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Hold onto Your Hats: The Multi-faceted Role of Career Practitioners During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Michelle Tullier

Job loss, career struggles, and financial insecurity are familiar client challenges for career development practitioners, but the COVID-19 pandemic compounds our clients' lives with medical, mental health, and logistical concerns. We must rely on all of our training, experience, and compassion to shepherd clients through these difficult times, while being impacted by the crisis ourselves. While we are not on the front lines, we are integral to the well-being of those whose work lives are affected.

The Hats We Wear

Rising to this challenge requires that we take a deep look at the sub-roles that constitute our overall role. The "hats" we wear vary depending on our specific practice areas, ethical considerations, and what our credentials permit us to call ourselves. We go by titles such as career counselor, coach, consultant, facilitator, specialist, or others, but regardless of title, we all wear multiple hats that reflect duties, philosophies, and purpose. These "HATS" are: Helper/Healer, Advisor, Teacher, and Strategist.

The Helper/Healer Hat

There is always an element of helper and healer in the work we do. We aim to help clients make good decisions, reach their goals, and attain greater fulfillment and happiness. Blustein's (2006) psychology of working model provides insight into how profoundly our clients may be affected by this crisis and in need of even more help emotionally. His taxonomy is built around three core functions of work:

Working as a means for survival and power

"Working provides people with a means of obtaining the necessary goods and services to survive and to enhance their social and economic status" (p.68). During COVID-19, major industries are suddenly crashing, lay-offs are rising, hiring freezes are put in place, and small businesses are floundering. Survival and power have always been just beyond the reach of marginalized members of our society, but now a much broader swath of our population is grasping to hold on.

Working as a means of social connection

This element refers to the way that "...working facilitates contact with the broader social fabric of our culture... historically and currently, work has functioned to foster direct contact and meaningful connections with others" (pp. 88-89). Our clients may be sheltering-in-place, quarantined, or keeping a social distance. Work is being conducted virtually in all but essential businesses. Casual break room conversations and after-work happy hour gatherings become video or phone conferences. COVID-19 is making avenues for social connection more tenuous, or at a minimum, more logistically complicated.

Working as a means of self-determination

Work that offers opportunities for autonomy, developing competency, expressing one's interests, and values alignment may enhance motivation and sense of agency over one's work destiny and satisfaction. Our work shapes

who we are, and when conditions are right, we are able to shape our work. During this crisis, people are experiencing feelings of helplessness and lack of control. Our clients, and we, are at the mercy of a tiny virus cell. What does this realization do to our clients' sense of self-efficacy around their work lives?

All three of the psychological elements of work are in jeopardy for many people now. We must help clients tap their reserves of resilience, adaptability, and perseverance. We can ensure they have access to support, and we should collaborate with, and refer out to when called for, mental health providers, and hotline resources.

The Advisor Hat

No matter which areas of emphasis make up our professional practice, there is likely to be an element of advising in our work. Academic and career advisors in secondary and higher education settings provide a helpful example for this. Among the resources of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, Wilcox (2016) provides an overview of three longstanding approaches to advising. These are by no means the only approaches to advising, but they are particularly relevant.

Prescriptive advising

This is a basic approach to advising in which the advisor takes an active role in guiding the student, or client. We might say, for example, "Theresa, based on your assessment results and our discussions, I thought you might be interested in the health services fields working with the elderly. Have you looked at the resources offered by the Council on Aging?"

As industries, occupations, and professions are disrupted due to COVID-19, careers professionals may need to be more prescriptive than we are usually comfortable being. It is important that we stay on top of business and industry insights, recruiting and hiring developments, and how roles are shifting as work becomes more virtual.

Intrusive advising

Despite the negative connotations of this name, intrusive advising can be a positive intervention. In academic settings, this may mean reaching out to an at-risk student long before he or she fails the class. In our work, this could mean calling a client who is not scheduled to see you again for another couple of few weeks and ask how the job search is going.

Developmental advising

This approach is likely to feel the closest to what most of us already do as career counselors or coaches. We ensure that information, resources, and strategies are aligned with a bigger-picture view of a person's overall life systems, context, and development.

"Petra, would you like to use your family genogram to explore career options? It would match your goal of being connected to your heritage." Petra might then be reminded that her uncle successfully bounced back from the hit his executive career took during the Great Recession of 2008. Or, she might see the rich lives other family members have led, including multiple careers, and gain some perspective on how her career is not doomed simply because her summer internship is called off.

The Teacher Hat

Teachers often take an active learning approach, engaging their students in the learning process by involving them through activities that encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and peer interaction. Some of the best career

counselors, coaches, and facilitators do this, too.

Under non-crisis conditions, we teach clients how to understand themselves or search for work, and we don't hand over resumes on a silver platter. We partner with clients on tasks and teach them to find their own solutions.

These methods align with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and constructivist theories (e.g., Savickas, 2005), which view people as active agents in their lives, not simply reactive to external events. Now, more than ever, we need to be teachers who engage our clients as active learners, empowering and equipping them to develop and manage their careers.

The Strategist Hat


Creative strategies are critically important for our clients during this crisis. Clients may need to pivot, learn new skills, and generally rethink their plans. Just before the COVID-19 outbreak struck the United States, Deborah, a client, decided to transition from administrative work in banking to being a cruise line director. In light of the pandemic, we worked together on a new strategy, looking more long-term. Deborah will now “shelter-in-place” in her current job while doing an online hospitality certificate program to take steps toward her new chosen field.

Embracing the Burden of Opportunity

It is helpful to recognize the diversity of the sub-roles or “HATS” we wear and to ensure the care of each through professional development, lifelong learning, reflection, and peer support. In a time of crisis, it is even more critical that we do so. If we attend to our own self-care to bolster resilience and well-being during COVID-19, and if we closely examine and strengthen our “HATS,” we have an opportunity to make a major, positive impact in the lives of those we serve.

References

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 **Michelle Tullier L. Michelle Tullier**, PhD, CCC, CPRW, is a career counselor based out of Atlanta, GA and Vinalhaven, ME, who works online with clients across the U.S. She serves young adult career launchers, mid-career changers, and individuals developing careers while in recovery from addiction and co-occurring disorders. She is the former career center executive director at Georgia Tech and held career coaching and regional leadership roles with global outplacement firm Right Management. Michelle is a member of Maine Career Development Association, serves on the board of Georgia Career Development Association, and is the Associate Editor, Independent Practice, for Career Convergence. She was published in Career Convergence in 2019: “[Don't Burn the Candle at Both Ends: Crowdsourcing our Practice Challenges and Solutions](#)” and in 2018: “[Promoting Student Well-Being and Mental Health: the Career Center's Role.](#)” She can be reached at michelle@drtullier.com or www.tullierconsulting.com.

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6 Comments

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Sunitha Narayanan on Wednesday 04/01/2020 at 08:25PM wrote:

Thank you, Michelle for this timely article- what strikes me is our collective attention to helping people practice holding hope- regardless of the hat worn in a conversation.

Sheri Mahaney on Thursday 04/02/2020 at 10:19AM wrote:

Michelle, thank you for putting into words the very thoughts I have been having these days. As career counselors/advisors we need to become even more self-aware that we too must do more than just stay on top of the where job growth/loss is happening and advise our clients accordingly. We too need to do a deeper examination of our roles and "pivot" in our approaches as we are still needed and need to shift our thinking in order to remain relevant. The old way of "doing business" before the pandemic is rapidly becoming obsolete. Now, more than ever, we need to focus on self-care and professional development to be able to meet these challenges for our clients and for ourselves.

Michelle Tullier on Thursday 04/02/2020 at 12:26PM wrote:

Thank you, Sheri, for this thoughtful commentary. We certainly do have to shift our own thinking, as you say.

Michelle Tullier on Thursday 04/02/2020 at 12:26PM wrote:

Sunitha, you're welcome! Your identification of the hope thread is so important. Thanks.

Carol R. Anderson on Thursday 04/02/2020 at 04:54PM wrote:

Michelle, anything you write is a "must read" for me. You taught me career development theory at NYU 20+ years ago and were tremendously helpful in drawing the line for non-clinicians between career advising and therapy. This article is, as usual, exceptionally nuanced and helpful.

Michelle Tullier on Friday 04/03/2020 at 09:47AM wrote:

Carol, Many thanks for that incredible feedback. Those years teaching at NYU remain one of my favorite times of my professional life. So many great students (peers, really) during that time, including you! Thanks again for the kind words.

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