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Career Planning: Guided by Fear . . . or by Faith?

By Mike Sharp

Career planning can be a thrilling journey as we consider blazing new trails and anticipating all the possible adventures in *front* of us. But let's face it: job transitions can also be a huge pain in the *rear*!

Just thinking about making a job change can instantly stir up feelings of anxiety, doubt, confusion, and occasionally, downright fear. The question isn't as much *if* we will be faced with these emotions, but rather *how* we will respond when these emotions make their way to the surface.

Of course, hard work and preparation can go a long way towards combatting these visceral emotions that tend to invade our hearts and minds when we consider accepting a promotion, taking on a high-risk project, transferring to a completely different department, or interviewing for a new job. As the old saying goes, "If you fail to prepare, you are preparing to fail." So, do all the things that common sense would tell you to do. Do your homework on the new opportunity, the new team, the new city, the new position. Grab coffee with colleagues who are working in or around that position. Seek wisdom from people you trust who may have already traveled the path before you. Make a Pros & Cons list and talk it over with your family or trusted friends, keeping in mind that your decisions may impact them as well.

In addition to good preparation, however, there is another weapon that I would encourage you to include in your arsenal as you combat the anxiety that can sneak its way into the career planning process: faith. Faith in a power greater than ourselves, one who is all-good and all-knowing, can yield freedom, hope, patience, and direction—all of which help us navigate tough decisions. Let's take a closer look at each one of these, one at a time.

Freedom: Many of us in the business world are under the illusion that we are in total control. When we're considering making a job change, or perhaps trying to advance more rapidly in our present job, we have the urge to control each and every variable around us. Having faith in a power beyond ourselves can help alleviate a lot of the pressure once we admit that we are *not* in control of the entire universe. This doesn't mean we get to scrap all our due diligence because we suddenly got a free pass on our homework! Faith simply gives us the freedom to eventually choose the path that we think is best, all the while knowing that if our decision doesn't turn out exactly the way we had planned, we're not doomed or alone. And the best news of all? Faith promises us that good things can still come from a decision, even a bad one, if it's grounded in faith (Romans 8:28).

Hope: When we're faced with tough decisions, it's easy to lose hope. This is especially the case when there doesn't seem to be a good answer. Other times, it may seem like there are *too* many answers, too many options, too many solutions . . . and that we'll never be able to make a decision at all. Anxiety creeps in as we get trapped in our own indecisiveness and we lose all hope of moving forward. The underlying cause of this anxiety may be rooted in where, or maybe in whom, we have placed our hope. If our hope is totally dependent upon ourselves, our talents, our past achievements, our jobs, or even devoted parents or loving friends, then we probably have good reason to worry! All of the above, at times, will fall short and disappoint.

We must remind ourselves from time to time that our jobs represent *what we do* . . . not *who we are*. When we place our hope in the one who did create who we are, we can know we're in good hands, hands that will never let go or disappoint. Hope in a good and all-powerful God doesn't immediately solve all life's challenges, but it does help us shift our perspective away from our current circumstances and focus more intently and more strategically on our eternal purpose and existence. Hope, grounded in faith, can serve to alleviate much of the fear and anxiety we find ourselves wrestling with as we face what we perceive to be life-changing decisions. We might discover that hope, based on faith, is actually *the* life-changing decision we were seeking all along! (Psalm 121:1-2)

Patience: Another thing we often struggle with when considering a career decision is patience, or lack thereof in my case! We feel pressure to make the right decision—and make it fast! Often, the pressure to make a swift decision about our careers is self-imposed. At other times, the pressure can come from well-intended colleagues, friends, or family members who share our anxiety and just want to see us pull the trigger and move on. It's as if someone installed a shot clock above the career planning basket and we feel the need to shoot before it hits zero, sometimes launching one from way beyond the arc. This is not to say that we can, or should, drag our feet as we make career decisions; but like any good 3-point shooter, we need to take our time, set our feet, get our balance, and *elevate*. The same goes for approaching career decisions.

We've all heard the saying that "If you're not moving forward, you're moving backwards." I haven't found that to be the case when it comes to career planning. Often it is helpful to pause when we face important decisions about our careers. Devoting quality time to doing our homework and taking inventory of our passions, giftedness, and life goals before making key career decisions is time well spent. Picture for a moment an NBA player charging down the court for a fast break. Yep, there are times when the right answer is to force your way to the basket and go for the dunk. There are other times, however, when you realize the best option is to hold up a bit, allow your teammates to catch up and permit the play to develop naturally. The same can be said for career planning.

Having faith in a power beyond ourselves can allow us to not just take this pause, but actually enjoy it! Faith allows a power that transcends all time to breathe wisdom and truth into our decisions. Faith can supply the patience we need to eventually achieve a peace that surpasses anything we could ever fully understand on our own (Philippians 4:7).

Direction: Faith can also serve as a compass of sorts to help us navigate our way through the many job-related decisions we may face throughout our careers. As we discussed earlier, there is never a shortage of opinions from well-wishers when we're attempting to make an important career decision. Again,

there's no harm in pausing to listen for wisdom coming at us from reliable sources. Faith in a power beyond ourselves, however, can offer a level of wisdom, a perspective, unlike no other.

Let's jump to baseball for a second. Base coaches are on the field for a reason; they can see things that the baserunner cannot because of their unique experience, objectivity, and vantage point on the field. The same goes for looking to an all-knowing God for guidance. When it comes to searching for advice on the game of life, why not seek counsel from the coach who created life to begin with; from the one who knows how it began and how it's going to end? Back to our baserunner, how awesome would it be to have a base coach who literally invented the game, can see every play before it even transpires and knows better than anyone how best to get you home? When we permit God to serve as our Head Coach, that life-changing opportunity becomes a reality.

Of course, a question we all wrestle with is "How can I hear God's voice amongst all the other noises in my life?" There are many ways that faith can speak into our hearts and minds. Setting aside time to read scripture, daily devotionals, praying, attending worship, joining a community group, striking up a conversation/friendship with someone who's further along in their journey than you . . . all of these can be effective means of allowing faith to speak into our lives. Some people receive their greatest spiritual guidance by simply spending time outside and relishing the beauty of nature. Others find that God's voice speaks to them through life's circumstances. At times this *voice* can sound like a whisper and other times it can feel more like a two-by-four across our heads! Regardless, we should consider giving it a listen, as God's plan is usually far superior to anything we could ever dream up on our own. (Jeremiah 29:11 / Ephesians 3:20).

I hope you will consider making faith an integral part of your career decisioning process. The freedom, hope, patience, and direction we can receive from faith are both unlimited and unimaginable. Remain open-minded to the possibilities of a next season designed, inspired, and led by faith. You might just find yourself traversing a brand-new trail with a lot less anxiety . . . and a lot more joy, peace and anticipation.

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