

Career Path: Develop Principles

Career Development



Bad advice will be given to the new manager. By this, I mean a great mound of well-meant, but ultimately useless advice. I will save you the decade or so I spent following what turned out to be mostly fads. There is a simpler, better way to grow. But to fully appreciate the simple path, you must first understand the pitfalls that lie on the new manager's road.

Categories of bad advice

Here are some categories of advice I believe are as likely to lead you astray as help you: Almost everyone’s first-hand explanation of what made them successful, almost all articles in management and business journals, and the majority of psychology or economics research purporting to find some surprising quirk of human thinking or behavior.

You can identify potentially bad advice from among the following characteristics: It is largely anecdote-driven, it contains statistics expressed as percentages and only few absolute numbers, and it is included in a best-selling book with a dust-jacket blurb from Bono, Bill Gates, or Barack Obama. (Not to pick on these three fine individuals.)

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Most of all, bad advice falls in the set of suggestions described as “This worked for Successful Person X or Company Y; try it and you can be successful too!” Because we humans are fantastic pattern-recognition machines, we seek patterns everywhere and we find them everywhere. This would be wonderful except that we regularly assume causation in the face of nothing more than correlation. We are easily taken in by anecdotes and stories because they trigger our pattern-recognition function. We recognize a pattern, and we are primed to look out for the moral or lesson of the story.

What to do with others’ success stories

You should consider one person’s description of success to be an interesting story, nothing more. That person experienced a unique situation, with unique challenges and opportunities, and brought to bear their special skills and experiences. That person encountered far more randomness than they realized in each of their settings, their actions, and the outcomes of those actions. Even if you could replicate their actions precisely (which you cannot because you are your own person), what are the chances that you will be in a similar enough situation and not influenced by a different set of random interactions?

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Why fads sell

Management and business journals are in the business of selling advertising, which means they need to drive viewers. Surprising and interesting stories attract eyeballs and clicks. The truth of those stories is of secondary interest. Turns out if you tell people what they want to hear and occasionally titillate them with something surprising along the way, they’ll read your stories.

How about scientists? Can we take refuge among tenured professors, the scientific method, and peer-reviewed journals? Alas, you must be vigilant. Most published studies cannot be replicated, in most fields. Even studies with some validity are blown out of proportion in the push to publish. And reporters describe findings sensationally and without context because they want to grab your attention.

Focus on your own situation, skills, and experiences

In the business context, such advice from individuals, journalists, and experts is more than not useful. It's downright harmful because it distracts you from focusing on what you could be more profitably doing. "And what is that?" you ask. It is to focus on your own situation, your own skills and experiences, and your own challenges and opportunities.

What works for someone else is unlikely to work for anyone else because others are not you and others are not facing what you are facing. But what works for you is something *you* should focus intensely on: How did you make that decision, why did it work (or often, not work), what will you do differently next time?

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Carefully observe your thought process and your decision-making process. Write down the principles that you are following. Discuss them with your colleagues on your team and refine them over time with the direction you'd like to take.

When I ran a legal team, I described our Legal Team Principles, called the Six Ps, as follows:

0. Proactive – We address risks as early as possible.
0. Protective – We protect the company's long-term interests.
0. Pragmatic – We take informed risks.
0. Purposeful – We work on high-risk and high-value topics.
0. Plain – We seek to reduce complexity.
0. Powerful – We follow continuous improvement principles.

To someone outside our team, this may look like a list of virtually useless buzzwords. To me, it was a framework helping us decide among many competing priorities. It contained the seeds of our values and our mission. It reminded us to only work on topics that were directly supportive of the company's strategy.

I am not recommending the Six Ps to you as candidates for your own principles. I am suggesting that you spend time first considering and then committing your own principles to paper. By focusing on how you make decisions and what you are doing in your unique situation, and then describing and improving your principles, you can drown out the distracting noise of others' unhelpful advice.

The only advice I'd like you to consider is this: You know how to improve your own results better than anyone else.

Be well.

James Bellerjeau



Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

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