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## Lessons Learned Along the Way

### TWELVE SUGGESTIONS FOR OPTIMIZING CAREER SUCCESS

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In prefacing my remarks, let me first note that they are based more on experience than on science. One may thus question their generalizability. My  $n = 1$ . At the same time, the scientific databases dealing with academic career success are quite limited.

My remarks result from my participation in more than a dozen doctoral consortia devoted to the “whys” and “wherefores” of career success, extended conversations over the past two and a half decades with respected peers in my academic cohort, and hours of personal reflection tinted with a liberal dose of agony.

*Warning:* My remarks are admittedly very prescriptive, with many “dos” and “don’ts.” Additionally, they may seem, but are not meant to be, harsh or snide; I mean them only to be candid. To this end, they are organized into

what might be termed suggestions for optimizing career success. Although my remarks may seem to be aimed only at individuals who wish to pursue high-profile academic research careers, in reality the proffered suggestions are directed to all those who seek personal and career success.

#### **Suggestion 1: Hit the Ground Running**

A large measure of career success is the ability to differentiate oneself. In this respect, every cohort has its standout Hi Ps—high-potential members—who announce their presence with an early and rapid succession of first-tier publications. The importance of timely publications and the notion of a greater multiplier effect for

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publications authored earlier rather than later in one's academic career is supported by both experience and empirical research. Tuckman (1976) reports that those who publish are rewarded not only with higher salaries, but with larger incremental returns from early as compared with subsequent publications. As to be expected, his data also show an increasing probability of promotion with increased publication output.

With regard to differentiating oneself in the academic marketplace and announcing one's presence, various rules of thumb are commonly offered to doctoral candidates. Two publications, two to three paper presentations, and attendance at a doctoral consortium constitute a common benchmark. Fortunate are those doctoral candidates whose socialization has prepared them to make informed choices among competing activities and to pursue their craft effectively. My favorite query for consortia attendees is whether they feel guilty watching TV. If so, chances are they've been properly socialized, with a strong work ethic. I can easily identify several of my own peers who, after 25 years, still feel guilty watching television! So much for the traumas of graduate school.

It has been frequently observed that developing a successful career is much like riding a train. Both require having one's ticket punched along the way. Getting a quick start, or hitting the ground running, can do much to ensure that the journey from assistant, to associate, to full professor proceeds in a timely fashion, as one's ticket is properly punched at all the appropriate stations. This is not to say that all successful careers necessarily follow the same timetable. It took the immortal Abe Maslow 23 years to make full professor (Hoffman, 1988). Some trains are obviously slower than others, but nevertheless do reach their intended destinations.

### Suggestion 2: ~~Locate~~ the Best Predictor of Future Performance

Several points are intertwined in the concept of predictors of future performance. First, the prestige of an individual's doctoral institution is a major determinant in his or her being selected for a position in a distinguished academic department. This has been shown to be true across disciplines, including in the field of

management (Bedeian & Feild, 1980). At the same time, whereas pedigrees may be helpful for obtaining desirable positions—especially early in academics' careers—at good universities they are of little value for keeping such positions. Few people are successful in sustaining entire careers on the basis of where they earned their degrees. (As an aside, I've long contended that if the first thing an individual mentions upon initially meeting fellow academics is where he or she received a degree, it's likely that person has little else to talk about.)

Thus, whereas choice of graduate school sets an indelible mark on a scholar's career, the cachet of a prestigious degree will ultimately wear thin unless bolstered by some degree of performance. Concomitantly, the handicap of initial identification with a less prestigious department can be surmounted through the establishment of a strong publication record and a professional reputation to match. Although graduates of prestigious departments do have a beginning advantage through their greater access to other distinguished departments, personality and ability are also key causal antecedents of career success (Rodgers & Maranto, 1989). Admittedly, as the graduate of an institution with no discernible cachet, my interpretation of these "facts" reflects a belief in advancement by merit rather than in particularistic criteria such as doctoral origin. Simply put, I've always believed in "hiring people, not schools." For my money, I've thus always favored job candidates with a high need for achievement over graduates of prestigious departments with little else to recommend them. Available evidence supports this practice (Taylor, Locke, Lee, & Gist, 1984).

As a second point concerning predictors of future performance, tenure and promotion committees are well known for discounting publications that are dissertation based. The extent to which such publications represent candidates' efforts or those of entire dissertation committees is seldom clear. Whereas collaboration is to be encouraged, some display of "independent scholarly ability" is almost de rigueur for tenure and promotion consideration. This is why sole-authored publications are seen as important in the evaluation of academic performance (Reichers, 1985).

As a third point, tenure and promotion committees are also known for stressing the impor-

tance of a “sustained level of academic performance.” This, of course, places a premium on hitting the ground running and penalizes “late blooming.” Consider a tenure/promotion candidate whose publications over the past 6 years have all been accepted within the past 6 to 12 months. Is the first 5 years or the last 12 months most representative of the candidate’s scholarly ability? Believing that the best predictor of future performance is past performance, and realizing that some people respond only when their feet are to the fire, a risk-averse tenure and promotion committee is likely to return a negative vote.

In my personal experience, I have found that if new assistant professors don’t publish within the first 3-4 years on the job, the odds are they never will. This may well explain why, other things equal, a new PhD’s market value is generally greater than that of a seasoned PhD who has yet to publish. The former, at least, offers potential. The latter can only offer excuses.

Before leaving this issue, I want to acknowledge that some scholars labor their entire careers, making sustained and substantive academic contributions, and never attain great notoriety. This highlights the fact that in some cases careers are built on peak performances. Without listing specific names, I believe it should be quite easy for most readers to identify several management “stars” whose fame is bound to single theories or models. As a graduate student in the late 1960s, I remember thinking how fantastic it would be if I could just develop a theory or model that would bear my name. Maslow’s need theory being popular at the time, I could just see it—Bedeian’s hierarchy of needs. I’d be famous for life!

### Suggestion 3: Location, Location, Location

Realtors tell us that the three most important factors in selecting a site for home or business are location, location, and location. If I were asked to name the most important factor in a successful career, my answer would unhesitatingly be locating with colleagues one can work with—that is, having a critical mass of colleagues involved in researching, writing, and publishing.

In her book *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Kanter (1977) argues that the job makes the person, not vice versa. Career success, she suggests, is at least partially determined by the nature of the social circumstances people find themselves in, rather than what they inherently bring to a job. Thus if an individual is a successful scholar, this may say as much about the surrounding environment as it says about his or her capacity to do research.

There is no doubt that whatever career success I may have enjoyed was largely determined by my being able to spend the first years of my career at Auburn University. The environment within the Management Department there was one of nourishment, excitement, and collegiality. Above all, no one was afraid of excellence and achievement in others. Why the critical mass that existed at Auburn in the mid-1970s formed is a question that still puzzles those of us who enjoyed the thrill of being part of what for many is a never-in-a-lifetime experience. Why it dissipated is unfortunately too easily explained as the result of poor university management. Without commenting further on this issue, let me simply note that, in my own experience, the old maxim that “good universities don’t support bad departments, and bad universities don’t support good ones” is generally true (Orr, 1993).

Nevertheless, whatever the circumstances, the bottom line is simply stated: Work with good people. I have collaborated with more than 65 colleagues—several of whom I’ve never met face-to-face. Playing to each other’s strengths, we’ve complemented one another quite nicely. Commenting on this same point, and its relevance for junior and senior scholars alike, Nobel laureate Herbert Simon (1991) advises:

To make interesting scientific discoveries, you should acquire as many good friends as possible, who are as energetic, intelligent, and knowledgeable as they can be. Form partnerships with them whenever you can. Then sit back and relax. You will find that all the programs you need are stored in your friends, and will execute productively and creatively as long as you don’t interfere too much. (p. 387)

#### Suggestion 4: Publish, Publish, Publish

One of the first lessons one typically learns upon entering graduate school is that publication is the primary basis of academic recognition. In economic analogy, publications are the major currency of the realm. Whereas there may be diversity in academic reward structures at the institutional level (e.g., teaching, research, service), the reward structure at the national and international levels is monolithic rather than plural. Thus, whereas scholars may draw their paychecks locally, academic recognition and the rewards that follow (e.g., editorial appointments, professional board memberships, fellow designations) are conferred elsewhere as a consequence of judgments made by the larger academic community (see Fox, 1985). Publications mean visibility, esteem, and career mobility.

In that the academic community is nationally rather than locally based, aspiring academics soon learn the necessity of adopting a "cosmopolitan" rather than "local" orientation (Gouldner, 1957). Cosmopolitans seek national recognition within a discipline as a whole, and feel separate from their immediate environments. They may work within institutions or departments, but they never belong to those entities. In contrast to locals, whose loyalties reside in their employing institutions, cosmopolitans may thus threaten locally vested interests.

The academic visibility, esteem, and career mobility enjoyed by successful cosmopolitans do, however, provide a measure of local independence. The rewards (e.g., editorial appointments, professional board memberships, fellow designations) that follow national recognition translate locally into what Hollander (1964) has termed "idiosyncrasy credits," operationally defined as the degree to which an individual may deviate from commonly expected behavior. Hence, as long as they are able to maintain a credit balance, cosmopolitans are able to engage in idiosyncratic behavior without fear of locally imposed sanctions. Stated differently, by expending discipline award credits, cosmopolitans are generally able to "get away with" actions unthinkable on the part of their locally oriented colleagues.

The benefits of a nationally based academic reputation should thus be obvious. This is not

to say that local considerations can be ignored. When all is said and done, however, the aspiring scholar would do well to remember that "one's performance is the best tenure one can ever have" (Duncan, 1991).

In reflecting on this advice, one should not come away believing that performance is solely determined by research productivity or that excellence in teaching and research are at odds. The contention that teaching and research involve an either/or bifurcation implicitly establishes what I believe to be a false dichotomy. Complete academic success demands that those who wish to "play in the big leagues" be able to both "walk and talk," "hit and run," "teach and research." For any school even purporting to be a major university, only those scholars who excel in *both* teaching and research should be tenured and promoted. Establishment of a dual structure whereby faculty members are rewarded for excellence in *either* teaching or research will invariably result in three levels (or classes) of faculty—those who are notable teachers, those who are notable researchers, and, at the highest level, those major leaguers who are both. The internecine conflict that is likely to result as a consequence of such a pecking order is, no doubt, more than familiar to most faculty.

#### Suggestion 5: Be Proactive

In academia, as in any walk of life, an individual can be overwhelmed by meaningless activity. This underscores the necessity of making effective choices among alternative activities, given their potential payoffs. The aspiring scholar bent on a successful career must quickly appreciate that no individual has enough time to dispense effort endlessly to all comers without regard to the ultimate consequences. Given my previous emphasis on earning academic currency, my comments at this point are directed primarily at the individual's proactive management of workload so that he or she can transcend the immediate environment and establish a cosmopolitan role identity.

With sound teaching as a given, overinvolvement in administrative work or "service" can be an attractive distraction. Service activities such as committee assignments are often highly visible, easy, appreciated (in the short term), and, thus, nonthreatening (Taylor & Martin,

1987). At the same time, as Taylor and Martin (1987) note: "No one ever got promoted because of committee work" (p. 28). In such cases, all too often, the reward for doing a good job is another job.

The key to managing the service load proactively is the early development of an understanding of local norms. One should avoid overinvolvement in service activities, but should also take care to do one's fair share—otherwise, one will likely be resented. In this regard, there is typically a price to be paid for saying no. However, there is also always a price in terms of one's time for saying yes. In my own career, I've actually practiced saying no in anticipation of being "honored" with assignment to this or that committee. With experience, I've discovered that if I can't say no, I should at least avoid saying yes. Buying time with a noncommittal response has often afforded me the opportunity to seek higher-level intervention on my behalf.

### Suggestion 6: Do Different Things

It has long been my belief that academics should do different things at different points in their careers. This contention rests on several bases. The first involves the obvious need for beginning faculty to provide early evidence of their teaching competence and scholarly abilities, both being prerequisites of promotion and tenure. As a consequence, untenured assistant professors (and most associate professors) are generally advised to direct their efforts toward refining their classroom skills as well as establishing and executing deliberate research and publication programs.

As I have noted, faculty at the beginning of their careers are judged primarily by the quality of their research, and by journal publications in particular. Authoring textbooks may offer the promise of monetary gain, but it is an ineffective means for earning either promotion or tenure. Indeed, at many institutions, textbooks are not even examined as a part of judging publication performance, but are instead considered a form of teaching or service activity. Thus it is standard advice that one should consider authoring a textbook only *after* one has

received tenure and, depending on local norms, after one has been promoted to full professor.

A second basis for my belief that faculty should be doing different things at different points in their careers is the realization that, over time, they are capable of making different contributions to the academic enterprise. The "gray-hair" credibility of a seasoned senior professor is a distinct advantage in continuing education, outside consulting, and executive MBA programs. Senior faculty are also likely to be in a better position to divert time from their research to pursue research grants, accept administrative appointments, and become involved in such activities as faculty governance.

A final basis for my belief that individuals should do different things at different points in their careers is normative in nature. Simply put, I believe that each member of our profession should return something to the field, and those blessed with high standing have a special obligation to do so. Jack Duncan has labeled this obligation "Luke's Iron Law of Responsibility," after the Gospel of St. Luke, 12:48: *To whom much is given, shall much be required* (cited in Hunt & Blair, 1987, p. 207). Thus senior faculty involvement in mentoring junior faculty, accepting memberships on government panels, and so on are all means of giving something back.

### Suggestion 7: Achieve Academic Credibility

At some point in their careers, most faculty members at least entertain the possibility of accepting full-time administrative appointments. No doubt, higher education desperately needs better-qualified administrators. It all too often seems, however, that those who pursue administrative careers do so for all the wrong reasons—reasons having more to do with power and status than with fostering scholarship and classroom learning.

My one "tip" in this regard is more truthfully an opinion. That is, those who do go into administration should carry with them a measure of academic credibility. This is especially important because it avoids situations in which deans or department chairs demand that faculty members do things (e.g., conduct research, publish, secure grants) that the administrators

have not done and perhaps could not do themselves. Unfortunately, this is an additional reason some faculty go into administration—they can't do, but they don't mind telling other people to do.

### **Suggestion 8: Take Quantum Leaps**

Whereas my preceding suggestion constitutes an opinion masquerading as a tip, here I offer an observation: At least two moves are typically required to maximize a career. The first involves that all-important initial academic appointment; the second is the seemingly mandatory quantum leap to secure a named professorship or endowed chair. Why the second more often than not requires a move from one institution to another is a conundrum. A partial answer might involve a second observation: An individual's academic accomplishments are almost invariably honored more by others than by those at his or her own institution. This, combined with the fact that one generally has less bargaining leverage at home than away, leads to a peculiar form of academic musical chairs. In one case, I actually witnessed an institution seeking to fill a chaired position forsake a deserving local candidate in order to hire an "outsider" who was half as qualified. The kicker is that the outsider was not only half as qualified, but required being paid twice as much. Meanwhile, those in charge seemed to delight in believing they were coming out ahead—another testimonial to the need for better-qualified administrators.

### **Suggestion 9: Balance Work and Family**

There is perhaps not much new that can be added to what has already been proffered in the popular press concerning the trials of balancing work and family. In my salad days, I could routinely spend 14-16 hours a day locked in my study revising a textbook. The burnout that ultimately resulted, and the death of a well-known contemporary, actually found dead at his desk, occasioned a simple question: Did I want to spend the rest of my life writing textbooks? My answer was no.

Looking back, I now see how I cheated not only my family but myself of irretrievable time together. Would I have achieved in my career as I have without such sacrifice? Who knows? Was it worth it? I honestly can't say. Materially, my family and I do have more than we would have had otherwise. And, admittedly, the additional income provided a sense of independence from the vagaries of state funding for salary increases. At the same time, let me caution those unreformed workaholics who may read this that rather than achieving fame and glory, they may simply die young and make their spouses' next partners rich.

### **Suggestion 10: Continue Your Education**

It seems strange to me that so many in our field fail to practice what they preach. We give entire lectures on career planning that stress the importance of investing in one's future by continuing one's education. We admonish our students that receiving a degree should be viewed as the beginning and not the end of a person's education. With no empirical proof, I would guesstimate that most faculty members acquire 80% of the knowledge they need in their careers *after* they've completed their formal education.

Perhaps the smartest decision I have made in my entire career involved "going back to school." I enrolled in my first multivariate statistics course while I was a faculty member at Auburn. I spent a sabbatical taking a course in research design. To this day, I take methodological notes on every issue of every journal to which I subscribe. Working with PhD students and younger colleagues has also been an invaluable means of updating and expanding my knowledge base. *Be forewarned:* When one submits to the temptation to jump from a research report's abstract to its conclusion, bypassing the methods section, it is time to go back to school.

### **Suggestion 11: Become Involved in the Associations**

The career benefits of professional association involvement extend well beyond those provided by formal paper sessions. Interacting with others in one's discipline is not only a means of

establishing a professional identity, but a way to find points of reference for one's career. Networking, the informal job market, and an opportunity to develop name recognition are likewise benefits commonly attributed to association membership. In reflecting on the benchmarks of my own career, I am particularly proud of being the youngest person ever elected an Academy of Management fellow. At the time (1979), I was 32 years old. My DBA had been awarded only 6 years prior. I remain similarly proud of serving (in 1988) as the Academy's youngest-ever president. Both honors have afforded me a measure of academic credibility (not to mention a cache of idiosyncrasy credits) that would have been otherwise unattainable.

Less commonly acknowledged benefits are perhaps more subtle. In my own case, the opportunity to meet several times a year with my "reference group" of special colleagues has been more valuable than any therapy group. By coming together to ventilate our feelings and vocalize our frustrations, we provide one another with both social support and encouragement. The resulting friendships have meant more to me than all my academic achievements combined.

### Suggestion 12: Have Fun!

Putting aside my earlier comment on the need for a strong work ethic, having fun (at work and play) requires that one not take one's career too seriously. There will always be conflicts and trade-offs. No matter how sharp one is, there is always someone sharper. And the more career success one enjoys, the harder it is to reach the next level of achievement. In the end, when that last lecture is given and that last manuscript is in the mail, one must define career success for oneself and find one's own personal happiness. Good luck! Enjoy!

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