

The ABCs of Work: Fakery

Career Development



Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles, *The ABCs of Work*, he shares the formula with you.

Greetings readers and congratulations! Simply by virtue of being here you are already on the path to increasing your odds of success. While luck plays a gigantic role in life, that does not mean you are helpless to control your fate. If you want to think of it this way, the tips we'll explore are ways to increase your odds that luck will find you.

Today's topic is **Fakery**.

Last time we talked about Equanimity, in the sense that we must maintain our self-possession in difficult circumstances. Today we talk about an interesting side effect that arises when people are mindful of their thoughts and actions: the possibility for fakery.

What does fakery have to do with work?

Let's look at it from two angles. No doubt many of you are recalling the common advice for newly promoted managers to "fake it until you make it." So, the first type of fakery involves the tools and attitude we employ when we feel nervous about performing up to the high standards our jobs demand.

It is normal to be anxious about measuring up. In fact, for high achievers, it is expected. You've been successful, in part, by caring deeply about doing well, which means worrying whether you've done enough or whether you're ready.

If we all waited to act until we felt fully ready, nothing would ever get done. It is necessary, therefore, to trust that you will be able to navigate your way in new waters. You may not know exactly how you'll make your way to the next shore. But, you know that you have successfully accomplished many difficult tasks and will rise to the occasion.

Call upon your well-founded confidence that you will prevail despite unknown odds and uncertain methods. Then, and this is crucial, behave as if your confidence is warranted. Do your best and don't second-guess yourself or betray uncertainty. The Stoics say, "As you think so shall you become." I say, as you behave, so shall you believe in yourself. The way you act becomes the way you are.

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Early in my legal career, I was surprised to find one of the most useful skills I had practiced came from my high school days: acting. I did all the school plays and musicals, and I did them for the sheer joy of it. What a boon to find out that acting was a great tool for the budding lawyer. Need me to portray confidence in a contested negotiation? No problem. Are we bluffing the mediator that this is our best and final offer, and now we go to court? They'll never know.

Call it acting. Call it fakery. Call it whatever you want. Just call upon it in whatever measure you need to get you through the times of self-doubt.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

When faking it is ill-advised

I said we'd examine fakery from two angles. We've explored the positive. The second angle is when you need to be on your guard. You are not the only one employing fakery to personal ends. Everyone else is too.

I often heard a wonderful saying in Switzerland (although I understand the origin is Russian): Trust, but verify. I'll take you at face value, but I'll also make sure not to get taken for a fool. Listen to what people say and watch what they do. Over time, you'll learn who deserves trust and who deserves closer watching.

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Finally, never forget that you deserve vigilant watching as well. Because our method serves to build your self-confidence and push you to taking on hard challenges, you will be tempted to bluff when you really shouldn't. There is no shame in recognizing when you're genuinely in over your head. On the contrary, it takes a mature and confident person to say, "I need help."

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It is only well-founded confidence that supports safe fakery. Make sure you know when you've strayed into dangerous pretensions of competence when you lack sufficient foundation.

Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as fakery. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and all the more so because we've kept things simple. Here to finish are some honorable mentions to serve as food for thought:

- **Forgetting** — People will do you wrong. Bad things will happen to you and your company. Unless bad people are plotting to do you imminent wrong again (in which case I have another F- word I'd like to apply), it is healthy to learn how to forget. You may even be so magnanimous to arrive at forgiveness, but I say forgetting a past grievance is enough. Anger and regret are corrosive to peace of mind, and they distract you from doing your best work. Leave them.
- **Friends** — People will be wonderful. You will learn to appreciate and like many colleagues. Should you become friends with them? Some measures of the best workplaces ask whether you have meaningful friends at work. I say, it depends on your personality and your role. It is harder for the boss to be friends with her team than for peers to befriend one another. I wrote about this in Career Path: How Much Should Bosses Care About Employees?
- **Fun** — Finally, a tip that you can get fully behind! Yes, work can and should be fun. Do everything in your power to contribute to a fun workplace. Your colleagues will appreciate it, and you will enjoy your life that much more.

Be well.

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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.