



Own It! 5 Tips For Managing Your Career And Performance

By Scott Patchin

It was April 14th, 2009. I made a lunch, headed to work early to prepare for some training I had later in the week around a new performance review process we were rolling out. My 9am meeting with my leader proved to be the last meeting I had at the organization. I was home before noon as a newly unemployed person. A friend helped me put an upbeat spin on it when he said “Isn’t it ironic that the person who helps others build networks and manage their own career is now practicing what he preaches?” It was funny, even on that day, and it was time to really test if the practice made any difference.

Prior to 4/14/2009 I had spent the better part of a decade helping individuals and leaders learn to lead themselves and others more effectively. In that time I partnered with or experienced almost every conceivable organizational or professional transition. I call it the Employment Triple Crown:

Hiring Crown: I have been hired by someone and made the hiring choice on someone else.

Promotion Crown: I have been promoted to a new role and promoted someone else.

Firing Crown: I have had to fire someone else and I have been fired.

Through these experiences I have learned a few things about what is important in managing your career. The one clear message for everyone is that organizations can support you in your goals, but it is not their responsibility to set your career goals. We have to own our career and our performance, and when we do, good things happen. Here are the key tips for doing just that.

Tip #1: Own it

For the past year I have been the lead facilitator of a career transition program in Michigan called Shifting Gears. We bring together 25 – 50 mid/late career individuals who desire to make a transition, many to smaller companies or a different industry. On the first day I can tell where they are in the process by their language. If I hear words like *they*, *them*, *frustrated*, *angry*, *stuck*, *trapped*, *can’t*, or any other word that indicates someone else is at fault I know they are stuck. I know the ownership of what they have to do is with someone else. The first and biggest transition we all need to make is to shift our perspective on things.

- Who owns a career journey? Me, we, us, I
- Are you looking forward? Hopeful, optimistic, us, support, commitment, exploring
- Are your past failures a point of learning? I learned, I realized, I took away

When we reframe something in our mind and start using the words that accompany the change, we show up differently. Owning it is a choice. Seth Godin has written several books focused on the journey to excellence, and this quote is a great reminder:



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And it is a choice. A choice to buy into the fear and the system or to chart your own path and create value as you do. It's your job to figure out how to chart the path, because charting the path is the point.

Seth Godin - *Linchpin*

Without ownership, it is simply a journey to prove someone else is wrong or to do enough to get by while at least one of our feet is firmly anchored in reliving a past injustice. Assuming 100% ownership is step 1.

Tip #2: Self-Awareness

The economic downturn brought at least 25% of our population to a point that survival was the goal. In late 2009 and 2010 the unemployment rate was around 12.5% and the underemployed was estimated to be at least the same number. As a result, I saw too many people being defined by their circumstances. My conversations with people were littered with phrases like *unemployed engineer*, *frustrated project manager*, *ex-GM leader*, or *experienced professional*.

The reality is that we all have three things that define us:

Our talents: Those things that are just wired into our work. Our gifts. Strengths and talents that come out of us naturally. Things like empathy, achievement, connecting with people, seeing the plan, making it perfect.

Our passions: Things that fuel us. Our highest life priorities. Things that get us up in the morning.

Our rewards: At the end of the day, the things that we receive that help us feel good about what we did, and often help us endure the natural dips in life. The rewards can be internal or external, and they become the basis for many of our needs.

By defining these and knowing these we are able to evaluate our opportunities with a lens that helps us see if the choices we generate are in an area where "We can be at our best."

Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves – their strengths, their values, and how they best perform.

Peter Drucker – *Managing Oneself*

Tip #3: Create a Target

Yogi Berra once said "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." While the exact detail needed for any plan will vary, having a destination is critical to a successful career journey. Here are three benefits to having some sort of plan:

1. It makes it easier to ask for help: Things written down can be talked about with friends or key sponsors.

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2. An end target allows you to set intermediate goals: One of the top motivating factors for people is getting work done. It is hard to labor day after day without feeling or seeing any sort of success. A target and intermediate goals help us feel success and provides us fuel for the rest of the journey.
3. It provides a basis for change discussions: Life is full of changes. Change happens. When there is a set goal, it gives us the opportunity to talk about whether the change is positive (vs. our current goal) and how our work has to change if we shift our goals.

What Color Is Your Parachute is one of the most popular career books of all times. Going through all the exercises in the book will provide detail around why you want to do what you do and many specifics around where you want to go. It will also take you many hours to accomplish. For some that works, for others a shorter version would be helpful. Here are some short term questions to answer from a career standpoint that will help you create a target for yourself.

Short term goals:

- Option 1: Where do you see yourself in 12-18 months? What kinds of challenges are you looking for? What problems do you see that you would like to help solve?
- Option 2: In your current role – What would you like to do more of? What would you like to do less of?

Long term goals:

- Option 1: What do you want to be doing in 2-5 years? If you had to create a career path for yourself today, what would it look like?
- Option 2: Take a piece of paper and, using only pictures (no words) create a picture of you at your best. When you review it – What does this say about your gifts and passions? Let's brainstorm a little – what are two to three roles we can think of that fit you at your best?

Remember that creating a target for yourself is not about being perfect, it is about being purposeful. When we articulate a goal, it creates an opportunity to work towards something that is meaningful and provides an opportunity to evaluate the choice and change it as we refine our goals and needs.

Tip #4: Committing to Mastery

You need not see what someone is doing
to know if it is his vocation,
you only have to watch his eyes:
a cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon
making a primary incision,
a clerk completing a bill of lading,
wear the same rapt expression, forgetting
themselves in a function.



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How beautiful it is,
that eye-on-the-object look.

--W.H. Auden

Summertime in Michigan is a time of art fairs and beach days. At both places I find myself getting lost in watching people display their mastery. Artists that take you to a beautiful sunset or a forest full of birch trees with only a brush. That is mastery. A kite surfer effortlessly using the wind to propel them over waves as they travel back and forth along the beach. That is mastery. But while we get lost in the outcome, it is important to remember the path to mastery is work.

There is an old Eastern adage that says:

Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.
After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.

Malcolm Gladwell defines mastery for us in his book *Outliers* by putting a number on what it takes to get to mastery – 10,000 hours. While innate talent is a critical ingredient to excellence, it is the actual practice of those talents for hours and hours that makes someone great.

This is a critical step, because up to now it has been about feelings and words, and now the work begins. 10,000 hours is 5 years of work. It is important to remember that when we are doing what we love to do, it does not feel like work. When our work intersects with our talents and our passions – it often feels more like we are sharing gifts (our gifts) with the world rather than doing work.

Whenever we set out on a journey to achieve a long term goal, things will get in the way of our success. The three barriers that most often exist for the journey to mastery are:

1. Thinking too big and broad: Getting so excited about the vision and journey that we do not define the next steps (the actual work).
2. Getting overwhelmed or trapped in the detail: When we see all of the things we have to do to get to mastery and not starting until the perfect plan is laid out in front of us. I tell leaders helping to track 'high potentials' to future leadership roles never to commit to a specific role or a timeline. Things change, and we have to be ready for that.
3. Going alone: There is a reason most world-class athletes train in groups or entrepreneurs find more success launching businesses out of incubators. We need the support of a community to handle the ups and downs of the journey. (more on this in the next step)

The goal for this step, recognize the work it will take and pick two things to work on or experiences you want to have over the next year. It is important to set time aside each week and/or month to work on these goals, then practice.

Tip #5: Find Partners / Build a Network

Through my role in Shifting Gears I have had the opportunity to partner with over a hundred individuals on a journey to work, some making significant career changes. By far, the top thing these individuals

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mention is the benefit they get from the networking they have to do as part of the work. We ask them to do it on their own, and they naturally do a lot of it as part of the classroom time and the peer to peer work they are asked to do. It has provided evidence for me that too often support is the missing ingredient to the career journey.

Journeys without support are hard. Look at history. When any historical figure heads to the wilderness to learn or be tested, they all needed the support of others to be successful. Shackleton. Sir Edmund Hillary. Columbus. Lewis and Clark. The Pilgrims. This journey is no different.

In a professional journey this is called your network or your community. They play several vital roles for you:

1. Comforter/Encourager: Any journey is going to provide us with surprises. When is the last time you went on vacation and everything worked perfectly? When we try new things, there will be moments when we just need someone to remind us of our progress or our gifts.
2. Challenger: Most of us like the *easy* way. Most of us also like the *safe* way. After the economic meltdown we just experienced I have heard many people use these words. The problem, often times the *easy* and *safe* way are not the *best* way. Challengers point that out to us and ask us to make bold steps forward and call us out when we hide too much.
3. Expert/Mentor: Learning things, sometimes the hard way, is how we grow and develop. Always learning the hard way is expensive, both personally and for your business. Having people willing to spend time with you to help you get smarter faster is critical. Your network is your most valuable learning resource.
4. Door Opener/Connector: One of the benefits of having a network of people that know you and trust your ability to do the work is that you gain access to their network.
5. Accountability Partner: It is one thing to say you will do something, but mastery requires action. When we verbalize our goals to someone it creates a deadline that becomes harder to ignore. Having someone to hold us accountable protects us from getting caught up in all of the urgent things and ignoring the important things that are not as urgent.
6. Coach/Questioner: We know the answer. It is there, and sometimes it is just hard to see it because of all the 'life that is happening around us'. Being asked questions brings us clarity because we have to answer them. When we do, the answers within us often emerge.
7. Listener: We all have bad days, and in any career journey it is good to have someone that, on those bad days, will just listen. That safe place to unload frustration or share disappointments is just like finding a well in the desert.

These roles are not about having more 'best friends'. They are about intentionally joining communities of people where you will get to know others and they will see you work. We build relationships by getting to know each other and through working together and establishing trust.

The top two things you can do today to build your network are:



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1. Make a list of 30 people you have a strong relationship with. (i.e. Friends, relatives, neighbors, people you have worked with). For each of the roles above, where would each name fit? When you fill in all the names, what are some of the gaps you see? (hint: Gaps = Action Plans)
2. Commit to two events per month where you get out of your business, your normal circles of friends and go out and meet people that share some similar interest or passion, and work with them. Examples might be: Boards, professional organizations, Chamber get togethers, volunteering with your kids' activities, or forming a neighborhood group.

Tip 5.5: The Habits

I added this as a key final piece that needed to be talked about. Some of the great minds in personal development have used varying terms for this step, but they all align with the content of this habit.

The late (and legendary) Stephen Covey called it sharpening the saw. The late (and equally legendary) Peter Drucker talked about the habit of feedback analysis. This step is about making time to revisit: some of the plans you set for yourself, the things you defined as your priorities, and the items that created a picture of where you were at your best (talents, passions, rewards/needs). Revisit them and update them based on what you have learned. Time changes and refines things. Life events such as death or divorce are big things, and they cause us to shift our priorities or needs. When we take on challenging projects, we experience successes and failures that help us refine what we know about ourselves. In his article *Managing Oneself*, Peter Drucker talks about how reflective journaling refines the self-knowledge that is so critical for a worker to have in the *new economy*.

The key habits here are:

1. Writing down the plans you have, including:
 - What you know about yourself
 - Where you see yourself in 2-5 years
 - What experiences you want in the next 12-18 months
2. Carving out one to eight hours once or twice a year to revisit and revise some of your plans.

One thing I have learned over the last fifteen years is that everyone has amazing gifts to bring to the world. These gifts can make an incredible difference in the organizations you join, but in order to make that match there has to be a great conversation. What you bring to the table is knowledge of yourself, and that is created by owning the process of development and self-discovery.

Go Own It!