

Strategic planning: a tool for personal and career growth

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INTRODUCTION

This article has been written from the content of lectures that the author used at the Radiology Leadership Academy at Emory University and the Junior Faculty Career development lectures at the same institution. Although generic in nature, the content is intended for early healthcare professionals who have shown interest and promise to become leaders in their profession. Of course, this interest or awakening may occur at any point in the professional's career.

The original title of this material was 'How to achieve career success'. It became evident that the ideal candidate to benefit from this material was a professional who by most metrics was already successful. These are professionals who succeeded at several levels of higher learning and obtained employment usually at a prestigious organisation such as at an academic and/or medical institution. It also became evident that for career accomplishments to be truly successful, it should not come at the cost, particularly a catastrophic cost, of an unfulfilled personal life. Thus, the emphasis of the message has shifted to growth rather than success and to a strategy to grow in both personal and career achievements. Success is subjective and about achieving goals, while growth is about the journey to get you to your destination. Regardless of the stage you are in your personal and professional life or your perceived level of success, the object should be continued growth.

Motivation for achieving greatness

The premise here is that you should continue to grow until achieving greatness; a recognition of eminence that facilitates the fulfilment of your personal and career vision (more about vision later). This goal is facilitated by the recognition that you are already great! All of us are high-level biological organisms that have survived and improved our fitness through many generations of evolution. As such you should *trust your instincts*. These are the same instincts that kept our ancestors alive and our species thriving. Yet, it is important to realise that being great does not equate to achieving greatness, a state that comes only through considerable, continuous personal and career growth.

Fixed versus growth mindset

Before entertaining the concept of how to pursue personal growth, we need to visit the concept of the *mindset*; the established set of attitudes held by a person particularly one pursuing growth within our context. Often people's fixed mindset is a belief that who they are, their basic qualities, can never be changed. This fixed mindset forces them

to continuously prove themselves and their beliefs. In her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck,¹ through her research experience, points out that,

'a growth mindset grows out of the belief that our basic qualities are things we can cultivate through effort; the hand you're dealt is just the starting point for development. Although we may differ in our initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—we can change and grow in extraordinary ways through application and experience'.

Figure 1 shows us the transformation that is necessary to change from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset, a requirement for pursuing personal and career growth. This figure illustrates how in the fixed mindset individuals compartmentalise their brains into the things they do or are willing to learn and the things they do not do or are not willing to learn. The individual with a growth mindset constantly evaluates whether to do or learn something new as well as stop doing something they do in order to move forward.

HOW TO ACHIEVE CAREER GROWTH

Below are recommendations to help achieve growth and success also listed in box 1. None of these recommendations are simple, yet they are all doable.

Get out of your way

By far the individual who most often and most severely criticises your actions is yourself. It is the same individual who stands in your way to growth and continuously questions your worthiness towards achievement of greatness. Learn to get out of your own way and allow yourself to grow at every stage of your life.

Do not make excuses

It is easier to make excuses as to why we have not accomplished a goal than to put in the effort, sometimes the extraordinary effort that it takes to accomplish it. It is easy to say 'I am not smart enough, strong enough, tall enough, rich enough, ... to accomplish the goal I had envisioned'. Although all of these personal attributes help, as we will see later, they are not the essential trait for achieving a successful goal.

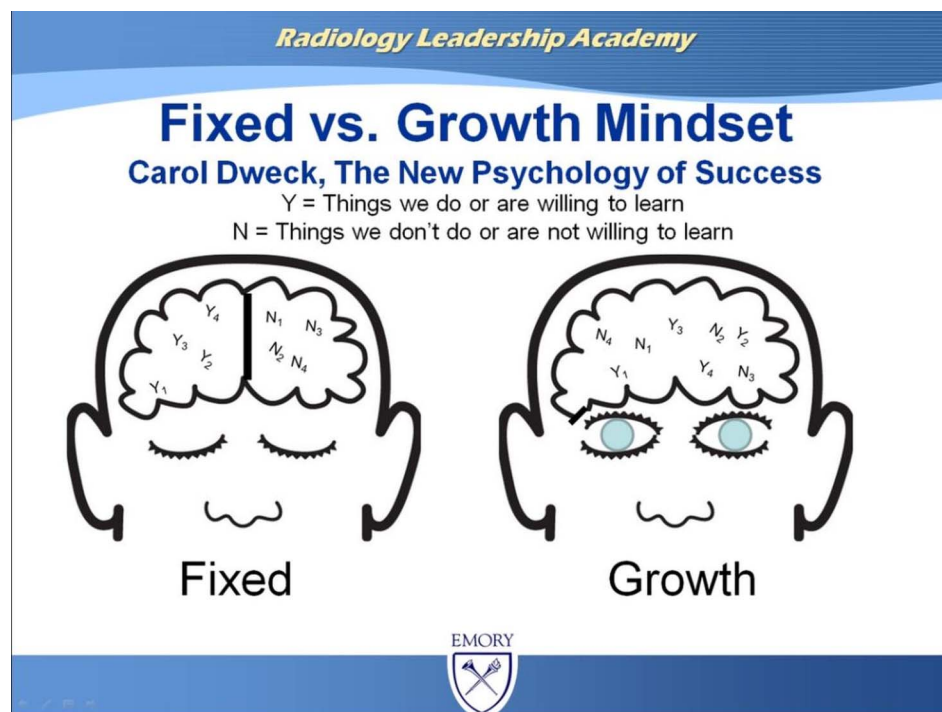
Let us review the examples of three individuals who at some point in their lives decided to stop making excuses in order to achieve extraordinary goals. First is the example of Grace Hopper, nicknamed 'Amazing Grace', who was the first woman admiral in the US Navy and one of the first American computer scientists having invented the



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Figure 1 Fixed versus growth mindset. This illustration shows how in the fixed mindset individuals compartmentalise their brains into the things they do or are willing to learn (Y) and the things they do not do or are not willing to learn (N). The individuals with a growth mindset constantly evaluate whether to do or learn something new as well as stop doing something they do.



first compiler for a computer programming language and popularised the idea of the machine-independent language that led to the development of the COBOL language.² Born in 1906, she did not let her small stature or her gender in male-dominated professions stand in her way. She inspired others to take risks by using her two favourite quotes: (1) 'A destroyer is safe in the harbor but destroyers were not built to stay in the harbor', and (2) 'If it is a good idea go ahead and do it even if you don't have the time to ask for permission. It is often much easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission'.

The second example is that of an anonymous aerospace engineer who overcame his blindness from birth to master this difficult career. In his 40s, he was promoted to director of a division of his company. At the time this division was on the verge of collapsing due to poor performance but he managed to totally turn it around in 3 years for which he received a prestigious industry award. During the award ceremony, he was asked by an interviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* if he expected when he became director to turn the division around 180°. He stated: "I knew that the status of the division was such that it was impossible for me to turn it around 180°, but I had the confidence that I could turn it one degree in the right direction 180 times."

These two examples of people who became very successful while overcoming major obstacles illustrate the power of avoiding making excuses. Although all examples are from people born in North America, similar stories are found in all continents and practically in every region of the world.

Box 1 Achieve personal growth

- ▶ By getting out of your way
- ▶ By not making excuses
- ▶ By investing in your career/life
- ▶ By adding value to your career/life

Invest in your career/life

You are accountable for your own growth and success. Investing time and/or money in career and personal growth should be one of the first priorities in your investment portfolio. Six ways to invest in your career have been suggested³:

1. *Get a degree*: most readers of this article would already have an advanced degree such as MD or PhD or both, which are essential in leadership positions in academia. Often these readers also tend to pursue business degrees to deal with the financial aspects of any large clinical or research endeavour.
2. *Become certified*: certification implies expertise in a specialised field and thus can enhance your career and focus.
3. *Learn cross-cultural communication skills*: this often refers to skill improvements for someone working outside their native country and not speaking a native language. In our context, it also means to learn the language of those you have to interact in order to make progress. For example, a scientist performing research on a disease should be able to talk-the-talk of the physicians in that field.
4. *Build your brand—online*: this implies both that you have or will build a brand and that your brand is well known and well recognised. The brand can be that you are your city's expert in a specific field such as resynchronisation therapy, that you are recognised as such and that you have an online presence in social and scientific networks that confirms it. It also infers that no derogatory information exists about you or your expertise.
5. *Find mentors*: seek the advice of experts in your field who have undergone the journey you are just starting on. Prospective leaders often have more than one mentor, a concept known as the mosaic approach. In this approach, you can seek specific advice from experts who have specific knowledge about the specific decisions in your career and personal life. The best mentors are those you can count on for honest advice for your entire career.

Add value to your career/life

Whereas the previous section emphasises what you need to put into your career to grow and succeed, this section deals with

what you get out of the process and at what cost. Here we can take the lead from changes in the healthcare field where we are moving from a volume-based system to a value-based system.

Porter defines value in healthcare as the ratio of outcomes divided by the cost for reaching that outcome.⁴ For example, in a patient who was successfully revascularised with a stent for a proximal coronary lesion, the outcome was elimination of angina and perhaps a longer survival divided by the total cost of all the clinical diagnostic and therapeutic procedures performed on this patient. When considering the value received from one of your efforts towards career growth, consider what outcomes resulted from your actions and what it cost you personally to make it happen. It is important to understand that all personal outcomes, whether positive or negative, come at a considerable cost.

This entire section has emphasised considerations to grow your career. It could have been easily titled 'How to achieve personal growth'. The synergy between your personal and professional life is incontrovertible and a strong reason to maintain a balance between the two.

PLANNING LEADS TO CONTINUED GROWTH

What is the trait most often associated with successful people? Many think it is perseverance, intelligence, level of education, looks, luck, a combination of these, and so on. Absence of some of these traits can be used as an excuse by some for not being able to achieve success. Box 2 lists the five main personality traits as defined by psychologists:^{5–7} openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Psychologists have reported that the main trait associated with success is conscientiousness. High scores on conscientiousness indicate a preference for planned rather than spontaneous behaviour.⁷

The main trait associated with success is planning. Those persons who plan as well as those organisations that plan have been shown to be the ones who succeed. Zig Ziglar, one of the first motivational speakers ever, expresses it this way:⁸ 'You were born to win, but to be a winner, you must plan to win, prepare to win, and expect to win'. This is a mantra that is often repeated by chief executive officers of successful organisations and venture capitalists who fund successful entrepreneurs: 'Have a plan, stick to the plan'. This realisation has popularised the need for strategic planning.

What is a strategic plan?

A strategic plan is a roadmap to successfully achieving desired outcomes. Johnson and Scholes define *strategy*⁹ as 'the direction and scope of an organization over the long term which achieves *advantage* for the organization through its configuration of *resources* within a challenging *environment*, to meet the needs of *markets* and to fulfill *stakeholder* expectations'.

Box 2 Big five personality traits

- (O) Openness to experience: (*inventive/curious* vs *consistent/cautious*)
 (C) Conscientiousness: (*efficient/organised* vs *easy-going/careless*)
 (E) Extraversion: (*outgoing/energetic* vs *solitary/reserved*)
 (A) Agreeableness: (*friendly/compassionate* vs *analytical/detached*)
 (N) Neuroticism: (*sensitive/nervous* vs *secure/confident*)
 Acronym: OCEAN

The definition of the strategy for an organisation may be transformed into a personal one as follows: 'Strategy is the *direction* and *scope* of an individual over the *long-term*: which achieves *advantage* for the individual through their configuration of *resources* within a challenging *environment*, to meet the needs of *their career/life* and to fulfill *stakeholder* expectations'. Here the stakeholders are the individual and their family, even their coworkers. Again another example that career and life are interconnected in developing your personal strategy. More simply put by Ryan Blair,¹⁰ personal strategic planning is a disciplined thought process that produces fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide who you are, where you are going, what you do and how, when and why you do it. All of this is done with a focus on the future.

In developing a personal strategic plan, it is imperative to know and understand each component of the plan as listed in box 3 and discussed below.

The mission statement

This is a general statement of your main goals in the form of expected outcomes. It is the starting point of your journey. It can be simple as in my mission is to be promoted to the highest level (professor), or more introspective as in my mission is to have a successful (academic) career. Here we must differentiate and not confuse rewards (promotion) with outcomes (successful career). This requires your very explicit definition of success as expectation is everything (for all stakeholders). This is important since you want all your accomplishments to be consistent with your view of personal success. Similarly, your short-term goals (expected outcomes) should be consistent with your long-term goals, necessitating both a short-term and a long-term strategic plan.

The vision

Whereas mission is about *what* you plan to achieve, vision is about *how* and *why* you will achieve these goals in terms of general or basic principles. Although difficult to define what vision is, what it is not is about predicting the future. Vision is about having a conviction of what the future should be and how you will help make it happen. The best explanation of what vision really is comes from a statement by Napoleon Hill¹⁰ about a trait that he recognised is in common in all of the world's great minds that he knew personally. *Vision is a refusal to compromise a circumstance*. Take, for example, a young person who travels to a remote village and witnesses young children dying because of lack of clean water in their village. This

Box 3 Strategic plan components

1. Mission
 2. Vision
 3. Strengths
 4. Weaknesses
 5. Opportunities
 6. Threats
 7. Action plan
 8. Timeline
 9. Continuous course correction
 10. Cost
- Acronym: SWOT

experience creates a vision in the person's mind that this is a circumstance that has no compromise and that he or she refuses to accept it and thus will build a future around reversing this circumstance. Vision is by far the most important aspect of a strategic plan as vision generates the passion you will need to have the perseverance you will need to accomplish your mission—that is, achieve your long-term desired outcomes.

SWOT analysis

This is an analysis of the strategic plan that evaluates the strengths, weaknesses, opportunity and threats specific to the plan. Each component affects the goals of the plan, for example, you want to set goals that (a) capitalise on your strengths, (b) remove/mitigate weaknesses, (c) blunt threats and (d) seize opportunities. This SWOT analysis, in concert with your plan's mission and vision, generates the initiative or action items that need to be accomplished to reach your destination.

Timeline

Having a plan is only as good as whether it is followed on a timely basis.

Having a timeline, or plan milestones, allows you to keep track of your progress in achieving your goals and, more importantly, to synchronise the order of when the various goals need to be completed. In following your planned timeline, it is also important to understand the need for continuous course correction just like when you encounter a roadblock while using a GPS to reach your destination. These roadblocks have led to the often quoted line, 'Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.....recalculating'.

Cost

Every mission, whether a success or a failure, comes at a cost. You need to understand your risk tolerance. Part of the planning process is to understand, accept and convince your

stakeholders to see your vision, invest in your mission and minimise the financial and personal costs to reach your destination.

SUMMARY

Vision generates the passion you will need to have the perseverance you will need to accomplish your mission, which when achieved will help you create a future consistent with your conviction of success, using an action plan that capitalises on your strengths, minimises your weaknesses, blunts your threats and seizes your opportunities at a cost you are willing to pay.

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