

Reinventing Your Career — When It's Not Just About You

by Herminia Ibarra

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Summary. When you decide to change careers, the important people in your life have a stake in what you do, so it's important to factor them in to your decision process. The challenge is to figure out how to honor your responsibilities to them without allowing yourself to be... [more](#)

“I wish my husband never read your book,” a friend said to me some years ago, referring to *Working Identity*, my book about how people make career changes at mid-career. A successful corporate executive, my friend's husband had been thinking of making a career shift when he was offered a severance package. The package was generous: It paid him well enough that he was able to

explore some of his entrepreneurial ideas for two years, notably one that he'd been dreaming about for years: starting a wine business.

Two years seems like a lot of time. But new careers always take much longer than you expect to take off, and my friend's husband was the sole breadwinner for a family that include three school-age children. To complicate matters, he and his wife had very different risk orientations. She felt the only responsible thing to do with the severance package was to put it in the bank, as insurance against harder days ahead, and then to immediately start looking for a new "bring home the bacon" role. But he felt differently. After decades of hard work, he felt he'd been given a reward that would finally allow him to invest in reinventing his career. Difficult conversations ensued.

No one reinvents themselves in a vacuum. Your significant others have a stake in what you leave behind and move toward. In many ways, explicitly or implicitly, you've already negotiated a deal with those people about who you are and what role you play in your family and community. If you decide to reinvent your career, you threaten to upset that deal, and it makes the people who are closest to you understandably apprehensive, even anxious about what it might mean for the relationship.

When people decide to change careers and are in transition, they often grapple with not just their own sense of loss (as they leave their former professional self behind) but also the expectations of the people around them (many of whom expect them to maintain the status quo or restore what has been lost). As a result, they often adopt a conservative approach, restricting themselves to career options that are close to what they've already done instead of taking a more imaginative and playful approach to their possible selves.

The challenge is to figure out how to honor your responsibilities without allowing yourself to be defined exclusively by the "ought selves" that others impose. It's also important to bear in mind that

you may not get job offers that allow your most logical and responsible selves to come into being. In many ways, the more diversification you can envision, the greater the chances of finding a career solution that both appeals to you personally and fits within your life constraints.

One way to enable yourself to think creatively about what next is to adopt the following two-pronged approach:

1) Create a list of possible selves and then go over it with your primary stakeholder (usually, but not always, your life partner).

Even better, ask that person to make a list of their own and take turns exchanging items from your lists. As the INSEAD professor Jennifer Petriglieri has shown in her research on dual-career couples, this kind of exchange, involving your possible futures and how they come together or diverge, is vital for the viability and growth of your career and your relationship with a life partner. Petriglieri's work shows how vital it is for couples in mid-career and empty-nest transitions to "flirt" with multiple possibilities for who they will become together.

2) Expand the reference group within which you consider and evaluate possibilities.

Although it's natural during difficult times to rely for support on the people who know you best, make sure when you're in transition to share your thoughts and concerns and difficult emotions — confusion, sense of loss, fear, anxiety — with others. It's not fair only to rely on those close to you. Doing so won't even serve you, because their desire to protect you and your family will sometimes push them into conservative mode; they'll become "the voice of reason" at precisely the time you also need to hear a freer and more imaginative case made for growth and self-fulfillment. They may wish to be supportive but they're likely to reinforce — or even desperately try to preserve — the old identity you're trying to shed.

The world-famous CEO coach Marshall Goldsmith recently told me a story about what he learned running small “life discussion” groups for some of the very senior and highly successful people he coaches. Because they are public figures, they often have no peers with whom they can talk openly about their fears and struggles. Marshall’s groups bring together people who share similar situations and can relate to one another’s concerns but who have no personal stake in what the other decides to do, which means they bring no judgement. That combination has been life-altering for many of his participants.

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You likewise will benefit from finding one or a small group of kindred spirits or fellow travelers on your transition journey, especially if you are building this next stage on your own. Look for these people and invest in relationships with them just as much as you’d do when networking for actual roles.

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