

- What aspects of my job give me the greatest sense of pride and joy?
- What four work experiences were especially meaningful to me and why?
- Ten years from now, how would I like to describe my accomplishments?
- What do I do for a living no matter what my title may be?

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