

Telling your story

“What do you do?” Whether in a formal job interview or a casual encounter, we’re all asked this question. Do you have a good answer? Here we present two metaphors to help you articulate your own professional journey.

The river

Your career journey evolves almost on its own

Starting point

You enter the river – like getting an internship or a first job after college – and see where it will take you.

Direction

You follow the current, changing jobs or even companies as opportunities arise. You never really think about the direction the river is taking you.

Too slow or too fast

The river sets the pace. Too slow and you feel frustrated. Maybe you quit and go back to school. In the rapids, you may become so focused that you neglect your most important relationships or even your health.

Capsizing and crises

Losing a job is like flipping over. Should you take the first boat that comes along or ask yourself if this river is the right one for you? A crisis might make the entire river run dry. Is this the time to change or do you wait for the rains to come again?

Looking ahead

Have you talked with people who can tell you what lies further downriver?

The race

You see your career as a race against others

The field

At the start, the ground is flat. The faster you run, the farther you get, although some people seem to have a head start.

The rough

Running as fast as you can on uneven terrain may cause you to trip and fall. You will want to move quickly but watching where you step and avoiding political pitfalls. Do you have a mentor who can help or even pick you up if you do fall?

The forest

Don’t just watch the ground or you may run into a tree – i.e., letting your ego get in the way or failing to nurture important relationships. Do you blame the tree for obstructing your path, or do you navigate around the trees and get through the forest in one piece?

The swamp

Visibility is poor and you might lose your way. You may, in fact, have to take a few steps back if you want to take a different path or make a significant career change.

The beach

Where do you want to end up: overlooking the sea – sailing, surfing, fishing or watching the boats go by? Where will you ultimately feel settled and content?

Source: *Learning to fly: How to manage your career in a turbulent and changing world*, by Mike Rosenberg (2022).

Which metaphor resonates with you?

Try telling your own life story using one of these metaphors, making sure you hit the same five beats:

1

Why did you make your initial choices?

2

How did you change and adapt along the way?

3

How did you react to negative experiences and overcome obstacles?

4

Did you take responsibility for your actions and try to learn from your mistakes? Learning and growth should be central themes.

5

Finally, spend some time thinking about the future, and show you’re preparing yourself for probable scenarios and logical next steps.

Crafting an honest story – a brief yet captivating elevator pitch – will resonate with recruiters, who can smell artifice a mile away, so make sure everything you say is true. Also, as the coronavirus pandemic has upended all our lives, make sure you make that part of your story, too. **Now is the time to process the past and craft the future you want!**