

Career Path: What Should We Wish For?

Career Development



Perhaps we should wish for something other than more of the promotions, wealth, and possessions that aren't making us happier.

I used to sign farewell cards at work with something like: "I wish you every success in your new endeavors." Now, when I think back, this was wrong to write. A person who is successful at everything has no reason to question the foundation of their happiness. They have material wealth, career success, and seem to have it all. But such persons are at great risk of identifying their happiness with those external things.

Failure and setbacks are normal

What happens when life knocks a pillar out from underneath a person who's known nothing but success? Say they suffer a career setback, a health issue, or have relationship troubles? It can be devastating. They become unhappy and cannot be happy again until the external situation is fixed.

If getting everything we want carries its own pitfalls, what should we wish for others to achieve? Let's say you are a caring boss and you want your colleagues to succeed at work. What does that success actually mean? Does it mean they never make a mistake? Or is it better that they learn from the small mistakes they make and so become wiser?

Promotions are not the true measurement of success

Does success mean an employee advances from one promotion to the next, scaling the heights of power? Or would you wish that they come to appreciate the deep satisfaction from doing their existing jobs ever better? Does success mean they make more money than their peers in other companies? Or are they better off learning early that their worth is poorly measured in money?

... When you set a goal, you are opening yourself up to a potentially long period of

> unhappiness until you reach your goal. You may find that the cost of achieving your goal far outweighs the benefits ... .

Wish what parents wish for their children

What about what parents wish for their children. If you ask the kids themselves, many will tell you they want to be rich, powerful, or famous. Sometimes all three. It takes the age and experience of parents to wonder if a far more valuable gift would be that their children are happy, find love, or make a lasting contribution to society.

I suspect you've noticed people who never seem satisfied with what they've achieved. You may have managed employees who are always itching for more: responsibility, pay, promotions. I've noticed the desire for more does not seem to correlate with talent. That is, all sorts of people fall prey to being dissatisfied with their current position, the gifted and the striving alike.

External wants don’t satisfy

It’s usually easy for a boss or a parent to offer sound advice to a colleague or their child: Be careful placing your hopes and dreams in external things like wealth, power, or fame. When you set any of these as your goal, you set yourself on a path of guaranteed hardship and likely disappointment.

Goals are a declaration of what you want, not a blueprint for how to get there. Moreover, when you set a goal, you are opening yourself up to a potentially long period of unhappiness until you reach your goal. You may find that the cost of achieving your goal far outweighs the benefits, but you realize this only after the damage has been done.

> Most of us have demonstrably more wealth, health, and possessions than humans across the vast march of time.

Taking the larger perspective, we live in times of great abundance. Most of us have demonstrably more wealth, health, and possessions than humans across the vast march of time. We have also advanced the state of our collective knowledge to unprecedented heights. How do we explain then that we simultaneously find ourselves irritated and annoyed to distraction? We chafe and argue with one another and believe we are surrounded by dangerous idiots. We feel that our own success remains out of reach and we run harder chasing after it.

A tranquil mind

Perhaps we should wish for something other than more of the promotions, wealth, and possessions that aren’t making us happier. I think we'd do well to give ourselves the same advice we'd give our colleagues and our children: To experience lasting joy — and not just fleeting enjoyment — we must remember that joy does not come from external things but from a tranquil mind.

> When you are free from doubt, worry, jealously; when your course is the same whether you are pushing into the headwind or blown along by a tailwind; when you delight in stillness as much as you do in motion; when you do not rely on external things, joy is your reward.

So the next time you sign a farewell card, consider writing something like this: "I wish you a string of small failures that teach you to be mindful so as to fully appreciate all that you already have, the people you're lucky enough to spend time with, and whatever you're doing at exactly this moment."

Or if that's too long, you can just say "Be well" and hope they fill in the blanks themselves.

Be well.

Learn more and network by joining ACC today.

Disclaimer: The information in any resource in this website should not be construed as legal advice or as a legal opinion on specific facts, and should not be considered representing the views of its authors, its authors' employers, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

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.