

It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Much You Want It

By David Maister

People often ask me about my career and what I have learned from it. There's a lot to say, but here's some of what happened and what it taught me.

As you will see, I think the lessons apply not only to individual careers, but also to firm strategy. I'll tell my story, then explore the lessons for individuals, and finally use those lessons (toward the end of the article) to make some comments on firm strategies. But don't skip ahead – it's all connected!

Some Personal History

Like many people, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life when I left college. I took a job as a statistician because that's what my undergraduate degree had been in. I soon discovered that it was neither my passion nor my area of special talent. So, because I couldn't think of anything else to do, I went back to school for a master's degree, taking a teaching job to support myself.

Bingo! I discovered (without planning it this way) that while my studies were a chore, I loved teaching and happily did that for a number of years. I was still teaching *statistics*, which did take the edge off my excitement a little.

I had no idea what opportunity was going to come next – I considered a lot of things, and waited, eyes open. At one

point I even applied to be a radio producer at the BBC. (I didn't get the job.)

Then the chance came to do a doctorate degree course at the Harvard Business School. (I had been sent by my employer as a delegate to a course HBS was running in Europe.) I had *never* previously considered an academic career.

This was a big step, and one I was not sure I could pull off. Teaching in a local college is not the same as committing yourself to a career of producing original, scholarly research. I had never been top of my class in anything at any stage of my education (I still haven't been) but – well, it was worth a shot!

The problem was that I had no money, so I could only make it work if I got a full scholarship. But which one should I apply for? There were generous scholarships available in a variety of specialties.

Two factors affected my choice. The first was my respect for a faculty member who was both impressive and helpful. (Thanks, Jim Heskett!) The fact that his area also offered the largest scholarship may also have had something to do with things!

That's how I ended up spending the next six years as a specialist in logistics and

transportation. My doctoral dissertation was about grain transportation in Canada, and I ended up writing three books on the trucking industry and one on the airline industry. Given my focus today, people are always surprised to learn about that part of my history.

Which is, of course, the point! Did I know when I started whether transportation was going to be a fulfilling field for me? No, I didn't. Did I give it my full commitment and *try* to make it work for me? Absolutely. And when it became clear that this *wasn't* my life's calling, did I hunt around for the next chance to move on? You bet!

It came with the chance to return to HBS three years after graduation, but this time as a faculty member teaching management of service business and factory operations. (Yes, that was also a stretch, but you have to keep trying things, right?)

This was not as obvious a decision to make as it might now appear. I already had a good job in a good university, with friendly colleagues. Giving that up to join HBS was equivalent to signing up for the Olympic team. Not only would I have to work much harder and achieve higher standards, but also there was a very real chance that I would not make it. HBS has an up-or-out policy with very high standards for its faculty.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) the challenge, I took the new post. Eventually, at age 35, I started work on the topic that really turned out to be my passion – professional services.

I was 35! Had I not enjoyed the previous 14 years of my career since I obtained my undergraduate degree? Quite the contrary! It was by turns frightening and fulfilling, but it was always exciting.

One more personal story before we search for the lessons: I always wanted to be a published author. I remember that even in my college days I thought how cool it would be to have someone who doesn't know you read your ideas and know your name.

There was only one problem: the act of writing has always terrified me! Whenever I have some writing to do, I get agitated, sweat, and avoid the task like the plague. In spite of this, my consulting career was launched (and is sustained) on writing.

In my academic career, I had written a lot of books and articles, but I must confess it was always a case of "publish or perish." I did it because that's what academics are expected to do. However, I kept discovering that the topics didn't *really* excite me.

Things began to change when I left academia to start my solo consulting business. I promised a magazine editor that I would write an article every month, knowing full well that I was committing myself to something that I would not necessarily enjoy, but which would get me where I wanted to go.

Having no choice, I lived up to my commitment and soon was being referred to as the guy who keeps writing all those articles. They weren't all good, and few people liked all of them, but the key was that I got my audience used to the idea that there would be a new set of thoughts from me on a regular basis. The phone started to ring and my consulting career took off.

Force and Momentum

"Find your passion" is common career advice. But less frequently pointed out is how difficult this can be. You really need to work hard to find out what you

can be passionate about. Unless you are very lucky, you may find that, like me, it takes many years to discover what really turns you on, long-term.

Successful people often appear to have had a rational career progression, with each step a seemingly sensible preparation for the next. The truth, however, is that most successful business careers have been based on experimentation and opportunism.

This is where business careers differ from careers in, say, sports and the arts. In those fields you usually have to pick an event or an instrument and dedicate yourself early to an almost exclusive focus on that choice.

Business careers are not like that. Did Richard Branson know he was going to found an airline or a telephone company when he started selling records? Did Bill Gates ever know what products Microsoft was going to offer in a few years' time?

To succeed, you must be prepared to keep searching until you find out what truly excites you, even though there will be temptations along the way for you to give up your search.

After all, what you are doing at any given moment is almost by definition the result of a previous guess of yours as to what you thought would be fulfilling. So, it's unlikely to be disastrous. It's probably "OK."

This is where the world divides into two groups of people. One group will stroll down the path labeled "It's OK, so why change?" while another group will run down the path marked "It's only OK, let's find something better!"

My trainer once pointed out that to get the benefits of exercise, you must use

force, not momentum. You don't develop a muscle by letting momentum move the equipment – it's the amount of force you apply that develops you.

The business equivalent is obvious. Career momentum can do a lot of the work for you and, indeed, carry you a long way. However, it is only when you add force to this that you create enhanced capability and extra achievement.

Actually, the conclusion is probably even stronger than that. Since even the most thrilling things become familiar after a while, passion and "engagement" will almost inevitably decline and there will be a life-long need to seek out new challenges. However, given the power of momentum, only those determined to get somewhere will actually do what it takes.

If you truly want to succeed (and many people do *not* want it badly enough to make it happen) then you must never settle, never give up, never coast, never just accept what is, even if you are currently performing at a high level.

If what you have now isn't what you dream (or dreamed) of, then you must keep looking, experimenting, and adapting. You must always search for the next thing you *think* you can feel passionate about, so that you will have a burning reason to show the discipline and drive that will distinguish you.

Once you have found something to try, you must then throw yourself into it and work at it with as much commitment as you can muster until you can answer three questions:

- Is it as exciting as I thought it was going to be?

- Is there a market for this? (Will anyone pay me to do it?) and
- Can I make a contribution that others are not (yet) making?

All three must be present to succeed. If any component is missing you must move on.

Living your professional life this way is not easy. Each step in *my* career often seems to other people like a terrific “step-up” accomplishment: giving up my statistics job to go get a master’s degree, signing up for a doctorate, joining the Harvard faculty, then later leaving it to become a solo consultant.

The truth, however, is that for me (as for most people) each successive step was a terrifying leap into the unknown, requiring me to abandon the security of what I had without any certainty (or even probability) that it was going to work.

Determination: The Only Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Sheer determination is the only explanation I can offer as to why I took these career risks. Looking back, I am amazed at the chances I took, and am grateful that they worked out (almost always with setbacks along the way). I often feel that my career has been one of “stumbling upwards.”

There are no guarantees in life, and determination is only an essential ingredient, not a sufficient one. People try and some of them fail. But a lot more never try, and they cannot win.

The key lesson is that, for me and for others, lifelong drive and determination, the *burning passion to get somewhere next*, are the key ingredients in career success.

Did Richard Branson or Bill Gates (or anyone else) succeed mostly because they had higher IQs than anyone else? They are certainly very smart people. But what made them *special* and *successful* was clearly something else: discipline, ambition, passion, entrepreneurship, energy, enthusiasm, engagement, and a whole host of closely allied characteristics.

The point is worth stressing. In a free-market economy, what is rewarded is not inherent value, but scarcity (the relative supply and demand). If many other people have what you have, then you cannot earn a premium or distinguish yourself just because you have it.

Intelligence, IQ, brains, and smarts are all important, but they are also more common than drive and determination. The latter will be more highly rewarded and also more determinative of future success.

And here’s the key: you can’t sustain lifelong drive and determination unless you are passionate about accomplishing something. Discipline for discipline’s sake won’t work.

These things also apply in most other walks of life. World-class athletes and artistic performers push themselves to the limit with repeated practice, training, and rehearsal. No matter how much natural talent they bring to the game, it is their determination to do what it takes to get there that makes them distinctive. It is the most talented performers who practice the most.

It’s the willingness to keep trying, always committing yourself to getting better, whenever you have just stumbled — which is hard. What may be more critical, successful people keep

stretching when they are already doing well — which is even harder!

Whether we are in our 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, or 60s (or beyond), the question that we must all address is: are we *still* trying to get somewhere? Do we have new worlds to conquer, and do we know what they are? It's always worth examining this because, as Napoleon said, glory may be fleeting, but obscurity is forever.

Bouncing Back

If people sometimes lose sight of the need for energy and “force” because their momentum is carrying them, they also lose drive and energy when they have to deal with setbacks. Things that didn't really go so well. A missed promotion. Ungrateful superiors, colleagues, or clients who fail to acknowledge a contribution.

We all have setbacks, whether they were our fault or not. The question then becomes: What are you going to *do* now? Withdraw, or renew your efforts?

It's tempting and completely understandable to conclude: “Ah, I've been trying but the struggle is too frustrating. Why bother? Look what happens every time I try to change things.”

It's also tempting to beat yourself up. We have all lain awake at night thinking about mistakes we have made, things we could have done or said differently. Rather than dwell on any accomplishments they might have attained, people often tend to dwell on missed opportunities and failures.

All of this is, of course, quite useless — literally. Nothing productive can come from it. While we must not veer to the opposite extreme of always blaming external forces and other people for what

happened to us, there is no point getting stuck in a “doom loop” of self-criticism.

You're going to live with yourself for a long time. It's your own good opinion of yourself that matters more than anyone else's. Be kind to yourself. There are plenty of people out there prepared to judge you. Why do it for them?

The good news is that it's amazing how many times you can mess up in life and still succeed. As Winston Churchill reportedly said: Success is the ability to move from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.

Another example — George Washington barely won a battle in the early years of the Revolutionary War. His greatest triumph was to prevail by not losing (and inspiring others not to give up, despite terrible defeats and narrow escapes). Just staying in the game led to victory.

The key skill in life is not “never make a mistake”! That's impossible. Rather, it is rebounding from (and fixing) your mistakes. Although it doesn't always feel like it, you have a choice in how you react to things that happen to you. You can let them get to you or you can brush them off. “OK. I blew it. Time to move on.”

Lessons for the Firm

If moods, emotional states, and such characteristics as determination and enthusiasm are the keys to individual success, what does all this mean for companies and firms?

The most important lesson is that managers, if they are to serve their role, must, above all else, be net creators of energy, passion, drive, and enthusiasm in other people.

Even Jack Welch, the recently retired chairman and CEO of General Electric, who had a reputation for being a hard-driving boss, wrote (in his book **Winning**): “The job of any leader is to build self-confidence in the people around him. Make those people feel twelve feet tall. Clap for every achievement, no matter how small, with everybody around you. That’s a hell of a lot more important than some finite strategy.”

Unfortunately, in too many cases, managers, rather than being creators of excitement, end up being net destroyers of it. Managers have been encouraged and trained to focus on tasks, activities, outcomes, and accomplishments, but they are rarely trained to understand and influence people’s emotions, either as individuals or in groups.

For example, few business strategies are chosen because of (or tested against the criterion of) how motivating individuals and groups in the firm will find them. Product, service line, and location choices are still most frequently made on the detached, analytical grounds of “it’s an attractive market.”

The received approach to good corporate strategy remains one that stresses analytics, planning, and logical, rational thinking. Managers are frequently skilled at figuring out what their firms should be doing. It is less common to find managers who can get their people and their organization to go there.

I have previously observed (in “Strategy and the Fat Smoker,” an article on my website) that the primary outcome of strategic planning should not be analytical insight or smart choices, but a superior resolve to accomplish something.

Too few organizations, and too few individuals, have implemented the basic insight of this article: He or she wins who gets more done, and he or she gets more done who passionately wants to get to the next level of accomplishment. Creating and sustaining that ambition is management’s primary task. It’s obvious, but it’s still scarce.

How well does your firm stack up against these behaviors and states of mind?

- New challenges are eagerly, continuously sought out.
- The firm and its people never rely on momentum for their success, but are always seeking to build new capabilities.
- Compared to key competitors, the people in the firm are distinguished by a superior, burning passion to get somewhere new.
- The firm emphasizes and requires adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness as key virtues.
- The firm’s strategies are created through continued and repeated experimentation.
- The firm is markedly superior in creating (not just hiring for) energy, excitement, enthusiasm, drive, determination, passion, and ambition.
- Service offerings, locations, and operating units are repeatedly assessed against the three key criteria: Do the people in the firm find this exciting? Are we making money? Are we doing something special that others are not doing?

- There is a restless refusal to accept “It’s OK.” People never settle, never give up, never coast.
- The firm sustains energy and investment actions both when things have gone badly and when things are going relatively well.
- The firm does not judge its performance by the levels of its accomplishments, but by the “relative incline”: whether or not it is improving relative to competitors on the characteristics it has chosen to compete on.
- Management is held accountable for its ability to create and sustain drive, enthusiasm, passion, ambition, commitment, and excitement, and instills these things in the individual members and groups that make up the organization. Managers who cannot do this are replaced.

Yes, these are tough standards. But if individual success is based on outperforming others on determination, it surely follows that an organization that cannot create and sustain it must be in trouble, no matter how much organizational momentum it has.

Last Thoughts

A final autobiographical note. In my mid-50s, after having written a book per year for three years in a row, I suddenly found myself without energy. The lethargy lasted for more than two years, and I have never been so miserable in my entire life.

It turned out that I had sleep apnea, a medical condition that meant I hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in two years or more. There was (I understood only in retrospect) a reason that I had been

physically and mentally exhausted. With treatment, my energy bounced back, and I’m writing again, great things are happening in my career, and I’m having a ball.

As the Anthony Newley / Leslie Bricusse song goes: I’m going to build a mountain / I’m going to build it high / I don’t know how I’m going to do it / I only know I’m going to try.



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