

Remarks by Jane Genova, President of Genova Writing, Coaching and More, at the New York State Bar Association Career Transition Program, Manhattan, New York, April 1, 2010

OUR STORIES: LEVERAGING THEM FOR CAREER TRANSITION

Lauren, thank you for that kind introduction. Rosemary, I appreciate your getting us started.

And I want to thank all of you here and on our web link for having the courage to be thinking about career change. It's a scary topic. I know. After 9/11, my communications boutique collapsed. I had to start something new. C.S. Lewis has said: "Experience is a brutal teacher but we learn, boy do we learn." I learned. I'm bundling what I learned and what I know from my communications and coaching background. And I hope to send you back into the work world with the tools you need for your own career transitions.

Our generation selected career paths and assumed we will stay on them. That isn't how things are working out, though, is it. The shock of that has made some of us inefficient in getting to What's Next. The most efficient way to move from where we are to where we need to be to earn a living is this: Creating the right stories and communicating them exactly right. The wrong stories told ineptly make everything harder. Or even impossible.

Here is how two different former partners started out their stories:

Story 1: “My firm said it wasn’t performance reasons.”

Story 2: “I’m a businessperson with 30 years experience and a law background.”

Guess who gets the job offers or is approached about starting a business?

Okay, both partners are bright, educated. Why does the first make such a poor presentation of self? Why so defensive? So stuck in what was?

I have come to see that there are five reasons why too many of us best and brightest make a mess of career change, at least at the outset.

One reason is Self-hate. When Buddhist monks come to America what they notice is the epidemic of self-hate. In their nation of Tibet, there isn’t even a word for self-loathing.

We tend to hate ourselves because that’s how capitalism operates. America has been the Magic Kingdom of capitalism. That system shaped us.

Capitalism is based on two beliefs: More and individualism.

The more impels us to strive to be more successful and acquire more material goods to show evidence of that success. Of course, the game is rigged. We will never get enough

of the more. So we wind up seeing ourselves as less-than. Self-doubt becomes the default mode.

The individualism part of capitalism puts the responsibility for being more squarely on us. So when there are setbacks, we blame ourselves. Shame follows. For our generation at least, setbacks carry stigma. We have been bad capitalistic girls and boys.

Our stories reflect this self-hate. We exclaim:

“I should have.”

“If only.”

“I was never meant to be a lawyer.”

These stories are what we tell the world and ourselves.

How do we stop telling them?

Here’s a shortcut. Pretend you’re guiding someone else’s career transition. How would you advise them to present themselves? Often small changes make big impacts.

The “I should have” can become “I did.” The focus is on accomplishment, often in the face of obstacles.

The “If only” becomes “We don’t know, do we.” The focus shifts to reality. The reality is that we will never know if we did X, Y would follow. So, we don’t go there. It’s mere speculation and it can be painful.

The “I was never meant to be a lawyer” becomes “From my legal background I can offer these skills.” The reality is that over the years we have acquired many skills.

One more tip about self-hate. It can be transformed by simple self-love. Try embracing yourself just as you are, with no need for an extreme makeover.

The second reason we tend to stumble in career change is that the past grabs us by the throat. The past controls us. When the past is in the driver’s seat, we aren’t in the present. We are not able to read situations and people accurately. We are not able to spot opportunity, pounce on it, and exploit it.

We tend to wind up in the past because that’s what we know. Human beings aren’t wired for uncertainty. The present is not very comfortable when we are in transition. The future is a total unknown.

How to lift ourselves out of the past? We listen to the stories of career changers who have gone before us. Think about Hillary Clinton. She's a wonderful role model for presenting herself to her advantage in the now.

We also tell ourselves stories about what could be. The most conversations in life, including in our dreams when we sleep, are with ourselves.

We tell the world optimistic tales about our progress in the now.

One day we wake up and we are in the right now. And it's an okay place to be.

The third reason for presenting ourselves poorly is ambivalence. That's expected. Most of us aren't ready for a long time to surrender our former identity and take on a new one. Understandable but lethal. Those who can help us become confused by the mixed signals we give off. Employers, customers, and clients don't have a clear idea who we are or what value we can create for them.

We apply for a public relations position with a lawyer's persona. Of course we don't get the job.

We try to start a dog-walking business and who the dog owners meet is a lawyer. Of course, we don't get too far.

We apply for a temporary job in document review as a partner of a top law firm. Those in charge of assigning scratch their heads.

The way out of this ambivalence is to select those in fields we want to enter. Study their professional persona. Imitate. Eventually we will find our own style.

We observe the head of a public relations agency who lives next door to us. What is her language? Her attire? Her eye contact? Her car? Her attaché case?

We observe the pharmaceutical writer who's at our gym.

We observe the entrepreneur at our 12-step meeting.

From all that, we put together a new image. We leave the lawyer behind. Change our behavior and the mindset will follow.

The fourth reason we don't have an edge in career change is fear. That is one of the most primitive emotions. And it can kill. The woman is attacked. She's too gripped by fear to even scream. She winds up murdered. The former partner is overcome by fear of the future. He starts on a downward trajectory. The partner fears being laid off. That so controls her that she makes all the wrong moves. She is laid off.

The good news is that science and experience show that fear is manageable. Fear doesn't have to determine our behavior.

The first step is awareness. We ask ourselves: What's going on? The answer could be fear. Awareness is our primary tool for dealing with fear.

Once we're aware, we take action. There are so many tactics. We can concentrate on how we inhale and exhale. It's a calming and centering ritual. We can learn more sophisticated meditation techniques. We can attend a free support group, such as 12-step meetings, to learn how to turn our fear over to the universe. There are medications which block anxiety attacks so they won't occur. We can take advantage of cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT. FORBES, the bible of capitalism, recognized CBT as working and only taking five months treatment time. The effectiveness of CBT comes from its orientation toward doing something. If we are in the act of doing, not feeling, we are not in the fear zone.

The fifth reason we blow opportunities to move to a fresh career is immaturity. None of us is fully grown up. During crisis, we tend to regress. His or her majesty the baby emerges and messes up everything.

There are a number of definitions of being grown up. One comes from a short story by Truman Capote. That story is "New York, 1949." In it, the narrator concludes maturing means realizing that not everyone loves us. Another definition comes from psychologists.

They posit we grow up when we accept that we are totally responsible for taking care of ourselves and that we are fully equipped to do that job. If we accept that responsibility we don't waste energy blaming others for what was, is or will be.

Believe me, career transition goes more easily when we are grown up. In 2003, I finally achieved that developmental milestone.

Okay, we know the Five Demons lurking to derail us: They are Self-hate, The Past, Ambivalence, Fear, and Immaturity. Now let's look at how to steer clear of them as we do our resumes and cover letters and perform in interviews.

The resume. Actually, it's plural: Resumes. There will be resumes. We have to custom-make them for each line of work we are exploring. Generic resumes get tossed.

Essentially resumes are stories we create to tell employers, customers and clients what they want to hear. Resumes are not about us. They are pitches to reassure skittish buyers that we are the ones to purchase.

Buying is a high-stakes decision in this economy of scarcity. The wrong decision can cost money, the brand, the organizational confidence.

Here are resume must-dos.

Find out the format of resume the industry or the company prefers. There are many kinds of resumes. Contact headhunters or human resources at the organization about the pattern you should follow.

Research the industry and the organization to pick up on what matters, the language used, the way to signal accomplishments. Switch over to that mode of presenting yourself rather than how you presented yourself as a lawyer. The first thing smart professionals do when entering a new field or organization is talk like “they” do.

Limit your professional history to the last 10 years. Otherwise you’re flagging yourself as “old.”

Be concrete. The more quantitative the better. Example, “The team brought in \$2.3 million of new business.”

Turn negatives into positives. If you were in prison, describe the literary program you created there.

Fill in gaps. It doesn’t matter how. What matters is that you’re communicating to the employer that you know the game. The game is that there can’t be gaps in employment history. You might have been trying to start a new business. You might have been consulting. You might have been taking temporary assignments. You might have been working for your brother-in-law.

Delete what doesn't align with a specific job description or assignments. The story has to be consistent and move forward. Less is more.

Video resumes are fine. But make sure your photo puts you at an advantage.

Keep asking yourself: Does this resume sound like it's from a lawyer or does it communicate a new professional identity?

Based on feedback, keep revising the resume.

I have been asked? Is lying okay.

No, lying is not okay. What is okay is positioning and packaging yourself to give you the advantage in applying for a specific opportunity. Everything has to be geared to that particular job or assignment.

What are the red flags a resume isn't effective? There are two. One is no response. The other is too fast a response. And that response is rejection.

Should you use a professional resume service? If you are not getting interviews, that means your resume isn't working. If you can't fix that, yes, research resume services.

They vary in quality.

Next is the cover letter. I view the cover letter as a type of performance art. It's dynamic. It should set off electricity. We are pulling out all stops to get the reader's attention. Our goal is for the reader to take the next steps, which are moving on to review our resume and then invite us for an interview.

Again, we are telling the story employers want to hear. This is not our story. This is a story custom-made for them.

Business is personal. We start out saying something about the organization. That means we did our research. What we say should be directly aligned with why we're enthusiastic about applying for this opportunity.

Next, present your strongest evidence that you are the best candidate. Make explicit what edge you're bringing. Be concrete. Employers want to hear about how you can do more with less. How your legal background can prevent problems with compliance. How you developed new business for a previous employer.

Go beyond. Offer to develop a marketing plan as part of the application process. Offer to work free for a week. Offer to do a competitive analysis.

Yes, you can attach material that is directly related to that job. For example, I would attach a chapter I ghostwrote on measurement when applying for an assignment on metrics in online communications.

Give a call to action. Say you will follow up with a phone call if that's allowed.

Otherwise let them know how they can reach you.

If you're not getting a response, try other approaches. If those aren't effective, then consider hiring professional communications help. Strong cover letters do get a response. That's the purpose of cover letters: To have you stand out so the employer notices you.

The third piece is the interview. You could be reviewed by email, phone, and in-person. As every salesperson knows, the way to "close" is to mirror the organization and the particular people in the loop. We humans are tribal. We want to be with our own. You want to demonstrate you can become a member of that tribe.

Mirroring requires research about the organizational culture and, if possible, about the screeners. In addition, once the process is underway, you will do speedreading. Based on what you are picking up, you will adjust your tone, pacing, language, and the kind of evidence you present. One technique is to act as if you are already a member of the team. Use the term "we." Suggest ways you can help out.

Mirroring is an art, not a science. Mirror too closely and you come across as a caricature. Mirror too selectively and you will be giving off mixed signals that confuse the screeners.

Mastering this art demands practice. That's why you will push for every interview you can get. In the beginning you will probably perform poorly. After the interview, reverse-engineer every aspect to discover what you could have done better and what was a fatal move.

Here are the interviews must-dos.

Understand that interviewers fall into types. There are essentially two types. One is the good cop. That tactic is meant to lull us into relaxing – too much. Never fall for that.

The other is the bad cop. That approach is meant to shake us up. Once we are aware this is the game, we can manage it. The focus is presenting yourself as the best candidate for the position.

Accept that not every organization is the fit for you. Interviews are a two-way street. We are checking them out just like they are checking us out. The marketplace is fragmented. That means there are diverse settings in which we can work.

Be detached. The most successful salespeople adopt an attitude of nonattachment.

Intensity scares others. It also inhibits our ability to speedread and make the best response. One trick is to position the interview as for something which will be a sort of temporary assignment. Nice to have. Useful. But not to take too seriously.

Mid-course, interviews going badly can be rescued. One tactic is to become explicit about sensing concerns by the employer or misconceptions they might have. Then address them. You have nothing to lose and the practice will do you good.

Follow-up. Yes, you can forward a paper you just published or an accomplishment on a part-time job.

Accept that there is learning curve. The way to keep count is if you're improving in how you present yourself, not if you get the job.

Okay, we know how to approach resumes, cover letters, and interviews. What else could we be doing to change our behavior to make transition smoother and to get what we want in terms of how we earn a living?

Here are some tips.

Never leave home without a cover story. We owe no one information about what is going on inside us or in our job search. The best defense is the offense. Cover stories about what we're up to puts us out there on the offense. We only have to let our families in.

Get work. Any type. No, not volunteer activities. No matter how much severance you receive, paid employment puts us in the marketplace now. We're liberated from the past.

We have a front-row seat at observing the new marketplace.

Planning can box us into only seeing certain opportunities. Better to stay totally open.

This is a volatile marketplace. Good things usually fall into our laps.

Prune your network. The old crowd probably doesn't want to see you. Research shows that weak links or distant ties are where jobs come from. Once we're out of our traditional networks we have access to new sources of information. Also our new contacts don't pigeon-hole us as to what we can or cannot do. They might say, "Mike, there's an opening in my building for a salesman you'd be perfect for." Our former contacts might not have seen us in the salesman role.

Honor the Sabbath. Taking breaks from career transition keeps us alert and creative.

Love learning. That's what the new economy is all about. Learn and earn. We learn from every "no" we receive. Failure is the new rite of passage. If we're not failing often and failing fast we're not trying enough that's new and learning enough.

Well, you can learn a lot more from my new book **OVER-50: HOW WE KEEP WORKING**. It's available online from Barnes and Noble as well as Amazon.com.

Thank you for your attention.

