


# Career Path: Things That May Be Hurting Your Career

**Career Development**



How do you succeed in life? Well, that's ambitious of me to answer in one article, so let's dial it back to a narrower, but still broad question: How do you succeed in your career?

Right away, I must acknowledge that your definition of success may not be the same as mine. If you've arrived at a personal definition of success that is outside the mainstream, then you are on a potentially very good path indeed. I discuss the importance of deciding for yourself what success means in one of my most popular articles, Career Path: The Stoic Career.

One reason I think people find themselves unhappy with the course of their careers is that they are stuck with the notion that success means progress, movement, and change. How can you be successful if you haven't been promoted recently? Are you successful if you work for the same company for 10 years? If your salary has not gone up every year?

No matter what your definition of success is, I guess *you don't want to fail* at what you set out to do. The wisdom of your goals is yours to decide. What I am going to discuss here are obstacles that may be standing in the way of you achieving your professional goals.

In preparing this list, I rely on a couple decades managing teams from a senior management position.

But equally importantly, I am relying on a curious quirk of human psychology: **It is much easier to see the flaws in others than it is to see our own failings**.

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As a public service, I offer this list for you to check whether you may be doing things that are inadvertently hurting your career. None of us is perfect, so if you find yourself answering, “yes," to any of these questions, do not despair. But perhaps you can use the questions as an inspiration to consider a change, if that is what you want.

## 1. Do you think mean things about your colleagues?

It is hard not to, right? We spend a lot of time with work colleagues, at least we used to before the work-from-home (WFH) days. People get on each other’s nerves for all sorts of reasons, valid and otherwise. You may think you are good at keeping your thoughts to yourself.

But if the turn of your thoughts is dark, if you find yourself thinking mean or uncharitable thoughts about your colleagues, you can expect them to pick up on it. They may not be able to say what exactly it is, but they will feel it. If you think mean thoughts, you will have a more negative impact in your interactions with colleagues.

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## 2. Do you find yourself saying mean things about your colleagues?

This is also highly tempting. Especially since the person you are commiserating with has the same impression as you. We all know people who are unpleasant to work with: selfish, stubborn, incompetent even. It can seem a harmless pastime to vent a little frustration.

When you say negative things about others, even if your observations are accurate and richly deserved, you train the course of your thoughts to the negative. Worse, not only are you the kind of person who has negative thoughts, now you are the kind of person who says those thoughts to others. Your grandmother was right when she said, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

## 3. Do you focus ruthlessly on getting your own priorities accomplished?

You are busy, and you hardly have enough hours in the day to get your own work done. If you did not focus on your own priorities, then you would not be successful at all. Right?

Well, yes, up to a point. In a business of any complexity, we rely upon others. At a minimum, we rely upon them to do their jobs for us to be able to do our jobs.

Beyond just doing your job, however, we are presented with countless opportunities to make others' lives harder or easier. You can be a selfish bastard, focused only on yourself. The refrain that comes to your lips most easily may well be, "That's not my job."

What you may not notice is that others notice. They help each other out from time to time because we all need help, and we certainly appreciate receiving help. If you never give help, don't be surprised if people are not so quick to offer to help you.

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## 4. Are you highly interested in what your friends and colleagues earn?

It is another quirk of human psychology that we evaluate things in isolation with difficulty, but we are particularly good at comparing two things. Is your salary high? No idea. Is it higher than that of your friend or your acquaintance? Easy answer, but such comparisons lie on a predictable path to dissatisfaction and unrest.

If you spend your days comparing yourself to others, prepare to be unhappy most of your days. Not because you are not accomplished, successful, and deserving. But because no matter how near the top you may have traveled, there is always someone a bit closer, doing a bit better.

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## 5. Do you feel you are not paid fairly for your contributions?

Fair is a magical word, in the sense that everyone hearing it has a different understanding of what it means. Yet everyone, from a young age onwards, has a distinct sense of what is fair, or rather, what is unfair.

Thinking about situations in terms of "fairness" is a recipe for sadness and frustration. First and importantly, the world is not fair (see Career Path: No One Said Life Is Fair).

In almost every way you can imagine, abilities and outcomes are unevenly distributed. Second, your conception of fairness is very different from others, and highly influenced by what you would like to achieve. Is it fair for you to be paid a higher salary? "Why certainly!" Is it fair for you to pay a bit more in taxes for those less fortunate? "Don't be ridiculous."

What does this have to do with success in your career? If you feel you are not fairly paid, you will become resentful.

This will impact your attitude and your work. And people will notice. Ironically, one way to boost your salary is to stop obsessing about it.

As you let go of the frustration and dissatisfaction, you will be happier. That will translate into your being a better colleague at work and doing better work. Which, of course, will over time translate into higher raises.

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## 6. Do you think other people less competent than you have been promoted ahead of you?

Again, we are geniuses at comparing two things (see point 4). We know our own virtues, and we know the many failings of the dolt who got promoted to the job that you deserved.

I've sat in on many promotion discussions. Trust me when I say your personal sense of others' abilities, experience, accomplishments, ambitions, and talents is incomplete. There are lots of reasons that people get promoted, and usually it is a combination of several factors, some of which you may have no inkling of.

I've also offered a sympathetic ear to many employees who felt that others were unfairly promoted ahead of them. Some of these complaints come from women who are rigidly focused on the fact that a man was promoted into a role, and doesn't this mean the company does not sufficiently care about diversity? For the true answer, see point 7 of Career Path: Are You Globally Competitive in Your Career?.

Whatever the reasons given, the unhappy employee is fixated on the idea that a less-deserving person has advanced ahead of them. Maybe they have. It is useful to remember that sometimes life is not fair.

But maybe the person promoted deserved it, and you are not aware of all the circumstances. Your bitterness is evident to your colleagues, and to your boss. This makes them question your suitability for promotion yourself. After all, as a manager you will be confronted with all sorts of difficult situations. Can you handle them pragmatically, dealing with the world as it is?

## 7. Do you feel that helping others is a distraction from your own work?

This like point 3, but with this difference: The person focused on their own priorities is just busy, and perhaps oblivious that the impact being self-centered has on their relationship with colleagues. It is easier for such a person to take a step back, look up, and realize that they need their colleagues to succeed.

If you think helping others is a distraction, then you are likely to be not just self-centered but selfish in your interactions with them. You treat the workplace as a zero-sum game, where others' success comes at the expense of your own. That is not a recipe for being considered a "team player." That is not an attitude that will win you admiration from your colleagues.

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The way to get more done is to enlarge the scope of your ambitions. You are not working for selfish,

personal goals, but for the good of the company. If helping the other person provides a greater benefit than focusing on your own task at that moment, your choice is easy.

## 8. Have you switched companies regularly (every three years or less) in pursuit of new opportunities?

This can come from the sometimes misguided belief that success in your career requires motion. You are ambitious, and therefore you want to see visible signs of progress. At a minimum, this means you need new responsibilities, a new title, a promotion, at least every few years. A company that does not see this and accommodate your needs does not deserve you. "Sayonara!" and you're on to another opportunity.

There is some truth to this. I have seen people job hop their way to outrageous title inflation, far quicker than persons who stay in one place and do not agitate for change. The trick is to find the balance between staying in one place long enough to learn the job and have an impact and switching rapidly to meet your own timetable of advancement.

I know it is arbitrary but switching companies every three years is too frequent in my view. Bad luck can strike anyone, either in terms of company, or boss, or job. I will understand one or two, even three switches sometimes. But as a hiring manager, if I see three or more such frequent hops, I assume one of two things: This person has an unrealistic sense of how quickly their career should progress, and/or this person is a poor performer and has had to leave once each new employer figures it out. Either way, you are not an attractive hire for me.

## 9. Are you jealous of others' success?

Objectively seen, another person's success typically has very little or nothing to do with your own. A friend from college has made partner two years ahead of you: What does that have to do with your career? Someone the same age as you is: (a) a CEO, (b) married to a fashion model, (c) invested in a startup and became wealthy, or (d) _____, fill in your own personal blank. Does that say anything at all about you?

No, it does not. Yet, it feels like it does. In our beating hearts, in the dark of night, others' success makes us feel less successful by comparison. We forget the countless others we have ourselves surpassed. In these moments, we neglect to consider all we have to be thankful for. Envy will eat us up from the inside and leave only a bitter-tasting shell behind.



This phenomenon is hard to combat. I've found you need to focus on caring about people. Start small, with the people closest to you, but expand your scope of caring if you can. I am never happier, for example, than when a teammate goes on to a bigger job and is successful at it. I do not turn green with envy, but I swell with pride. After all, that person worked in my team, and trained with us. We must be doing something well if that experience readied them for their new challenge.

Feeling proud and happy for others is helpful in two ways. First, it feels good, which is always welcome. And second, others can tell if you are genuinely happy for them. Guess what that means? It means they are inclined to help you if and whenever they can.

## 10. Do you find yourself focusing on the negative in a situation more often than the opportunities?

One of my mottoes in life is, "Be happy with what you have, not sad for what you don't have." I am not recommending you be delusional, or ignore bad things in your life. No matter the situation, you are faced with a choice. Do you try to identify something positive about it? Or do you dwell on everything that is not perfect? You may not be able to easily identify something good in a situation. But I can promise you this: If you live in the land of perceived imperfection, you will be unhappy.

A person who can find something positive in dark times is wonderful to be around. A person who does this and shares their positive perspective is exactly who you want on your team. Because a crisis is always just around the corner. I want people who are happy and positively inclined on my

team and in my life. Because they will make a bad situation better, in ways that the doomsayer never could.

## Some final advice

Remember, I told you upfront not to despair if you find yourself answering “yes" to any of these questions.

> We all have weaknesses and moments of doubt.

Your task is not to be perfect. Your task is to be self-aware and deliberate in how you approach situations. We all have weaknesses and moments of doubt. Armed with this list, perhaps you will pick one idea and try to turn the tide to your advantage. Slowly but surely, step by step, you will apply continuous improvement principles to tip the odds of success in your favor.

Be well.

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