5 Attributes for a Successful Career

Career Development

As our careers mature, we all play three, and maybe even four, distinct roles. Early in our careers, we are often both individual contributors and team players led by a “coach.” Later, we may become leaders, either for a team or a project. And then, for some, there is the role of manager — the person who makes the ultimate hiring, appraisal, compensation, and termination decisions.

Recently, I played all four roles. I ran MassMutual’s law department, leading many projects and initiatives while also managing the entire team. At the same time, I was a team member on the executive team, following the lead of the CEO. At other times, such as when I negotiated a merger or drafted a contract, I was an individual contributor.

To be successful in these career roles, there are five key attributes we all should strive to attain: curiosity and continuous learning; a drive for excellence; positive relationships; a moral compass; and effective use of our time.

Curiosity

My father would inspect the clouds in the sky, the waves on the ocean, or rocks on a mountainside and try to understand why they are the way they are. He was genuinely curious about everything and wanted to know the “why?” I often say the greatest gift my father gave me was curiosity.

A natural curiosity about the world will drive you to read history and biographies, which is a better way to learn than reading leadership books or articles, at least my leadership articles. There is truth in the George Santayana statement, “Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.”

In our fast-moving world, curiosity leads to innovation. And if we don’t keep moving forward, we will get caught from behind. No profession or responsibility will remain the same for long. In the practice of law, we cannot accept the status quo or apply only old ideas or approaches. We must continue to learn, innovate, and advance with the mindset of the late US Senator Robert Kennedy, who often stated during his presidential campaign that, “some men see things as they are and say, why; I

dream things that never were and say, why not?”

Reaching for excellence

As a young man, I worked park maintenance, and my boss made it clear that every time something can be improved, do it. If there’s a candy wrapper on the grass, pick it up. It doesn’t matter if it’s your job responsibility. More recently, as an executive, if I saw coffee spilled in the cafeteria, I found some paper towels and cleaned it. In my career, whether writing a legal brief, preparing for a cross examination, or making a board presentation, I worked and practiced, making it as close to perfect as I could. Just last week, I was making a presentation to a company board in Colorado, and as I drove to the meeting from the mountains, I recited the presentation out loud in the car numerous times — I strove for excellence.

Driving for excellence doesn’t mean perfection. It means we will make mistakes. Usually, done is better than perfect. We need to be resilient and learn from our mistakes, but also need to have the resiliency to strive for the excellence. As Mario Andretti, a four-time winner of the Indianapolis 500 car race said, “If everything seems under control, you’re not going fast enough.”

I was fortunate in my life, on several occasions, to interact socially with US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. And regardless of what you, or I, may think of him as a person or his opinions, I believe he summed it up best when asked, “Justice Scalia, what do you think it takes for a young person to succeed today?” “I think it takes what it has always taken,” he answered. “Make a habit of excellence. No matter how menial or trivial the task before you may seem — whether you’re stapling papers or washing dishes or flipping burgers or painting a room — do your dead-level best. Do it excellently. If you do that with the little things, you’ll probably soon find you’re getting more and bigger responsibilities. Then perform those with excellence. If you do this day in and day out, you’ll stand out from those in the crowd who are pleased with their own mediocrity; they do just what’s barely good enough. Your career will be better, and you’ll thrive. Just commit yourself to excellence in all things. That’s what I would say.”

Networking

Network, network, network. You might think, “But I am an introvert. And boy, is that exhausting — and hard!” Do not underestimate the value of positive relationships as you go through your career. People you worked for, with, or for you all matter. As do all the folks you interact with through your career. You never know who you might need or who might help you in the future. Build and maintain your network. And to do so, you need to project a cheerful, positive, can-do attitude.

In your relationships, be humble. You need to treat all those you interact with, at whatever level, with equal focus and respect. The great results belong to the team — the failures are yours. Everyone knows the truth. I have always said my resume doesn’t reflect what I have accomplished, but really summarizes the results of the teams I have had the privilege to be a part of and lead.

There were many times as GC that I pulled into my garage at 11 pm after a two-hour drive back from an event in Boston — absolutely exhausted. But I advanced the company’s agendas and met and interacted with many people who helped both my company and me. Whether an introvert or not, you simply need to get out, meet folks, and develop lasting relationships.

With your network, the best path to personal success is to be a giver rather than a taker. One of life’s

little ironies is that people providing a favor feel better afterward than those on the receiving end. Think about it. How do you feel when you can help someone? Yet many of us are reticent to ask, because we don't want to put someone out, or request help from someone higher up in the pecking order.

We are looking it wrong. By not making the ask, we are depriving someone of the opportunity to feel good. There was a young employee I was mentoring who really wanted to help her brother, who also worked at our company, to get into a good MBA program. We discussed if she should ask our CEO (probably four levels above her) to help him. I counseled her, "Absolutely yes." She asked our CEO, and he wrote a letter of recommendation. My guess, the most pleased person in this whole process was not my mentee, her brother, or me — but our CEO.

Doing the right thing

Always do the right thing. Even if you can "legally" defend something, that does not make it right. Possess a strong moral compass and follow it. I have always told my teams that on the issues of respect for fellow employees or the use of company assets/expenses, you do not get three strikes. You start with two and have only one left. I have terminated very experienced and valuable employees for violations of these simple principles. It may seem as a loss at the time, but it strengthens your overall team. Doing good is its own reward and creates a strong, lasting internal sense of well-being. Talk to an older person about their greatest regret, and they will tell you about when they did the wrong thing. Ask them about his richest accomplishment, and they will tell you about when they did the right thing.

Time

I was at a leadership conference several years ago and heard a presentation by one of the founders of Zappos. As you may be aware, Zappos says they don't sell shoes — they "sell happiness." That is why the shoes usually arrive early. In any event, she was talking about "what makes you happy." It turns out it isn't money, assets, or an executive title. I'm sitting there thinking — "Oh no, I have never decided what makes me happy." So, I spent some time thinking about it. What makes me happy is adding significant positive value to those who have put their love (wife, family) or trust (employees, colleagues, clients, shareholders) in me. You should think about what makes you happy and, with that in mind, how you use your most limited and valuable asset: time. It is the one resource you cannot buy, slow down, or accelerate. Remember, how you spend your time reflects what you value and who you are as a person.

No matter what role you may be playing, be a curious and innovative learner, while also networking and maintaining your moral compass. Spend your precious time on what you value. And everything you do — do with excellence.

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