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12 Ways to Build an Extraordinary Career

by Dan Coughlin

An extraordinary career consists of much more than just a well-paying job. I believe an extraordinary career entails meaningful and deeply satisfying work, generates great results, and provides meaningful and deeply satisfying rewards. Of course, the definition of what these are varies greatly from one individual to another. And that's the main point. An extraordinary career is in the eye of the beholder. You decide what an extraordinary career means for you.

Here are a dozen ways to create an extraordinary career:

1. Identify your values.

Values are important. (Pun intended.) Values are the behaviors you think are important. No matter how much you are paid, if you work in a place where people behave in a way that you completely disagree with, you will be miserable every day. Identify your values and then look for a career opportunity that is consistent with your values.

2. Know your strengths.

This is critical. You cannot build an extraordinary career by trying to leverage what you're average at. Identify your five greatest strengths and then put them into action. If you want assistance in this process, read *Authentic Happiness* by Martin Seligman. Once you know your greatest strengths, then look to apply them toward what you consider to be meaningful work

3. Do what you're passionate about.

Know what gets you excited. Once, in a huge audience, I wrote a question on an index card and handed it to Bill Gates. It read, "In your opinion, what does it take to become world-class in any field?" He read it, paused and said, "You have to love what you do. I've always loved to write software."

4. Know what you want to earn.

Money is a relative thing. When I was a high school teacher, I thought \$50,000 was all the money in the world and would have signed a lifetime contract if I could have received that every year. Now, it would be harder to live on that. Determine what is the minimal amount of money you are willing to accept. Determine how much of a financial upside you want in your career. Then determine the amount of risk you are willing to take. Doing passionate work that you are good at can become extremely exhausting if you feel that you are being deprived of the lifestyle you want everyday.

5. Always be willing to walk away from your job.

If you ever get to the point where you can't walk away from you job, then you're trapped. You may be trapped by success or fear or the unknown or the economy, but, nonetheless, you're trapped. Always leave yourself with options. Even entrepreneurs need to be careful not to get trapped into thinking that they have to work with certain clients. Being able to walk away from your job allows you to maintain your dignity and self-respect.

6. Determine if your work matters.

Ask yourself, "Who will be better off as a result of my efforts? Do I consider this to be a meaningful purpose?" If you are just putting in hours to accept a paycheck, you most definitely are not building an extraordinary career.

7. Do you have the time to live, or are you just making a living?

Does your career allow you to have a balanced life? Do you have time for important relationships outside of your work? Do you have the time and energy to take care of your mind, body, and spirit? If not, then you are living to work, not working to live.

8. Are you part of a Great Group?

Do the people in your peer group stimulate you and challenge you? Do you feel that the team you're on is going after an exciting goal? Do you feel that you are better off as a result of having been on that team? Do you feel respected by your peers, boss, and direct reports? (Read *Organizing Genius* by Warren Bennis and Patricia Biederman for more on the topic of Great Groups.)

9. Looking back, are you satisfied?

As you look back on the past five years of your work, are you deeply satisfied with what you did, who you did it for, why you did it, and the value that you provided? If not, it's probably time to reexamine your career. Fortunately for me, most of my career has generated great satisfaction. However, there was a five-year period of time where I was an assistant high school soccer coach. My main job was to make sure that all the soccer balls had enough air in them and that I brought them to every practice and game. Wow, was that ever meaningful and purposeful work!

10. Do you care about your customers?

Who are the people who ultimately pay for your product or services? Not your boss or peers, but who are the people shelling out the money for what is being provided? Do you care about them? Do you care that they are better off for having invested in what you have to sell? If you don't care about them, then you're probably in a "job" and not an extraordinary career.

11. Strategic action really does matter.

It is not enough to work long and hard. Understand your surroundings, your competition, your customers, and the psychology of the moment. Clarify what your guideline for making decisions is going to be. Develop several guidelines and then compare and contrast them until you hit on the one that will have the greatest positive impact on your results. Once you clarify your strategy for improving your desired results, then remain consistent in making decisions that fall within that strategy.

12. Protect and strengthen your self-esteem everyday.

This is critical. Your self-esteem is the value you see within yourself. If you lose that sense of internal value, it will be nearly impossible for you to add value to other people and build an extraordinary career. Even if you recently lost your job, go out and volunteer your talents and energy toward making a difference. What you will get out of it is a renewed sense of the value you bring to other people. Give and give and give of yourself so that you clearly understand your values, talents, and passions. These are the fundamental building blocks of a great career.

By building an extraordinary career, you automatically assist your organization in generating extraordinary results. And that's my main point. Organizations are made up of people. When those individual people are doing meaningful and deeply satisfying work, generating great results, and receiving meaningful and deeply satisfying rewards, they are collectively building an enduring great organization. Organizational success does NOT begin with a strategic plan. It begins and grows through individuals who are building extraordinary careers while simultaneously working together toward a common meaningful purpose.

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