

Achieve Your Career Potential!

By John West Hadley

(This article is part 3 of a 3 part series. Part 1 in the April 2004 issue of The Stepping Stone covered practical tips for hitting a home run in interviews. Part 2 in the July 2004 issue discussed how to hit the ground running in your new job.)

When was the last time you sat back and gave serious thought to what you want to achieve in life, and how what you do at work is aligned with that? Are you doing what you really want to do? Do you still think of your job as a career, or has it become simply a source of a paycheck? Do you get up in the morning excited to go to work? Do you take pride in what you've accomplished at the end of the day? If the answer to these questions is no, it's time to re-examine your priorities. Think of what it's costing you each day to come to a job you aren't really that interested in anymore, to periodically glance at the clock in the afternoon, wishing you could get home to what's truly important in your life! And what does that cost you at home—spending eight or more hours a day doing something that leaves you drained instead of energized?

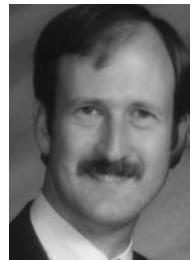
It's common to feel blocked at certain points in your career. A secret to getting unblocked is to first get back in touch with what is really important to you, what you want to see happen and then what achieving that will do for you. This is how you can tap into a real source of energy, for making things happen, and create a commitment to doing it. I did this in my own career when I pursued a promotion to vice president. I was well-compensated and enjoyed my job and level of authority. At the same time, I felt I sometimes wasn't seen as the key player I envisioned, since many other department heads were VPs already. I found enormous energy in just making the decision to earn that promotion, and found that my approach to my job was transformed by keeping my goal in mind. I set out to prove I had the leadership potential to deserve the promotion, and took charge of a major initiative. Within a year, I was promoted.

A variety of issues may create obstacles to career advancement, and often it is difficult for us to see how to get around them. We tend to develop tunnel vision because of habits we've

fallen into, assumptions we've made about what is or isn't possible or simply a lack of open, effective communication. For example, one friend left a job he enjoyed because he had a long commute and assumed that there was nothing to be done about it. He had been offered relocation expenses, but didn't want to move. When he turned in his resignation, his boss offered him a chance to work four days a week from a remote office 10 minutes from his home. That possibility had never occurred to him, but it was too late as he had already accepted another company's offer and felt honor-bound to leave.

It can be very helpful to have a fresh perspective on the issues you are facing everyday, and this is one of the values I offer my clients. An honest self-evaluation of important areas for career growth can be a critical first step. Here are some of those areas. Try rating yourself in these on a scale from 1 (= I desperately need to work on this) to 10 (= I am outstanding in this area):

- 1) My relationship with my boss
- 2) My relationship with my peers
- 3) My relationship with my subordinates
- 4) My success at developing my employees
- 5) My grace under pressure
- 6) My impact in meetings
- 7) My ability to consistently communicate the value I am adding to my company
- 8) The value my boss perceives I am adding to the company
- 9) The value my boss' boss perceives I am adding to the company
- 10) The value other influential people perceive I am adding to the company
- 11) My visibility in the company
- 12) The size of my personal network of contacts
- 13) My success at developing, expanding and effectively using my network
- 14) My ability to lead significant projects/initiatives
- 15) The perception others have of my leadership potential



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Ideally, you would like to rate yourself eight or higher in all areas, but this is rarely the case. Most of us are "works in progress" who constantly strive to make ourselves better. If there are any areas in which you rated yourself a three or less, you've identified problem areas that need immediate attention before they do serious damage to your career (or where you need to figure it out). Assuming you aren't in this desperate situation with any areas, it's time to prioritize what needs the most attention. This isn't just a matter of picking the area(s) in which you gave yourself the lowest rating(s). Instead, write down all of the areas in which you rated yourself less than an eight. Split them into 4-5 vs. 6-7 ratings. Now go back to your short-term and long-term goals. (And make sure you are honest with yourself about your goals. Just because "others" expect you to one day be chief actuary, CEO or head of your own consulting practice doesn't mean that it should be your aim!)

Starting with the areas that scored 4-5, think about which area has the most impact on achieving your short- and long-term goals. (If there are no areas scored below a six, move ahead to the 6-7s right away.) Get really clear on how improving your performance in that area will facilitate achieving what is most important to you and commit to making massive progress in the next three months. This doesn't mean that you will completely ignore any of the other areas you've identified; having accepted that you need improvement will by itself increase your sensitivity to ways you could do better. What it does mean is that your concentration will be on the one area that is most important to your progress right now. Think about steps you could take to work on that area, including finding a trusted advisor (e.g., an internal mentor, a peer, a close friend, a family member or a career counselor) who can help you evaluate your plans and partner with you in your progress.

Now, create an action plan with specific short-term goals, and decide on a way to reward yourself when you achieve those goals. Finally, commit to following through with your action plan, and to specific dates when you are

going to check in with your advisor on your progress. Once you've finished your first three-month plan, sit down with your advisor and honestly evaluate how you did, and whether you achieved the progress you were seeking. Remember that your purpose is not to beat yourself up for what you haven't done, but to figure out how to accomplish change for the future. Few of us change overnight the habits and ways of operating learned over many years, and you may need to experiment with different strategies to find the ones that work best for you. If your progress isn't what you sought, get really clear on why:

- Did you follow through on what you agreed, and if not, why not?
- Were you truly committed to making change happen, and if not, why not?
- Did you have unrealistic expectations as to what you could accomplish in three months?
- Did you let other unforeseen priorities interfere and should they have?

Now decide what is the most important area in which to make your most serious concentration for the next three months—this could be the same area as before, or you could go back to the other areas you rated below an eight—but be sure to re-score yourself based on how you feel about these areas in light of what you have learned in the past three months.

(Readers who want help in identifying their hidden obstacles so they can take action, are invited to call John Hadley to schedule a free 30-minute phone counseling session.) □

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