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Passionate Pursuit of Purpose

By Helen Harkness, Ph.D.



Igniting our passionate purpose is seen as a rapidly increasing necessity in today's chaotic and complex changing world. We are all aware that the 40-year "Womb to Tomb" job is totally defunct! There is no longer any safety net, except what we, the individual, create. I have labeled this career revision the "Yo Yo Model—You're On Your Own!" You and I are responsible for learning to successfully balance our own career on the current edge of constant change, chaos, complexity, and uncertainty. Though painful, frequently fearful, and characterized by a "miserable middle," discovering the purpose you can pursue with passion requires activating a major step of growth, creativity, coherence, and order for our work lives.

Helping adults identify and achieve their passionate purpose has been my mission for more than three decades. I say with certainty that it is the best anti-aging medication we can possibly have in order to **live long** and die fast! Personally, while I usually sleep very well, occasionally I wake up feeling as if I've been run over by a truck! However, staying in bed is not an option since I have client appointments that are critically important to keep. I arise, ignoring the discomfort, and surprisingly 30 minutes later I feel great and am totally unaware of any aches and pains! I begin what will be a long and busy day committed to providing the process, resources, insight, and contacts to help my clients realize and take the action on the purpose they can successfully pursue with passion.

My career clients include a wide variety of professionals: 25% are lawyers, 10% are physicians, and a large number are women, many coming out of a divorce after years as a housewife and mother. Many clients have succeeded financially but now realize that meaning is missing in their lives. Daily I talk with talented, seemingly successful adults who privately see themselves stalled in inane, pointless, unchallenging, and frequently abusive work situations. Countless people feel powerless, directionless, cynical, victimized, and trapped in a career that pays the bills but has no meaning or purpose for them.



Without thought, many of my clients have been imprisoned in a vicious cycle by what is seen as material needs, so they spend money to fill an empty hole in their gut because there is little other purpose in their lives. Burned out and sensing that their work life is out of control, they long for something different and better. They can't name it, can't find it, suspect they wouldn't recognize it if they ran into it or that they might be too fearful of the risk involved to take it. "I'm looking for the second half of my life. I could get it, if I just knew what it was!" The successful executives who told me this echoed what I hear constantly from clients seeking their career options today.

I urge my clients in pursuit of purpose to realize and remember always that today we are pioneers on a new frontier. To become successful today we are being forced to distance ourselves from the familiar and head toward the unknown and the unnamed. While this is fearful, it's a challenge and an opportunity to be a modern pathfinder, creating new routes and directions for ourselves and others who follow us. The colliding and overlapping of the old age and the new age of being "here or there" (but maybe both in a single lifetime) has created a breakdown in our expectations for the ways things are supposed to be. Their loss of myth, assumptions, and rules has created great anxiety, doubt, and extreme uncertainty about the way we are to live our lives. The current reality is that we live in an increasingly complex world, riddled with chaos and the "future shock" predicted by Toffler in 1970.

We can view the chaos in our work as a cry of disappointment or a stirring call for a new purpose. Discovering this meaningful purpose and direction strengthens the will and resolve to bring work into alignment with belief—the head with the heart. Our reality is that security in the past conventional sense is an illusion, and success itself must now be redefined. “Freedom is knowing our options.” This is my mantra, but I also stress that this freedom carries responsibility to discover, develop, and creatively utilize our potential to leave our world a better place. I explain clearly that taking creative control and changing careers can be incredibly challenging, but ultimately unbelievably rewarding. A career change can happen only for a client when their pain is greater than the fear, hence the formula: $CC = P > F$. After three decades of focusing on helping thousands of adults make this transition, I assure them that we can achieve positive results with their thoughtful and dedicated commitment. How do I accomplish this?

I communicate carefully to my clients that discovering and gaining their purpose is a four-step process of: 1) Looking Inward to identify values, skills, strengths, and possible career matches; 2) Looking Outward to research career realities; 3) Looking Forward to name the specific career matching the purpose; and 4) Action Steps to gain the purpose.

The Looking Inward Step is critical to identifying and igniting the purpose to pursue with passion. While I use countless assessments and exercises to achieve this, the main activity is completing the following chart.

Career Success Criteria/Prescription -- Glass Balls vs. Rubber Balls

Thoughtfully determine and list your "glass balls," your strongest, fundamental bedrock career needs for your success. These Career Success Criteria are from your DNA and are as individual as your fingerprints. Build your career on your bedrock, "glass balls" and not the unimportant "rubber balls" that clutter up your life.

Current, Former and Future jobs

List your "glass balls", your Career Success Criteria, and how you define them in order to measure and quantify them.

Then, rate each criteria on a scale from 1-10 (10 = highest) for each job you have listed.

My Career Success Criteria:	As Measured or Quantified by:					
Add each column & record in the Option Totals. The higher the number, the more that job fits with your Career Success Criteria.	Option Totals					

My purpose - my major Meaning Magnet, the tap-root that connects all my Success Criteria and Glass Balls, is: _____

This list of “glass balls” becomes their written prescription for what they are seeking. After careful thought, we analyze their list to determine their **Meaning Magnet**, their **tap-root**, the **passionate purpose** that ties all their glass balls together. As an example, mine is the following: I am a grower—of people, ideas, trees, and plants. As a teacher for thousands of clients, I follow up and am delighted when a client moves forward toward their career purpose. As a naturalist, I have an 8-acre yard that was originally a burned-out Texas cotton farm with one tree. Currently there are over 600 plants of all sizes and species which I water and look forward to their new leaves or branches. It isn’t necessary for the plant to be exotic or the client to be famous or unusual, but merely for both to grow in its natural way and place.

A 30-40 hour Skills Workshop for about 10 clients of various ages and careers represents a major component of discovering one’s purpose. Participants write about talents from various times in their lives and then share their stories in group sessions. These are stories about skills they (1) did well, (2) intensely enjoyed, and (3) remember with pride. Each listener in the group takes notes about the skills they have heard and shares the results with the speaker.

Frankly, this Skills Workshop is ranked the best part of my Career Design process by my clients. I am frequently amazed at their positive response gained from the interaction with each other and the opening up and trust that develops. They bond and stay in touch, helping each other and frequently starting businesses etc. together.

The following is the final summary sheet my clients complete: (Notice that Purpose is listed first.)

Pursuit of Personal Power

Balancing Life and Career at the Edge of Chaos

- **PURPOSE** – the meaning I can pursue with **PASSION** is: _____
- Based on my **PRINCIPLES** – my values and motivation of _____
- Developing my **POTENTIAL** – my skills and talents which are: _____
- **PLACE** – my choice of location, geography, space, is _____
- Connecting with **PEOPLE** in the community, family, and workplace who are: _____
- **PLANET** – actions to preserve our environment: _____
- **PLEASURE** – balancing work with **PLAY** activities – safety valve to release stress: _____
- With the **PROFITS** of \$_____ to meet my financial needs: _____
- **PLAN** – the focused, action blueprint I will pursue with **PERSEVERANCE** is: _____

In summary, to know and ignite your passionate purpose, our current “**Yo Yo** Model—**You’re On Your Own**” requires the following: (1) Assess and verbalize your skills; (2) Identify achievements where you successfully used these to bring successful outcomes; (3) Know your Success Criteria, your “Glass Balls,” the fundamental bedrock essentials necessary for your success and motivation; (4) Align these with the direction and needs of your profession; (5) Exude energy, intensity, stamina, and flexibility; stress enthusiasm for challenges and the ability to creatively cope with complexities created by change; and (6) Lead—don’t merely follow! Act—don’t always wait to react.

Editor’s note: **Helen Harkness**, Ph.D., founded Career Design Associates, Inc. (CDA) in 1978. She is a futurist, consultant, researcher, experienced speaker, teacher, writer, and a pioneer in the development and implementation of career management programs. She has worked with more than 10,000 clients by looking at the realities of today’s workplace in light of her intuitive eye for what’s next. Her books include *Capitalizing on Career Chaos*, *Don’t Stop the Career Clock*, and *The Career Chase*. *Dr. Harkness currently broadcasts a weekly show, discussing current career issues affecting the workplace on responsibleradio.com.*

Visit her website at www.career-design.com.