

# JACK & SUZY WELCH



## The Real-Life MBA

*Your No-BS Guide to Winning the Game,  
Building a Team, and Growing Your Career*

## What makes a successful career?

Over the past decade-plus, we've written a lot of columns about business, and by a lot, we mean upwards of 500. The topics have ranged from the perennial, like the principles of leadership, to breaking news events, like Joe Torre's contract with the New York Yankees. Some of these columns have received general agreement; others have incited \*&!#-storms of controversy. But few of our columns sparked the kind of emotionality of "Four Reasons to Quit Your Job," which, in short order, generated more than 750,000 views and nearly a thousand heartfelt and heartbreaking comments.

Too many people sit at their desks all day wondering, "What the heck am I doing here?"

Yet, by their own admission, most stay put. Inertia is the culprit in some cases. In others, people lack the career opportunities to leave unhappy job situations, or they face lifestyle constraints, or both. As one commenter put it, "In these years of recession . . . you have to bear whatever the situation is at your workplace."

But too many people stay in get-me-out-of-here jobs because they don't know what else they should be doing with their lives. All they know is that it isn't what they're doing at the moment.

Sound familiar? If so, read on, because the goal of this chapter is to help you make that problem go away.

## A DATE WITH DESTINY

A few years ago, we were part of a Microsoft-sponsored online series called *It's Everybody's Business*, in which we visited one company per episode and helped its management team work through a problem that was vexing the organization. It was during this diversion—which was really fun, by the way—that we ended up at Hertz, advising the company on the launch of its hourly car-share service, then known as Hertz Connect. (It is now called Hertz 24/7.)

In the process, we met a 42-year-old Hertz executive named Griff Long. It would have been very hard to miss him. Griff's energy was kinetic. Sort of like the Incredible Hulk, he always appeared to be on the verge of bursting out of his suit. We soon learned that Griff, when he wasn't making the case to senior management that he should run Hertz's new venture, was running, often as much as 20 miles a day, after which he'd go swimming and biking. On weekends, Griff competed in triathlons or coached others who were training for them.

Griff did eventually end up in charge of Hertz Connect, but the assignment didn't last long. We report this as great news, and Griff would, too. Because Griff left Hertz to take a job at Equinox, the upscale fitness lifestyle brand. His days now consist of opening new club locations, meeting with Equinox's managers and their top trainers, and talking about ways to encourage more people to exercise more often.

For the Equinox job, Griff had to let go of his concerns about salary advancement, and moved his family 1,500 miles away. But, he reports, "My happiness is huge and my wife and kids are so much happier, too. I never feel like I'm working. I'm doing what I was born to do. My only regret is it took me twenty years to get here."

Don't we all know stories like Griff's? The doctor who quits her job at age 50 to become a photographer? The corporate senior executive who jumps ship to run a museum or go into academia? The basic narrative is always the same, too—years or decades of "captivity," traded in for a second chance at living authentically, topped off with a moral of the story about doing what you love.

Such stories of reinvention, of course, are to be applauded. Similarly, trying on different jobs (or even industries) for a couple of years before settling on a career trajectory is normal and necessary. It's healthy exploration.

What pains us is Griff's long delay in finding career karma. Twenty years!

That's so common, but it doesn't need to be—because an antidote exists. It's a career assessment process called Area of Destiny (AOD).

Here's how it works. Imagine your life as two superhighways. One courses with the stuff you're very good at, the other with the stuff you really love to do. Now, imagine those superhighways intersecting. Right there—at the overlap of your capabilities and your happiness—lies the site where ideally you

on what they're vaguely good at in school, like an A-student in political science becoming a lawyer, or a top English student going into publishing. Or they take a parent's suggestion along the lines of, "There are lots of jobs in technology these days," or, "You never have to worry about a paycheck if you're an accountant." Or they grab an offer that's expedient because it will, say, allow them to live at home for a year or two or work in the same city as their significant other.

In concept and practice, AOD blows up that kind of momentum-based career *mishegas*. Let us emphasize that word "momentum," too. It's such a common reason things happen in life. Where we go to college. Where we end up living. And yes, where we go to work. AOD gets in the way of that; it's a momentum antidote, one of the best we know. It impels you to think about who you are and what would make your life abundant in meaning, impact, and happiness. To quote Mark Twain, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you figure out why."

AOD is all about expediting that second day.

Maybe that's why an AOD assessment isn't particularly easy to conduct. You've got to dig. You've got to grapple. You've got to be brutally honest about your skills, capabilities, and values. You may even need to do a bit of soul-searching.

Take the first superhighway—*the stuff you're very good at*. That doesn't mean the stuff you're pretty good at or somewhat good at, OK? Such a list, for most people, would be reasonably long. I'm good at writing presentations, you might think. I'm pretty solid at math. I'm good at getting things done. Whatever. Hordes of people in this world, thanks to decent parenting, education, and inborn gifts, are generally competent.

So forget that. The power of AOD lies in the word "very." What are you better at than the majority of people? In fact, what are you better at than *most* people?

When that's the question, your answer has to become refined. "I'm particularly good at turning complicated scientific concepts into plain English," you might say. "Everyone's always complimented me on that." Or, "I'm terrific at math when it comes to analyzing the cost and profitability of a new enterprise." Or, "I'm very good at getting things done as part of a team under extremely tight deadlines, and I'm even better at it when no one likes each other because I have a real knack for building consensus."

Over the past few years—we started using AOD analysis around 2010—we've heard all sorts of granular answers to this question. One woman—a classics major in college reluctantly thinking about a career as an academic—finally came up with, "I'm incredible at making strangers feel welcome. I've always been told that. And I guess it's true." She's now very happy as an administrator at an American university's study-abroad campus in Greece. A headhunter in his mid-twenties (already having a career crisis brought on by, in his words, "intractable boredom") offered, "I am uniquely good at connecting with really screwed-up kids. They gravitate to me—and I gravitate to them. They need to talk. I like to listen." He ditched his job on Madison Avenue to work at a wilderness education program for troubled high school students.

We cannot overestimate the importance of taking the time to identify the skill, capability, or trait (or two) that really differentiates you from the pack. Reflect on your life experiences from school to camp to family situations to jobs. When did you *particularly* excel? In which situations did you make the

team? Sitting alone or with a close advisor, musing over a strategic decision? Meeting friends for a long dinner? Volunteering with children at a local school as part of a company mentoring program? Traveling to places you've never been? Again, the list of possibilities is long, and you may love to do a slew of things, but for the sake of conducting a good AOD assessment, you need to narrow your picks. Which activities, undertakings, and pastimes really turn your crank?

With the two "superhighway" questions answered, all that's left with AOD is figuring out what industries, companies, or lines of work exist at your superhighway *intersection*. Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes not so much, for the simple reason that life, with all its many financial and personal constraints, can get in the way.

For Griff Long, it was the former. Here was a person who was excellent at sports and helping others become athletic in a very organized, very disciplined way. He was also a person whose favorite thing in life was participating in sports or talking about training with other sports fanatics. After decades working in the car rental business, no wonder he looked like he was about to implode when we met him. He was spending the bulk of his waking hours engaged in a desk job that was an imperfect match for his skills and didn't come close to filling his (emotional) cup. Fortunately, there was a whole industry that did.

By contrast, take the example of an acquaintance we'll call Jim, for whom figuring out how to land his career in his AOD intersection was more confounding. Jim studied musical theater in college and, after graduation, moved to New York to pursue a career on Broadway.

As with countless other hopefuls, Broadway didn't happen for Jim, and so after two years, he went back to school to become a landscape architect. Why? Well, he'd always been good at drawing, and he liked being outside. Plus, it felt like steady work. It was, he told himself, a good-enough solution.

Indeed it was, for 15 years. Jim got his degree, landed a job at a good firm, made junior partner, married, and had two kids. On weekends, he "indulged"—his word—his musical theater heart by singing in his church choir.

But something was missing. He knew it. His wife knew it. And that "something" was professional fulfillment. It was excitement. It was hope.

Enter AOD. Using the technique, Jim was able to pinpoint that he was very good at something that sort of surprised him: bringing teams together. In college, he recalled, directors used to fight to get him involved in their theater productions. Something about his upbeat, no-drama manner (in a world teeming with literal drama queens and kings) had smoothed out differences and galvanized people to work together productively. Jim's architecture bosses had noticed this gift as well; whenever there was a tough client or logistical or personality complications, he was assigned to the project.

As for the stuff he really loved to do? Well, besides spending time with his family, Jim just wanted to sing all the time.

Overlap, you might be thinking, what overlap?

But with some creative thinking, Jim identified it himself—musical theater management. He wouldn't get to sing every day, but he'd be around singing, which was almost as good. And in the meantime, he could really make a difference getting the hundreds of moving pieces involved in every show to come together.

Jim was thrilled about the outcome of his AOD assessment—"It feels so right," he said—but he also knew change wouldn't be easy due to financial obligations. He figures it will take five to ten years to segue from landscape architecture to theater management. Such time frames are not unusual for people whose AOD assessments reveal a far-flung "intersection." Indeed, sometimes getting to your AOD may not seem possible at all; it requires too much upheaval. Still, we would suggest that just knowing your AOD is useful, if only to give you a North Star.

A final AOD success story illustrates the disruptive (and positive) power of this seemingly simple device one last time. It concerns a young man we'll call Marcus, who attended college with every intention of majoring in geology. Why? Because in high school, Marcus had been good at math and science, and as careers in those areas go, geology seemed the most interesting. Plus, he'd heard the energy field had lots of jobs.

Freshman year was not even half over when Marcus discovered what it meant to be "very good" at math and science, and he knew one thing for certain: he wasn't. Marcus had also learned that a career in geology meant graduate school, and he was bereft thinking about six or seven more years of struggling to stay even with the pack. But right around then, he bumped into his AOD, or to be more accurate, he bumped into a worried set of parents who came bearing the AOD process.

The trio set about determining what Marcus was uniquely good at, and the answer came quickly. It was music, and more specifically, identifying new music that was going to become popular in a couple of months or a year or two. An obscure skill, perhaps, but one that Marcus had exhibited since he started

music that was going to become popular in a couple of months or a year or two. An obscure skill, perhaps, but one that Marcus had exhibited since he started listening to music as a kid. He often featured “about to be famous” music on his weekly radio show, which he started at age 14 and continued to host through college. In fact, it was a family joke that Marcus could predict Grammy Award winners three years before they were nominated.

As for what Marcus loved doing—that too was a no-brainer. It was listening to music. He also loved talking about music, sharing it with friends, reading music blogs, and going to concerts, the more unknown the band the better.

Today, Marcus is headed toward a promising career as a music programmer. To say he is happy is an absurd understatement.

His parents are happy, too. We know because we are them.

Anyway.

Look, there are a multitude of career books out there, containing a multitude of assessment tools. We don't mean to reinvent the wheel, just to offer the most effective way we personally know to answer the question, “What should I do with my life?”

Spend it in your Area of Destiny. It's where achievement meets happiness. It's where work stops being work and becomes life in all its fullness.

## MORE THAN A LIFESTYLE

Some of you reading this book may not remember the olden days of yore, when being an entrepreneur wasn't what everyone said they wanted to do. But such times did exist, back when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Or more seriously, back when careers pretty much happened inside skyscrapers or other similar buildings filled with people in suits. In the 1970s, the oil crisis had people rushing toward degrees in geology. Energy was where the action (and the money) was going to be! In the last 30 years, investment banks and consulting firms have been the MBA employer of choice, attracting newly minted graduates the way a vacuum sucks up cookie crumbs off a rug.

For most of the last decade, entrepreneurism has been having its moment (or two or three). To be clear, this dynamic isn't particularly widespread. In fact, as the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported, Federal Reserve data from 2013 indicates that the share of people under the age of 30 who own private businesses has reached a 24-year-low. But it's also a fact that a certain start-up-or-bust zeitgeist has taken hold at many top business schools. At Stanford, for instance, it's considered something of a badge of honor to not attend any recruiting interviews; why bother, if you're starting your own thing? And at MIT's Sloan School, one of us (Jack) taught a class where roughly one out of six students had started a business before even graduating.

Why such enthusiasm? Well, being an entrepreneur looks insanely fun, doesn't it? It looks heroic. You write the rules and there are no rules. Your office is in a warehouse; meetings are conducted at the foosball table. You work like an animal for a few years, but then one day, it's you ringing the bell on the stock exchange. A few years later, you're acquired, and after the trip around the world and the purchase of a professional sports franchise, you start all over again.

Now that's living!

But there's one catch.

*To be an entrepreneur, you need an idea.* A big, fat, value-adding, mind-blowing, paradigm-shifting idea. You need a different and better idea than all the ideas already out there.

And there's a second catch, too.

Along with that idea, you need a rare kind of fearlessness. We're not talking about a run-of-the-mill tolerance for risk, or even an above-average tolerance. To be an entrepreneur—a *real* one—you need the cold-blooded courage, crazy passion, and irrational determination to endure the repeated near-death experiences that will most definitely occur along the way to making your idea a reality. You might run out of money a few times. You will make dumb mistakes. You will have suppliers and partners who flake out on you. You will not sleep. You will not want, need, or get a chance to.

What we're describing here is guts. And to be fair, most people understand that part of the entrepreneurial equation. What most don't seem to understand, in our experience, is the “big idea” part. Indeed, in our travels since 2001, we've met hundreds, and probably thousands, of individuals (particularly students) who've excitedly told us of their desire to become entrepreneurs. Only to balk when we then ask, “So what's your one-of-a-kind product or service?”

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Sure, there've been occasions when an answer shoots right back. An industry-changing way of selling consigned clothing online, for instance. A handheld medical device to treat migraines. We heard about both of those ideas in their infancy from their founders and got goose bumps. (Today, incidentally, both companies are up and running.)

But more often—much more often—we hear something like, "Idea? Well, I don't have one yet. Maybe a new app. I'm not sure. But I *am* sure I want to be an entrepreneur. I just don't want to work for someone else."

That yearning, while completely understandable, is not enough. That's the bottom line here.

Please note, however, that our admonishment, if it applies, doesn't mean you're doomed to corporate drudgery for the rest of your life. All it means is that you probably shouldn't start something yet. What would you start? But you can certainly look for work in an entrepreneurial environment.

Remember Bunny Williams, whose story we told in the chapter on globalization? After a long and successful career as an interior decorator, Bunny decided to launch her own furniture line in 2010, with pieces manufactured in Asia and distributed in retail outlets around the world. Bunny's better/newer idea was that, by working closely on quality with Asian craftsmen, she could find a way to mass-produce upscale, designer-label furnishings and sell them to aspirational homeowners at moderate prices.

Bunny also knew what she didn't know: how to finance inventory, and how to do the books for her new business, for example. She immediately started filling out a team of experts in each of these areas around herself.

If you're an entrepreneur-wannabe without an idea, you can be part of such a team. Think of how many entrepreneurs-in-waiting got their starts working at high-tech success stories over the past 30 years. That's your kind of in, and it's a great one. To this day, Bunny credits her team with her venture's success. "I knew what I could do, which was all about the design. Everything else, I turned to them. They taught me so much."

Sure, as a member of the team, you don't share in all the glory, or the equity, of a start-up's founding idea-generators. But when the moment comes to commercialize your own big idea someday, you'll be ready. You can't put a dollar figure on that.

## YOU CHOOSE

No chapter about careers would be complete without some discussion of a subject commonly called "work-life balance." After all, whether you do an AOD career assessment or use some other tool, in making a choice about what you'll be doing with most of your waking hours, you're also making a choice about what you won't be doing, or will be doing less of, in your nonworking hours.

Notice our use of the word "choice." That, in a nutshell, is why we prefer the term "work-life choice" instead of "work-life balance." In our mind, the former term acknowledges that every career decision carries consequences, which the "decider" understands and accepts. By definition, "balance" implies that a certain split is ideal, and it's around 50-50.

Here's the thing. A 50-50 balance *is* ideal for some individuals. True, it's not for us. Because we happen to think work is wildly fun and we work together and we're sort of intense, we go more for an 80-20 or 70-30 split ourselves. But again, that's a choice. It's *our* choice. We wouldn't want people telling us how we should spend our time, and we don't take any pleasure in telling others how to design their lives.

Basically, we think this whole thing is about values—personal values. An individual who values intellectual discourse, learning, alone time, and deep friendships with one or two people is not going to make the same work-life choices as a person who values money, fame, and being invited to a lot of parties. Similarly, a twenty-something brand manager who dreams of becoming a corporate CEO by the age of 40 and loves the emotional high of skydiving on Sundays is not going to make the same work-life choices as an MBA drawn to nonprofit fund-raising because of the flexibility it will give him to help raise his children.

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Again, who's to say which values are right or wrong? Not us. If someone wants to go for something like a 50-50 work-life "balance," along with all its consequences, power to him or her. Same with 20-80 and 80-20.

And yet just go out in public and try to say that. We did, and we got slammed.

It was 2012, and we were asked to speak at the *Wall Street Journal's* "Women in the Economy" conference in Palm Beach, Florida. We had no agenda going into the event, and we surely had no intention of generating OMG headlines and snarky blogs, but that's exactly what happened when we made the "work-life choice" argument you just read. More specifically, we said success in the workplace was a function of overdelivering on results, taking on difficult assignments, and demanding consistent, thorough reviews from your managers in order to gauge where you stand. We also said that taking a reduced schedule and asking for limited availability in order to tend to family (or other interests) was a perfectly fine choice, but it was not going to accelerate anyone's ascent to the corner office, *male or female*.

Well, talk about igniting an online onslaught of, um, unfavorable comments.

But then, a funny thing happened. A number of prominent women CEOs said they agreed with us, some of them very publicly. And just like that, the controversy went away.

So, here's to defusing this topic. Work-life choice isn't about anything but exactly that . . . choice. Every career decision you make has consequences. Social, economic, emotional. Those consequences need to line up with values—*your* values.

Everything else is just noise.

**Look, the world has its share of people who know exactly what they want to do with their lives.**

We wish that kind of fulfillment for everyone. And it pains us that it can be so elusive.

That's why we recommend the Area of Destiny technique with such gusto. It's a catalytic mechanism for getting you from the dire and lonely place of, "What should I do with my life?" to the energized, encouraging territory of, "I *love* what I do with my life."

So dig deep. Analyze and assess. What are you really good at, what do you love to do, and what unharvested field of dreams lies at the intersection of the two?

Should the answer to those questions point you toward an entrepreneurial route, we urge you to keep digging more. Do you have a big new idea? Do you have the guts to start something new? If not, what young and daring venture might you join until your spectacular *aha* arrives?

Finally, we urge you to dig deep to understand what kind of "balance" you want in your life. Is it 50-50, or something different? And just as important, ask yourself, "What are my choices and their consequences? Do they jibe with my values?"

After all, the person living the answer to those questions is you.

## How to get out of a career stall.

Along the way in life, almost everyone has encountered the depiction of purgatory from Dante's *Inferno*: a vast, waterless pit filled with forsaken souls frantically searching for a way out, particularly in an upward direction.

Grim, right? And familiar-feeling, too, if your career has ever stalled.

You're an individual contributor who wants to run a team. A functional expert who yearns to move into general management. A middle manager who thinks you're overdue to get P&L responsibility. But when you ask about timing or push the point with your boss or HR, the answer is always, "Not yet, not yet. Just hang in there."

But you've been hanging in there for what feels like an awfully long time.

It's soul-killing, that waiting. You love business, and you're sure you can do more. You may even feel as if you're in your Area of Destiny. But like the inhabitants of Dante's netherworld, you feel stuck.

Do not despair.

The truth about purgatory (the career kind here on earth, that is) is that it always ends. At some point, if there's no movement, out of your mind with frustration, you jump. You take a lateral move within your own organization just for the get-out-of-jail momentum of it, or you quit for a position at another company that's better for the main reason that it's not your current job. Or, in some situations, a career stall ends because your company loses patience with you, and bit by bit, or all at once, you're pushed. None of these are especially appealing scenarios. We get that.

Which is why this chapter is about forging another path, one that leads to the promotion you've yearned for.

Will it be easy? Probably not. But you can make it happen. The process starts with understanding why your career has stalled—*really* understanding. After that, you have six options for action. You can attempt all of them, but two or three of the options might be enough to break your impasse.

It goes without saying that no one loves change, and several changes at once probably sound like as much fun as sunbathing in the Arctic Circle. But Dante had it right about purgatory: "Here indeed may be torment," he wrote, "but not death."

You just can't let that line describe your life.

## WHY CAREERS STALL

Every career-stall story has its own particularities. Its mitigating factors; its extraordinary circumstances.

But generally speaking, careers only stall for a few reasons, which we're going to run through here before getting to the action steps that we believe might help turn your situation around.

First, careers can stall when your company does not have a position for you to grow into. There's a "blocker" above you—usually your boss—who's doing a fine job and has no plans to retire, change industries, or move to Toledo. Your boss may even have a blocker above him or herself. Such a situation can be absolutely maddening, but it happens all the time in business. The main culprit is lack of growth; your company, industry, or the economy overall is in a hard place, standing still or even contracting. In such situations, opportunities for upward mobility are necessarily hard to come by. But blocking is also endemic to family companies, where the top jobs are often filled by certain "preordained" individuals.

If you're in a blocker situation, you really only have one choice, and it's to decide how long you're willing to endure stasis. And we mean, *decide*. Put an expiration date on your patience. "If something doesn't change within a year, I'm putting out feelers, and within two years, I'm out of here," you might conclude.

In this assessment, you also need to consider your standing within the company. If a promotion becomes available, are you likely to get it? Have you been

In this assessment, you also need to consider your standing within the company. If a promotion becomes available, are you likely to get it? Have you been getting A-plus performance reviews or only in the B range? Do you have an embedded reputation that might be hard to shake? Is your boss known for promoting his or her best people or sitting on their careers while he or she reaps the benefits? Every piece of such data is critical in determining the terms of the "perseverance contract" you write with yourself.

Importantly, there is no rule on the right amount of time to wait out a blockage. All that matters is that you explicitly pick a time frame based on your values, standing, circumstances, and constraints, as well as your company's future. In doing so, your stall won't end, but with a clear horizon and potential exit plan, your daily angst will surely ebb.

Another general reason that careers stall is wrongheaded notions about the importance of multifunctional expertise. We see this phenomenon all the time. Mary is a terrific financial analyst. Jeff is a star in marketing. Back in business school, both Mary and Jeff were repeatedly assured that the fastest, smartest, most time-tested way to senior management was by successively seeking out and landing stints in every function. "You need two to three years in each function, plus some time in international," they were told. "You need to build a well-rounded portfolio of competencies."

How cockamamie. Yes, there are some companies that like to parade their high-potentials through the fairgrounds, stopping at every ride. But far more often, companies promote people who are known to be really, really good at what they do, and they promote them right up the ladder, all the way to the top. The facts are, if you're a finance guru, you don't need two years in marketing to understand the function's importance to results. You know it in your bones, or through astute observation. Nor does a wildly creative type in marketing need to slog through a couple of years in operations to know that quality matters. Please. Yet, because of the received wisdom about "rounding yourself out," we've seen too many terrific functional experts jump out of their areas, only to vanish into the organizational ether.

Look, if you're really talented at something and you intentionally up and move yourself to an area where you're not so talented, it's like an ice hockey star quitting to join the NBA. (Or like Michael Jordan deciding to become a professional baseball player; we all remember where that went.) Our point is, don't wear skates to a basketball game. It's a surefire way to stall a career. And if you're finding that out for yourself right now, the fix is clear. Return to whence you belong. You'll soon be back in the game and your career will be too.

Then there are careers that stall because of an attitude problem. OK, that's being polite. We're talking about boss-haters. You know, the people who play by the rules outwardly, while inwardly they ooze disdain and disgust for the organization and its leaders.

The thing about boss-haters, we've realized after writing and talking about them for more than a decade, is that they rarely know they're boss-haters. *They* are not the problem, in their opinion. The company is the problem. The people in charge are fools and incompetents. They only care about money; they don't understand a thing about the customer or the products. And frankly, most of their coworkers aren't much better. They all suck up to the bigs and don't know anything useful.

As we said, we don't expect boss-haters to self-identify. But on the off chance these sentiments ring a bell, welcome to understanding why your career has stalled. And welcome, too, to accepting that, without a serious change in mindset, you *are* truly stuck. Because even if you're smart and capable—and boss-haters tend to be—no higher-up is ever going to give a leg up to someone who scorns them. It's not happening.

But enough about boss-haters. Luckily, they're relatively few in number. Let's turn finally to the most common reason that careers stall. Performance.

Or more precisely, underperformance.

Now, underperformance doesn't mean you're not trying hard at work. You might very well be giving it your all. But the last place effort counted more than results was in elementary school. This is real life.

Here's the problem, though. In real life, too many underperformers don't know that they're underperforming. The reason, as we said in Chapter 9, is that too many managers out there don't tell their people where they stand. They're too busy. Or they think people should figure it out on their own. Or they're too "kind" for straight-up candor, or so they claim.

None of these reasons make sense. In fact, as we said earlier, we'd argue that obfuscation around performance is cruel and unfair. People deserve to know how they're doing at something they're doing eight or ten hours a day. Come on.

But, sadly, that's the way it is. If you're in purgatory at a growing company, and you're not being blocked, you're not wearing ice skates to a basketball

But, sadly, that's the way it is. If you're in purgatory at a growing company, and you're not being blocked, you're not wearing ice skates to a basketball game, and you're not a boss-hater, you can assume that in the eyes of the powers-that-be, you're just not good enough to be promoted.

You're not big enough.

Now, we're not talking about *big enough* in terms of personality. In fact, sometimes having a big personality can hurt you as you try to ascend the ladder. People can read your extroversion as arrogance, or take you as a know-it-all or blowhard. People with big personalities can make very big targets of themselves.

No, we're talking about *big enough* in terms of having the breadth and depth to handle the next job.

Breadth and depth.

Regardless of the specifics of your job, that combination is what your bosses are waiting to see.

## 1. Don't Deliver. Overdeliver.

Ask yourself this: How close do you come to meeting your boss's expectations every day or month or quarter? Do you hit your targets? Make your quotas? Fulfill your order books?

If so, that's too bad. It's not enough.

If you want to demonstrate breadth and depth, the first change you need to make is not just meeting expectations. You must exceed them. You must overdeliver results. That means with every assignment, you must redefine its parameters to make it bigger, more exciting, more relevant, and more *everything* to make your boss smarter and make his or her job easier.

Remember, when your boss asks you to do a piece of work, they usually already have a sense of the answer. And they're figuring that you'll confirm that answer for them with your analysis, providing details or numbers to make the case easier to present to their own boss. Or even if your boss doesn't have a sense of the answer to a specific query, they do have an idea in their head about how your assignment should turn out.

Overdelivering means taking the presumed thinking or idea in your boss's head and elevating it to a whole new level.

Consider the case of two bright college grads we know who both landed one-year, up-or-out internships at an executive search firm in Chicago. After training with a team for about three months, each was asked to compile a list of candidates for an open position at a client's company.

Our first associate, let's call him Tom, had been getting somewhat mixed signals about his future. His work so far, his manager told him, was in the B to B-plus range. Good, he knew, but not good enough to land a permanent spot.

The other associate, Cindy, had joined the firm with an Ivy League halo over her head. She was invited to a couple of special lunches with senior executives, many of whom were impressed by her innate intelligence. Still, her on-the-job output was meh—no better than a C-plus.

As the assignment due date approached, Tom could barely sleep. He didn't want to live in his parents' basement forever, but even more than that, he longed for the impact that came with a permanent position. That's when it dawned on him: his boss would be *satisfied* with the assigned list of candidates, but he'd be *thrilled* with a wider and deeper picture of the industry, and in particular, one that suggested where potential new business might be found.

And so Tom set about creating such a picture. He did extensive digging to come up with a list of superstar candidates for the client, annotating the list with his assessment of how likely each was to be interested, based on his client's growth rate, and other factors. But Tom's final report also included the org charts of six companies in the same industry, with an emphasis on the fastest-growing among them.

Cindy, meanwhile, searched some of the firm's old files, poked around LinkedIn, and called an industry analyst she knew from college. Her list basically screamed, "Going through the motions."

You know how the story ends. Cindy is working in another field. Tom was hired and is on his way; he even has two interns of his own now. The difference is, he figured out that getting ahead isn't about handing in your homework on time.

It's about defining the extra credit, and then acing it.

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## 2. Volunteer for Hard Duty

Exceeding expectations is something you can strive for every day, but every now and again, you get the opportunity to show your breadth and depth by volunteering for, and nailing, a hard assignment.

A hard, high-visibility assignment, and in particular, the one that nobody else wants to touch. The initiative that only the boss likes. The joint venture everyone thinks is going to flop. The manufacturing plant with the yield problem, located someplace very out of the way. The big new client known for outsized demands and impossible deadlines.

Unfortunately, many people in career purgatory shy away from such prospects. They figure, "Why pile a public failure on top of a precarious situation?"

That question makes sense, until you realize the upside of succeeding at a kryptonite assignment. It has the potential to rebrand you from follower to leader, from muddler to winner, from maybe to yes.

True, you might fail. That's not the end of the world; you'll be able to add a line of new skills and experience to your resume as you look around for your next job.

In the best-case scenario, though, the impact will be galvanizing. In fact, you'll wonder why you waited so long to place a big, exciting bet on yourself.

## 3. Acquire Followers the Hard Way

A third change you can make to break your career impasse is the acquisition of followers. You need to show the organization that people—peers and bosses alike—listen when you talk.

Luckily, if you've embraced the first change of overdelivering results, the acquisition of followers should come pretty automatically. People generally want to hear what their organization's biggest contributors are saying.

So speak up.

That is, *prepare* and speak up.

Remember the head of HR we talked about in Chapter 3? He worked at a midwestern refrigeration manufacturer, one that had recently been acquired by a private equity fund. This leader changed the game for his company when he discovered that the company's performance evaluation processes were not being linked closely enough to its operations, and he demonstrated his findings with a chart that everyone could grasp with one look.

Insights like his, the kind of insights that improve companies and jump-start careers, do not come on the fly. The HR head had started with a competitive mindset. He'd been thinking like a company leader, driven by the question, "Why aren't these projects moving faster?" Then he'd dug into the data; he'd spent days with it. He was searching for an OMG idea, and he'd found it. And not only did his best practice make him a hero in his own company, it put him in front of every CEO in the private equity portfolio.

But data is just one quarry for you to mine to build your arsenal of smart insights. Every industry has thought leaders to read, academic research to plow through. There are podcasts, books, lectures, blogs, massive open online courses (MOOCs). Never miss a day of the *Wall Street Journal*.

The world is awash in ideas. Swim in them. Not just occasionally. All the time. Seek out higher intelligence from every quarter, synthesize ideas you've harvested, augment them with your own thinking and analysis, and bring them to your organization in ways that are relevant.

And have opinions—on everything. That really matters. No one wants to listen to a robot. Should Microsoft have bought Nokia? Who's the better long-term bet, Facebook or Twitter? Are activist shareholders good or bad for the economy? We're talking about these kinds of industry-shaping topics. If a big

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And have opinions—on everything. That really matters. No one wants to listen to a robot. Should Microsoft have bought Nokia? Who's the better long-term bet, Facebook or Twitter? Are activist shareholders good or bad for the economy? We're talking about those kinds of industry-shaping topics. If a big merger has just occurred in your industry, know all the players involved and form a view on whether it was a good or bad idea. If a competitor is reported to be working on a new technology, chase down the specifics and figure out how big a threat you think it poses. Keep track of the major leaders in your field and follow them in the print media and online. Over time, you'll begin to get a sense of what they believe about the future and how right or wrong they tend to be. Share those insights with your team.

Remember, you're not sharing either your insights or opinions to show off your big brain. Like the HR leader with the game-changing chart, you're sharing them to contribute to your organization's success.

When you do, people will look up when you talk. And soon, when it comes to your career, they'll starting thinking "up," too.

#### 4. Make Sure You're Tech-Current

The next change we're going to talk about is probably most relevant to the over-40 crowd. Make that over 35.

Actually, make that anyone who's decided to leave technology expertise to the "kids."

Big mistake. Not being tech-current is a surefire way to lose your seat at the table where any and all important organizational and strategic issues are being discussed. It's purgatory glue.

A few years ago, we were interviewing several advertising agencies to represent our online MBA program. Very early into the process, we observed that every meeting boiled down to a discussion about a few key tech acronyms, like CPM (cost per thousand), CPC (cost per click), and CVR (conversion rate). When we commented on this fact with a potential agency, one of the lone gray-hairs in the meeting smiled sardonically. "The geeks rule the world," he said.

They do indeed. While advertising still contains its moments of artistic inspiration—think of those amazing Super Bowl commercials—the industry is increasingly driven by science and data analysis in the form of A/B testing, conversion rate optimization, and attribution modeling, among other technical wizardry. The implications for those who entered advertising ten or 20 years ago—or even five—are massive. If you want to get ahead in advertising, you will only rise if you do so along with its relentless tide of technology innovation.

It's the same story in industry after industry. You must push yourself to learn what you don't know, even if the analytics you don't understand scare you. Otherwise, when the real conversations take place, your chair will be in the hallway, and pretty soon it could be on the sidewalk.

Take the story of an executive we've known for decades; we'll call her Linda here.

It was 2011. Linda, who was in her mid-fifties at the time, was running HR at a \$500 million manufacturing company that sold its widgets through a staff of around 200 salespeople across the country. She loved her job; the management team was terrific, and unlike at so many previous places she'd worked, Linda felt the CEO truly valued HR's input in key decisions.

But Linda also felt a creeping concern. Recently, every senior management meeting had ended up being about information derived from the company's newly adopted CRM system. Broadly speaking, Linda had a sense of the system's benefits, but she could see that her colleagues were fluent in its nuances. More and more, it was clear, they knew about each salesperson's performance in ways she did not.

Then one day, Linda's lack of deep familiarity came home to roost. Poring over the data from a recent CRM report, her colleagues started discussing whether the head of sales for the Northeast region should be reassigned, or perhaps even let go. As far as Linda was concerned, based on years of traditional performance evaluations, this manager was a solid performer, well liked by his team and customers. The data, however, seemed to be showing he'd plateaued in finding new business long ago, and his team had, too. Further, the whole region was clearly the least successful in its rollout of the company's new product strategy.

The meeting left Linda panicked. On the one hand, she was relieved no one had asked her opinion on the matter. Her "data" was obviously outdated to the point of uselessness. On the other, not being asked was an omen—a bad one.

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The next morning, Linda tracked down the company’s head of marketing and arranged for a two-day tutorial in the new CRM system, one in-house and the other with the system’s vendor. She also asked the marketing VP to walk her through a recent CRM report—the one that had been discussed at the meeting about the Northeast region sales manager—highlighting which data trends were the most closely linked to the company’s strategic goals. The session lasted four long hours, with Linda probing the meaning of practically every figure on every page.

“I wanted to be completely fluent in the system,” Linda told us. “I *needed* to be. I was right on the brink of not mattering anymore, of not being taken seriously.”

Our point here obviously isn’t about CRM systems, per se. It’s about waking up every day wondering what you don’t know about your industry’s technology and thinking *it could kill you*. Linda could have stayed in her HR silo and concerned herself only with HR terms and issues she natively understood. But that’s the same thing as waving a white flag in business today. Linda earned back her place at the table with other senior executives, and you will, too, by knowing that technology savvy isn’t optional anymore.

## 5. Get Real About Mentors

Sometimes, of course, expanding your expertise (be it in technology or other skills) takes more than the kind of dogged curiosity Linda displayed. In fact, sometimes it involves going back to school, either to get an advanced degree, earn a certificate, or take a seminar on the side. We are huge fans of continuing education—especially, given the economy, if you are able take your classes while staying employed full- or part-time. These days, you just don’t want to lose the momentum of your career’s trajectory.

But if continuing education is not an option (and even if it is), there’s still the fifth change we’re going to suggest in order to jump-start your career. Treat everyone around you as a mentor.

There it is. The M-word. We almost hesitate to use it.

Because “mentoring” is a buzzword. Parents, aunts, uncles, career coaches, leadership pundits—everyone tells you the same thing. Find a VIP in your company, form a bond, then sit back as he or she advises and protects you as you soar through the heavens.

The problem is, such knight-in-shining-armor mentors are as rare as, well, knights in shining armor. They come around when (and only when) a young businessperson shows extraordinary promise and the personal chemistry is perfect besides. Larry Summers, for instance, was an important mentor to Sheryl Sandberg at the start of her career. They met when Larry was Sheryl’s professor at Harvard, where she was a star student, to put it mildly; later he recruited her to work for him at the World Bank, and after that, at the Treasury Department. It’s generally understood that Sheryl, with her enormous brainpower and savvy, contributed to Larry’s success nearly as much as he did to hers.

So, yes, the kind of mentoring relationship your parents dream of for you . . . it can happen. But it is rare, rare, rare.

That’s why our strong advice is, no matter where you are in your career, consider *every* person in your sphere to be a mentor—young, old, and in between, in your area of expertise and outside it. From this circle of mentors, observe best practices. If someone in your field is a great speaker, study what she’s doing right and incorporate it into your own presentations. If another manager in your division consistently on-ramps new employees well, copy his techniques. If you have a colleague or superior who runs a great meeting, see that individual as a teacher and a guide.

Look, everyone knows something you don’t. Everyone.

Find that something and grab it to make your work smarter and better. Come to work each day committed to finding a better way to do everything you do, from the mundane on up. And in time—not immediately, but eventually—your breadth and depth will be much enhanced for it.

And your career will, too.

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## 6. Love Everyone

The final strategy we're going to suggest in order to break your career stall is the hardest. It's loving everyone.

Loving everyone is distinctly different from the mentoring mindset we just described. The mentoring mindset is about engaging with a community of colleagues in an effort to put their brains inside yours.

Loving everyone is not a brain thing. It's a heart thing.

Anthropologists would tell you that people have separated themselves into tribes since the dawn of time. We've gathered allies and eliminated enemies to protect our interests. We've engaged in gossip to know what's really going on. Basically, they would assert, it's human nature to gossip, criticize, whisper, trade info, join a clique, form a cabal, or otherwise engage in palace intrigue.

So what?

Just. Don't. Do. It.

We know that's hard! We plead guilty to almost all of the above charges. We've gossiped, criticized, whispered, and on and on. But this has done us no good, and that's because it doesn't do anyone any good.

So here's another approach—one that really works. To the best of your ability, refuse to talk about other people unless it's in positive terms. Refuse to join surreptitious coalitions. Refuse to backstab and politick. At first, people may be perplexed by your absence from the cabals. However, in time, people will come to see you for what you are: trustworthy. A person who's about doing the work, not manipulating the workplace.

A person who demonstrates integrity and leadership.

Qualities on the basis of which promotions are made.

Purgatory, Dante wrote, was a place to avoid at all costs.

If you're in a career stall, you get that.

Our goal here has been to describe getting *out* with six action steps we believe will help you demonstrate new and improved breadth and depth. Deploy all of these options, or pick a few and go gangbusters.

Because getting unstuck is a transformative thing. It reminds you why you went into business in the first place. To grow. To make a difference. To create a great life. To have fun.

None of those things happen when you feel as if you're standing still. So don't just deliver and hope for the best. Overdeliver and expect more. Volunteer for hard duty. The worst thing that could happen is you gain experience; the best is a whole new reputation. Acquire followers with smart insights and strong