



# Metaphors: Vocabulary of Success and Failure in Career Guidance

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## Abstract

*Language both reflects and constructs social reality. As Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” underscoring the role of language in shaping perception. In the context of work, evolving terminology reveals shifting understandings of careers, success, and failure. Metaphors are central to this process, offering accessible frameworks through which complex career theories and practices are communicated and interpreted. Common metaphors such as “lane,” “path,” “journey,” and “ladder” frame careers as linear or progressive trajectories, while “theatre” and “roles” emphasize performance, adaptability, and identity across the lifespan. In contrast, metaphors such as the “glass ceiling” and “glass cliff” draw attention to structural barriers and unequal advancement opportunities [1]. These linguistic constructs do more than describe career development; they actively shape how individuals interpret experiences, assess achievement, and respond to setbacks. This presentation examines how success and failure are constructed and negotiated through widely used career metaphors and theoretical perspectives, including Chaos Theory of Careers [2]. By analysing the language embedded in both popular discourse and career theory, it highlights how metaphor influences meaning-making in career development in an increasingly complex and uncertain world.*

**Keywords:** metaphors, success, failure, career theories, career development

## 1. Introduction

There are many metaphors related to career development and progression. Some of them show how much people can advance, others refer to how well employees can do. All of them try to define success and failure and set the boundaries within which one can move. Inkson [3] has seen metaphors as an appealing way to present career issues to different groups of people and analysed the different perspectives of looking at careers as legacy, craft, seasons, matching, path, network, theatre, economic, narrative. In this paper, we will refer to some of the common phrases related to what people see as next step in their career experiences and see how certain career theories translate their supposed meaning. Career theories offer us perspectives on how the world of work operates, how we can prepare for it, what gives us job satisfaction [4]. Career management in the past was mostly seen as an organisational task, but by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the shift was moved to the individual endeavours, to self-direct their career navigation although the circumstances might often be stressful, such as the COVID period, that often hides the organisational traps [5]. Some career theories have a central position on the discourse and have influenced the way career practitioners approach career guidance and counselling. We will also try to combine the key features of these metaphors to show an outline of competencies that an employee would find beneficial in their career development.

## 2. Road to Progression: Career Ladder and Individuals

Finding the best possible fit between individual vocational interests and jobs is considered one of the basic points of career decision and planning [6]. Beginning with determining the personality type (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Social), understanding the skills related to each one of those types and matching them to occupations helps clarify a clear progression route. Looking at such a linear progression, advancing within an organisation is often compared as climbing a ladder. It is one of the most common references showcasing a linear advancement, implying that everyone starts at the bottom and remains static until reaching the next rung in the ladder in an always linear route towards the top. There is a sequence of steps within a hierarchy, and this is clearly denoted in the job title, for example ‘trainee’, manager, partner. To follow this traditional career road, it makes sense to employees to find an institution that aligns to their values and remain in the same organization perhaps until retirement [8].

### 2.1 Career Ladders and Institutions

But if individuals can move up the ladder, then we assume that there must be a ladder in the first place set up by the organisations. Although organisations, such as Higher Education Institutes, present clear pathways of



upward career advancement with job titles denoting it, the questions that arise are how the organisations make the ladder accessible and whether there is only one career ladder for all employees in an organisation. Beyond individual characteristics and skills advancing in the career ladder could be an institutional/organisational issue, as there could be organisational barriers that make it difficult for employees to progress. Although this is an issue that has been dealt through affirmative actions and legislation, trying to protect people from biases and make room for them to be judged on the basis of competence and efficiency rather than personal characteristics, establishment malfunctions show the existence of stereotypes. First, noticed in 1970s [8] and then as the feminist movement grew stronger more widely researched in the following decades, the research of the invisible barriers that women employees face in advancing their career beyond middle management, known as the glass ceiling [9]. It showed that despite the wider entrance of women in the workforce, vertical advancement in the career ladder was not easy and this also obstructed by glass walls, as women were usually segregated within specific roles in their organisations, such as working at HR departments, and could not move to other roles -lateral ones- which would give them experience and skills to progress into top management roles. Even when women took leadership roles, often there were extraordinary circumstances, such as an organization in crisis and a high risk of failure involved [10]. It has often been said 'think men', 'think crisis – think women', implying either that the soft skills of women could be more beneficial in times of crisis or that women leaders could embrace change more easily [11]. Closely related was the sticky floor term, describing how employees were stuck in entry jobs without many career promotion opportunities. Later, these terms involved to show not only barriers in promotion but also low wages and salaries across the whole workforce organization and how individuals might need constrained to 'stay in their lane'.

### 3. Cycles of Career Development

Looking at the next steps in work experiences is not only a matter of opportunities but a combination with the life stage that people are, as career development cannot be viewed as separate from self-development. As Super [12] proposed in his Career Development Model, self-concept develops through time and experiences and distinguished five stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, decline. Highlighting the importance of change over time, vocational maturity is not defined to a certain chronological time, as individuals move through these stages at career transitions. One could argue that careers are like cycles or seasons in which change is not only inevitable but should also be welcomed in a life cycle of continuous learning. As sometimes, individuals will make great strides in growth, while others won't, skills such as flexibility, resilience and adaptability will help them grow in those cycles.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) [13] shows the fluidity of the needs of people and that decisions are based on three parameters: authenticity showing the alignment between the individual's values and the employing organisation's values; balance between work and non-work demands, such as family, carer's role and leisure time; challenge showing the desire of increased responsibilities and advancement. At a given point of time, more emphasis could be placed on one of the elements while another might play more important role in other career decisions. Although these differences refer to individuals, research between the career needs of different generation can show the different career needs, it can also be used to examine generational career needs in the workplace [14].

### 4. Life Storytelling

When the next step is not as obvious as a promotion, it is often an individual task to create a framework within which to visualize their next steps. A different perspective focusing on how individuals construct their careers is presented by the Career Construction Theory [15]. Instead of thinking of career as a linear activity progressing through stages, career construction theory is more interested in how individuals build and cross bridges between personality and career. Career is better seen as a journey as the pathway may be unknown, but the destination is clear as you are progressing towards a goal. In the journey, one might find curves that set them back and hide the destination, shortcuts that may lead to the destination faster or lead to a dead end and then one must find their way back. Adaptability becomes a key skill to help individuals choose and make sense of their job, adapt to the environment.

Pathways as a metaphor show the many choices that one has in front of them, adding dynamic to the career journey, where strategy has a key role to play. Advancement does not need to be vertical, as it could be lateral and to navigate it a map is important. The destination of a path could be unclear as there are so many choices and therefore uncertainty and loneliness could be severe disruptions to this journey.

A powerful way of understanding the motivation and the meaning behind choices comes through storytelling as individuals try to restructure their past experiences, traumas and career transitions. Through these stories the individual creates a narrative that tells how education, experience, connections and work converge and how the past not only shapes the present and the future, but also how the present becomes a catalyst of



understanding of the past. Therefore, the past does not dictate the future, but the perception of the past, the present and the future can be constructed by the person, and the narrative of the story can change directions. Storytelling is as unique as every individual and is built on their own inspiration and interests and career is one of the components that brings meaning to the whole life story. Savickas [16] using life designing counselling explains the importance of moving from the self-concept to the identity co-construction, where the individual becomes not only actor and agent in their life, but an author. On the other hand, as storytelling is not always a narration of actual events, but the interpretation of events, the individual projects a subjective rather than an objective understanding of events and situations.

## 5. Openness to the Unexpected

If we compared career planning as an equation, with the hope of handling all the variables so that the trajectory of a career could be organized and turned around as imagined in advance, there would be the variable of life situations that would make the result totally unpredictable. The theory of Planned Happenstance (PH) [17] recognises that chance events are inevitable and serendipity can impact career planning. However, luck is not a determining factor, it is sustainable key traits that make individuals turn chance into career opportunities: curiosity to explore new learning opportunities; risk-taking in pursuing action even when the outcomes are unsure; persistence to overcome obstacles; flexibility to adapt to new situations and change attitudes; optimism in seeing the potential of new experiences.

Knowing the right people and building a network or a web does not necessarily mean that these connections will be tools that can be used in advancing an individual's career. As a person's network grows over time and so do their skills, contacts and expertise. Making connections, asking questions, learning from other people's experiences and curiosity along with risk-taking can turn chance events into turning points. Although such an approach highlights the importance of readiness to make the most of unexpected events, it leaves a big margin to things beyond one's control and potentially more things for people to self-blame, if they don't have or can't have opportunities for advancement.

Although each one of the PH skills is important, synergy between them relies upon other variables. For example, optimism allows people to understand that there are endless possibilities and therefore revisiting past and present experiences helps to make connections between roles and experiences, but if people perceive barriers, then their curiosity diminishes [18].

The complexity of the modern world with global connectivity is also central in the Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) [19]. It acknowledges the many factors that influence career choices and the constant interaction between individuals and environments invites us to think outside the traditional career development practices that try to predict long-term planning and get prepared to handle unplanned events. It rejects the idea that typical career pathways follow a straight upward line and resemble them more to a drunken man's stagger' [20]. Therefore, seeing patterns and being ready to see them change is a way not to be afraid of complexity but work with it by cultivating an adaptability mindset, understand failures and see the positive things they hide. This moves individuals from long-term planning to planfulness, which is a process of constant reviewing and tailoring of plans, consisting of devising, revising, abandoning, pausing, re-launching, finessing, and adapting them. We would expect that the agency that CTC gives to individuals to make the most of any situation could be at the same time empowering and overwhelming, as it demands individuals to be constantly alert and ready to change course.

## 6. Synthesising Metaphors

Trying to make sense of the metaphors we presented (Fig.1), we would say that individuals should know themselves and have a toolkit of skills that they can use as it seems fit. Having a careers toolkit is a metaphor used both for employees as well as career practitioners. It relates to a wide range of skills and competences that we need to succeed. Like a handyman does not rely on one or two tools but uses a combination depending on the task, the employees should develop an array of skills, which will be used on their own or in combination with others. Beginning with their intrinsic motivation is essential to know their values and actively see how they align with the values of the organisation they work for or want to work for. Being motivated with the purpose of their work can lead to job satisfaction and successful transitions during their life.

They should also be reflective, taking stock and trying to analyse their past experiences not on a self-reprimanding or blaming way, but in a constructive way to see the influences of people and events in their decisions and visualise their future aspirations. Trying to plan everything is almost impossible because the environment changes, personal factors interfere, as life is totally unpredictable. Constant revision of the initial plans to match the data at any given time is more sensible but requires constant awareness of opportunities and may be beyond the comfort zone at some times.

Individuals need also to understand that it is not only way to success or that qualifications that matter and that their work experience and achievements can never be seen objectively. There will always be subjective



interpretations, and that they need to approach their work life as holistically as they can. Work cannot be detached by personal life, as work life is an organic part of the self-concept. Accepting that in the work life there will be ups and downs, detours, stagnation periods, toxic environments and other problems, but they should see all these with optimism and find the inner resources to turn them into opportunities for meaningful career moves. Resilience and adaptability are positive concepts on how to handle failure and feeling less fearful at the face of failure seems to be not just a personality trait that some have more in abundance of others, but a teachable feature.

From the side of organisations, it shows that they should take into account stressful situations and how they affect their employees. HR departments should take into serious consideration the employees' wellbeing, mental health, as well as being proactive in embracing inclusion and diversity [21]. Organisations should therefore address their responsibility in career advancement of individuals and provide multiple opportunities for career professional development, networking and advancement.

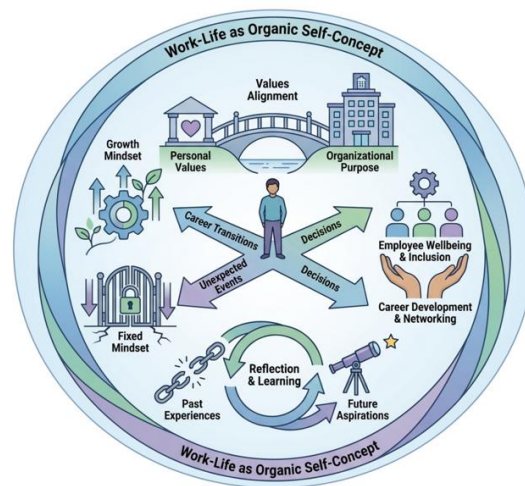


Fig.1 Work-Life as Organic Self-Concept - image created via Biorender

## 7. Discussion – Points to Consider

This paper is not an extensive analysis of metaphors in career development, but focuses on metaphors related to transitions, which can describe mobility, unexpected events and decisions. In different times of our life and career phase, different metaphors might be more appropriate than others. It is important to see whether these metaphors link to a growth mindset or whether they trigger self-limiting beliefs and are closer to the fixed mindset. Using language that supports development of personal agency where reflection and lifelong learning are highlighted as part of success and part of turning failure into success.

At the same time, it is not only individuals but also systems that enable success or failure. It should not be only the individuals who should be invited to move from thinking of restrictions, but organisations as well, which should change into a more enabling approach. Preparing for the unexpected, adapting to diverse contexts and rewriting the life story are attitudes that could help individuals understand success and failure not as terminal points, but as parts of the cycle.

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