

Actively Manage Your Career

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In a recent interview in the New York Times, Ford Motor Company President and CEO Alan Mulally was asked to provide his best career advice. He responded, “Don’t manage your career. Think about just exceeding expectations in every job you do, continually ask for feedback on how you can do a better job, and the world will beat down your door to ask you to do more...” I respectfully disagree. Exceeding expectations and seeking feedback are important but, in my experience, *success and advancement come most often to those individuals who actively manage their careers.*

I spent more than a decade in human resources at Target and Best Buy. I can’t count the number of times that people came to me frustrated over their perceived lack of career progress. The common theme sounded like this: “I work really hard. Feedback is positive. Performance reviews are good. Yet no one seems to notice. The best opportunities go to others.”

What I frequently found was that many of these individuals simply assumed that if they “exceeded expectations,” someone would notice and ensure that their career moved forward. Also, some of these folks could not answer the most fundamental question, What do I want to do with my career?

There may be lots of people- your supervisor, colleagues, human resource professionals, mentors- who think highly of you and will work to help you advance in your career. But, trust me, no one is going to do it for you. You must take personal responsibility for actively managing your own career.

And if you are going to manage your career, you need to know to what end. Ask yourself some tough questions, and be honest about the answers: Am I happy in my current job? Is it challenging and rewarding? Do I have room to grow, or have I hit a plateau? Where would I like to be one year, two years, or five years from now? Backing up from those goals, what affirmative steps must I take now to get there? In short, you need to be able to clearly answer the question, What do I want to do with my career?

Don’t measure your progress or self-worth solely by money, title, power or prestige. It is great to be ambitious. We need people in corporate America like Alan Mulally, who want to rise to the top of their organizations. But remember, just one person gets to be CEO. For the rest of us, at some point, we top out. If you are only seeking more money or the next title, you will be forever unhappy, because someone else will always be richer or outrank you.

Consider other measures of success. Is your work interesting? Are your skills put to the test? Are you learning new things? Do you receive recognition for your efforts? Do you believe in the mission of your company? Are you adding not just to the bottom line for your organization, but creating value for society as a whole?

Does your work match with your personal values? Consider the definition of career success as broadly as you can, with a focus on those internal measures of satisfaction that are personally important to you.

I do agree with Alan Mulally on the criticality of feedback. In order to successfully manage your career, you need to be in a continuous cycle of seeking, receiving, absorbing, and adjusting to constant feedback. Seek feedback from as many different sources as possible, not just from your boss. Find those one or two really valuable people who will unfailingly give you honest feedback on how you are doing. Listen carefully to what they say. Insist on specifics.

If you are told you lack good communication skills, ask for details. Do you need to work on written skills? Spoken skills? Ask for examples of when you have fallen short and suggestions on how to improve.

Make changes based on the feedback you receive. Demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to learn and grow. Put together a personal development plan with clear milestones and share it with your boss and other trusted advisors. Work that plan with seriousness of purpose. Adjust the plan when appropriate as your career moves forward.

Finally, don't think of leadership or advancement in your career as simply a matter of managing a checklist, like a Boy or Girl Scout completing activities to earn a merit badge. Sometimes people would say to me, "I've done the three things you told me to do... now I'm ready to be promoted, right?" The very fact that they asked that question told me they weren't ready. Think of leadership and your career not in terms of finishing a to-do list, but as an ongoing journey – sometimes complex and difficult journey.

Managing one's career is challenging, even in the best of times. These days, when so many of us are in crisis-mode, reacting to rather than shaping the reality around us, career management frequently goes to the back burner. Don't let it.

Remember these suggestions:

- Take responsibility for actively managing your own career.
- Develop a clear picture of what you want to do with your career.
- Measure success broadly, with a focus on intrinsic factors that are important to you.
- Seek specific, actionable feedback and respond appropriately.
- Put together a personal development plan and work it with energy.
- Consider leadership and career progress as a journey.

With these tips in mind, go forth and have, go forth and have a great career. Enjoy the adventure.

* <http://blueknightseminars.blogspot.com/>