

Sometimes it may be better to be nobody

Today's obsession with credentials has a significant downside

Credentials are a fact of life, whether they are degrees, certificates, diplomas, titles, qualifications, or other real or symbolic "merit badges." All have their place. They help us to feel confident, and encourage others to have confidence in us. They allow us to bid for responsibility and accountability, and support others' choices to permit us to lead, manage, or supervise. They verify our education and experience, and tell others that they can rely on our expertise. Where credentials get in the way is when a person becomes preoccupied, even obsessed, with some credential they have gained. Then they start to lose their identity and become that credential instead. They only feel like a "somebody" because of it, and so allow that part of their identity to become bigger than all the rest. At work, at home, and even at play, they can't separate from their assumed, credential-based identity. They wear it like a cloak. It's their "brand."

Are you a "somebody" — or a "something?"

When someone becomes their credential, they keep on reminding you of it — in formal meetings, in informal workplace gatherings, in water-cooler conversations, with clients and other stakeholders, in outside-of-work social situations, even when shopping at the local retailer. Their conversations and their interactions are driven by their need for recognition and acknowledgment; to feel emotionally secure and be seen as "somebody."

Yet this "somebody" is based less on asking "Do you know who I am?" than it is on inquiring "Do you recognize the credential that I possess?" As a result, the person becomes a "something" — a set of inanimate credentials — instead of the "somebody" they so long to be. Even the response to the question, "What do you do?" is an "I am..." statement. A "be-ing," not a "do-ing." Because they are their credential, "who I am" becomes "a qualified engineer," "a French professor," "an accountant with 30-years experience," "a project manager", "a banker", or "a Ph.D in physics," not Martha, or Howard, or Juan Carlos.

Do you even need to be anybody?

What would it be like to consciously choose to be a "nobody;" to be simply who and what you are, without the need to back it up with some written diploma or proof of expertise? To allow yourself to explore and be curious about what you see in yourself? To be a "nobody" and show up authentically without the crutch of the credential? What would it feel like if you went through an hour, a day, a week, a month, a year, or a lifetime, without needing to be "somebody" at all? Just show up as who you are right here and right now, in all your authentic humanity?

It might look like you are ready to own your mistakes and not blame others for errors. It might allow you to own your embarrassment, your shyness, and your vulnerability — and support you to guard against any tendency to become "too big for your britches," or come across as arrogant, holier-than-thou, or super(wo)man. Best of all, if you decided to shed any cloak of fakeness, phoniness, and pretending, you might allow yourself more often to say "I don't know." or "What do you think?"

What else?

- As a "nobody," you could learn to become more interested in others and let go of our ego. You could become more inclusive in thought, word, and deed; more open and accepting — operating with the notion that "I am one of you," and "We are in this together for our mutual good."
- Being a "nobody" would let you seek to understand before being understood; to stand back, inquire, observe and listen; to walk for a while in others' shoes.

- You could let go of power, status, title, and qualifications, moving away from desiring always to be “center stage” — maybe even move to being “behind the scenes.”
- It would be okay not to be “the expert,” and become servant rather than master.
- Being a “nobody” would help you become flexible rather than rigid; to get out of your own way; to become “quieter,” more self-reflective, and more self-observant. In a word, humble.

Being authentic in your life at work means accepting, simply, “I am me.” Not, “I am my job” or “I am my credential.” Just me. Being a “nobody” means looking up at the vast, vast Universe and knowing that none of us are at the center of it . . . regardless even of our loftiest credentials.

Here, as usual, are some questions for self-reflection:

- Do you rely on your credentials to be seen as “somebody?”
- Do you ever let credentials, yours or others’, get in the way of your relationships?
- Are you jealous of others’ credentials?
- Do you ever feel like a “nobody”, or deficient, because you lack a certain credential?
- What would a next credential “get you?” Are you a “nobody” without it?
- Do you use your credential to behave like a “know-it-all” or an expert?
- Do you ever use your credentials to mask weakness or irresponsibility — or to put others down?
- Do credentials line your walls? If so, why?
- When folks ask, “What do you do?”, how do you respond? With a “do-ing” phrase or a “be-ing” one?
- Who would you be without one or more of your credentials? Would you feel like you’re the same person?
- How often do you show up authentically? How does it feel?
- What would it be like to practice being a “nobody” today, or tomorrow, or next week?
- Can you accept who you are, without any artificial props? Why not?
- If you want others to be honest in how they show themselves to you, can you return the favor?

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