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Build Your Promotability or Honor Your Values? Why Not Both!

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#GDC2024

Is this even possible? Yes... and no



But first... a bit about me

- I've been helping people build their careers for the past 30+ years, as an educator, career development coach & consultant, writer/editor, speaker, etc.
- I've been contributing to some type of values-focused work for the same amount of time, with varying degrees of success.



On today's agenda:

- How can we make plans when everything is on fire?
- What “shape” is a career? What shape is a career that puts food on the table *and* lets you sleep at night?
- DETOUR ALERT: how to start figuring out the above!
- A bit of “constructive disillusionment,” and two emotions that you’re going to need to deal with sooner or later.
- Non-promotable versus promotable tasks.
- Why “POWER” is not a dirty word!
- Getting what you need to move forward.
- Tying it all together.

But before we begin...



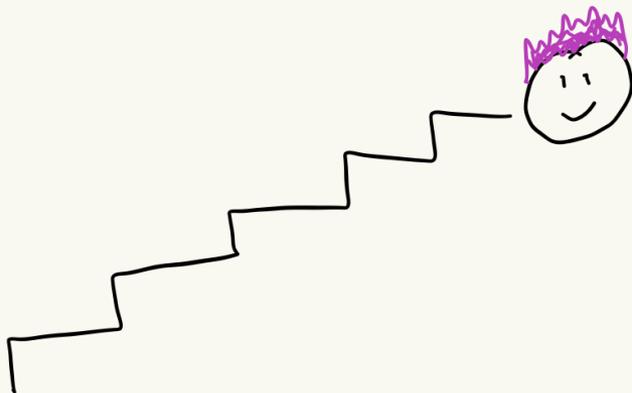
(Image: KC Green)

Most of us are probably trying to balance:

- What our employers want from us... (or finding a job in the first place!)
- What we care about... our values, interests, and non-work commitments
- Affording that expensive cat food that is the *only* thing they'll eat...
- Trying to move toward our goals... or create new ones... or make a course correction somehow, or...
- All while dealing with uncertainty, economic and political instability, and so much more.

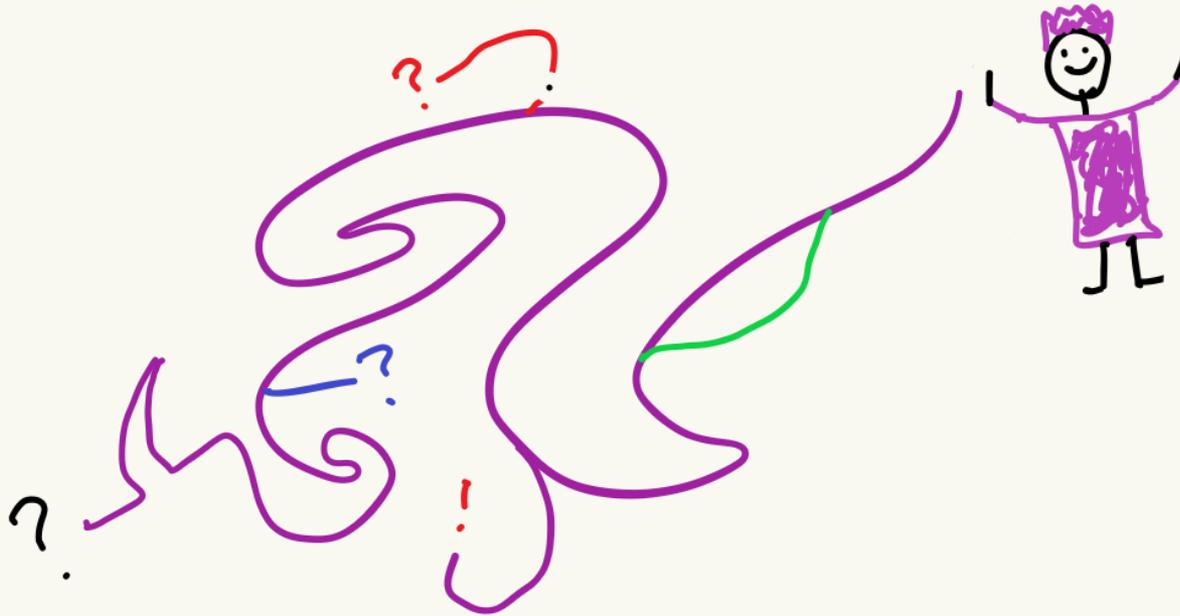
The shape of a career?

People tend to think that a career should look like this:



The shape of a career!

When for most people it really looks something more like this:



Flexibility != chaos!

- You should absolutely create a tentative narrative for your career that you can use to help you reach your goals.
- It will not go entirely according to plan! It will almost certainly have multiple branches, as a result of choice or of factors beyond your control. Flexibility is important.
- Your career narrative will involve moving toward success as you perceive it.
- *So. How do you perceive it?*



How do you measure a life?



A word cloud containing various terms related to life measurement, including: satisfaction, relationships, reputation, peace, equity, joy, wealth, equality, inclusion, family, power, mastery, legacy, autonomy, faith, comfort, success, kindness, charity, honor, promotion, glory, tradition, hobbies, influence, fame, diversity, skill, inclusion, kindness, charity, honor, promotion, glory, tradition, hobbies, love, longevity, pets, stability, integrity, strength, representation, money, innovation, harmony, recognition, freedom, security, travel, kids, talent, and stability.

A small exercise for later

- Temporarily “Ctrl+X” the specific job titles right out of your thoughts about your career. Instead, think about:
- What types of problems you most enjoy solving, and for whom.
- What a perfect “productive day” would look and feel like to you.
- What sort of work or activity puts you into what many would call a “flow state” (and others might call hyper-focus!).

(Write this stuff down when you do it!)

And THEN:

- Consider what types of activities make you feel really good about your skills and talents.
- AND what types of activities make you feel really good about YOURSELF.

(If you decide to do this at some point, this would be a good time to sit in your thoughts and feelings for a few minutes, before you start making any major decisions!)

Finding the balance

- You will be happiest and healthiest in a career that allows you, on the whole, to feel good about the work you do *and* about yourself.
- Sure, this is will never be true for 100% of your time... but it's the goal.
- This will almost certainly mean, over time, trying to strike a balance between skills-based work and values-based work.
- (And yes, of course it all depends on what you value! But I choose pragmatic optimism over cynicism!)

A moment of *Constructive Disillusionment*:

- Whatever you do to promote your values-based goals, **it will almost certainly never feel like enough.**
- This can lead you to feel two dreadful and unproductive emotions: **guilt** and **shame.**
- When you say “no” to tasks that align with your values but not with your professional goals, the guilt and shame may intensify. Be prepared.

Here's the thing.

- Before you can make real change happen—change that reaches all the way to the highest levels of an organization—you have to level up. Otherwise...



An unfortunate truth

- In many workplaces, doing certain types of work may hinder your career progress, *even if you are being directly asked by your managers & supervisors to involve yourself in this work.*
- This includes much of what we might consider values-driven work: voluntary DEI work, running Pride committees or women's groups, mentoring juniors, etc.
- There's also the adjacent category of office housework—the kind of tasks that keep things running smoothly, but that don't lead to raises or promotions.
- Most (though not all) of this work falls under the category of *non-promotable tasks.*

What are “non promotable” tasks?

- They are not directly connected to the company’s overall purpose/ “bottom line.”
- They are not directly connected to the job you were actually hired to do, and may not require your specialized skill set.
- Their impact is often low visibility within the organization— uncredited or credited only among a small internal group.
- They may be time consuming while adding little if any measurable value to the “big picture” of your own professional success, or your team’s.
- If they *are* visible, their visibility is often primarily a matter of “good optics” for the company.

Then, there are “indirectly promotable” tasks

- Sometimes, a project or initiative that is non-promotable may help you in other ways (developing new skills and connections, raising your visibility significantly among the “powers that be,” broadening your knowledge in some important way).
- Don’t discount the possibility that some NPTs might pay off later on —but evaluate each NPT carefully, and don’t count on this.
- If you consider a project or task and find that it aligns with your personal values *and* clearly contains the seeds of future growth, don’t rule it out.

In short:

- **Promotable tasks** leverage the unique skills you were hired for (and probably spent a pile of money getting educated for); **non-promotable tasks** do not.
- Even if a task is appealing and sounds like a positive use of your time and effort, remember that there is an **opportunity cost**.
- Most of us have to do the occasional NPT—the problem arises when we are expected to focus on these at the expense of our growth.
- I am certainly not suggesting that you should refuse *all* this type of work—just don't disappear under a pile of it!
- That way lies rapid burnout.



“But I thought this was *important* to you?”

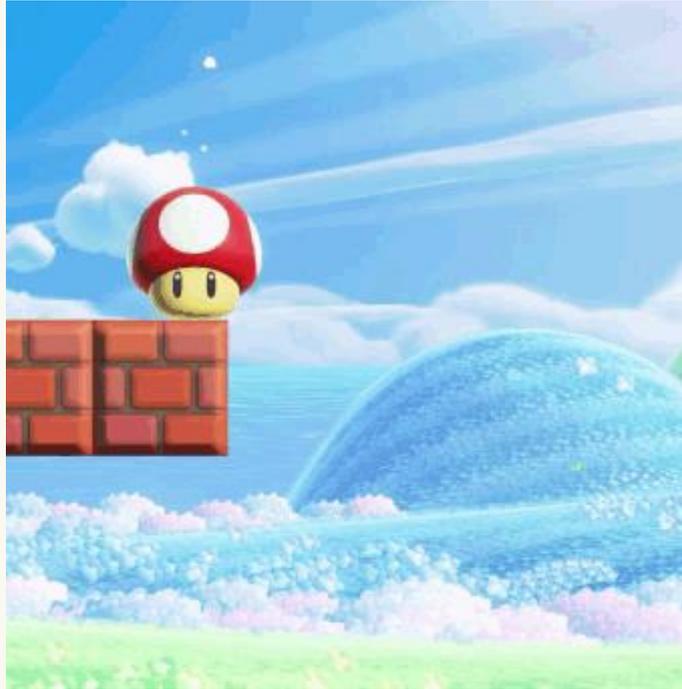
- Often, junior and/or marginalized employees will be asked to do these tasks, & will accept, to “be nice,” “show willing,” or “pay their dues.”
- As Prof. Joan C Williams of University of California Law San Francisco explains, “Saying no without seeming touchy, humorless, or supremely selfish is a particularly tricky balancing act.”
- Also, it’s easy to feel flattered when presented with a NPT request dressed up as an opportunity!
- Learning when and how to say no IS important though, so let’s consider a few possible approaches.

How to say no

- Thank you for asking, but I have too much on my plate right now to take on this project.
- No, I won't be able to pick up a birthday cake for Dave on Tuesday—perhaps Jason or Ryan could do that.
- I'm committed to multiple other initiatives at this time, so I would not be able to give this committee the attention it needs.
- I took the meeting notes the last three times—let's rotate it through everyone who attends the meeting from now on!
- Actually, I think this would be a great job for Mike the Intern.
- Thank you for thinking of me, but no. (Work up to this one!)
- Avoid over-explaining, and *definitely* avoid apologetic language!

OK, now what?

Now, it's time to focus on powering up.



But I don't want to be all *power hungry!*

"Power, once mastered, can be used to accomplish great things, horrendous, terrible things, and everything in between. The point: Don't confuse or conflate your reactions to 'power' with your reactions to how, or for what, it has been deployed—particularly if it has been deployed successfully against you."

-Jeffrey Pfeffer

How to move toward what you want

- Make well-thought-out requests, not unreasonable demands.
- Be prepared to make a solid case for why you are best suited to take on a given role or high-visibility task.
- Use clear, straightforward language (“I would like to be considered for Position X when it opens up.” rather than being oblique or hedgy “Oh, X looks like a really cool job!” (at least in low-context cultures like the US.)
- Understand how your employer’s performance review system works, and factor this into your planning.
- **Get out of your own way!**

Not all managers are created equal

- Some managers are great at giving feedback and helping their direct reports grow; others may be uncommunicative or conflict-averse.
- If your performance review consists of vague phrases like “just keep doing what you’re doing,” you may need to pick up some of that slack.
- Request clear, actionable feedback (and focus on building your own ability to respond appropriately and effectively to feedback!).
- Ask specific questions about what you need to do to move forward, and what sort of timelines and constraints may be involved.
- Remember that a good leader wants you to succeed and will support you in doing so—even if that means losing you in the end.

A fine balance

- Your career trajectory will almost certainly be a mixed bag of careful planning, random chance, and the occasional bit of serendipity.
- Your ability to honor and promote your values in your professional life will probably be much the same—frustration punctuated by progress, & vice versa.
- You will have many opportunities to be a good ally and help others succeed—embrace these opportunities! A strong network based on mutual trust and support is a wonderful thing.
- The more thoughtful and proactive you can be about the choices you make—*and the stage of your career at which you make them*—the more likely it is that you'll be able to build a life you can feel really good about.

Thank you!

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