

OUTGROW YOUR SPACE AT WORK

HOW TO THRIVE AT WORK
AND BUILD A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

RICK WHITTED



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Dedicated to my tribe—my wife (my BFF and the love of my life), my son (my Buddy), and my girls (Little Mama and Little Bit). *You* are my ministry. I have not earned the right to serve or minister to the needs of others if I have not first served and ministered to your needs. I love you dearly.



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Dad and Mom, you were the first mentors I ever knew. Thanks for planting my mind in good ground and showing me what it means to work hard for a living.

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Most important, to the perfect *mirror* by which I've seen both who I am and the good I can become. Thank you, Jesus.

Introduction

People in a hurry cannot think, cannot grow, nor can they decay.
They are preserved in a state of perpetual puerility.

Eric Hoffer

I never expected an employee to teach me something that would change my formula for lasting career success. But he did.

I stood outside my glass office surveying the floor. As I scanned the dark blue Berber carpet, the glow of polished black wingtips sauntering toward me grabbed my attention. On Jacob Worthy's perfectly chiseled chin hung a confident smile.

He erupted before he even reached me. "I need to talk to you about something very important."

I raised an eyebrow and held my breath as he continued. "Boss, I think I am ready to do something else. Something bigger. I've mastered this job, and there's not a lot more for me to learn. How can I get promoted?"

Jacob had joined the firm about eighteen months earlier. In that time he had become my best-performing employee. If an important client needed concierge-level service, Jacob was typically

at the top of my list of whom to call for help. His future looked bright, and he knew it. He had a keen instinct. While others on the team grappled with concepts that I coached, Jacob swallowed them whole.

Could this guy perform and produce? Absolutely. Was he ready for the next level, something that would give him charge over others? Not yet. Jacob still needed to learn critical people skills that were essential to building a cohesive and productive team. Within the next twelve to eighteen months, I had no doubt that he would be a top managerial candidate.

Clearly he had rehearsed this conversation a thousand times. His timing was impeccable. Jacob was ending his best month ever, and he had a glutton's supply of confidence.

I smiled at his request. "You don't get promoted," I said. "You outgrow the space that you're in. When that happens, a bigger space will be made for you."

He, in complete silence, gave me a glazed-over stare. It seemed his processor was in overdrive. I wasn't sure if his eyes expressed bewilderment, disgust, or shock. Obviously, this scene wasn't in the script he had rehearsed in his mind.

For the next several minutes I shared with him what he did well and reiterated the areas in which I believed he could improve. As I continued, the fire in his eyes dimmed to a glow, and his robust smile weakened. This information was nothing new to Jacob. I was continually acknowledging his strengths, coaching him regarding his areas of opportunity, and encouraging his professional growth.

"Jacob, I am confident that in the next year to a year and a half you will make a phenomenal manager. You still have quite a few things to learn, but I know that we can get you there." Though we were barely twelve inches apart, his eyes narrowed as if gazing from a distance.

His smile dissipated. "Oh . . . uh . . . okay. Thanks." His voice sank, and he shuffled away from my office. I didn't expect my

response to alter the trajectory of his career. What I'd intended to encourage Jacob actually ended up discouraging him.

From that moment on, he was no longer concerned about the developmental process that would lead to his promotion. He seemed frustrated and focused only on getting promoted quickly. His willingness to go above and beyond what was required soon vanished. Being asked to do anything extra was a reminder of why he should already be promoted. He lost sight of his teammates.

Yes, he had a potentially bright future. Yes, his career trajectory was vertical. On my team he was hands down the best. Yet impatience brewed and feelings of entitlement began to stain his attitude. My confidence that he could be a next-level leader began to fade.

Not even eighteen months after that conversation, Jacob left the company. My most promising employee (or so I'd thought) was gone.

Two years later I received a call from Jacob. By this time I was managing a different line of business within the company. He wanted to relocate to a neighboring state where my firm was building a team. The hiring manager for that team was one of my former top producers. Somehow Jacob learned of this and wanted me to recommend him for the job.

I heard his voice but realized I wasn't paying much attention to what he was saying. My mind strayed to quickly calculating the math. *He worked for us two and a half years. He worked for this competitor two years. Now he wants to come back? Three company changes in less than five years?* I was perplexed. How could someone so talented be job-hopping?

In this book, I will impart more than two decades of personal experience in the corporate world. I will also share several employee stories like Jacob's, which are composites of various people I've interacted with during this time. I have anchored my career on the lessons learned from both. The principles of career progression that

I share are not fancy and don't require a graduate degree to master, but because of them I've received promotion after promotion.

Wandering from job to job and from company to company is not the best path to career success. I know this may sound out of place in today's culture where the prevailing thought is, *Get what you can and keep moving because no one cares about you*. But it is possible to have an enduring career, with few or no company changes, if you are willing to learn from the many lessons I will share with you in the following pages.

At the end of each chapter are several questions for you to reflect on and, in some cases, act on. Answering them honestly will maximize what you take away from this book. You may find it helpful to keep a journal of thoughts and ideas these questions spark. I'd also encourage you to experience this resource in a small group study format if at all possible. I believe a career path is best traveled with support. It is my desire that after reading each chapter you will be able to approach your job with a new strategy, confidently engage company leaders in a fresh way, and positively stand out from the others in your workplace.

Part 1

What Motivates Your Career Decisions?

1

The Career Question No One Asks

Promotion: activity that supports or provides active encouragement for the furtherance of a cause, venture, or aim.

Oxford English Dictionary

Why Is a Promotion Important to You?

Gary and I decided to have lunch at Seasons 52. We were visiting a new coverage territory a few hours away. I had hired him a year earlier to support this new area. Now the market was up and running, and he was more confident and well established in his role. His first year was terrific. Those he supported thought highly of his contributions.

As we entered the restaurant, a business manager we work with greeted us as she left. As we were being seated I said, “You know, she asked me about you a few days ago. She seems very impressed

with how you carry yourself in your role and how you partner with her managers.”

Gary’s eyes burst with interest as we were seated. “Really?” He looked up attentively. “That’s great to hear.”

He was obviously interested in knowing more. I handed the menu back to the server after placing my order and casually asked, “So Gary, have you thought much about your career path?”

Gary loved his autonomy. He was single, had no mortgage, and was a hard worker. But when work ended, that time was exclusively his. On Monday mornings, it wasn’t uncommon to hear him talk about a weekend getaway to an exotic location with his friends or family. We all tend to say work-life balance is very important. For Gary this was not only important but also the reason he worked. He saw work as a means to enjoying the activities and people in his personal life.

There were two primary paths that Gary’s current position led to. Option one was that he could manage clients directly and have complete flexibility and control of his schedule. Literally, this would be an office with no walls. Option two was a more traditional managerial role with a fifty- to sixty-hour workweek inside of four walls.

As he began discussing these different job opportunities, I surveyed his logic. Surprisingly, the role he talked about most was the manager option. This was definitely not what I would have considered the best career fit for Gary. I had no doubt that he could do the job. However, it did not seem to line up with what I knew was most important to him personally: work-life balance.

Gary’s current role allowed him tremendous flexibility and autonomy. I was sure he would want a career path that would continue to provide those attributes. However, as we began to discuss a promotion, he immediately identified the rigid management path as his future career progression. I was curious why Gary so

quickly dropped what he valued most when it came to the topic of a promotion. Midway through his explanation, I interrupted and asked, “Gary, why is a promotion so important to you?”

He pursed his lips to speak but quickly retreated behind furrowed eyebrows and a wrinkled forehead. “That’s a good question. Hmm . . . I guess I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Okay. Think about it now.” I asked again, “Why is it so important to be promoted into the next-level job?”

After a short pause, he began explaining how the next job would help his career and create opportunity for larger roles in the future. Maybe even his boss’s job—my job. I interrupted again. “Yeah, but why is that important?”

His eyes sank beneath the crinkled brows and forehead again. I could tell he was stumped. Every answer he gave kept coming back to his desire for bigger promotions later. I kept challenging him to explain why that was important. He seemed to be determined to get to the next level but couldn’t really explain why. After running out of answers, self-discovery dawned on his face.

Although I asked him the question, I don’t know that I’d ever considered the answer myself. Up to that point, I wasn’t any different from Gary. For me, doing a great job at work was about being able to get to the next position and make more money. In that moment, I realized I also had no idea why earning a promotion was so important to me.

This new revelation fascinated me. After lunch with Gary, I began asking everyone around me the same question. “Why is earning a promotion so important to you?” Peers, colleagues, and mentors alike could clearly express what a promotion would give them: opportunity to advance, more money, career stability, a sense of accomplishment, and so on.

While these benefits express what a promotion can provide, they don’t answer the fundamental question of why getting one means so much to us. Why do we view occupational advancement

as success? Why are workplace accomplishments such a huge statement about how well we are progressing in life?

Trying to get to the root answer to my question, I kept pressing those I spoke with. I'd ask, "But why is that so important to you?" Very few people could answer this question. I had to force them to go beyond what a promotion does and explain why receiving one is significant to them. I was intrigued that many couldn't articulate their feelings. I was blown away that no one had ever considered asking the question in the first place.

I have spoken with countless individuals about their careers. It seems that the single most important indicator of progress to a vast majority of us is a promotion. In fact, we don't even consider ourselves as traveling on a successful career path if one is not involved.

The pain of not getting *the* job promotion we desire can rival the gut shot of being rejected in our personal lives. And like Jacob's story, it can have a major effect on our confidence. Yet, I've learned that very few people can articulate, or even know, why they have such a strong desire to move up at work.

In this chapter, I am not trying to answer the question of why you want a promotion. We will only scratch the surface of that question. My purpose is to make you think before you wander down a dead-end path or waste time going after a job that will not align with what you value most. The best way to make certain of this is by getting you into the habit of asking this question in the first place: "Why is getting a job promotion so important to me?"

Work—The Center Stage of Life

I was determined to help Gary get back on track. So I continued. "Do you live to work or work to live?"

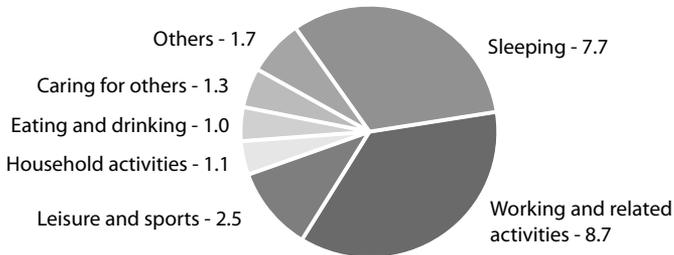
Without hesitation he answered, "Oh, I *definitely* work to live!" He was certain.

“Oh. Really?” I smiled. “Do you conform your work schedule around life? Or do you conform your life activities around your work schedule?”

His eyes retreated beneath his forehead lines again. “Wow, when you put it that way, I don’t know. I guess I cancel personal events for work events more often than I do the reverse.” This is true not only for Gary but also for most of us as well.

In 2013, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) conducted a survey of working Americans, ages twenty-five to fifty-four, to find out how we spend our time. The graph below¹ offers a helpful visual on how much of life is performed on the stage of the workplace floor.

Time use on an average workday for employed persons ages 25 to 54 with children (hours)



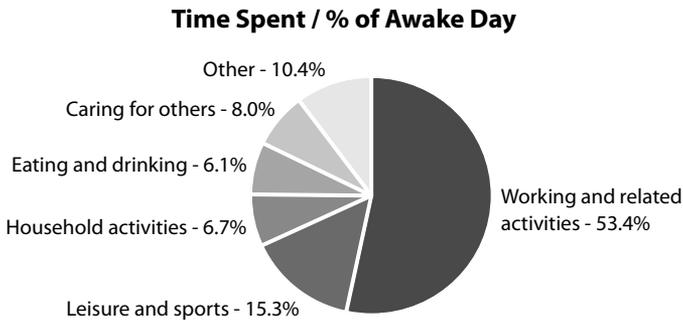
NOTE: Data include employed persons on days they worked, ages 25 to 54, who lived in households with children under 18. Data include nonholiday weekdays and are annual averages for 2013. Data include related travel for each activity. SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey

As you can see, on an average workday we spend more time working than we spend doing any other single activity, including interacting with our spouses or children, eating, performing household activities, going to our places of worship, or sleeping. Based on the twenty-four-hour clock, work is the center stage of our lives.

In 2013, the same American Time Use Survey² also revealed that 34 percent of us work on the weekends. And 67 percent of those

working multiple jobs use the weekend to fill the clock with more work. For another 20–30 percent, our home is our workplace.

We do not measure ourselves by promotion in any other area of our lives—except work. No one wants to admit this. I know I don't. It sounds like I'm some kind of overboard workaholic. Thirty-seven percent of our lives are consumed by work activities. And when you strip away sleeping, as I have done in the graph below,³ you can see the pervasiveness of work in our lives.



NOTE: Chart based on data from Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey

The pie chart says it all. The work slice looks like Pac-Man has stretched his mouth back as far as he can in order to swallow everything else whole. And that's how we often feel trying to strike a balance between work and life. More than half of our waking hours during the workweek are consumed by the workplace. In comparison, nothing and no one else can compete for our time and attention on a weekly basis. I was beginning to understand why Gary, others, and I couldn't explain what on the surface seemed to be a simple question.

We Measure Ourselves by Promotions

In a crowded restaurant at the lunchtime rush, Gary and I were lost in solitude and introspection. As we ate, I continued to ask,

“But why is having a promotion so important?” Then a lightbulb moment occurred for Gary. “I guess it shows that my life is progressing. You know . . . moving forward.”

That was it. Now I understood why so many of us are blindly chasing after the next position. It now made sense why I, and countless others, tend to experience the two- or three-year itch. (That’s when you’ve been in a role for a couple of years and start thinking you should be doing *more* by now.) Even if we are happy in our current jobs, as time goes by we tend to feel like we are stuck and not making progress.

Gary nailed it. We measure our lives based on a simple question: Am I moving forward? In every area we assess our success, self-worth, and growth based on progress. This is heavily reinforced by a culture that continually tells us we need the next best thing to make our lives great. If we don’t have the money, finance it. Do whatever it takes to get the latest. We will be happier, healthier, smarter, and more attractive.

It’s easy to see why everyone wants a promotion. It’s not about the job. I’m probably going to shock you, but it’s also not about the money. Don’t get me wrong, the money is important, but I’ve rarely done an exit interview with an employee who left a company strictly for monetary reasons. There may be multiple factors that cause them to leave. But ultimately the trigger is always a belief that where they are going will provide a greater career opportunity for promotions.

I remember when I first got my iPhone 3G. I felt like I had joined the technology revolution. I loved my phone. The next year the iPhone 3GS came out, but I was still happy with my iPhone 3G. There was no need to waste money when the phone I had was still providing me the access to technology I was so proud to have.

Then came the iPhone 4 and the 4S. The phone I had been so happy to have now seemed outdated. It was the same phone. My needs hadn’t changed. Yet I was no longer as happy with it as I

once was. At first I answered my phone proudly. Now I made sure that bulky, outdated contraption was on silent, and I'd peek under the table to see who was calling. Why? Because I was getting left behind. I wasn't progressing.

It may seem odd to compare technical obsolescence with career advancement. But when we feel it is time for us to advance to the next level in our careers, we treat the job we're in the same way I did my old iPhone. We do this in most areas of our lives. Is this relationship going somewhere? Should I move forward with it? Or should I break it off? Am I making progress physically? Should I work out more, run more, or go on a diet? Are my clothes outdated? Should I buy a new wardrobe?

These questions are not about clothing, relationships, physique, or career success. They are about progress. When we perceive we are not moving forward (or worse, getting left behind), we become restless, less confident, and discontent—even if the status quo is actually good. If we leave these feelings unchecked, we can sink to a place that sucks the very air out of us.

I started this book with Jacob's story. Jacob was doing well, making money, and building a solid reputation. Unfortunately, he defined promotion only as a higher position. To Jacob, not getting promoted when he perceived he should have been meant that he was no longer progressing with this company.

If we are honest, we all behave this way at some point during our careers. To be in the same place over an extended period of time feels like we are not moving forward. That's why achieving a new title and a greater area of control excites us. It's also why watching someone else get selected over us is so discouraging.

Our momentum at work is not the sole measure of our progression in life. It seems ridiculous to even have to say it, doesn't it? That is, until we don't get the promotion we were hoping for. If you have been in that situation, then you know what I'm talking about. You may have left the company as a result, or you may

have remained with a good attitude. Either way, it was a major gut shot.

Right or wrong, we strongly identify who we are with what we do. And because a bulk of what we do every day is connected to work, we evaluate our lives by our work-related progress.

Others Measure Us by Promotions

This is not an internal dynamic only. Everyone else measures us in the same way—and we know it. You don't believe me? Take notice the next time you meet someone for the first time. After talking with them for just a few minutes I guarantee that one of their questions will be, "So, what do you do?" And thus triggers the measuring of where we are and how far we've come in life.

As with many of you, both my mother and father love me dearly. They are proud of me. Typically when they introduce me to someone or update someone about my life, they always cover the big three—my wife, my kids, and my work. We all tend to do this, don't we?

We never start off by saying, "My brother and sister are great people." We may get to that, but usually we start with, "I'm so proud of my brother and sister. He is a successful attorney who works downtown, and she is an outstanding medical doctor." We seem to determine our worth and the worth of others based on our occupations.

A few years back I was a regional manager of a particular business line that supported a much larger division within the company. To be more in accordance with that division, our line received a new name. The job didn't change—only the name. However, the new name was close to that of a highly respected business line in the firm whose function was similar to ours. This was like waking up one morning in an organization where czars rule and being told you are now called a czar.

A company-wide memo went out announcing the new name. It listed me and all of the other managers who oversaw the business line. For days our in-boxes were bombarded with congratulations from well-wishers across the country. Within less than one minute of the memo being sent, we were being praised for our accomplishment. Our teams also received the same praise.

The people we supported began viewing us in a very different way. Don't get me wrong, they valued and appreciated us before, but we were never quite viewed as peers. However, when our organizational title matched a group they viewed as peers, we were immediately treated the same way.

Prior to the name change I had to convince candidates of the benefits of working for me. Our division name did not seem to align with the preferred career path. I was always asked to explain repeatedly what exactly we did. Now top candidates began proactively reaching out, trying to convince me that they were the best person for the job.

Suddenly, everyone noticed us. Mind you, I was in the same job doing exactly the same work I had done the day before the announcement. But because I acquired what was perceived as a higher title, people were asking me not to forget them on my way up. It was hilarious. Heck, had I not been the wiser, I probably would've actually thought that I had been promoted.

To tell you the truth, having others view my job as a progression was quite gratifying. Even though there was no pay raise or expanded scope of control, their acknowledgment made me feel like I was advancing. Having the respect of others who perceived me as moving forward actually increased my job satisfaction.

It's no wonder so many people desire a promotion. We, and most everyone around us, equate professional progress with life progress. Warning! Be careful. Like Gary, this can easily send us down a career path that does not align with our values. We will talk about this in the next chapter. But first, take some time to review the reflection questions below.

If you're not in a group setting, I would highly encourage you to have this conversation with someone you trust—maybe a mentor, spouse, trusted co-worker, or manager. Be open and honest. You may answer questions you have never taken the time to contemplate before.

Reflections

1. What stood out most to you in this chapter? What insight(s) benefited you most?
2. What is the first thing you think about when considering a job change or career move? After you've answered, look at the graph on page 23. Were any of these your answers? What do you believe is motivating your thought process?
3. What motivates you to want a promotion? How has this factored into the career decisions you've made?
4. Give an example of when you knowingly or unknowingly measured your life's progress based on receiving or failing to receive a promotion. Explain the situation.
5. Give an example of when someone else measured your life's progress based on you receiving or not receiving a promotion. How did this make you feel?