

Managing Expectations and Career:

By

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(Speech delivered at one of the IIMs)

The points mentioned are relevant at all the time for all people of all generations from all walks of life. There is a Thai saying that experience is a comb which Nature gives to man after he is bald. As I grow bald, I would like to share my comb with you.

1. Seek out grassroots level experience

I studied Physics and Engineering at University. A few months before graduation, I appeared for a Hindustan Lever interview for Computer Traineeship. When asked whether I would consider Marketing instead of Computers, I responded negatively: an engineer to visit grocery shops to sell Dalda or Lifebuoy? Gosh, no way. After I joined the Company and a couple of comfortable weeks in the swanky Head Office, I was given a train ticket to go to Nasik. Would I please meet Mr. Kelkar to whom I would be attached for the next two months? He would teach me to work as a salesman in his territory, which included staying in Kopergaon and Pimpalgaon among other small towns. I was most upset. In a town called Ozhar, I was moving around from shop to shop with a bullock cart full of products and a salesman's folder in my hand. Imagine my embarrassment when an IIT friend appeared in front of me in Ozhar, believe it or not! And exclaimed, "Gopal, I thought you joined as a Management Trainee in Computers". I could have died a thousand deaths. After this leveling experience, I was less embarrassed to work as a Dispatch Clerk in the Company Depot and an Invoice Clerk in the Accounts Department. Several years later, I realized the value of such grassroots level experience. It is fantastic. I would advise young people to seek out nail-dirtying, collar-soiling, shoe-wearing tasks. That is how you learn about organizations, about the true nature of work, and the dignity of the many, many tasks that go into building great enterprises.

2. Deserve before you desire

At one stage, I was appointed as the Brand Manager for Lifebuoy and Pears soap, the company's most popular-priced and most premium soaps. And what was a Brand Manager? "A mini-businessman, responsible for the production, sales and profits of the brand, accountable for its long-term growth, etc., etc. I had read those statements, I believed them and here I was, at 27, "in charge of everything". But very soon, I found I could not move a pin without checking with my seniors. One evening, after turning the Facit machine handle through various calculations, I sat in front of the Marketing Director. I expressed my frustration and gently asked whether I could not be given total charge. He smiled benignly and said, "The perception and reality are both right. You will get total charge when you know more about the brand than anyone else in this company about its formulation, the raw materials, the production costs, the consumer's perception, the distribution and so on. How long do you think that it will take?" "Maybe, ten years", I replied, "and I don't expect to be the Lifebuoy and Pears Brand Manager for so long"! And then suddenly, the lesson was clear. I desired total control, long before I deserved it.

This happens to us all the time - in terms of responsibilities, in terms of postings and promotions, it happens all the time that there is a gap between our perception of what we deserve and the reality of what we get. It helps to deserve before we desire.

3. Play to win but win with fairness

Life is competitive and of course, you play to win. But think about the balance. Will you do anything, to win? Perhaps not. Think deeply about how and where you draw the line. Each person draws it differently, and in doing so, it helps to think about values. Winning without values provides dubious fulfillment. The leaders who have contributed the most are the ones with a set of universal values! Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King for example. Napoleon inspired a ragged, mutinous and half-starved army to fight and seize power. This brought him name and fame for twenty years. But all the while, he was driven forward by a selfish and evil ambition, and not in pursuit of a great ideal. He finally fell because of his selfish ambition. I am fond of referring to the Pierre de Coubertin Fair Play Trophy. It was instituted in 1964 by the founder of the modern Olympic Games and here are two examples of winners. A Hungarian tennis player who pleaded with the umpire to give his opponent some more time to recover from a cramp. A British kayak team who were trailing the Danish kayak team. They then stopped to help the Danish team whose boat was stuck. The Danes went on to beat the British by one second in a three hour event! What wonderful examples of sportsmanship! Play to Win, but with Fairness.

4. Learn to Enjoy whatever you do

I never understand when people say "Only do what you like". Sometime things just don't work that way. Learn to like/enjoy whatever you do.

Sir Thomas Lipton is credited with the statement, "There is no greater fun than hard work". You usually excel in fields, which you truly enjoy. Ask any person what it is that interferes with his enjoyment of existence. He will say, "The struggle for life". What he probably means is the struggle for success. Unless a person has learnt what to do with success after getting it, the very achievement of it must lead him to unhappiness. Aristotle wrote, "Humans seek happiness as an end in itself, not as a means to something else". But if you think about it, we should not work for happiness. We should work as happy people. In organizational life, people get busy doing something to be happy. The more you try to be happy, the unhappy you can get. Your work and career is all about you're reaching your full potential. Working at one's full potential, whether it is the office boy or the Chairman, leads to enjoyment and fulfilment.

A last point about enjoyment.

Keep a sense of humor about yourself. Too many people are in danger of taking themselves far too seriously. As General Joe Stilwell is reported to have said, "Keep smiling. The higher the monkey climbs, the more you can see of his backside".

5. Be Passionate about your health

Of course, as you get older, you would have a slight paunch, graying of hair or loss of it and so on. But it is in the first 5 - 7 years after the working career begins that the greatest neglect of youthful health occurs. Sportsmen stop playing sports, non-drinkers drink alcohol, light smokers smoke more, active

people sit on chairs, and starving inmates of hostels eat rich food in good hotels and so on. These are the years to watch. Do not, I repeat do not, convince yourself that you are too busy, or that you do not have access to facilities, or worst of all, that you do this to relieve the stresses of a professional career. A professional career is indeed very stressful. There is only one person who can help you to cope with the tension, avoid the doctor's scalpel, and to feel good each morning - and that is yourself. God has given us as good a health as He has given us health, like a credit balance in the bank. Grow it, maintain it, but do not allow its value destruction. The penalty is very high in later years.

6. Direction is more important than distance

Every golfer tries to drive the ball to a very long distance. In the process, all sorts of mistakes occur because the game involves the masterly co-ordination of several movements simultaneously. The golf coach always advises that direction is more important than distance. So it is with life. Despite one's best attempts, there will be ups and downs. It is relationships and friendships that enable a person to navigate the choppy waters that the ship of life will encounter. When I was young, there was a memorable film by Frank Capra, starring James Stewart and Dona Reed, and named IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. It is about a man who is about to commit suicide because he thinks he is a failure. An angel is sent to rescue him. The bottom line of the film is that "No Man is a Failure Who Has Friends".