

Who are you?

It's such a basic question but if you can answer it with clarity and relevance, you'll have a big advantage over other job applicants -- and be able to make major decisions with confidence and success.

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I'll admit it. As far as career counsellors go, I'm a one-trick pony. For almost 20 years, I've started virtually every new client meeting with one question: "Who are you?"

It doesn't matter why they're coming to see me. Recently fired executives. College grads with fresh faces and even fresher diplomas. Mothers returning to the work force after raising families. Lawyers, accountants and consultants wanting more out of life than just billable hours.

The first question I ask is always the same: "Who are you?"

Almost without exception, their answers fall into two categories: job descriptions or a list of generic adjectives that could be applied to virtually anyone in those jobs.

When I point this out to them, they try again. And again. And again. But when I ask them how they feel about their answers, the response is always the same: That wasn't very good, was it?

And it doesn't matter that you now know "the question." If you come to see me, I'll still ask it.

Because chances are you've heard it before in job interviews when the interviewer says, "So, tell me about yourself. . . . Who are you?"

In those interviews, in spite of your prior knowledge that the question was going to come up, you probably didn't answer in a way that was special to you.

You used a bunch of generic phrases. Creative . . . bottom-line oriented . . . a people person . . . a team player . . . honest . . . hard-working.

Any of these were likely to have been used by the person who was interviewed just before you in that very same office. Or in offices all around the world that day for entirely different jobs.

This not only fails to help you stand out in the hundreds of interviews that today's hirers have to endure; it doesn't help them understand why you in particular would be right for the job.

"Who am I?" is the most important question to ask yourself before someone else asks you.

If you can answer this question with clarity, relevance and in a memorable way, you will not only have a significant advantage over other applicants for jobs, you will be able to make virtually any major decision - - career, relationships, lifestyle -- with confidence. And you will be more successful.

Satisfaction, motivation, success

... a story

When I sold my advertising agency 15 years ago, I wondered what I would do next. I wanted whatever it was to be a success.

But who was I now? No longer could I answer that question with ad executive, business owner or chairman. My titles and job descriptors were gone. So how could I figure out what I was going to do if I didn't know who I was? And how could I be successful at something if I didn't know what that something was?

I sought counsel from others who were successful. I talked to business people, surgeons, firefighters, teachers, marina operators, ranchers and farmers who felt good about what they were doing.

After interviewing more than 100 men and women, I found a pattern. They were successful because they were motivated. They were motivated because they felt satisfied.

Simple enough. And though I wasn't the first one to discover the link between motivation, satisfaction and success, I knew that there was something important here in my search for my next career.

So I talked to hirers. What were they looking for? As it turns out, their need was fairly simple. They wanted potential employees to make the hiring decision easy by telling them three things: Who they were (beyond

the generic phrases); what they had accomplished (proof of who they were); and how these were relevant to the job being discussed.

Not surprisingly, the hirers said very few applicants could do this effectively. Why? Because they couldn't answer the big question: "Who am I?" And to answer that one, they needed to ask another.

Where have I gone right?

When bad things happen in our lives -- losing a job, breaking up with a mate or even simply feeling unfulfilled -- it is human nature to ask, "Where have I gone wrong?" We seem to think that by looking back at things we didn't do right, we'll be able to avoid those same mistakes in the future and be more successful, happier or productive.

The fact is, "Where have I gone wrong?" is exactly the wrong question. It leads to brooding and negativity. It drains your energy and takes you 180 degrees in the opposite direction from where you want -- and need -- to go.

The better question -- the question that opens doors and possibilities and gives you renewed hope for positive change in your life -- is "Where have I gone right?"

Why? Because asking yourself "Where have I gone right?" will lead you to a more honest, complete and useful answer to our first question, "Who am I?"

And as I said, when you know who you are, you can lay that down on top of decisions and options to find the best fit.

Accomplishments against common sense

So where have you gone right? Think about a time, place or event in which you felt really good about something you did. Think about an accomplishment. It doesn't have to be huge. It doesn't have to be public. Think about those little moments where you said to yourself, 'Well done.'

You made a gourmet meal for friends. You taught a child to tie his or her shoes. You got a great shine on a car. You scored a personal best in Scrabble. You found the perfect outfit at a terrific price.

To you, these may not seem like accomplishments. They may seem like common sense, but I don't believe there is any such thing.

When my neighbour's lawnmower breaks, he takes it apart and logically eliminates potential problems -- no gas, dead sparkplug, blocked carburetor -- until he finds the solution.

To him, it's just common sense. To me, common sense would be to take it to a lawnmower shop. Or get a new lawnmower.

So don't get fooled into thinking that what comes naturally to you isn't an accomplishment. In most cases, if it made you feel satisfied, it probably was special -- and should be noted.

Skill, interests and values

"Who am I?" is simply the summary of your skills, interests and values. So when you have identified a series of accomplishments, break them apart and find the common links. What skills did you use? What interest areas did these accomplishments involve? What values did they demonstrate or reinforce?

With time, some prodding by others and a process that keeps you on track, you can eventually create a short list of core skills, core interests and core values, the key conditions to your satisfaction, motivation and success in the past --- and the future.

Personal reference point and allegory

By looking back at accomplishments, you can also discover what I call a "personal reference point" -- that one accomplishment from your past that demonstrates who you are in a memorable way.

Mine is called "Teaching Bobby How To Swim." It's the story of how the skills, interests and values I used in helping a child overcome his fear of water about 40 years ago aligns me perfectly for jobs, careers and life choices in which I can use communication skills, show enthusiasm, work with people and make a difference. (Do you see why career counseling might fit?)

Some people (though less than 40 per cent in our experience) can also create a "personal allegory" which acts as a dramatic metaphor for who they are. By painting a picture of who I am -- through an allegorical

representation of my skills, interests and values -- I can again see if there is a match with the choices I am making in life.

In my case, I am a "Wagonmaster" (independent, helps others along). Some of our clients' allegories include "Navigator" (stands behind the captain, gathers information) and "Decoder" (sees patterns in people to help predict future behaviour).

Use either your "personal reference point" or "personal allegory" in an interview to answer the "Who are you?" question and guess what?

Not only have you made the hirer's decision easier by declaring and demonstrating who you are, he or she is going to remember you long after the other applicants who simply rehashed a bunch of adjectives and job titles.

About more than getting a job

There are thousands of websites and books to help write better résumés. You know dozens of people who will help you network with the right people in the right industry for the right job. And there are scores of organizations that can coach you on interviewing techniques. These are important components to any job search.

However, in the end, the challenge will always remain the same: When you hand over your résumé, meet those networking contacts, sit down for the interview -- or, heaven help you, when you come to my office - - how will you answer that very first question?

Because this is about more than getting a job. It's about getting a life you can live with. And it all starts with knowing who you are.

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