

**THE POWER OF SELF-INVESTMENT
And the Myth of Meritocracy
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We've all read the books, or at least skimmed the titles, of the business "how-tos" that promise to provide the keys to the kingdom of success: how to grow rich, climb the ladder, be effective, get business, be a star. And we vow to work harder, and smarter and be more politically adept, and recruit a sponsor to help us ascend to the next level – just as soon as we put out the latest fire or quell the latest investor uprising or deal with the employee crisis du jour.

Too many of us do excellent work, go above and beyond, rack up impressive victories – and then wait and expect that all good things will come to those who deserve them. A quick look around you will probably tell you what you already instinctively know: many of the guys at the top are a study in mediocrity – except when it comes to self-promotion – that four-letter word (plus another nine for good measure) that many of us were taught to avoid like the measles.

I once heard a speech by a business futurist who said that if you told her what year you turned eleven years old, she could identify some of your fundamental characteristics that helped mold your life and dictate your choices. Go ahead, try it and see if it works. So for example, if you turned eleven during the spate of political assassinations from 1963 to 1968, you likely have some level of distrust of “the system,” even as you adapted to survive within it.

If you turned eleven when massive layoffs from large, corporate and government employers became the norm starting in the early 1980s, you probably don’t believe in trying to stick with one employer your entire career because you saw how that worked out for your parents.

Or if you turned eleven in the aftermath of 9-11 you may feel the deep-seated fear, anxiety and insecurity that still plagues this nation more acutely than others in different age groups.

So what does that have to do with those who are at the point in their careers where they believe they should be moving up and are instead feeling like they’re standing still? Those who labor in Corporate America and its various vendors who are in their late thirties to mid-fifties -- meaning those who were eleven somewhere around 1973 to 1990 -- a tumultuous era if ever there was one?

Well, it has to do with the fact that a great many of us were trained to follow the rules, work hard, and wait for the blessings to follow. A great many of us were taught that good work is its own reward and that self-promotion is a tawdry advertisement unworthy of quality goods.

Even as we intellectually know the folly of those views, we still cling to the belief – and the hope – of its truth. And we still follow the route carved out by our managers on the path to greater responsibility, status and compensation. Which is a sucker bet because everybody can’t make the climb, nor are they intended to by the system that created the career path in the first place.

This over-reliance on a meritocracy that has never existed is especially harmful because its adherents tend to put all their energy into their job performance, when, while certainly important, it is just the first step in skillfully managing your way into the career position to which you aspire. Investing in your employers’ businesses is a given; but investing in your own career is a must-do that too many ignore.

None of this advice is groundbreaking, but putting it into effect when we are all so swamped by the many obligations demanding our time, attention and energy is daunting. And so even though we understand the need to invest in and direct our own careers, as long as things are going well, we put off the task of self-investment.

Of course, when things aren’t going so well, or when we find ourselves discontent with the pace or direction of progress, all that neglect comes into sharper focus. But just like

you can't fulfill the goals of your retirement account overnight, or try to reconstruct years' worth of timesheets or expense reports from memory, neither can you expect to make up for years of lost time with frenzied activity as a substitute for steady and incremental effort.

So how do you begin the journey of self-investment? You can start by defining what success means to you. Not everyone wants to be in the C-Suite or Entrepreneur of the Year, and being honest about what truly fulfills you is an absolute requirement for designing a successful work life.

Moving from the broad-brush concepts of success to narrower definitions and characteristics of what your brand of success looks like is a next step you can take. You can make a list of your current state and your desired future state to help you identify areas of focus.

Identify what roles or types of positions have the potential to fulfill your defined goals, and now you have a goal. Don't sweat it if your goal is amorphous at this point – goals can and should change as personal and professional growth occurs.

Now take a look at your skills, talents, education and experience and match them up to the requirements for the types of positions you've identified. Are there gaps? Wonderful! You have a place to start filling in the blanks.

Need assistance in figuring out the best career paths and strategies for maneuvering in the business world? Well, the Internet is a wonderful thing – thank you, Al Gore, for inventing it. There are an abundance of sources on just about any subject you can conjure. Your task is to separate the relevant and thoughtful information from the stories about Big Foot.

Consider others who have walked the path before you and recruit allies. Find out what skills and characteristics your role models have that you don't have and emulate them. Everybody likes to be asked for advice and most people are happy to spare fifteen minutes to share wisdom earned through experience. Get people vested in your success and check in with them at appropriate intervals to keep your network of advisors vibrant.

Increase your profile by writing or speaking on your subject matter expertise. Need help with public speaking or professional writing? Perfect, you've identified another area of self-investment you can plumb.

The thought of engaging in "office politics" is enough to make many turn and run for the hills. But politics is nothing more than the art of persuading people to do what you want them to do, so don't consider honing your persuasive skills as a necessary evil but rather as a tool to keep sharp and wield often.

Identify the power dynamic in your workplace, and in your industry and in your city, state, and on and on. Consider ways to elevate your profile among selected power

brokers in those forums in which you seek to star. Don't limit yourself to your particular company or workplace because the upward mobility that is so crucial to success very often comes from opportunities outside of your current gig, not within it.

Know when to make a move. Complacency is a natural human tendency, particularly when exhaustion has become your middle name. And while your employer may not agree, the time for you to make a move is when you have just reached a professional goal, or promotion (within an acceptable length of time) or accolade. Move while your stock is hot, because that's when you are most marketable.

Plot out your trajectory on your career path to get you from current state to desired state, and evaluate every potential assignment, expansion of responsibility or change in your work life with that trajectory in mind. The question becomes: does this enhance my chances of success as I've defined it, detract from that possibility or is it neutral in its likely impact?

Don't wait for your employer to offer you career coaching or specialized classes in areas you've identified for self-investment. Do it for yourself. You are the only one who is focused on your career and how to grow it – not your employer or your co-workers or your friends. The only person with an agenda that is completely in sync with your best interests is you.

Remember that for most of us, life is long – and work life is longer. You need not confine yourself to one career goal to last you a lifetime. As your needs and wants change, so should your career goals. You can identify phases in your career and ramp it up or down as your life needs dictate.

Make self-investment a priority and a habit. Just as business development is a skill that must be honed and endlessly practiced in order to reap benefits, so too is self-investment. When you analyze how you spend your time, you'll probably find that you make time to do those things that are truly important to you. Make yourself important and gift yourself the time on a regular basis to create your game plan, check in on your progress, and assess your next move.

Taking ownership of your career and making self-investment a priority pays off whether or not you attain every goal you set for yourself. A conscious and thoughtful journey is the reward for those who take the time and make the effort to be the driver of your career, rather than the passenger who is carried along at the whim of others.