



Siobhan Soraghan BSc MBA MCIPD MCMI
Director, Active Insight Consulting Ltd

The Passion Paradox

How often do we read about the importance of passion? How do you feel when you hear the word expressed in a business context? Inspired? Irritated? Indifferent? Where does passion come from? Is it something we can turn on? Is it age related? Is it that important? Is it the same thing as drive?

Drive is a key factor in executive success. However, the source of the drive is critical. Is it an inner drive, a genuine motivation emanating from a strong sense of self-worth and clarity of purpose about making one's unique contribution in the world? This I would equate with passion. Or is it externally triggered, determined by others' demands and others' perceptions? The latter occurs where there is a lack self-esteem and so the individual is driven to please others and in doing so validate their own worthiness. So I would like to distinguish between "having drive" and "being driven". There are often unfortunate consequences of being driven - such as burnout, illness, and painful endings to relationships both professional and personal.

Drive rarely seems a problem for the majority of capable, healthy "20 or 30-somethings". The phrase "exuberance of youth" springs to mind. Perhaps it is born of the optimism and naiveté that comes from not yet fully appreciating one's limits, from having the majority of one's life spread ahead, a life where possibilities are still limitless. And from the need to prove oneself by generating external tangible evidence of one's worth. So, a heady mix of internal and external drivers can be at play.

Having coached many MBA students over the years, it has struck me how those in their late 20s and early 30s have a stronger need than their older colleagues to prove their worth to employers and peers. Many seem keen to sign their life over to a "brand" with which they wish to identify, without quite understanding what it is that they as an individual have to offer that is special and unique. They want so

much to succeed and be seen to be succeeding - but readily hand over the definition of their success to strangers. Perhaps external drive naturally tends to dominate at this stage of life.

As we progress through those early career decades, bit by bit we generate tangible evidence of our success. Those who appreciate their achievements along the way become less dependent on others' opinion of their worth. Sadly many people fail to do this and even forget or seriously undervalue what they have achieved. As a consequence, their self-worth can remain largely dependent upon others' opinions or the outcome of their last project.

Recognising that one has achieved considerable success can bring its own challenges. Some people unexpectedly arrive at a point in their lives where they realise they've done pretty much what they set out to do, and more. They may find they no longer need to prove anything to themselves or others. And so what they thought was passion can evaporate leaving them feeling quite directionless.

Furthermore, by our late 30s early 40s some harsh realities have touched most of us. People we care about have become ill and maybe some have passed away. Accidents have happened. Our own health may have been impacted by our lifestyle. We have discovered that even if it's "not an option", in real life failure happens. That our body has limits. And that our relationships don't always last or work out how we expected. And many people come to realise that some of their dreams have not yet come to pass and are not likely to.

All of the above can trigger what I have seen a lot in clients - a reckoning phase, in fact the not-so-mythical mid-life crisis. It can hit any time between about 35 and 50. Although uncomfortable, this can be a very healthy and potentially fruitful opportunity to take stock and adjust - particularly with good support mechanisms in place. We all benefit from friends who will remind us in our darker moments of who we really are. The loved ones who will encourage and sustain us through our frustrations. The mentors and coaches who can help us learn from our experience and move through this phase to the next. Sadly, those without support can get stuck with feelings of disappointment and lack of fulfilment, which will often be suppressed rather than addressed.

With courage, curiosity and good resources, this phase can be an exciting, maturing process of rediscovering one's own inner passion and can yield a wonderful sense of groundedness and renewed purpose. The care and attention required to distil from one's life experience a healthy appreciation of who you have become can be one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself. What was external drive can transform into something more powerful emanating from within.

And in that is the seed of the paradox. When we give up our misplaced attention on external validation, we can focus more within to cultivate a self-acceptance and peace. And from this springs a true motivation - a passion that comes from deep within, from a solid sense of self – the desire to make one's best contribution to one's world, with a clear personal vision of how to do that.

So,

How conscious are you of how you make your unique contribution, and how sound is your sense of self and your self-esteem?

If you had a clear vision of you being your best self in your world, what aspects of yourself would you see more of than you do now? What would others see you doing differently?

If you were living this vision of your best self, with a clear sense of purpose, what difference might it make in your life - and the lives of others?

What support mechanisms have you got around you to help you get to that place? What might you do to grow them?

We all deserve the peace of accepting ourselves as human, mortal, imperfect - while being in touch with our capacity to make an incredibly valuable and unique contribution in our worlds.

Siobhan has developed a powerful process for helping individuals become clear about, and articulate, their unique contribution. To experience this and get unparalleled support in developing your personal vision and living "on-purpose", contact Siobhan now on siobhan@active-insight.com.

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