

Steer your career decisions with no regrets

Margaret Beaton 22 November 2012

"This above all: to thine own self be true" is part of Polonius's advice to his son who is in a hurry to get on the next boat to Paris. This captures the essence of my guidance to you: Steer your career and have no regrets.

In a way we all seek 'Paris' in our lives and careers and the transitions we make. Whether we are stepping up or letting go, we want work that is meaningful and plays to our strengths; a place to belong; friendships and relationships with others; an organisation of which we can be proud; challenge and opportunities to grow personally and professionally; and fair reward.

To find this Nirvana you have to make choices: For which jobs to apply; what offer to accept; when to move on; where to go; on whose advice to rely. A career with no regrets is one where you have a touchstone to guide you at each of these decision points. To help you decide whether to stay or go. Turn left, or right. You'll have no regrets if your decisions are the right ones for you.

So, how to know what's right for you? The answer lies in knowing—truly knowing—your values. There are five keys things you need to understand about values in order to clarify yours and draw on them in your decision-making.

First, values are something that are fundamentally and abidingly important to you. They have personal meaning that influences how you see the world around you and how you direct your energies. We use words to express our values, but the same word used by two people can have quite different meaning for each. To one, 'honour' means working in an environment associated with virtue and integrity. To the other, 'honour' means working to be recognised and achieve high status.

Second, values have a hierarchy. In other words, some carry more weight than others in a particular situation or transition. It's important to know what's most important to be able to put some values ahead of others. For example, financial security may be so important that a person stays in a job where they find the work boring.

Third, your values can change with time. In young adulthood, hedonistic pursuits may be all-important and knowingly enjoyed at the expense of career advancement. But with the responsibilities of marriage and children, working hard and studying become superordinate—and partying a distant memory.

Fourth, if you make a decision that is contrary to—or at least not fully in keeping with—your values you will regret it. Sooner or later. Inevitably. Values provide your decision criteria, enabling you to assess your options. Ignore these criteria and you will make wrong decisions. You waste valuable time and compromise your happiness.

Fifth, to rely on your values you need to bring them to the surface of your consciousness. You need to be able to express and explain them—to others—and above all to yourself. You need to articulate the handful of core values you regard as crucial in words that give precise meaning to each. You may find the two explanations of 'honour' in the paragraph above helpful in this regard. Once clarified—or codified—your values are your decision criteria for your life-career transitions. You will be equipped to make the trade-offs with greater confidence and certainty.

Don't be in a hurry like Laertes, Polonius's son in Shakespeare's Hamlet, when you make your next career decision. This applies to you if you are *stepping up or letting go*. Know what's important to you and you'll have no regrets.

This post was written by Dr Margaret Beaton, a director of [Beaton Executive Coaching](#) and [Beaton Research + Consulting](#). You can also find Margaret on [LinkedIn](#).