

Career Path: Who’s Running the Show?

Career Development



I've noticed something interesting about some successful people. They are the first ones to promote the idea that people are in charge of their own destiny. That with hard work and sacrifice you too can be successful. They may espouse a corollary belief, which is that people who do not achieve all they want are simply lazy or lack intelligence or drive.

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But take such a person and ask them to explain a prominent failure they were associated with. "That wasn't my fault," you will hear. They trot out a thousand explanations and excuses, all of which point anywhere but them. The takeaway is clear: Good things that happen are the result of their agency. Bad things are caused by something other people did.

Which group are you in?

I don't mean to pick on successful people. I've observed many unsuccessful people say the same thing. It's just they have fewer accomplishments to feel smug about, so you don't notice their inconsistency as much. Let us refer to the inconsistent situational thinkers, whether successful or not, as the **Fair Weather Flock**.

Some smaller number of people are at least consistent in their thinking, although they fundamentally diverge into two groups in their approaches to life. Let's call the first group the **Things Just Happen** adherents and the other group **I Make Things Happen**. Do you count yourself among either group? Here's how to tell.

You can distinguish members of the Things Just Happen group from the Fair Weather Flock in this way: They never add the words "to me" to their inner thoughts. You will never hear them say "This bad thing happened to me," or "This good thing happened to me." Things just happen, it's not personal, and members of this group deal with it.

You might also think of this group as realists or fatalists. They don't control the cards that life deals them, but they find a way to make the best of the hand they've got. What's refreshing about their approach to life is you don't usually hear them complaining. Life is what it is, sometimes great, often unfair, but they get on with managing their affairs.

Working with different styles

A member of the Things Just Happen tribe is great to have on your team because they are rarely fooled by wishful thinking. They see the world as it is and they respond accordingly. But this comes with some potential downsides. When you see the world as it is you can become cynical because we're surrounded by unfairness. The result can be a lack of initiative and less motivation to take on big challenges. If the world is screwed up and out of our control, why should you go the extra mile?

Consider now the happy members of the I Make Things Happen group. You can also think of them as optimists, dreamers, and even naïve. They are certainly more likely to see the world through tinted glasses. On the positive side, they assume they control their destiny. They believe that with persistence and determination, they can make their own success.

This can-do attitude also makes them great team members. They are prone to putting in extra effort and consequently they achieve great things more often than not. When the Fair Weather Flock observes the successes of the I Make Things Happen group, they grumble, "They were just lucky," noting neither how this is inconsistent with how the Fair Weather Flock assesses their own performance nor how the I Make Things Happen group's luck always seems to go in only one direction.

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> at everything.

But the I Make Things Happen members also suffer. Even the most determined people do not succeed at everything. And when failure strikes, members of this group feel it personally. They believe there must have been something more they could have done to avert the problem.

Pros and cons

When I started this article, I thought I would declare a clear winner. For example, the I Make Things Happen group is more likely to be successful so the lesson would be that you should strive to take ownership of your life. But I see that membership in each comes with pros and cons:

- **Fair Weather Flock**: inconsistent and delusional, but happier by virtue of taking credit for good things while not taking the bad personally.
- **Things Just Happen**: most accurate perception of the world, so avoids many wishful thinking mistakes, but can miss out on opportunities that require hard work.
- **I Make Things Happen**: consistent and delusional, most likely to be successful by virtue of taking more chances, but sense of responsibility means balance and life satisfaction are harder to find.

Membership in these groups is not fixed or exclusive. Although I think most people tend towards one inclination most of the time, I have seen people purposefully change the course of their lives and careers by choosing another group.

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Change requires two steps: Audit your past thinking to see whether you consistently assess the causes of both positive and negative events in your life; and make a conscious choice to assign agency for everything that happens in your life.

Your choices are these: I'm running the show (as long as times are good), no one's running the show, and it's always me running the show. Choose wisely.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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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.