

Career Path: Hard Work Doesn’t Make You a Hero

Career Development



What does it mean to genuinely work hard, and who are the two people (or rather one person and one group) you should compare yourself to?

This continues our exploration of lessons to be learned from judging and being judged, including giving and receiving feedback more generally. Last week we discussed how to identify the most valuable types of feedback, and why you should be careful relying too much on how hard it seems like you're working. See What I Learned from Judging and Being Judged.

Today we cover how to think about genuinely working hard, and the two people (or rather one person and one group) you should compare yourself to.

Work is not the best place for your efforts

It still bothers me, I have to be honest, but hard work doesn't make you a hero. For much of my career, I distinguished myself (so I thought) by working harder than most people around me. I worked mornings, evenings, weekends, holidays. I worked when I was feeling great and when I was feeling ill. I worked 100-hour weeks.

Later, much later, I learned why hard work is not only insufficient for success, but not the best place to invest your efforts either. Why not? Well, there's a whole life philosophy behind the answers, which I'm sharing with you bit by bit. For today, let's say it's for two reasons:

(1) the mere fact you are busy tells us nothing about the **reasons why you are busy**, and

(2) the quantity of work you perform says nothing in itself about the **results you deliver**.

Some people are busy because of structural inefficiencies. For example, their department is understaffed and they are doing the work of multiple people. Or their company has redundant processes, like holding weekly status update meetings and drafting memos for people who don't read them. Or the person themselves creates problems by letting deadlines lapse and then needing to respond to the resultant pressure in crisis mode.

This all creates stress and hard work, no doubt, but do we rank the people suffering under such structural problems as better performers because of it?

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> are results.

Now, consider the hard work we all sometimes do that yields no result or a negative result. We worked like the devil, but didn't complete the acquisition, or win the lawsuit, or sign the contract. We would like to be rewarded for our effort, but if we're honest, effort alone is not worth very much. In fact, the person who delivers a result with the least effort is someone we need to watch.

(The obvious exception consists of people who take shortcuts in achieving their results. In business, the ends never justify the means, and a result obtained improperly is worse than a failed project.)

I once had responsibility for a major initiative in an area adjacent to my core legal work. The CEO gave me the task as a chance to develop and to see how well I could perform in new areas. And although I worked as hard on that initiative as I ever did anything, I had a string of poor performance reviews that I deserved.

Why? Because despite my admittedly hard work, we did not achieve our objectives in the timeline we wanted. My results didn't match up to my efforts. As you advance in your career, put aside the thought that you deserve a gold star for effort. What earns you kudos are results.

The two people you should compare yourself to

If you want to be happy in life, there is only one comparison you should ever make. That is, compare who you are today to who you were yesterday. Your goal should be to make incremental progress in the direction of your choosing. If you are making steady progress in this fashion, it does not matter your pace.

Learning to compare yourself to yourself is one of the keys to a meaningful life that Stoic philosophy offers. It allows you to be your own best judge of your performance. And if you are committed to your own improvement, the chances are excellent that you will improve your work performance as well.

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Because I assume you want career success in addition to happiness, I will let you know the secret to your second comparison. You can greatly enhance your chance of success at work by choosing the best-performing comparison group. Compare yourself to the best performers *anywhere in the company*, not just among your direct peers on the legal team.

I reported to three tough graders over my in-house career. The thing that helped me most was being compared to the best performers in the whole company. These are the people driving significant value creation.

What am I doing that compares? Not in terms of perceived effort, or hours worked, or even compared to other lawyers. But compared to the best that our superstars were delivering. I had years of tough reviews as a result, but boy did I hold myself to a high standard. I developed accordingly.

When judging the ACC Top 10 30-Somethings, I can tell you the finalists were all extraordinary. But you could tell which ones realized their comparison group was not the lawyers in their own company, but the best in-house lawyers all over the world.

Next time I'll pick up with what we can learn from extraordinary circumstances, what your convictions are worth, and what makes you unique.

Be well.

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Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.