

Own It!

5 Tips for Managing Your Career and Performance

by Scott Patchin



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

Prior to my termination, I had spent the better part of a decade helping individuals and leaders to learn how to lead themselves and others more effectively. During that time, I executed or experienced almost every conceivable organizational or professional transition. I call that experience the "Employment Triple Crown":

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

The Promotion Crown: I've been promoted to a new role and promoted someone else.

The Firing Crown: I've been fired and had to fire someone else.

Through these experiences, I've learned a few things about what's important in managing your career. The one clear message for everyone is that organizations can *support* you in your career goals, but it's not their responsibility to *set*

those goals. We must own our career and our performance. When we do, good things happen. Here are some key tips for doing just that:

Tip #1: Own It

For the past two years, I've been the lead facilitator of a career-transition program in Michigan called "Shifting Gears." We bring together 25 to 50 mid-to-late-career individuals who want to make a transition, often to smaller companies or to different industries. On the first day of the program, I can tell where these individuals are in the process just by their language. If I hear words like "they," "them," "frustrated," "angry," "stuck," "trapped," "can't" or any other word that indicates the thinking that someone else is at fault, I know that they're stuck. They perceive that the ownership of what they must do lies with someone else. The first and biggest transition we all need to make is to shift our perspective. Consider what words you might use in your answers to these questions:

Who owns my career journey?

"Me," "We," "Us," "I"...

Am I looking forward?

"Hopeful," "Optimistic," "Support," "Commitment," "Exploring"...

Are my past failures an opportunity for growth?

"I learned," "I realized," "I took away"...

When we reframe something in our thoughts and start using words that accompany change, we show up differently. Owning it is a choice. Seth Godin has written several books focused

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on the journey to excellence, and this quote is a great reminder:

“It is 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: Are You Indispensable?*

Without ownership, the journey is merely a path to prove someone else is wrong or to do just enough to get by, with one foot firmly anchored in reliving a past injustice. Assuming 100% ownership of your journey is the first step.

Tip #2: Cultivate Self-Awareness

The economic downturn brought at least 25% of our population to a point where mere survival became the primary goal. In late 2009 and 2010, the unemployment rate was around 12.5% and on top of that, the percentage of underemployed was estimated to be at least the same number. As a result, I saw far too many people defined by their circumstances. My conversations with people were littered with self-identifiers such as “unemployed engineer,” “frustrated project manager,” “ex-GM leader” or “experienced professional.”

In reality, 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 emerge from us naturally.

Examples include qualities such as empathy and a drive to achieve and abilities such as connecting to people, seeing a plan and making it perfect.

Our passions: Those things that fuel us, that motivate us to get up in the morning and that we hold as our highest life priorities.

Our desired rewards: Those things that help us feel good about what we have done and often help us to endure the natural dips in life, that proverbial gold at the end of the rainbow which makes the journey worthwhile. The rewards we seek can be internal or external — ranging from satisfaction for a job well done to enhanced financial security for ourselves and our families — but they become the basis of many of our needs.

By defining these three things, we create a lens with which to bring our opportunities into focus.





“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

“If you don’t know where you are going, you will wind up somewhere else.”
— Yogi Berra

While the exact detail needed for any plan will vary, having a specific destination in mind is critical to a successful career journey. Here are three benefits to having some sort of plan:

- It makes it easier to ask for help. Things written down can be shared with friends or key sponsors.
- An end target allows you to set intermediate goals. One of the top motivating factors for people is getting work done. It’s hard to labor day after day without feeling or seeing any sort of success. Having a target and intermediate goals helps us feel success and provides us with fuel for the rest of the journey.
- It provides a basis for change discussions. Life is rife with the unexpected. Change happens. A set goal provides an opportunity to talk about whether a given change is positive with respect to our current goal, and how our work must change if we shift goals.

What Color Is Your Parachute (Richard Nelson Bolles; 1970) is one of the most popular career books of all time. Going through all the exercises in the book will provide you with detail about why you want to do what you do and many specifics about where you want to go. It will also take you many hours to accomplish the exercises and to achieve the outcome of creating a career target. That works for some people, but for others a shorter version would be helpful. Here are some questions for you to consider and to answer to help you create a target for yourself:

Short-term goals:

- *Option 1:* Where do you see yourself in 12 to 18 months? What 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 two to five 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 look at it, what does it say about your gifts and passions? Now, let’s brainstorm a little: what are two or three roles we can think of that fit you at your best?

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Keep in mind that creating a target for yourself isn't about being perfect; it's about being purposeful. When we articulate a goal, it creates an opportunity to work toward something meaningful. It also provides an opportunity to evaluate our choices, and to make changes where necessary as we refine our goals and needs.

Tip #4: Commit to Mastery

"You need not see what someone is doing to know if it is his vocation,

you have only 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.

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

— W. H. Auden, *Horae Canonicae*

Summertime in Michigan is a time of art fairs and beach days. At both the fairs and the beach, I find that I lose myself in watching people display their mastery. Artists who 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 herself over waves up and down the beach... that is mastery. But, while it's easy to get lost in the end result, realize that the path to mastery is the *work*.

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

— Zen proverb

Malcolm Gladwell defines mastery in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success* by putting a quantifiable value on what it takes to acquire mastery: 10,000 hours. While talent is a critical ingredient to excellence, it is the actual practice of working those talents for hours upon hours that makes someone great.

This is a critical step, because up to now it has been about feelings and words. Now the work begins. 10,000 hours is roughly five years of work at 40 hours per week. However, when we're doing what we love to do, it often doesn't feel like work. When our work intersects with our talents and passions, it often feels as though we're sharing gifts — our gifts — with the world, rather than performing drudgery.

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

- 1. Thinking too big and too broadly.** It's easy to get so excited about the vision and the journey that we fail to define the individual steps to get there (the actual work).
- 2. Getting overwhelmed or trapped in the detail.** When we stop to look at all of the work required to acquire mastery, it can be overwhelming. A journey to mastery means accepting ambiguity and a fluid timeline as



part of the challenge. The first step is to dive into the fogginess and start. Things will change. We must be ready for that change and not allow it to derail our journey.

- 3. Going alone:** There's a reason why world-class athletes tend to train in groups, and why entrepreneurs tend to 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 goals of this step are to recognize the work it will take to commit to and achieve mastery, and to pick two things to work on or experiences you want to have over the next year. It's vital to set aside time weekly — or at least monthly — to work on these goals. I call this our practice.

Tip #5: Find Partners

Through my role in Shifting Gears, I've had the opportunity to partner with more than 100 individuals on a journey to work, sometimes involving significant career changes. By far, the prevailing observation I hear from participants is the benefit that they get from the networking required as part of their work with us. These observations have shown me that, more often than not, support is the primary missing ingredient in a career journey.

Journeys without support are hard, as history has shown. When historic explorers have delved into the wilderness to learn or be tested — Sir Henry Shackleton, Sir Edmund Hillary,

Columbus, Lewis and Clark, the Pilgrims — they needed the support of others to be successful. This journey is no different.

In a professional journey, this support is called your “network” or your “community.” Members of your network can fulfill a variety of vital roles:

- **Comforter/Encourager:** Any journey is going to offer surprises. When was the last time you went on vacation and everything turned out perfectly? When we try new things, there will be moments when we just need someone to remind us of our progress, or of our gifts.
- **Challenger:** Most of us like the *easy* way. Most of us also like the *safe* way. After the recent economic meltdown, I've heard many people use these words. The problem is that *easy* and *safe* are not often *best*. Challengers point that out, ask us to take bold steps forward and call us out when we hide too much.
- **Expert/Mentor:** Learning things, sometimes the hard way, is how we grow and develop. To always learn the hard way is expensive, both personally and professionally. Ensuring that you have people willing to spend time with you to help you get better faster is critical. Your network is your most valuable learning resource.
- **Door Opener/Connector:** One of the benefits of having a network of people who know you and trust your ability to do the work is that you gain access to their networks, providing further opportunities to connect with others.



- **Accountability Partner:** It's one thing to say you'll do something, but mastery requires action. When we verbalize our goals to someone, it creates a deadline that consequently becomes harder to ignore. Someone who can hold us accountable protects us from getting caught up in a sea of immediate distractions and ignoring the important things that might seem less urgent.
- **Coach/Questioner:** We know the answer. It's there. Sometimes, it's just hard to see through all of the life that's happening around us. Being questioned and having to answer can bring clarity. When we open ourselves to questions, the answers within us often emerge.
- **Listener:** We all have bad days. In any career journey, it's good to have someone who, on those bad days, will just listen. Having a safe place to unload frustration or share disappointment is a well in the desert.

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

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

1. Make a list of 30 people with whom you have strong relationships: friends, relatives, neighbors, people you've worked with. For each of these roles, where would

each name fit? When you fill in all the names, what gaps are evident? Gaps are opportunities for action. What does the list look like if you remove your spouse or family? If you remove co-workers? Are there too many Comforters and not enough Challengers? If so, you won't have enough people to push you when you get stuck.

2. Commit to two events per month where you get out of your business and your typical circle of friends and meet people who share similar interests or passions. Then, work with them. Examples of such events could include boards, professional organizations, chamber get-togethers, volunteering with your kids' activities or forming a neighborhood group.

Tip #5.5: Hone the Habits

Once you have completed these five steps, now it's time to synthesize, review, revise and repeat. Practice makes perfect. Some of the great minds in personal development have used varying terms for this step, but the content is essentially the same. Stephen Covey called it "sharpening the saw." Peter Drucker called it "feedback analysis."

This step is about making time to revisit some of the plans you have set for yourself, the things you have defined as priorities and the items that created a picture of you at your best: your talents, passions, and desired rewards. Revisit these points and update them based on what you have learned. Time does change and refine things. Life events such as

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death or divorce may happen, necessitating a shift in priorities or needs. When we take on challenging projects, we experience times of success and of failure, both of which help us refine what we know about ourselves.

In his article “Managing Oneself,” Peter Drucker describes how reflective journaling refines the self-knowledge that is so critical for a worker in the new economy.

The key habits here are:

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

One thing that I’ve learned over the last 15 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 created by owning the process of development and self-discovery.

Go Own It!

About the Author

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