

Vocational Counseling's Contribution to the Collaborative Team

by
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"I'm getting divorced and I don't know what's going to happen to my life."
Attorneys in collaborative practices hear these fear-laden words from anxious clients often. The legal aspects of marital dissolution are complicated; often the emotional and psychological issues also pose real barriers toward resolution. Building a collaborative team that includes vocational counselors brings additional resources to address clients' emotional dynamics and support them in making crucial decisions.

Divorce is a new experience for most clients and often disrupts all aspects of both lives. The collaborative team functions as a source of support, information and expertise to advise and assist the parties through this unsettling transition. "The Collaborative process is designed to give the couple as much control over their future and the outcome as feasible, resulting in empowerment for both husband and wife." (Sheff, 2007) Choosing a career and planning to achieve it can be an important experience of self-exploration, decision making, follow-through, and success, all of which can confirm that the client has the power to reshape her life after the major disruption and losses of divorce. (For the purposes of this article, let's assume that we're discussing the future of a wife who hasn't worked in 20 or more years and is ending a long-term marriage. We'll call her "the client.")

The vocational counseling approach, which employs both real-world information and counseling insights, can enable a nonworking or low-earning client to make realistic vocational choices. The process can be helpful as well to the other members of the team who can incorporate the information about career plan timing, vocational activities and potential earnings into the financial, custody and support decisions under discussion. The specific skills that vocational counselors provide as part of the collaborative process include:

- expertise in counseling
- experience in guiding a client in gathering information
- understanding of how decisions are made
- thorough knowledge of employment possibilities

The vocational counselor's guidance can help a client gather information, organize her thoughts, and become aware of her interests and values as they

emerge – and all these processes support the client as her self-efficacy¹ increases. The client will see that she is in charge of many aspects of her life, a realization that can be a major change from the feeling that the control of her life has been in someone else's hands. Her new experience of self-efficacy can empower a client to reach settlement rather than holding on out of a feeling that she has to keep control of the few aspects of her life left to her. The vocational plan as part of a collaborative divorce starts with self-discovery and becomes the foundation of a new life path that is hers alone. Though often challenging and sometimes filled with uncertainty, a career plan is a gift the client gives herself with the support of the collaborative team.

The empowerment process can be part of a shift from an external locus of control to an internal one. With an external locus of control, an individual believes that her behavior and its outcomes are guided by fate, luck, someone else, or other external circumstances; with an internal locus of control, the individual believes that her behavior and the outcomes in her life are guided by her personal decisions and efforts. (Neil, 2008) Generally, research shows that people do better in motivation and achievement with an internal locus of control; that is, it is psychologically healthy to perceive that one has control over those things which one is capable of influencing.

Decision-Making in Four Domains: Ending the "Swirl"

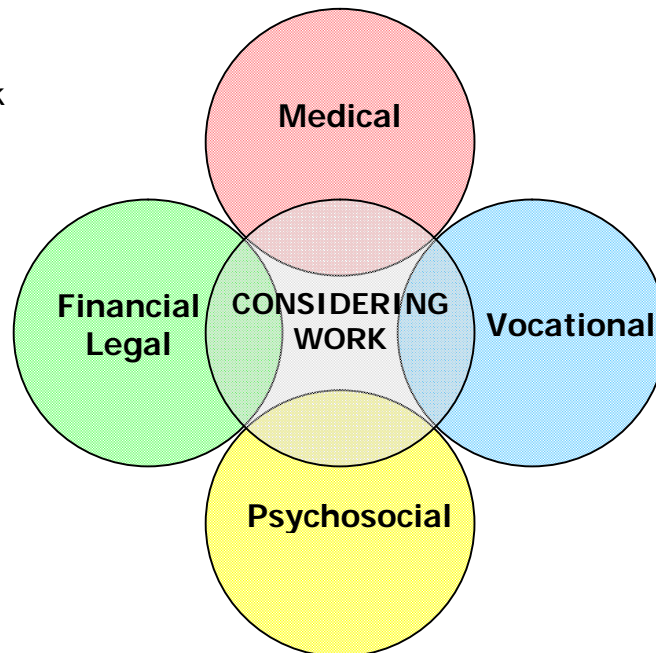
The client in a divorce often feels that all the stable elements in her life have come untethered, that she's floating unanchored in a swirling mass of decisions and concerns with little control over the outcome and little influence on the direction her life will take. The vocational counselor can explain that considering her future work means taking into account factors in her life in four major areas or domains. Guiding her decision making in an organized, structured process with distinct divisions helps the client interrupt her swirling thoughts. She sees that all her concerns will be heard, that realistic planning can happen, and that she can have support to make sense of it all. As she breaks the swirl into manageable parts, she sees how to take each decision step by step.

A holistic approach to vocational counseling requires looking at all four domains, not just the vocational side of the client's life. Thinking solely about vocational concerns - who's hiring or what training programs are available or what skills the client can develop - is too narrow initially. While all these may come into consideration as a plan develops, the beginning of career planning must take into

¹ "Self-efficacy" is a concept (Bandura, 1986) that refers to a person's belief that she is capable of behaving in a way that will produce the desired result. The concept incorporates both the belief that actions can have a specific effect and that the person is capable of performing the actions. Thus a person may believe the general proposition that stopping smoking is beneficial to health, but her sense of self-efficacy exists only to the degree she believes she is capable of stopping smoking.

account the person as a whole, and her concerns in all aspects of her life. The four domains include the following factors, and may include others as needed. (Goldblum & Kohlenberg, 2005)

Figure 1
Domains for
Considering Work



- Medical: diagnoses, prognoses, medications, restrictions in activities, physical limitations
- Financial/legal: income, health insurance, support, resources for retirement, debt
- Psychosocial: psychological diagnoses, prognoses, medications, restrictions in activities, limitations; children's ages and needs; social support networks and constraints, housing, cultural factors
- Vocational: education, work history, job seeking skills, interests, values, hobbies, geographic constraints and resources, transportation, salaries and wages, local labor market conditions

Medical - For most divorcing clients, medical issues do not need to influence vocational planning. Addressing the medical domain can be a swift check-in about exercise and medications. For some clients, however, this domain is the major concern. For them, a thorough look at the medical limitations they, or their children, have is the essential first step in making vocational plans. Medical barriers may preclude any vocational planning at all. Often the vocational

counselor's questions may prompt the first full evaluation of the extent of a disability that was hidden within the structure of the marriage.

Financial - The realities of income, housing, support and resources for retirement have a significant influence on motivation toward work and the types of employment structures to consider. For instance, the client who realistically needs to have a steady income with health benefits may not find that self-employment can be her first or immediate option. The vocational counselor works with the financial specialist and attorney to help the client to collect her financial information and to look seriously at what she will need to do to contribute to her financial future. This may require her to confront information she has not wanted to know, or to work with numbers she has been avoiding or to which she was not allowed access until the collaborative process began. Informed support from the financial specialist helps her to overcome her fears and reluctance, and vocational counseling links the figures to actions and career decisions. Most clients feel better when they have actual figures to see, rather than making fearful assumptions about uncertain amounts.

Psychosocial - Psychosocial issues often present considerable barriers to decision making. The client may have spent most of the years of her adulthood responding to the needs of her husband and children, ignoring or learning not to pay attention to her own. When the vocational counselor asks about her interests, she may respond, "I don't know. I know what I don't like, but I don't know what I do like. I've always done what my family needs me to do. I don't even know how to figure out what I want."

Clients sometimes know what they prefer, but have little experience of using this knowledge as the impetus for action. For many, self-awareness is held in abeyance, not used to guide their lives but put aside in deference to the needs of other family members. The vocational process supports the self-exploration that will let the client reconnect with her own desires and make decisions on the basis of them.

Other psychological issues may function as vocational limitations if they are serious enough. Depression, low self esteem, lack of confidence, fear and anxiety, and phobias about driving are fairly commonly seen in people going through divorce. The vocational process can include a structured and gradual re-entry into the work world which can both increase work-related skills and function as a safe work adjustment plan. Success in school activities can alleviate many of the effects of social isolation and feelings of inadequacy.

The thoroughness of vocational interviews can allow the client to talk about psychological events of vocational and emotional importance that are so associated with shame that they may never have been exposed. Simple

questions such as, "Why did you change high schools in your junior year?" may elicit the honest answer, "My uncle was molesting me and I had to move out of the house." Another question, "How was school for you?" can open a discussion of a learning disability that has major implications for career choice, but was never revealed to the husband because of a deep shame. At this point, the vocational counselor can discuss referrals to an outside professional if further care is needed to help with unresolved problems.

The failed marital relationship and complex custody arrangements often infiltrate the vocational planning process. It may take the client some time to get used to the shift in the couple's power relations and recognize the opportunity to make independent decisions. She may say, "I can't do that; he wouldn't let me" without understanding that her career future is hers to plan. Covering fears about her ability to earn under the mothering role with which she is comfortable, the client may limit her work options, saying, "I have to be at home for my children every afternoon. That's the way we decided we would raise the children and I don't want it to change just because we're getting a divorce." Counseling can help her acknowledge her fears and see that a caring parent might want to function as a role model, demonstrating a competent adult female in the work world. Discussing the financial consequences of delaying work may prompt practical decision making.

Vocational - Addressing the concerns in the other three domains allows the client's self-knowledge to increase enough to use her vocational interests and values to underpin her career choice. Coaching on resumes, interviewing, information gathering and job seeking, when needed, helps to update the client's rusty skills in facing employers and increase her confidence in confronting the work world. Vocational counselors facilitate the client's ability to distinguish between a mild interest and a passion, between a hobby and activities that can function as the basis for a viable vocational plan. Looking honestly at the client's skills and personal qualities can indicate whether a self-employment idea could become a reality.

Counseling and Personality Influences in the Collaborative and Vocational Process

The four domains organize an understanding of the external and psychological circumstances of the client's life. Understanding personality types allows the collaborative team to perceive some internal influences on the client's style of functioning. For different personality types, the dissolution process and career choice present varying challenges. In vocational counseling, it is often helpful to use a personality assessment instrument to clarify the client's style of functioning. Thorough interpretation of the results helps her see how her style can help her choose an appropriate work setting and career tasks. Similar insights can be

used in the collaborative interactions, as suggested by Elizabeth Arnold. (Arnold, 2007)

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)², a commonly used assessment instrument, designates 16 personality types with a four-letter code which shows a preference for opposing styles in each of four factors. A major result of looking at personality types is the understanding that other people really do see the world differently, and that these differing perspectives are legitimate and deeply rooted in personality structures, and do not stem just from rudeness, inattention, or misunderstanding. There is no “best” type to be, although some types occur more frequently in the population and some occur more frequently in particular occupations. Most people have some characteristics on both sides of each preference continuum.

The vocational process challenges each preference differently and the dynamics of the collaborative process may also reflect the personality preferences of the divorcing couple and their attorneys. Here are some possible influences of personal type on both sets of activities.

Myers Briggs Type Indicator <i>(incidence in the population)</i>	
<p>E Extraversion People who prefer Extraversion tend to focus on the outer world of people and things.</p> <p>70%</p>	<p>I Introversion People who prefer Introversion tend to focus on the inner world of ideas and impressions.</p> <p>30%</p>
<p>S Sensing People who prefer Sensing tend to focus on the present and on concrete information gained from their senses.</p> <p>70%</p>	<p>N Intuition People who prefer Intuition tend to focus on the future, with a view toward patterns and possibilities.</p> <p>30%</p>
<p>T Thinking People who prefer Thinking tend to base their decisions primarily on logic and on objective analysis of cause and effect.</p> <p><i>Males: 66%; Females: 34%</i></p>	<p>F Feeling People who prefer Feeling tend to base their decisions primarily on values and on subjective evaluations of person-centered concerns.</p> <p><i>Females: 66%; Males: 34%</i></p>
<p>J Judging People who prefer Judging tend to like</p>	<p>P Perceiving People who prefer Perceiving tend to</p>

² Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and MBTI are registered trademarks of Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.
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a planned and organized approach to life and prefer to have things settled.	like a flexible and spontaneous approach to life and prefer to keep their options open.
55-60%	40-45%

MBTI Preferences and Their Influences

E-I Preferences

E(Extraversion) - draw energy from interacting with other people and observing the world

In the Vocational process

- May see writing thoughts down as arduous “homework”
- Avoid working alone; isolation feels like punishment
- Find busy job settings stimulating and exhilarating

In the Collaborative process

- May enjoy the 4-way team discussion process
- Prefer to talk things out to discover what they are thinking
- Find assignments to do tasks alone difficult

I(Introversion) - refresh their energies by being alone and may find social interactions draining

In the Vocational process

- May like to think about vocational goals ahead of time and write thoughts down to bring to meetings
- May find noisy job settings and teamwork intrusive or exhausting
- Prefer working alone for at least part of the day

In the Collaborative process

- May prefer to have a written outline of what will be discussed ahead of time
- May find it difficult to express ideas in a group and prefer one-on-one discussions
- May be quiet and want to have time to think before acting

S-N Preferences

S(Sensing) – understand through direct experience of what is now and has been

In the Vocational process

- Prefer to observe or experience concretely something in which they will invest, so may have to observe or try out work, intern or take a class, before choosing a career
- Prefer jobs with established procedures, precedent, templates, or structured methods
- Good at finishing a task and attending to details

In the Collaborative process

- May find new situations uncomfortable and so prefer clarity about what to expect
- May want to hear facts and details first, rather than an overview or philosophy of the process
- Oriented to the present and past, rather than to the future; may want to hold onto the past and know exactly what will happen before moving

N(iNtuitive) - imagine alternatives to the way things are now

In the Vocational Process

- Enjoy doing new things and in new ways; value change and imagination
- Good at starting; may have difficulty attending to details to finish a task.
- Independent, inventive self-starter; may not use available precedents

In the Collaborative process

- Comfortable with spontaneity and interested in new ideas
- Interested in initially understanding the underlying patterns or whole concepts
- Use and understand metaphors, analogies and abstract language

T-F Preferences

T(Thinking) - approach decisions systematically, sequentially, logically

In the Vocational Process

- Often use method, pro/con lists, and sequential thinking to reach conclusions
- May tend to ignore their own preferences and feelings for 'practical' concerns such as earnings
- Analyze and criticize others and accept criticism as feedback

In the Collaborative process

- May not recognize their own or others' feelings or think that emotions could take precedence over logic
- May be impatient with delays due to emotional needs; may characterize others as irrational or illogical
- Comfortable with outlines, following steps, checklists

F(Feeling) – approach decisions through subjective impressions and emotions

In the Vocational Process

- Perceive and value their own and others' feelings
- Seek support and encouragement and offer sympathetic responses
- Value harmonious relationships at work

In the Collaborative process

- Find disagreement uncomfortable and may agree just to avoid conflict
- Value their own and others' feelings most as the criteria for decision-making and may feel disrespected if feelings are not given priority
- May tend to look at the immediate emotional impact rather than long term impact

- May find outlines and agendas intrusive or cumbersome rather than helpful

J-P Preferences

J(Judging) – make decisions easily and quickly

In the Vocational Process

- May find the exploration process uncomfortably open-ended and just want “the answer”
- Decide using basic amount of information
- Value closure and coming to a conclusion

In the Collaborative process

- May reach a decision sooner rather than later and hold it firmly
- May be impatient with an inclusive process
- May prefer to avoid last minute changes after a decision is made

P(Perceiving) – keep options open and make decisions slowly

In the Vocational Process

- May feel trapped by a need to make a final decision
- May need a career plan with many open options at the end
- May need much more information to reach a decision
- May feel that a 9-5 job is constraining and need a more flexible work schedule
- May do well in a career with clear guidelines to simplify frequent decisions

In the Collaborative process

- May feel rushed or pressured to make a decision before they are ready; may postpone making a decision
- May feel their options are precluded by others' ability or willingness to make decisions quickly
- May not be able to decide about categories and have difficulty organizing
- May make choices impulsively without information, by accepting the default option
- May need a prescribed range of options and guidance in choosing

Since Collaborative Practice is a method of resolving disputes, and the object is to reach a settlement jointly, personality differences that influence how people interact in groups (E/I), imagine the future (S/N), attend to feelings (T/F), follow a structure or reach decisions within a designated time frame (J/P) all may become factors in the process.

The vocational process which adds to the client's self-knowledge of her personality style may allow her to make her needs known to herself and to the collaborative team. Empowered to make a career decision by her discovery of herself, she will also be able to bring information to the settlement discussions and a sense of control over her life and her future.

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