

Turn Your Career into a Work of Art

by Gianpiero Petriglieri

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Whose life am I living? I'm sure you ask yourself that kind of question from time to time. *What am I really good at? What is the purpose of my work?* These are not new questions. Sooner or later, we all seek answers to them.

Up to three or four decades ago, most people struggled with such questions once or twice in their lives. When they chose their line of work, or when they resolved to break from the expectations of their family.

Today, fundamental questions of identity and purpose are no longer a once or twice-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Many of us face them again and again. Not only when we are struggling, but, paradoxically, when we are succeeding.

That's because the better you do, the broader the range of opportunities you have. You no longer just get to move up, you get to move around. You are exposed to different opinions, worldviews, and lifestyles. You become keener to look for work that grants you more than sustenance and recognition. Work that allows you to feed your passions, express yourself and serve a larger cause.

Today's careers are no longer ladders. They are more like works of art.

In this context, what does it mean to succeed? What does it take to thrive?

First, you need a foundation of knowledge and skills. You can't be Picasso if you can't handle brushes. Second, you need to use those skills to express something that is both deeply personal and that resonates with an audience.

Success in art is not just making a living, or being famous and acclaimed. Those are consequences. Success is moving and being moved. It is opening vistas. Unsettling the status quo. Peeking beneath the veil of convention.

Making art is not an artist's job. It is an artist's life. This is why it is exciting. But it also creates anxiety, and second-guessing. Putting your passion on display can be scary. How do you know what is your true passion? What if your work is ignored, derided or misunderstood?

In my research and leadership development work, I witness the same mixture of excitement and anxiety among people who aspire to craft careers centered on their passion. Especially when they are faced with the prospect of becoming a "leader." It is as if leading in a world in flux amplifies the dilemmas of living in a world in flux.

We expect leaders, more than anyone else, to express their authentic concerns and desires and, at the same time, to give voice to the concerns and desires of those they aspire to lead. We expect them to be fully committed to a purpose and community – but also to be constantly pushing for change.

How do you manage to show up and put yourself aside? How can you stay grounded if you are meant to be always changing? Think of artists again. They often congregate, to teach, inspire and support each other. And although their gatherings may not always be harmonious, many find freedom, courage, and voice once they find a tribe.

Similarly, being able to turn your career into a work of art, to thrive and lead with passion in a world in flux, requires finding a space, and I mean both a psychological and social space, where what you do is tied with who you are and what people around you care about – a community where commitment feels enabling, liberating, rather than just constraining.

Jennifer Petriglieri and I describe these communities as “identity workspaces.” They are groups or organizations where we can both acquire valuable expertise from others and also address fundamental questions with others. Identity workspaces are communities that help us discover who we are, where we belong, what we can do and how we are meant to do it.

For some of us it may be a community within an established institution, like a company or a profession, like medicine or the law. For others it is a less formal community, like a volunteer group, an annual event, a group of classmates that stay connected as they move around.

If we find an identity workspace within our organization, that organization has a profound impact on us, it’s harder to leave, and what we learn there keeps orienting us even after we leave. If we don’t find one, the organization feels like a place we’re passing through while our heart remains elsewhere. And when we can’t find an identity workspace anywhere we feel empty, uprooted, deprived of meaning. We spend more time trying to be liked than to be taken seriously.

If you are a manager, you may want to ask yourself, is your team or organization an identity workspace for the people who work there? Can they easily share and acquire expertise? Do you reward those who personalize their work and make it meaningful for others? Do you encourage people to find their voice and push against conventions?

If you do, they’ll not only be more satisfied, creative and productive – they will also think twice before leaving, as they may not grow as fast and express themselves as fully elsewhere.

Because ultimately, while mastery, identity and purpose are very personal, we can neither find nor pursue them alone. We’re still peculiar animals endowed with consciousness and cast in a sea of suggestions and demands. We need others who care enough about us, and whom we care enough about, to help us take it from there.

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