

Narcissism 2.0-Bring Your Professional Presentation to New Heights By Engaging in the Process of Self-Discovery and Self-Disclosure

By Peter L. Smith, Esq.

In a quiet pool near a silent grove, Narcissus fell in love with a reflection of his youthful face, and died. Not a complicated plot. Curiously, while short, this story is recounted numerous times in Greek mythology, and in a variety of interesting forms. Obviously, the myth must have communicated something important in Greek culture. With the proper understanding, it can provide vital information to us in our time as well. My hypothesis is that this illusive character from Greek mythology presents us with a profound mystery and potentially an important insight into the human psyche. Understanding the deeper message presented by Narcissus' challenges, and failure, can have a direct impact upon our understanding of ourselves, and upon our productivity and career satisfaction-ultimately, perhaps more than that.

Introduction

At the most basic level, this article is specifically designed for my candidates to give them a framework (and comprehensive list) of information that I as your recruiter need to represent you. The story as told by the Greeks and many of their apologists, is of a young man who was unable to see himself for who he really was, and by means of this, was unable to relate to others. He was thus destined to be consumed with a superficial understanding of his own worth (valuing only his reflection and not his own true self) and therefore foreclosed from success in relationships or life.

This understanding of the unexamined or faultily-examined life also characterizes the modern understanding of clinical narcissism. What I propose for anyone seeking to reach higher levels of productivity and fulfillment from their profession, is that they combine what to some may seem a 'narcissistic' attention on one's self, but in order to avoid the pitfalls of the true meaning of the word. In short, I propose a way through the contradiction between the popular meaning of the word on the one hand, and the classical and clinic definitions on the other. Thus, the challenge that I lay before my candidates is: that they find a greater and more accurate understanding of their owns strengths and weaknesses through a thorough examination and profound attention on themselves, in order to escape from the pitfalls of a failure of self-knowledge (which is often a false esteem, called narcissism), and thereby access and hone their strengths and abilities for greater professional productivity.

How To Read This Article

This piece, while long, is NOT intended to 'scare you away' or overwhelm you. Rather, it is designed to give you ideas and serve as a starting point for conveying what you believe is of note in your career path. There is no need to provide answers to all of the below questions, nor to do it in any particular form or order, or to follow any particular format at all. Rather, please view the below as merely a brain-storming experience to get your creative juices flowing.

Further, feel free to skip around. You may want to read only the overview below, and perhaps the conclusion, or perhaps get ideas for only one aspect of the project you are having difficulty with. The danger in giving anyone 'guidelines' for a creative experience is that it will rather stifle creativity. Don't let that happen to you! If you find this explanation restrictive, or, if you have a very defined, and limited set of information that you feel best describes you, great! There are a number of ways to get to our common goal, which is: to present as much information about you as a professional and a person to give a potential hiring partner a sufficiently detailed understanding of what you can bring to his or her organization.

Confidential Nature of the Information

I am asking for a free-form, stream-of-consciousness email, written confidentially to me, with the purpose being to communicate as much about your experience as a professional (and student, businessperson, etc.) as possible the good, the bad, the ugly, but most especially the wonderful, unique, inspiring, shamelessly name-dropping, and personal. As we will have already discussed in person or by telephone, the information will stay between us-no one else sees it (no staff person and no database entry person-neither will it be saved on any system accessible by others). Further, as it has always been and remains my policy for all candidates to sign off on the text of all cover letters, there should be no concern that any particular revelation will find its way into a cover letter without your knowledge and consent.

The Overall Gist

The point of the exercise is for the candidate to divulge as much as possible of the information and detail that they would eventually like me to be able to mine for a compelling cover letter. On the most banal level, I need great one-liners for the text of that letter! On a higher level, I need to have a critical mass of information about your professional and academic (and other) experiences to get a sufficiently intuitive sense of what you bring to the table so that I can develop themes that will form as the superstructure for that letter. Further still, I need to know who my candidate is to a sufficient degree to know how to answer those little "pertinent questions" that law firm recruiting coordinators tend to ask-and to answer them in a way that is accurate, compelling and presents you in the best possible light. My goal is for the candidate to take the project wherever it goes-it is not necessary to use the document as an outline. Every candidate has unique experiences and attitudes toward life, their career, the law everything. Thus, each time the process is engaged in, there is a different result-which is entirely the point.

Nevertheless, there is a wide range of information that is suitable subject-matter area. In order to prime the pump of your imagination, I provide the below outline of possible avenues to take. I have hesitated long before putting these suggestions in writing, as I certainly do not intend this exercise to descend to a "deposition by interrogatory." Rather, these are provided only as placemarkers in the process. With that important caveat, please refer to the below list of topics when beginning the process:

I. Your current practice:

Try to give me a narrative that explains the arc of your career. How and why did you begin in your first practice group and how and why did that evolve (it may have been chance, it may have been by design). Importantly, what is your current practice, what do you like about it, and what do you want to do in the next phase of your career? The following are provided by way of illustration:

Provide a laundry list of each component part of the process that you have actually engaged in with respect to your core specialty. When people hear that you are a "corporate" lawyer, for example, they want to know specifically what parts of that global set of practices you have experience with, and what tasks you have actually performed within that.

Describe the types of industries that your clients are in.

Begin at the beginning: list each subject-matter area that you have practiced in throughout your career.

If your career is sufficiently lengthy (5 years and up) you may have some meta-analysis to provide. By that I mean that you likely have a broader understanding of how all the component work you have completed fits into the arc of a particular business process. If so, tell me about it.

Talk about the parts of your practice that you like and those that you don't. Further, tell me about the parts that you have excelled at and those you haven't (it will be interesting to see the slippage between those two sets of criteria).

II. Your Academic Career

I am interested in understanding not only all about your law school career, but also about your other graduate experiences as well as your undergraduate career. If your secondary education was overseas or otherwise remarkable, it too may be worth discussing. Try to use the following as a guide for the detail to provide:

Discuss why you picked the institution (banal, Machiavellian and climatic reasons are all valid!). Disclose your grade-point-average and your class standing. If you took a particular interest in one topic, discuss what it is, why it was interesting, any particular recognition you garnered from that interest, etc.

Make sure to list every single award, extra-curricular activity, and all organizations in which you had any sort of leadership role (academic, professional, pro-bono, civic, service, community, fraternal, etc.).

Discuss any personal triumphs you enjoyed or challenges you overcame.

Discuss any particularly important influences (professors, other mentors, formative events going on in society during your educational experience, etc.), how they influenced you, and how they impact your current approach to your career.

III. Your Transitions

It is exceedingly important to handle properly the issue of a candidate's transition from one work experience to another. Further, no matter what degree of success you perceive that you have in your career, please understand that your understanding of what a law firm may perceive as a "good" or "bad" reason for moving is probably other than your immediate reaction. Thus, it is good to trust your recruiter on this point-they deal with this issue literally every day and are generally free from any particular bias-they simply know what the current trends are and can help advise you in managing this particular issue. That being said, the recruiter cannot help you if you do not actually disclose all of the reasons you left or are intending to leave your current position and why you think another position will be better. Therefore, as the candidate generally is not in the relatively knowledgeable position regarding 'good' and 'bad' reasons, it is best to think long and hard about what they are and then disclose them to your recruiter for advice.

There are two types of transitions to consider-the immediate change between your current (or immediately preceding employment) to the next (with respect to which you are asking your recruiter to assist you).

The Current Job Change:

As stated, rational thinking and full disclosure to your recruiter are key. To that end, it may be beneficial to consider the following issues that often come up in any particular transition:

unfulfilled in the current position due to corporate culture;

unfulfilled in the current position due to lack of appropriate type, caliber or volume of work;

unhappy because of a particular co-worker or set of co-workers in the current organization;

personal, non-work-related need to change geographical markets;

personal judgment about the viability of advancement in the current position;

personal judgment about the continued vitality of the current firm;

personal judgment about the future direction of the current firm;

professional decision that a different (more prestigious, larger, smaller, more focused, more generalized, etc.)

firm is better in terms of your overall professional plan;

perception that you have enemies at your current firm;

perception that you have burned bridges and/or otherwise made yourself unable to advance in the current firm.

In addition to the above issues, it is important to think about what questions may be raised by large changes in direction in your career-past or present.

Past or Present Changes in Direction

It is important to think about the reasons you have left a particular position, as stated. Moreover, it is important to explain to your recruiter any sea-change in your overall career direction. For example, if your prior experience was heavily weighted in one practice group, and you are looking to change subject-matter areas, or, rather, if you are seeking to move from government work to the private sector, your recruiter needs to understand this. Further, any such change in your past career must be similarly explained. For example, I once had a candidate that had a JD, two LL.M.s and a JSD; the burning question in my mind, and in everyone else's, was why this candidate now wanted to move from academia into private practice. The point is, moving from one sector of a market (from government service or academe to private practice or from an overseas

practice to the US or from one region to another) raises a question in the mind of the potential employer-and you must answer the question on your own terms rather than leave the employer to guess. To be sure, such changes do not go unnoticed.

IV. Positive Feedback

It is certainly true that firms are interested in hearing positive feedback that you may have received in the past-the more specific the better. While firms often ask for references at or near the time of making an offer, they certainly would benefit from hearing about past praise that you have received to assist them in evaluating whether they want to get that far. The key is to be specific: what sort of skills have you demonstrated, what positive outcome was the result, what was the context of those skills (whom did they benefit), etc. Consider the following:

Review any and all prior written evaluations. Provide a sampling of specific positive feedback. Try to avoid banalities. Solid observations are what are needed. For example: "seems to have great rapport with clients", "is able to hone in immediately on the core issues", "judgment is trusted in the firm" are all positive.

Conversely, banalities such as "fitting in well" or "doing a great job" do not communicate anything helpful. Think back to positive statements made by colleagues, clients, partners, co-workers, professors and the like. Provide quotes or near quotations if possible.

Be free to name names, or at least to identify the rank or position of those that have had an influence in your professional career, or have given you positive feedback. It is helpful to know that you relate to clients, but better to know that the CEO of Chevron thinks so if that is the case. Likewise, it is certainly positive that you participated in symposia and gave lectures that were well-received by the attendants, and better to know that the attendants included senior trade officials, diplomats of several industrialized nations and an ambassador or two.

On the topic of 'naming names', please be as thorough as possible with respect to the names of friends that you may have potential target firms. We can use those names (if you believe it appropriate under the particular circumstances) to use those names as internal references to follow on any submission.

Remember, one of great advantages to working with a recruiter is that he or she can sing your praises (effectively and appropriate to be sure) but nonetheless sing them. To do that, your recruiter needs the raw materials to draw upon. Our opinion (while valued!) will not get you an interview-the candidate must demonstrate that he or she is respected in their current and/or former milieu.

Conclusions

The process of a legal search can be a mere blip on your professional radar, a minor catastrophe, or, conversely, the beginning of something new, wonderful, and even life-changing. It all depends on how much of the real, down-and-dirty thinking that you are willing to put in to the process. When it comes down to it, we must be willing to face ourselves, and do so on a far deeper level than Narcissus did. He saw only his face, the mask that he presented to the world. As passionate professionals, however, we are challenged to look still deeper, into all the wonder and majesty behind our faade, and even behind our conscious thoughts. To the extent we can gather the full quantum of data about our preferences, temperaments, experiences, skills and limitations, and apply thoughtful analysis to the same, we can become far more successful than ever imagined. Please enjoy the process, but engage in it nonetheless!

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