

A Critique of Career Self-Reliance

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Background and Definition

Career self-reliance is successfully being marketed across America as the new paradigm for empowering workers. (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). Does this claim hold up to scrutiny?

The globalization of the economy has radically changed how corporations do business and has forced individuals to redefine their work lives. Private industry is cutting costs through such massive restructuring measures as down-sizing, re-organizing and out-sourcing. These practices have resulted in less job stability for individual employees. No longer are there guarantees of long-term employment, salary increases and upward mobility within an organization. Nor can employees now assume that the organizations they work for will automatically provide health and vacation benefits. A new social “contract” has emerged between employers and employees that reflects the current economic conditions. The old contract based on mutual loyalty between organization and workers has broken down and been replaced by one of unilateral convenience. Accordingly, many career consultants now teach clients a set of attitudes and strategies to help them better cope with the changing social contract. These are summed up in a new model of work called ‘career self-reliance.’ (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994).

Career self-reliance was originally defined as “the attitude of being self-employed, whether inside or outside an organization.” (Collard, Epperheimer & Saign, 1996). The Career Action Center, an independent, non-profit career center based in Cupertino, CA which coined the term, later modified their definition to make it more palatable to the consumer: “the ability to actively manage one’s work life and learning in a rapidly changing environment.” (Collard, Epperheimer & Saign, 1996). In either definition the underlying assumption is clear - that the individual must think of himself as his own corporation.

Proponents of career self-reliance teach clients that it is important for them to adapt to change. Clients need to change their mindset from job security to career resilience. Scott Cook, chairman of Intuit, and champion of career self-reliance, says that workers should no longer expect their employers to take care of them, but now must take personal responsibility for managing their work lives. “What we are doing now is returning to what we have always known as a country: we create our own future...we are in charge of our own destiny - whether it be a company, financial security, or one’s career.” (Career Action Center, 1996). David Korten, author and president of the People-Centered Development Forum, observed this trend in a 1995 issue of Fortune magazine that advised college graduates to view their job search as though they were

already self-employed, because “success will come to those who look out for number one.” (Korten, 1996). The implicit message here is that to be responsible adults, clients must align themselves with this way of thinking.

Career self-reliance currently influences a wide spectrum of clients who turn to career consultants for guidance during stressful periods of work transition. All across America, in outplacement or career management consulting firms, university career centers, fortune 100 corporations, independent career centers and private practice, some career consultants teach this model without questioning its ethical assumptions or implications. (Collard, Epperheimer & Saign, 1996). Nor have the originators of career self-reliance demonstrated that it is the most effective strategy to help clients navigate the marketplace. Because many employers no longer accept the role of providing job security, many career consultants believe that career self-reliance will empower their clients to provide their own security.

Career Self-Reliance Principles

Career self-reliance does contain some useful principles. For example, the individual is the primary architect of her work life. She is responsible for the design and direction of her career. (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). The personal responsibility dimension is important because it fosters a feeling of competence and control over one’s life. It helps the client cultivate her own inner resources to solve problems. Taking personal responsibility also encourages active thinking about what kind of work would be most satisfying, rather than just reacting to local opportunities. Career self-reliance can even stimulate the creative synthesis of unique kinds of work, such as portfolio careers, where individuals sell various skills to multiple employers.

Another useful principle is the emphasis on continuous learning (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). As certain careers become more specialized, it is wise for clients to stay current in their fields through continuing education courses, certificate and degree programs, and relationships with mentors. Coaching clients to create a professional research and development plan can prevent career stagnation and help clients thrive in a changing marketplace.

A third pillar of career self-reliance is teaching clients flexibility in dealing with organizations and managing their work lives (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). With employment patterns no longer predictable, clients must be willing to stretch beyond the boundaries of their job descriptions and take on new tasks. Clients must also understand that their work lives won’t return to “normal.” Change is here to stay. Therefore, the most successful workers will be those who can best accommodate the changing needs of their employers while keeping a clear sense of self and direction.

A Paradigm Shift?

Before exploring the deeper ethical issues raised by this model, let us consider how career self-reliance currently gets billed to clients and how it measures up to the billing. Proponents argue that the model represents a paradigm shift, a radically new approach to thinking about work (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). This is simply not the case. The concept of “rugged individualism,” or “every man for himself,” an underlying assumption of the model, has been a cornerstone of U.S. economic life for the last two centuries. Yet, the purported “newness” of the model is precisely what gives it extra momentum and power over clients, who may not know the historical trends of the marketplace.

Neither does the model’s insistence on adaptation to organizations’ changing needs mark a paradigm shift. Adaptability is hardly a change in fundamental assumptions about the world of work. There has always been an emphasis on worker flexibility. Consider the mobility of American workers in response to organization relocation in the past 50 years, or the shift that workers experienced in the change from piecework to assembly-line production. Workers have always had to be flexible because they have always been economically dependent on their employers for their livelihood. The same holds true today, even when workers choose to form contracts with multiple organizations. The adaptability tenet of career self-reliance is better described as a restatement of existing principles in response to the shock of accelerated change.

The “values-driven” tenet of career self-reliance is also considered by its originators as radically new (Collard, Epperheimer & Saign, 1996). “Values-driven” in this model means helping clients discern their priorities and using this information to choose appropriate work content and work settings. Back in 1909 the prevailing career counseling model was the “trait and factor” approach developed by Frank Parsons. (Brown, Brooks & Associates, 1990). This model assumed that workers and jobs each had a unique set of characteristics or traits. Early career counselors tried to match workers with appropriate jobs using these characteristics. The closer the match between personal characteristics and job requirements, the greater the likelihood of job productivity and satisfaction. Similarly, in the 1990s, values clarification is strongly emphasized to match clients with suitable occupations.

Rather than being a new paradigm, career self-reliance is a collection of old, albeit partly useful approaches, re-packaged to help clients cope with a looser social contract between employers and workers. How, then, does it stack up as a useful counseling model to assist clients? While career self-reliance contains some valuable precepts, it also has serious, unexamined flaws.

Blaming the Individual

Career self-reliance assumes that difficulty in navigating the marketplace and actualizing career goals is a personal problem rather than considering that it might be a cultural or societal one. Is this a helpful or a necessary assumption? In my experience, many clients already think there is something wrong with them for not being able to succeed by the new, implicit rules of the marketplace. For such clients career self-reliance reinforces their self doubt because it promotes the dominant value of competitive individualism and fails to help them understand their particular circumstances in a larger social, economic and psychological context. They are pushed to view themselves in isolation from a larger whole. If clients were instead taught to place their difficulties within a broader economic and social picture, they might stop blaming themselves, reach out for help, and offer support to others. Furthermore, if clients stopped seeing themselves as deficient they might question the current social contract that threatens their own economic viability.

Isolation

The language of career self-reliance reinforces the assumption that “I’m in this alone. It’s me against the world. There is no ‘we’ here, only ‘me.’ ” Yet, as private industry consultant David Whyte asserts, “We are all desperate to belong to something larger than ourselves.” (Whyte, 1994). The need for connection is fundamental for all human beings. Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of human needs and found that the emergence of self-actualization, “the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is,” rests upon some prior satisfaction of belonging needs. (Maslow, 1987). Career self-reliance, in emphasizing an attitude of being self-employed, asks us to abandon this need for connection in favor of pursuing our self-interests. Cliff Hakim, author and career consultant, epitomizes the movement towards self-interest by encouraging workers to focus on their own desires first. “What do I want” is the first element of his self-employed creed (Brown, 1994). The flaw of this reasoning is that the need for self-actualization is inextricably intertwined with the need for belonging.

Whyte and Maslow illustrate the need for a larger, more comprehensive view of human nature than that admitted by career self-reliance. Career self-reliance favors a theoretical set of limited human traits that would succeed optimally in the current market situation. The creators of career self-reliance insist on this imaginary view of human nature, regardless of whether anyone genuinely possesses these traits in sufficient abundance to sustain a life-time career based on them. Career self-reliance reinforces a split between our natural, human inclinations towards community and the way we must conduct ourselves in order to survive in the marketplace.

Objectification of Others and Self

Proponents of career self-reliance might argue that the model is not isolating because it embraces the concept of building relationships through professional networking (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). Professional networking is necessary and useful, but does not fill the need for deeper connection. In fact, networking is not only ineffective in countering isolation, but reinforces it by encouraging people to objectify one another. Networking is based on the assumption of the bargained-for exchange. “I am associating with you primarily for what I can get from you; for instance, connections with important people, valuable job tips or information, and help in accomplishing my goals.” A 1997 article on networking in *Working Woman* magazine encouraged its readers to not just trade business cards, but also spend “quality time figuring out which people can help you achieve your goals.” (Shroff, 1997). In other words, career self-reliance trains us to interact with others for what we can get from them. If the motivation for human connection is largely selfish, it creates a climate of distrust and thereby reinforces social isolation (Lerner, 1996). Networking is, on some level, the antithesis of an emotionally supportive community (as opposed to a purely business-based community) and that’s what career self-reliance promotes.

Career self-reliance also objectifies people by coaching them to view themselves as commodities. The common phrase of many career consultants is “sell yourself!” People learn how to better market themselves and their skills so they will be more attractive to employers. When people are trained to commodify themselves, they come to believe that their primary value as human beings is the degree to which they are productive. Yet most long to be recognized for who they are, not for what they produce (Lerner, 1996). Career self-reliance seen in this light is terribly demeaning. What happens when people can no longer produce or are temporarily too deeply affected by personal troubles? Furthermore, what happens to those clients who cannot market themselves because they have neither the appropriate temperament nor the inclination? Career self-reliance creates a double-bind for clients: they either commodify themselves to succeed in the marketplace or opt out of the system, knowing full well they are surrendering any chance to get ahead.

Dismissal of Loyalty as Valuable

Because workers understand on a primary level that the organizations they work for have no more loyalty to them, they repay this lack of commitment in kind, by leaving their employers whenever the possibility of a better deal arises somewhere else. The result: high worker turnover. Some employers may prefer the new social contract which provides short-term savings by using workers on an as-needed basis. However, these employers ignore the long-term consequences of opting for this strategy. In 1997, according to one national outplacement firm, the average turnover of employees in Silicon Valley was once a year. How can organizations successfully build a vision, implement it and remain functional if their employees are not committed? Retention of core employees is ironically becoming a key issue for corporate survival.

(Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). Furthermore, the mutual lack of commitment translates into higher operations costs for corporations due to the continual need to train employees. Career self-reliance increases this instability by encouraging workers and employers to focus solely on their own interests.

Harming Client Effectiveness

Career self-reliance enshrines the current tendency toward a loosening social contract as the ethical and motivational foundation of how clients should view their work lives. Re-organizations, down-sizings and out-sourcing make most people feel anxious, off-balance, alienated, depressed and isolated. People who feel this way find it more difficult to obtain work because they cannot present themselves to an employer in the best possible light. The grief and anxiety people experience from restructuring seems to run counter to the very goal that career self-reliance tries to reach, namely, self-reliance! Yes, down-sizing is a current reality and cannot be ignored. But rather than shrugging this off as “the new way” and telling clients to simply move on, we need a “new social context to legitimize and deal with the grief” (Pascale 1996) associated with job loss. Unfortunately, our society has not yet acknowledged that job loss is one of the “most painful human experiences - ranking alongside divorce and death of a loved one.” (Pascale, 1996). Helping clients integrate their normal human reactions to this kind of market environment takes time. The current tendency to blame clients for not presenting a self-confident picture of themselves immediately after a layoff is counterproductive and based on unrealistic expectations. Yet, in my experience, career self-reliance frequently leads some practitioners to such inappropriate client guidance.

Assumption of Scarcity

Career self-reliance stresses the assumption of scarcity, that there is not enough to go around and only the top performers will survive (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). This is a Darwinian view of the work world (Korten, 1996). A model that emphasizes scarcity fuels anxieties for some clients. When clients’ level of stress and anxiety exceeds their coping skills they will have a greater tendency to act from this state of mind rather than relate to it. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). The danger for these clients is that they might: 1) make inappropriate career choices by making premature decisions; 2) become less effective in managing their job search; and 3) carry their anxieties over into other areas of their lives.

Double Messages

By way of an internal contradiction, career self-reliance reinforces an already dangerous tendency in clients. Clients frequently come into our offices asking “What *should* I do?” Or, “how can I fit into the economy?” They almost never ask “What parts of myself do I want to cultivate?” The career self-reliance model emphasizes finding one’s core values. Yet, why should clients discern their core values if they are simultaneously expected to change themselves continuously to thrive in the marketplace? According to career self-reliance, the top performers will be those who can adapt to the employers’ changing needs.

(Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994). The model issues clients contradictory instructions: “Find out who you are, then ignore these insights and mold yourself to the employers’ needs.” The model thereby again runs the danger of harming clients’ morale, and consequently their effectiveness at work: it teaches clients that their value as human beings is the degree to which they can contort themselves into the best possible human product.

Author David Korten neatly sums up the current market place in this way: “In the global free-market economy, caring, loyalty and moderation are out. Individual self-interest, materialism and opportunism are in.” (Korten, 1996). Career self-reliance aligns with the latter view by providing justification and rationale for a looser social contract between organizations and employees, promoting competitive individualism and belief in the meritocracy. All this seems to suggest that career self-reliance may undermine the clients it purports to serve.

Alternative Considerations

As career consultants, how can we step outside the current career self-reliance framework and re-envision a new model of working with clients? After all, many corporations are now experimenting with changes in the social contract with their employees. Career counselors have a professional responsibility to help clients manage the difficult situations that arise from these developments. But the career self-reliance model is fraught with pitfalls that can harm client effectiveness. How, then, can we promote the highest ethical standards of the profession, draw on the strengths of career self-reliance, yet avoid those pitfalls? I do not have full answers, but I propose the following considerations and invite career consultants to think critically about the issues raised in this article as springboards for deeper discussion.

The current model says that the individual is responsible for her own failure and success in actualizing career goals. Workers buy into this ideology and see themselves as deficient for expecting a more humane corporate environment. Clients have not always seen themselves as they do today. Author Michael Lerner observes that during the Depression people understood that their misfortune was due to an economic condition brought on by forces they had no control over. The fact that this is not happening today “is not a change in economic facts, but a change in the degree to which people feel isolated and unable to believe that we could be part of some larger ‘we’ in which we all cared for one another.” (Lerner, 1996). Lerner suggests another way of relating to ourselves and one another, an ethos based on caring and awareness of common interest. If career consultants adopted this ethos, we would actively discourage clients from blaming themselves when they get stuck in the career planning process and encourage them to build relationships that are not only based on professional roles. This would reinforce the development of the “we” mentality that Lerner is referring to.

The implication of the current ideology is that corporations have much less responsibility towards their employees. This might seem true because we are living today in an economic climate of unrestrained corporate decision making and prioritization of bottom-line thinking. Some might ask why should successful corporations look out for workers' best interests if the reverse is not true? The answer is economics. Corporations simply cannot afford to pay higher operation costs to replace core employees. Career self-reliance encourages workers and employers alike to behave in ways that are economically detrimental to both.

Encourage Human Value

Career consultants might encourage human value, rather than objectification of self and others. There is an important distinction between marketing your skills to an employer and marketing yourself. The latter encourages devaluation of self when setbacks arise, which inevitably leads to morale problems that make it more difficult for clients to search for work. Richard Pascale (1996), consultant on corporate change, agrees that "job loss and employment insecurity is an inherently painful experience that triggers a loss of self-esteem and social identity." The loss of self-esteem occurs because the other domains (family and community) where people have traditionally anchored themselves have weakened. (Pascale, 1996). One way career consultants could counter this tendency is to encourage clients to cultivate other interests, such as hobbies and activities that promote a sense of well-being, during their job search campaign. This strategy reminds clients that their larger identity is not solely tied to the outcome of their efforts and helps improve their job search because they are taking better care of themselves.

Pool Resources

Career consultants might also advise their clients to pool resources with others, for instance, by forming job search groups that provide emotional support and generate new work ideas. Some consultants have established such groups successfully. Groups can be a highly effective way of breaking the isolation that is commonly felt after a layoff. The point here is to promote real connections between people, rather than advocating the development of a self-help marketplace where people relate solely on the basis of professional roles.

Promote Self-Actualization

Career consultants should encourage their clients to self-actualize rather than self-contort. This could be achieved by helping clients more deeply explore their own inclinations, dreams, and goals. This may mean rethinking the current model of career counseling that relies heavily on the administration and interpretation of inventories to make career choices, an extension of the old Frank Parsons trait-factor approach (Brown, Brooks & Associates, 1990.) Although information uncovered through inventories can provide clients with a framework for self-understanding, they are not a substitute for good counseling that facilitates both deep

inner exploration and action planning. Relying less on inventories might change career counseling practice from a few quick fix sessions to an ongoing developmental process. The advantage is that clients may come to understand what they truly want and develop the motivation to go after it. Career consultants could also play a role in this stage by helping clients identify and overcome barriers and convert their dreams into career realities. For instance, career consultants could educate clients about more creative alternatives to work such as split positions, part-time professional work, portfolio careers and consulting positions. Many are already doing so.

Support Real Connection

While the current model enshrines competitive individualism which increases isolation, a more progressive model would encourage genuine connectedness, beyond professional roles. One step in this direction is changing the way in which we talk to clients. The language we use can have a profound impact on how clients think about themselves and operate in the marketplace. For instance, the word ‘career’ not only suggests linear thinking about work-life, but also fails to accurately reflect the multitude of permutations in which Americans work today. Similarly, the very term, self-reliance negates our fundamental need to be with and support each other. When we begin to think and talk differently, our clients will follow suit.

Are these notions at odds with corporate goals, and therefore overly idealistic? I believe not. Corporations have an interest in fostering the development and retention of valuable workers who have both a strong sense of self and a sense of community. Corporations, after all, rely on community values like loyalty. High worker turnover is expensive. Judi Neal, a professor of management at the University of New Haven, notes that “the old ways don’t work anymore. Companies are recognizing that it is difficult to accomplish much with a demoralized, frightened work force. They want to empower the staff.” (Stern, 1996). As more career consultants understand how the current economic climate affects their clients’ psyches, they too will want to empower their clients by encouraging them to live a life they can truly call their own, rather than simply adapt to the marketplace. Smart corporations will follow that lead.

We cannot foresee the future, but given that the social contract has shifted back and forth in the past, career consultants would be well advised themselves not just to react to current tendencies, but to take a broader view and address clients’ deeper concerns.

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