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From Golden Cage to Golden Age for Your Career

FOCUS ON THE CORRECT JOB PATH

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Do you sometimes feel stifled in your career? Unappreciated? Having little chance for advancement? I'm here today to tell you it is possible to move from a "Golden Cage" to a Golden Age for your career, regardless of where you're starting from, and I'm going to lay out some steps for you, to make it so! To begin, how do you become the kind of employee your organization can't live without and at the same time proceed with relative grace and ease?

Believe it or not, you don't have to be extraordinarily gifted to accomplish this. It simply requires following a few simple methods, such as: Taking the unwanted job, going the extra mile, working harder when unsupervised, getting credit for your group, making your boss look good, handling key client development, becoming a mentor, being aware of a supervisor's needs, and knowing what's needed.

Taking the Unwanted Job

Martina was new to the firm, brought in as one of a well-established group of trainers and instructional designers. Rather than melting into the pot of professionals versed in education, Martina became an expert in a software spreadsheet program that greatly facilitated project

planning.

All of the organization's records were being changed over to this program. Oddly, most of the firm's professionals had no interest in learning about it. Martina, however, saw a niche for himself. The president of the organization needed someone who could explain the software program and its applications so that instructions could be given to others. Martina stayed after work at least twice a week to become an expert at the software. Soon, anyone with a question about it was referred to Martina. In short, Martina became vital to her department.

Similarly, you can develop your own niche by picking up a skill or technical knowledge that is vital to the Bank, yet relatively hard to learn. Be the best at something that no one else wants to do, and you'll dramatically raise your level of importance to your organization.

Going the Extra Mile

To get ahead, periodically take on more work than you're assigned. Volunteer to help on a project that is running over deadline and make yourself available for extra projects. You'll be noticed.

Frequently, companies need assistance with rush jobs. At the consulting firms where I've been employed, I al-

ways volunteered to work on proposals. Because a quick turnaround is necessary, volunteers are greatly appreciated. Also, working on proposals exposed me to information outside of my department and to people I did not work with on a day-to-day basis.

Jill, a coworker, was called the “Jill of all trades,” a name of which she was proud. When a project required short-term assistance to bring it to close, Jill was asked to take on the extra work in addition to her own project. She was able to switch gears quickly from one project to another and had soon worked with everyone in the organization at least once, a unique feat. Her broad experience led to her rapid promotion within the following two years. Although going the extra mile may not always pay off so quickly, the reward will eventually come.

Ellen was a new staff person at a mid-size company. Austin was having family problems and his work had been poor over the previous few weeks. Ellen began to finish Austin’s projects, often working until late in the evening. Without bringing attention to herself by complaining or by making it obvious that she was staying late, Ellen greatly helped a fellow worker. This was eventually acknowledged by management as well as her peers.

You can go the extra mile in other ways. Do the little things that make a difference to your project. For instance, I prepared client reports in a three-ring binder. This was not usual procedure but I took it upon myself to do this extra work. It made a great difference in the way the reports looked to clients — and to my boss.

Working Harder When Unsupervised

The scene occurs in thousands of offices every day. The boss is away, on business or vacation. A great sigh of relief goes up the minute he or she is out the door. People drift into each other’s offices, the telephones light up with personal phone calls, people log on to fun sites on the Internet, and lunch hours are stretched to the maximum.

Managers report productivity to be only two-thirds of normal when they’re not in the office. That’s why working, even at your normal pace, when they’re away will impress your supervisors.

My strategy during this time, always, was to work extra hard. I knew the boss was likely to monitor employee performance following periods of his absence, rather than while being in the office for an uninterrupted stretch of days.

To add to your aura, when supervisors are away, strive to complete jobs they assigned before their departure. There is nothing a supervisor appreciates more after a trip than, “Here’s the job you wanted. It’s done.” The subtle, yet deep-seated message you convey is long-lasting.

Getting Credit for the Group

Getting credit for the entire group of people you work

with can advance your career. This seeming irony — standing out by praising the group — makes sense in an overall career context. Those who make it to the top levels of management are the people who are able to motivate others to do their best and to work well in group situations.

What are you actually saying when you say, “My team did a great job”? Those above you know that when a group does well, it’s at least partly because someone exhibited leadership. High-lighting the team is especially useful when you are the group’s manager. It indicates your ability to facilitate good work.

Making Your Boss Look Good

Similar to the concept of getting credit for the group of people you work with or manage, making your boss look good can only reflect favorably on you. Both your boss and his or her supervisors will appreciate this.

The best way to make your boss look good is to handle your work efficiently and thoroughly. If your boss is fair, he or she will give you credit for the work, increasing your chances of promotion. If your boss is not doing his or her share of the work, leaning on you unfairly without giving you the credit, it’s still likely that you’ll be promoted when your boss is promoted. That person knows you’ve been doing more than your share, and he or she won’t be able to take a new position without your help.

Handling Key Client or Constituent Development

This may not apply so much at the Bank, but in general if your job involves working with clients who do business with your organization, particularly key clients on whom your firm depends, you’re already positioned to become a valuable member of the organization. Each time you interact with the client, either by mail, online, or in person, you’re planting the seeds of a personal and professional relationship.

If you’ve done your job well and have proven time and again that you are a professional upon whom the client can rely, your relationship with the client, in part, becomes one of your organization’s important assets. As such, your relationship needs to be protected in the same way that other tangible assets, such as the plant and equipment, are protected.

An important caveat to developing key client relationships is to avoid threatening your supervisors, professionally speaking, by undermining, overstepping, or otherwise harming the relationships they may have with clients.

Becoming a Mentor

Maybe you’re only 27 years old, or maybe you’ve only been with your present firm for a year and a half. Yet, with your previous experience and achievements, you may already be in a position to serve as a mentor to junior members of your organization. This can be accomplished on an informal, ad hoc basis, and you can literally choose

the amount of energy you're willing to commit. Helping junior members always looks good to those above you, especially at performance review time.

I always gladly accepted the role of ad hoc mentor to junior associates by distributing reprints of material that I knew was directly helpful in accomplishing their present tasks. At one consulting firm where I was a project manager, I produced a 15-page information resource booklet that I distributed to everyone in the department. This booklet was a compilation of names, phone numbers, and addresses of frequently called libraries, government agencies, and other information services. It was of great use, particularly to junior staff who were not familiar with some of the entities listed. Now, instantly, they had a complete resource file at their fingertips.

Being Aware of a Supervisor's Needs

Receiving praise is a primary human need. Yet, how often do we remember to praise our bosses? They are people, too. If your boss has been extra supportive of you, tell him or her that you appreciate it. Remember to praise your boss to your coworkers and other supervisors.

Be honest. A phony attempt can be detected immediately. Still, everyone has some good points that can be praised.

Be aware of any special quirks your supervisor may have. If he or she is feeling personally insecure about a particular client or project, help out and give the credit to your boss instead of taking it for yourself. You may need similar support some time in the future.

Knowing What's Needed

One way to become truly vital to your team is to be on top of your job, your department's goals, and your organization's objectives. This three-way strategy includes reviewing your job description, deciding precisely what your department's goals are, and determining your organization's objectives. Let's take a brief look at each.

First, knowing your job description and honoring it, or amending it if necessary, protects you from any misunderstandings. It will also give you an idea of the part you play in the total picture of the organization, an important factor in your work satisfaction and chance of promotion.

Your job description ideally contains all the important activities of your position, the knowledge you need to have or acquire to perform those activities, and some sense of your overall role.

If your job description does not adequately detail the information you need to know and the responsibilities you have, now is the time to change it.

Second, learn and understand the goals of your part of the organization. By whatever method your organization is broken into groups — department, division, project team — your group has objectives. Goals are important to guide

actions as well as to mark milestones. Knowing your group's goals will help you to set priorities for your own work and to make wise decisions concerning how jobs can best be done.

Finally, be aware of your organization's mission. Any entity, from the smallest agency to the multibillion-dollar organization, has a mission. If you don't already know it, find it out. Your organization's brochure, annual report, promotional literature, or employee handbook will have the mission spelled out. The mission will unify and give meaning to all the division or department goals. Although conflicts among divisions will occur because of the nature of different responsibilities, a solid base can be produced when all employees realize the overall mission of the organization.

If you're unsure of the direction to take on a particular project and are not receiving sufficient guidance, look at the problem in light of your organization's mission. Is what you're doing in line with a mission? Will it be good for the organization in the long run? Your ability to make the correct decisions will be greatly enhanced by your awareness of your job description, your group objectives, and the organization's mission.

Keys to Promotion

Suppose you follow these guidelines. Are you guaranteed a promotion? Not necessarily. By the same token, making a big mistake in your job probably won't keep you out of the running either. The career track of those who get ahead hardly ever shows an uninterrupted rising trend line. It's a zigzag — uneven, going this way and that, but eventually to the top. However, there are some key ways to increase those upward "zags" and parry your job experiences into promotions.

Anticipating Organizational Changes

The usual promotion occurs because someone has resigned or has moved on to another position in the organization. In addition to filling such a vacancy, you can create your own promotion by being aware of organizational changes before others are and carving out your own niche in the new structure. As your organization expands or shifts its focus, be on the lookout for needs that you can fill on the new organization's chart.

Consider Caryn, formerly an assistant editor of a hobby magazine. Although she had advanced quickly, her chances for further growth were not good since her supervisor was well entrenched in his position. Recognizing that she needed a chance to grow, Caryn began calling her network of publishing friends and making efforts to get a job with another magazine. Then, from some remarks her publisher made at a farewell luncheon for one of the secretaries, Caryn learned that a plan was in the works to buy another hobby magazine, about doll collecting.

She acted quickly and went to several area doll shows, getting ideas from the exhibitors on what they wanted in a magazine. When the publisher announced a special staff meeting, Caryn went to him that day with strategic plans for the new magazine and a table of contents for the first issue. When he reported the acquisition at the staff meeting, he also announced Caryn as the new editor. She saw an opportunity and took aggressive, appropriate action to make the best of the chance.

Becoming an Expert

Individuals who become irreplaceable may get promoted, even if a new title has to be created for the position. Alec became his company's expert on HTML, someone who could answer any question on the topic. His office extension became the hotline for quick information. Because he took over a function that the company hadn't required before, it took some lobbying on his part, but he was named Director of Web Development. It was a new position in the company and a nice promotion for him.

In your present organization, are you developing expertise on a particular topic? If so, make your superiors aware of your special knowledge and the extent to which people depend on you to provide that knowledge. Or, if there is an area in which you feel that your department is sorely lacking — perhaps, market research, coordinating function, or follow-up work — choose to be the one to fill the gap. Chances are you'll reap the rewards of career advancement.

Taking Charge of Your Performance Reviews

In my years as a management consultant, I came to the conclusion that performance reviews were all too often unfair and sometimes counterproductive. Most managers see them as a necessary evil and give their employees only a perfunctory review. Yet despite the prevailing problems inherent in performance review system, this is still the one time during the year, quarter, or review period when you and your boss can sit down specifically to discuss you. I've found that it's often possible to turn these matter-of-fact sessions into opportunities for promotion with a little career marketing "homework."

The key is to keep vigilant track of your own performance throughout the year. I used to evaluate myself quarterly, without fail. All you need do is review your appointment book and your list of goals and other planning aids and compare how you've done versus what you set out to do. Then, write up your own mini-evaluation using lists and descriptive sentences. Three areas to cover are objectives, skills, and inventory, the latter being simply an overall description of your performance during the last three months.

Armed with your own self-appraisal, you can take more control during the performance review session with your boss. By being able to point quickly to concrete accomplishments, you might avoid simply being labeled with a numerical performance rating, slapped on the back, and sent on your way. More likely, your boss will remember what you've said and will take your case to those higher up in power. An additional perk of the self-appraisal system — no matter what the outcome of your performance review — is that it keeps you on your toes in your career marketing efforts and may even help you to sell your skills and experience to another organization.

Preparing Your Boss

Your boss is vitally important to your career advancement and, as such, needs to be prepared for such an eventuality. A supervisor who is confident of his or her own abilities and chances for success will be pleased to see you move up. In this case, share your advancement ideas with your supervisor. Let that person know that you seek and will work for more responsibility and more independence, and that it will look good for both of you to the rest of the organization.

Take care, however, with a manager who's afraid that you're after his or her position. People who feel threatened have a tendency to protect themselves. Your forward progress could be delayed by your manager's fear. With such a manager, it's a good idea to indicate that your advancement will be a boon rather than a threat. Failing that, you may have to make allies of your supervisor's supervisors and other influential people in your organization.

Also consider the needs and desires of your supervisor. Is he or she content with the current position or also looking for advancement? Knowing that will allow you to analyze your chances of taking over his or her job and will give you an idea of the rewards and negative features that such a promotion would entail.

A promotion, per se, does not automatically mean you're advancing along your chosen career path. You can also be promoted to what proves to be a dead-end position or to one that diverges from the path you are seeking.

In evaluating the worth of a promotion, consider two different factors—the overall strength and stability of the organization, and the visibility and opportunities of the position to which you're being promoted. Look ahead several positions in the ladder above your current position. "Living ahead" will keep your eyes focused on the correct path and stretch your brain to thinking through the types of situations you yourself will face one day. As such you can move from a Golden Cage to a Golden Age for your career, regardless of where you're starting from!