

# Your Career: Pearls or Pinecones? (Part One)

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My son, a bright nine-year old, came home last year before Mother's Day with a necklace that he had made at school. The art teacher had given the children a large selection of natural materials such as pinecones, juniper berries, cactus flowers and other products of the desert. They had strung these together and come up with their own interpretation of something that Mom would find beautiful. If you have kids, you'll know how happy his mother was to receive that eclectic necklace.

But, despite sentiment, when he compared it to his Mom's other jewelry it was obvious to him that there was a huge difference in worth. "Dad, it may be nice but its not a keeper like this one," he mused, comparing it to a beautiful necklace of shiny gemstones.

Sure enough, when compared to the real thing, juniper berries don't have a lot of value at the end of the day.

## **Stringing Together A Career**

I was recently asked this question: "What is the difference between a "job" and a "career"?"

One of my responsibilities outside of the office is to moderate a bio-career discussion group on the internet, populated mainly by new graduates and postdocs seeking to learn more about the real world of biotech employment. One of our attendees for this online

conference asked the above question and I was amazed at the divergence of responses that he received. For many people, the lines are blurred between job and career. I answered him with an analogy, for it does seem to me that building a career is a lot like stringing together a necklace. Job after job, eventually a career takes shape.

We fabricate this necklace over a lifetime of work by adding either gemstones or pinecones until at last we have a chance to sit back and admire it. Our worklife necklace will either become a thing of beauty or a sentimental curiosity, depending upon what we have made of each individual piece. Have you a plan in place that will turn each job into a gem in this lovely chain? Remember, the first step in planning a career is to set your sights on where you want to go:

ALICE: Please sir, can you tell me the way?

CHESHIRE CAT: Where are you headed?

ALICE: I don't know.

CHESHIRE CAT: Than any road will take you there!

## **Two Unwritten Rules for Choosing Your Road to Career Riches**

Throughout many years of my columns in a number of print journals, I've focused on the many "rules of the road" for building a successful career in the startup company business. Articles in this series have focused on empowerment, career self-control, and the personal freedom that we have to manage our work lives to success. But, despite this focus, there have been two important

areas that have remained unmentioned to date. Here are these two points to consider:

1) *Career success can be a long, slow process.* While we all know that our industry is as fast-paced as they come, the pace of individual success and achievement isn't always moving at the speed of light. We all know of examples of those whose careers have been positively affected by being in the right place and at the right time . . . Stories of the young millionaires from early Amgen and Genentech are legendary. But for many of us, career success is measured more by job satisfaction and contribution than it is by pure financial terms (although no one wants to pass up the chance to cash in!). Things can still take time to happen, however. A drug takes years to come to market through our regulatory system. Likewise, a career in biotech can still take the same number of years to blossom as it does in other industries.

A recent search for a CFO for one of our client companies proved to me that many people commit career hara-kiri by searching for the “big play” instead of allowing their career to grow naturally with time. Our client is a profitable biotech company that has already grown to \$50 million in sales. The CEO, a dynamic entrepreneur, felt that it was time to add a key financial strategist to their team to help him grow the business to their first \$100 million year.

Our search turned up an ideal candidate, a relatively young but very experienced second-in-command at another biotech firm. The personal chemistry with the CFO was great and the fellow was offered an opportunity to move into the VP and CFO role. We were all surprised when he turned it down. Why? It was because he was seeking “the big one” instead of a place to dig in. Our client CEO wanted to grow his profitable business instead of taking it public. That CFO prospect, incidentally, has now been through two companies looking for that hard-to-find chance to cash-in. Could

career success for this fellow have been achieved by building a major company instead of searching for a two-year window for an IPO?

2) *There are a lot of other people out there who won't be rooting for your success.* Despite all of my earlier columns that talk about the personal control you exercise over your job and career, there will be many circumstances in your lifetime in which someone else will negatively affect you. As Dr. William Lareau, author of *Conduct Expected*<sup>2</sup> puts it so bluntly: "There are a lot of mean, nasty, stupid people out there who are very dangerous to your career." I haven't written much in my series of articles about the effects of other people on your job, preferring to focus on those areas that are under your control. My first impression of Lareau's book was that *Conduct Expected* is simply an exposé on company politics that goes into great detail about the obvious and not-so-obvious political traps present in many companies. While I still feel that the book goes overboard in making organizations look evil and just plain nasty, some of Dr. Lareau's advice is very good. Here are some thoughts on his advice that I have paraphrased for this article:

Be aware that there are people in every company who delight in causing hurt and suffering to others. Oftentimes, this is the result of their stagnation in the company. Put yourself in their shoes for a moment . . . How do you think you would feel about successful others if you knew, with absolute certainty, that you would go no further than where you are right now? Routine studies regularly show that lots of people can't stand their jobs. If you were one of those who hated getting out of bed for work each morning and you knew that you were going nowhere, wouldn't it be exciting to watch others stumble on the career ladder? Lareau's advice: "The jungle floor is carpeted with the bones of careers whose owners let down their guards." In short, recognize that these people exist. Know those who would just as soon hit you with a corporate brick

and make certain that your career plans don't count on their help.  
And watch your back.

In part two of my "Pearls or Pinecones?" series, I will focus on the differences between "Career Strategists" and "Career Planners." Today's world demands a strategy, not just a plan, and we'll discuss the unique ability that some people have to build a career of true value in the fragmented, volatile world of employment in the late 20th century.

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