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POST

# The Third Metric

Redefining Success Beyond Money & Power

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## The Best Careers Are Not Planned

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People love to ask kids the question, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' When we grow up and have jobs and careers, people change the question a bit, but it still means the same thing. They ask, 'Where do you see yourself in 5, 10, 20 years?' That still screams, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

As kids, there is no right answer. The person asking the question mostly wants to make sure the kid is thinking about it or is looking to be amused by the answer. When we are grown up and the question comes, we are expected to know where we are going to be or at least have a plan in place to get us where we want to go.

But what if we don't? What if we are stable, successful and happy, but don't know exactly where we are going or how we are going to get there? Is that OK?

The truth is that the answer, no matter how old you are, is still, at best, a guess.

I was having a discussion with a friend recently about career planning. I told him that I had received some advice about my career plan. I had been told that I need a more defined career plan and need to control where my career is going. Some of the advice was solid. For instance, I was told that I need to identify my weaknesses and find ways to improve them or get the experience required for my dream job. True. But I was also told that I need to work out the details right down to choosing a region and finding organizations in that region for networking. That seemed a bit intense to me. I was assured that I could apply my own personal metrics and essentially control my career path.

My friend asked me how old the person offering the advice is and I gave the age. My friend grinned and said, "Oh, well that is young enough to think he can control those things."

I love that answer.

I love it because we are all told to plan and try to control every aspect of our lives to win the prize of career, money or other desired goal. The problem is that our ability to control really stops at the end of our fingertips. We can only control ourselves (and in some instances that is complicated and difficult).

Later that week, I attended a meeting with two very successful professional women. I had the chance to chat with one of them about this issue and she laughed as she said that she could have never planned her career track. There was no way she could have orchestrated a plan to get her to the position that she is in today. She was not in control. Of course she worked hard at her job and made responsible decisions along the way, but she didn't have a plan. There was not a list or laser beam focus.

I love my friend's answer and this successful woman's story because I don't have a career plan. At least not like the one I was recommended to develop.

I graduated from law school 10 years ago and did what I thought I was supposed to do; I took a job at a law firm. I practiced law for three years. I found that the negatives of practicing law outweighed the benefits, for me. I am not made to work 6.5 days a week, take no vacation, and be anxious all the time - that is how practicing law made me feel.

When I was given the opportunity to leave my law firm I took it. It was the hardest and scariest thing I have ever done. I was stepping outside the box (I hate that phrase, but it applies here). I went to school to be a lawyer. I borrowed money to be a lawyer. The plan for lawyers like me was to work hard as an associate and make partner. My career was planned out -- canned, if you will. I never expected to leave the firm and others did not expect it either. A partner's secretary who knows what is what about the place said "I pegged you as a lifer and I am usually right." I thought so too. But we were both wrong. So much for planning.

It has been seven years since I completed my last timesheet as a lawyer. I don't miss that, but I do miss being around other lawyers, making arguments, saying demurrer twice a week and craving over any chance I could get. But despite all that,

looking back, leaving the practice of law was the best decision that I ever made. It changed my life. It led to a career path that I love and that I could never have imagined or predicted. I have a comfortable quality of life, a supportive employer and growth opportunity. I feel like I am going somewhere. I just don't know exactly where.

I do know that I could not have planned my way to where I am today. No one could have predicted it.

Going forward, I have an idea of what I want to be when I grow up. I have preferences about where I want to live and the people I want to be around. But, at the end of the day, I can only control myself. I cannot make opportunities open up, I cannot make other people conform to my plans, I cannot always pick the location of the next opportunity and I cannot always imagine what could be next.

So, when my friend told me that you can't control your career plan. I shared my "plan" with him. My plan is to work hard for my current employer and be good at my job, amass all the skills that I can, meet and be kind to people, constantly work to improve myself personally and professionally and be open to every opportunity that comes along. He responded, "I am glad that is your plan."

When I first heard that I needed a defined career plan I thought for a while, *Wow, this is right, I need to be more deliberate and driven and shrewd.* But, for me, the truth is that I know that I cannot control all the variables. I cannot pick a job and make that happen. If I focus only on one potential result, to the exclusion of all others, I am going to miss out on something wonderful, something even better than I could imagine. I know this because I am working a job right now that is better than I could ever have imagined.

We don't have to know what we are going to be when we grow up when we are 5, 10, 16, 25 or 40. We just have to be in control of our performance and decisions and let God sort out the rest.

"Successful careers are not planned. They develop when people are prepared for opportunities because they know their strengths, their method of work, and their values." - Peter F. Drucker

*This post is part of a series produced by The Huffington Post in conjunction with our women's conference, "The Third Metric: Redefining Success Beyond Money & Power," which took place in New York on June 6, 2013. To read all of the posts in the series and learn more about the conference, click here. Join the conversation on Twitter #ThirdMetric.*

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