

Dreamsmithing Your Career
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For many, midlife is life's chief checkpoint; we review our lives and inventory our regrets. We may think:

I wish I had lived and worked in Europe.

I'm sorry I didn't make more time for relationships.

I wish I had started my own business.

We may have time to turn these regrets into reality, but fear holds us back. We fear we are too late, or worse, we make empty excuses for why we can't manifest our dreams.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice tells the queen that she doesn't believe in impossible tasks. The queen replies that she completes six impossible things before breakfast. If, like the queen, we practice believing in our dreams, we will manifest them.

Like alchemists, we can turn our dreams into goals and manifest them. Four steps can support us:

1. Define the goal.
2. Believe in the goal.
3. Visualize the goal.
4. Actualize the goal.

Define the Goal

Chances are your dreams have been with you a while, sometimes since childhood. "Go figure," a client shared. "I knew I wanted to be a financial advisor since junior high school. I knew money meant freedom, and I wanted to be free to live life on my terms." Today, she is a successful stockbroker.

If you have several dreams, your first step is to select one and then make it specific. Instead of saying, "I want to live abroad," say, "I want to live and work in Paris." Then, turn your dream into an intention by making it measurable and forceful. For example, "I *will* live and work in Paris by the fall of 2007."

At midlife, deciding what you want is not as difficult as deciding if you are willing to pay the price to get it. Sometimes the only way to know is just to do it.

What are your career dreams? You may want to redesign your job to closer match your strengths, or change careers all together. Or, maybe you are ready to approach your boss about a raise. You may be even considering retiring, repackaging yourself, and re-entering the job market, but working in an all-new way. Other career dreams could include:

- Be promoted to...
- Start my own business doing ...
- Receive this award...
- Have more time for family and leisure activities...
- Shift job responsibilities to...

If you need some help identifying your career dreams, these questions will assist you.

What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?

What would you like to leave behind as your legacy?

What qualities would you like to develop, possess, and express?

What is waiting to be born, and what is waiting to die within you?

Where can you best give your gifts to benefit the world? (And what do you need in order to give them freely?)

List your career dreams here.

Now select one dream, reword it into a special goal, and include a deadline. For example, if your career dream is to go to the next level in your organization, your career goal could be “I want to be promoted to director of marketing by September.”

Believe in Your Goal

Of the four steps, believing is the hardest, yet it is the most important. “Beliefs act as magnets pulling to you situations and people that are congruous with your subconscious beliefs,” writes Denise Linn in her book *The Secret Language of Signs*.

Begin by asking who and what can assist you. If your intention is to live and work in Paris by the fall of 2007, find out if your current company has an office in Paris. Do you have international experience? Do you know someone who works there? Inventory your resources, past experiences, and people who can assist you in making your dream a reality.

List those resources, past experiences, and people who can help you reach your goal.

Ask trusted friends and colleagues to support you during your transition and check in with them at least weekly. One client calls her group her “board of directors.” If you were forming your own personal board of directors, who would you invite? Who do you feel is safe, supportive, wise, and understanding? Can you list six names?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

A while back, a dear friend called a “wisdom circle.” Feeling somewhat unclear about the direction her career was taking, she invited eight trusted friends to help her find focus.

“I am inviting your wisdom, your questions, and your silence. I imagine this being a contemplative evening with abundant wisdom available for us all,” the invitation read.

We were asked to follow the format of a Quaker Clearness Process where participants are invited to ask questions but not to give advice, evaluation, comments, or criticism. The intention of the clearness process is to help the person connect with his or her own inner guidance. The person may or may not elect to answer the questions.

We began in silence, forming a physical circle by holding hands. Several minutes later, the questions began. Insight, wisdom, and love soon filled our hearts, and as promised, “abundant wisdom became available to us all.”

Some of the questions included:

1. What would you do if you knew what to do?
2. What were three defining moments in your life, where your life took significant turns?
3. If things keep going the way they are going, will you like where you end up?
4. How would you describe a perfect day? (Give me as much detail as you can.)

Within an hour, the questions began to fade, and my friend felt clearer. More importantly, she knew she was supported. The circle was unbroken and remains so even today.

When I made the decision to expand my business, I invited four friends who were also expanding their businesses to form a “Power Up! Group.” Each week we met to set goals and report our progress. There’s something nice about having a built-in cheerleading squad, as well as three coaches holding you accountable for meeting your goals. Since then, I have begun offering “Power Up! Groups” to people who want to expand their businesses, look for a new job, or change careers.

After we find support, we are ready for the hard part: identifying and minimizing the naysayers. Some naysayers are internal, others external.

Internal naysayers include:

- Inner Critic
- Limiting Beliefs
- Societal and Parental Rules
- Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Our inner critics first appear in childhood when parents, teachers, and other authority figures begin to instruct us on the “right” way to behave.

Oh honey, you really don't want to do that, do you?

Quit being so immature and act like an adult.

Why can't you be more like Tommy?

Left unattended, our inner critics grow up with us and continue to affect our lives in negative ways. They take many shapes and sizes. They can be the needling voice inside us that whines “I can’t,” the part of us that judges others, or the long list of “shoulds” that often controls our lives.

Our inner critics are often incited by limiting beliefs or negative beliefs that we hold about ourselves that are mostly untrue. One limiting belief I hold about myself is that I am unlovable. A friend suffers from the limiting belief that money is the root of all evil, and another feels people cannot be trusted.

Limiting beliefs are often born during a negative life experience. When we can identify this experience, it helps diffuse the inner critic’s power.

Societal and parental rules are those “sayings, shoulds, and musts” we heard over and over and eventually bought into. Some examples are:

Never quit until you have another job.

Men should never take a break from their careers.

Once women have children they never go back to work.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are those statements our inner critics make that begin like this: “If I do this, then that will happen.”

If I take a sabbatical from work, I will never get promoted again.

If I start my own business, I will have to deplete all my savings.

If I change careers, I will have to take a smaller salary.

We can manage our inner critics, limiting beliefs, faulty rule systems, and self-fulfilling prophecies once we are aware of them. Once we have identified the internal naysayers, we can evaluate just how accurate they are. What we’ll find is that in most circumstances, they are false. Sometimes, though, we simply don’t know if they are true or false.

One exercise I learned was to commit all the voices in my head to paper. Without taking time to evaluate, I list all the things that are running through my mind about a particular situation. Then I review each item and write a “T” for true, an “F” for false, and a “DK” for don’t know beside it. In every case, there are few “trues.” Most of the voices are either “falses” or “don’t knows.”

Let’s look at changing careers. My immediate thoughts include:

I will have to take a pay cut.

You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.

I will have to start at the bottom.

I am too old to start all over again.

No one will hire me at my age.

And the list goes on.

I then place a “T”, “F”, or “DK” next to each:

I will have to take a pay cut. DK

You can’t teach an old dog new tricks. F

I will have to start at the bottom. DK

I am too old to start all over again. F

No one will hire me at my age. F

This exercise allows me to see the truth behind any issue. Sometimes, I can uncover the truth by checking in with a trusted friend. Other times, just getting away and taking a walk allows me to gain a new perspective.

I often reword the strongest negative messages into affirmations. For example, instead of "If I take a month-long vacation, I will lose clients," I write, "My clients are loyal and will continue to work with me after I take a month off for vacation."

Let's try it. As fast as you can, write all the thoughts you have around your career goal. Include any limiting beliefs, faulty rule systems, and self-fulfilling prophecies. Once you have completed the list, go back and place a "T" for True, a "F" for False, and a "DK" for Don't Know.

T, F, DK

Review what is true, false, and you don't know. What is the reality?

Asheville-based leadership coach Shonnie Lavender is teaching me how powerful words can be. When I phrase something negatively, she gently suggests how much more powerful--and useful--my statement would be if I reworded it more positively.

"Our language creates our reality, so it's important to think about what we communicate," she explains.

Shonnie has five tips to help harness the power of words to manifest our dreams:

One: Drop should. "*Should* is like a psychological choke chain," she says, "as are *ought to*, *have to*, and *must*." Often the purpose of these words is to punish, belittle, deter, or make someone feel guilty.

Two: Stop trying. Instead of saying, "I'll try to do it," stake your flag and say *yes or no* or negotiate another scenario that works better for you. *Trying*, like using *can* instead of *will*, implies a lack of commitment.

Three: Replace can with will. I admitted to Shonnie that *wills* sometimes make me uncomfortable, but she reassured me that a *will* is not the same as a *have to* or *should*. "You can always change your mind later," she reminded me.

Four: Eliminate always and never. These two words distort our view of reality. In a moment of anger, we might say to our spouse, "You *never* show me any appreciation." While this might be true at times, or even *most* of the time, most likely it is not true *all* of the time.

These words--along with *no one*, *everybody*, and *everyone* --are called absolutes, and absolutes are almost always never true.

Five: Watch where you place your but. The word can erase whatever comes before it. It works positively if the first part of the sentence is negative, but it works negatively if the first part of the sentence is positive. Look at what reordering a sentence around *but* does:

Positive: *He didn't meet his goal, but he sure did work hard, didn't he?*

Negative: *He sure did work hard, but he didn't meet his goal, did he?*

As if the internal naysayers weren't hard enough to deal with, we will most likely have to face external ones too. It may seem strange but sometimes those closest to us are the most resistant to us changing.

I remember when I debated changing careers in my late-thirties, my wife -- now ex-wife -- was not particularly supportive. Many times, those closest to us are invested in us *just the way we are*.

What helps is to listen empathetically to fears they may be experiencing and share why a change is important to us. While not a cure-all, good communication does help win loved ones over to our side.

For some people, the glass is always half empty. These folks are energy suckers and should be avoided if possible, especially during periods of transition. If you can't avoid them, then set clear boundaries. Be clear. State, "What I need from you is...."

Protect your dream by maximizing support systems and minimizing naysayers. Author Jack Hawley offers this sage advice, "(Have) thoughts so strong they act as beliefs, and beliefs strong enough to make things happen."

Once we believe in the possibility of fulfilling our dreams, we are ready to visualize them.

Visualize the Goal

Both athletes and businesspeople say that visualizing a positive outcome is critical to achieving peak performance. Your imagination is one of your best tools in achieving your goals – and it's free.

There are several different ways to visualize. Most people find a quiet spot, close their eyes, and visualize. Some suggest visualizing in detail. If your dream is to conduct workshops in front of large groups of people, visualize the room, the audience, and most importantly the applause at the end of your workshop.

Others instruct us not to focus on what we want, but the emotions it generates. Using the previous example, we would focus on the feelings of pride and accomplishment we would feel after a successful seminar.

Both of these schools of thought are correct. In visualizing any dream, focus on both details and emotion.

Let's try it. Write a short paragraph describing your goal. Include lots of details such as colors, smells, and touch.

What emotions bubbled up for you while writing the above paragraph? Some examples might include pride, joy, and serenity.

Some clients have even created altars to manifest their goals. I have an altar in the entry hall of my house right now that has the *New York Times* Non-Fiction Bestseller listing on it, among other things. Others with a more creative bent will create colorful collages with pictures gathered from magazines that represent their goals, and I know of one man who has the brochure for a Porsche Boxster pinned to the wall of his office.

Actualize the Goal

Now that you have defined, committed to, and visualized your career goal, it's time to actualize it. This exercise will get you started.

What are three action steps that would take you closer to achieving your career goal?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now, commit to a deadline for each action step.

Action Step One: _____

Action Step Two: _____

Action Step Three: _____

Create and commit to an action plan to manifest your dream, but also remain open to what life serves up. Sometimes something better comes along.

Angeles Arrien in her book *The Second Half of Life* reminds us that when we release judgments we begin to accept circumstances rather than resign ourselves to them. When we accept the "what is," we open ourselves to possibilities and outcomes that we may not have ever imagined.

Perhaps theologian John O'Donohue says it best in his poem, "Fluent":

*I would love to live
Like a river flows,
Carried by surprise
Or its own unfolding.*

One of the biggest lessons I am learning at midlife is to flow, not fight. In my twenties and thirties almost everything I accomplished, I accomplished through sheer force of will. While I reached many of my goals, the process wasn't a pleasant one, and I wasn't pleasant to be around.

Flowing not fighting doesn't absolve me of action. Action is still imperative in reaching my goals. In addition to the three action steps we detailed above, a different type of action is called for -- inspired action.

Inspired action requires us to set our intention and then act upon inspiration. Inspiration comes from many sources including hunches, synchronicities, life events, physical sensations, illness, emotions, other people, and dreams. And it requires us to stay attuned to our lives to see if we are on the right path.

Several years after my divorce, and after living in a tiny apartment in an impersonal Atlanta high-rise, I was ready to purchase a house. After house hunting for only a few days, I found the perfect home. I made an offer, and they accepted. The night before I closed on my new home, I had a remarkable dream. I dreamed of sliding down the curved banister of my house out the open front door.

Although I knew the house was the right one, I now sensed that I would live in it only a short time. Within two years, I made the decision to leave Atlanta for Asheville, North Carolina, and sold the house in four days.

I usually know I am headed in the right direction when I am feeling good. When I am not, I need to take note and regroup.

Rarely is it too late for us to realize our dreams. The world is full of late bloomers who have achieved great things later in life. Like alchemists, we can spin our dreams into goals and manifest them.

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