

**Christian Greiser**

**REMOVE  
REPLACE  
RESTART**

**The Essential  
Maintenance  
Manual for  
Your Engine  
for Success**



## Praise for *Remove, Replace, Restart*

Career journeys today are more like winding, multileg road trips than the traditional ladder of yesterday. The formulas and three-step processes from the past no longer apply. Instead, *Remove, Replace, Restart* offers a highly relatable and practical guide for all of us to reflect on our careers and take action to make “work” work.

—CHRISTOPH SCHWEIZER, Chief Executive Officer,  
Boston Consulting Group

A fresh and stimulating look at a field that so often seems to be dominated by processes and templates, Christian’s book brings humanity and wisdom to bear in equal proportions. Written in a cheerful, practical, and engaging style, this is a fresh and welcome addition to the resources available to those of us who might otherwise flounder in the face of career challenges and crises.

—GUY ASHTON, Chief Executive Officer, Meyler Campbell

Every leader goes through transitions in his or her life. This book is a wise and practical guide to navigating these transitions successfully. Christian writes both thoughtfully and engagingly, making this a very refreshing and hugely valuable book for each of us.

—HARISH BHAT, Brand Custodian, Tata Sons;  
marketer, author, and columnist

To deal impactfully and professionally with all the ambivalences and challenges in the business world requires constant development in leading others and leading oneself. Christian Greiser shows, with a light touch, how we actively and courageously decide to look at, reflect upon, and question ourselves. Drawing from his unique perspective through working with leaders, his extensive business insights, and his personal experience, he invites us

to push our own boundaries consistently and to reframe the accountability of the leadership role in a strategic, disciplined, and also encouraging way.

—DR. THELSE GODEWERTH, member of the Board of Management,  
and Labour Director, Rolls-Royce Power Systems AG

I have been fortunate to work with Christian on my own career journey, and I am so pleased to see that he has decided to write this book so that everyone can benefit from his wisdom and insight. I recommend this book to every leader and aspiring leader because they will enjoy Christian's ability to interweave his experience, case studies, and good humor into practical advice.

—ANDREW BELSHAW, Chief Executive Officer, Gamma Communications plc.

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* is a timeless classic where Robert Pirsig studies the concept of quality. I have read and reread it several times over decades. Recently, I discovered Christian Greiser's *Remove, Replace, Restart*, a book that struck similar chords in my mind. However, its topic is not quality in general but the quality of your career. The book is relevant for everybody who puts value on conscious career planning. It enables you to detect an overzealous inner driver that might push you to burnout. It teaches you to turn breakdowns into insights that allow you to build not just a great career but a beautiful life. My copy is already quite tattered from frequent rereading and doing the helpful exercises, and I have gifted this wonderful book to several friends who are shaping their own careers or those of their children, coworkers, or clients.

—PROF. DR. FRANZ J. GIESSIBL, nanoscience pioneer,  
University of Regensburg

Christian Greiser's book certainly shifts gears! It outlines a simple and easy-to-follow pathway of how to switch from the passenger's seat to the driver's seat by mastering your professional goals while aligning them with what truly fulfills you. It encourages you to try and test, to experiment with who you could be and what life could look like. While backed by hard facts,

studies, and numbers, it encourages you to trust the somewhat intangible gut feeling every leader has at some stage that “something is not quite right” and convert it to a powerful tool of self-steering.

—CHRISTINA VIRZÍ, founder and Chief Executive Officer, Virzı & Co KMG

If you want to achieve more and overcome the typical challenges of a top management career, this book is the ideal read. The real-life case studies shared from a gifted coach perspective will softly urge you to do some introspection. Christian has beautifully intertwined the merits of the six Rs, particularly *remove*, *replace*, and *restart* to *rejuvenate* and continue to grow and pursue one’s dream.

—ANIL JHANJI, Chief Commercial Officer, Tata Steel UK Limited

Many leaders are at an inflection point, learning how to lead their organizations and progress their careers after so much volatility and uncertainty in our lives the past few years. Christian Greiser’s book provides exactly the guidance needed to navigate this time, pairing a lighthearted rendition of relatable stories with encouragement to reflect and self-realize a path forward via his six Rs approach.

—LAURA JULIANO, North American Operations Practice Lead,  
Boston Consulting Group

Think career guides are difficult to digest and even more difficult to put into practice? Not in this case: you are invited to observe others’ ineffective behavior in entertaining case studies as a charming mirror in which . . . I started recognizing my patterns almost by accident. And the suggested coping strategies are just as easy to digest: they come within the case study, supplemented with a quick explanation of the underlying model. [*Remove, Replace, Restart*] feels like a beach read . . . while being great food for thought at the same time.

—DR. TOBIAS KEITEL, member of the Corporate Board of Management;  
President and Chief Executive Officer, Voith Hydro

Many have looked to tackle the challenge of present-day management: at the core, executives are simply overwhelmed. Christian Greiser's book presents the challenge and solutions in an engaging, easy-to-read, and motivating way. It is a pleasure to read and, more importantly, the examples are salient and relevant, leaving a lasting impression to jump-start personal change for the reader.

—DIANA DIMITROVA, Managing Director and Partner,  
Boston Consulting Group

*Remove, Replace, Restart* is truly career- and life-changing! The hands-on advice in the book is so insightful and impactful that it changed the way I think about my job, my career, and what I want to achieve in the next five years. The case studies gave me a new and fresh perspective on my management style and my inner workings. I absolutely recommend the read to anyone, irrespective of which stage of their career and life they are at—the book has ton of insights for everyone. A must-read!

—TIMUR YUMUSAKLAR, President and Chief Executive Officer,  
F. Schumacher & Co.

Christian Greiser's book is a wonderful and fun-to-read guide for everyone's journey through the career jungle—where, more and more, straight-line careers will be the exception rather than the rule. I wish I could have read it earlier: I turned from a “Wall Street lawyer” to a “management consultant” to a DeepTech start-up founder during my career. With Christian's book, a lot of self-doubt and unstructured thinking could have been avoided. If you are considering a career change and are holding this book in your hand, then you are lucky. Go out and try new things—and this book will be a great advisor all the way.

—TRINH LE-FIEDLER, Chief Executive Officer and founder, Nomitri

You might be skeptical at first when you get your hands on the 300th career guide. But this book is really different, especially because of the case studies, in which Christian Greiser comes to surprising conclusions with very unusual analyses of clients' problems. While reading, one sometimes catches oneself anticipating the usual career advisor's answer, and then

stumbles over a sentence that takes a day to think about. Great book, best read in small stages so that you give yourself enough time to reflect thoroughly on what you have read.

—FREDUN MAZAHERI, Chief Risk Officer and Chief IT Officer,  
Pictet Europe

In a time where 95 percent of companies find that they will fundamentally change over the next five years and two-thirds of their leaders assume that they will be facing the most challenging moments in their career, Christian Greiser's book comes at the right point.

Organizational change typically involves some personal "rebooting." Christian Greiser's very pragmatic approach will help any leader reflect, readjust, and rewire their own path. Super helpful, perhaps if you are planning to leave your current employer, and definitely if you want to reboot.

—ISABEL POENSGEN, Sr. Executive Coach

With a career as a top manager, BCG Senior Partner Emeritus, and Executive Coach, Christian Greiser has all the skills to enable today's executive to kick-start their engine of success. If you do not have a chance to get a coaching from him, at least read this book!

—PROF. DR. VEIT ETZOLD, best-selling author, speaker,  
and managing director, Strategy & Storytelling

Christian Greiser masterfully elucidates the interplay between career highs and lows, while introducing mindfulness as a vital, yet often overlooked, resource for navigating the managerial realm. Drawing from his personal narrative, he crafts an authentic and valuable coaching approach that resonates with readers. This insightful book is a practical guide, essential for anyone embarking on their professional journey.

—BRIGITTA WURNIG, top management coach, speaker, and author

Christian has done something amazing in writing this book. He sparks the curiosity of his readers through insightful examples and stories. He illustrates the trials and tribulations of a typical career, and he does that

wonderfully by taking his readers on the scenic road. You never quite know what might be behind the next curve—but you get a sense that it is something truly inspiring. He gently invites his readers to develop their own map by providing insightful examples, easy-to-understand stories, and a wealth of ideas. Written from a truly exceptional background of his own career, and with his signature humanity, this is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand their career and its potential development. Enjoy!

—ROLF PFEIFFER, managing partner, S&P Executive Advisory Partners;  
chair, Commonpurpose Germany

Rarely have I read a book that describes so clearly and practically how we as leaders can change our mental models, assumptions about ourselves and others, or emotional patterns in the course of our careers and life phases in order to pursue a successful career.

In the many case studies Christian Greiser describes, he shows his unusual foresight and, at the same time, precise and humorous way of guiding executives. Most of the time I was surprised by the unexpected solutions, which often prompted an “aha” response from me.

The 6 Rs, which Christian Greiser uses as a “process model,” wonderfully connect the inner dimension, the inner individual processes that are sometimes our friend and sometimes our enemy, with the outer dimension, the way to the “top” in the company, providing a clear structure to reflect deeply.

—LIANE STEPHAN, co-founder and co-managing director,  
Awaris GmbH/Inner Green Deal gGmbH



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**Remove, Replace, Restart**



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# Remove, Replace, Restart

The Essential Maintenance Manual  
for Your Engine for Success

Christian Greiser

GABAL

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# Prologue: What Happens When the Engine Stops?

*How Silence Woke Me Up from the Noise—and Turned My Worldview Upside Down*

## Ganghwa, South Korea, September 9, 2007: The Monastery

I was woken by a dull knock, as if someone were slowly hammering in a nail. It was dark, and my back was aching from the hard mattress. I fumbled, disoriented, for my watch: 3:30 a.m. Where was I? Bits and pieces of thoughts began to swirl and form a picture. *The bus journey . . . Monks . . . Monastery . . . Monastery! I'm at the monastery.* In this particular community, it was not bells that sounded the wake-up call, but the striking of hammers against wooden blocks. *Time to begin the morning ritual,* I thought. I had only a couple of minutes to get dressed. The grey meditation gown was hard and scratchy; the black fabric shoes pinched my feet. I exited my cell and met Jules, a tall Belgian man, in the corridor. “Are we going to be late?” he asked, with a touch of consternation.

“I hope not,” I replied. We hurriedly made our way out of the sleeping quarters, into the darkness beyond the door, and onward to the temple on the small mound at the center of the monastery grounds. Light rain was falling.

Jules and I were guests at the monastery and had met for the first time the day before. I was in South Korea for a management consulting project. Together with my team, I'd been advising a major client—a mechanical

engineering firm—on the restructuring of its Korean subsidiary. The problems were many and varied: outdated products, unprofitable prices, unproductive factories, and, inevitably, major losses. All options were on the table, including a partial relocation to China. In management consulting terms, we were dealing with a complete transformation. With an impairment review looming, we had just twelve weeks to propose a viable restructuring concept. A colleague had talked me into this adventure; I'd never even been to Korea before.

I had spent my weekends thus far in Seoul; my family was at home in Germany. Aside from a single trip back to see them, my time had been spent working or exploring South Korea's capital. I frequently found myself in Insadong, an art and antiques district filled with brush makers, seal carvers, galleries, and myriad small restaurants. The streets were colorful, lined with people, and bathed in a scent that was entirely new to me: ginseng, I was later told. I filmed short videos on my cell phone and sent them to my children. I missed my family very much.

One day, I watched a video about Zen meditation to pass time on the treadmill at the hotel gym. Here in Korea, I had learned, one could undertake a short "templestay": a weekend spent living with the monks, partaking in their daily routines and rituals, learning about Buddhist culture, sleeping under the roofs of Korea's most beautiful monasteries, and reflecting and reenergizing. I picked a weekend and signed up.

I had arrived at the monastery yesterday. The journey had been an adventure in itself: I don't speak Korean and the bus driver knew no English. Hand and foot gestures proved insufficient as a means of communication. As I floundered, assistance arrived from an unexpected source: a gaggle of giggling youths, one of whom spoke enough English to volunteer as interpreter. The bus made its way, and I was keenly questioned about where I'd come from and why I was taking the trip. When I finally disembarked in the small village near the monastery, they gazed at my surroundings with a look of distinct pity. It was as if I were heading into Dracula's castle itself.

The landscape was one of magnificent rolling hills and towering deciduous forests. As I approached the monastery, a monk greeted me with a broad smile and showed me to my room, handing me the grey clothes I'd be required to wear for my stay. I ventured outside and met the other templestayers. In addition to Jules, a sales manager at an automotive group, there were three students from France, a young Japanese medic, and an

interesting older Brazilian gentleman: a former ophthalmologist who had quit the rat race and chosen to live off the grid. We sat together and chatted over a cup of tea. The remainder of the day was taken up by an introduction to the monastery's strict practices: how to enter the temple, how to bow, the meanings of the various mantras and chants. There was much to take in, yet what struck me most was the atmosphere of the place—peaceful and yet alive with energy.

## A Mystical Place

I wasn't exactly sure why I had come here. Curiosity was part of it, certainly, but I was also yearning for calm. My first weeks in South Korea had been remarkably taxing. Seoul was hot and crowded. The humidity was grueling, as were the endless taxi rides through the noisy streets. The project was highly pressured, and cultural misunderstandings abounded within the team. Nobody in South Korea says no, but, as I learned, the absence of no should never be taken to mean yes. I was constantly required to read between the lines, which sapped my time and energy as the weeks went by. I had no chance to think. Here at the monastery I could switch off my cell phone and BlackBerry and get away from it all, at least for a weekend.

The others were already present as Jules and I entered the temple that morning at a jog. The space had a mystical feel: the chanting of mantras by the monks mingled with the sound of the fresh morning rain outside the open doors. The temple was lit by the atmospheric glow of candles and lanterns and scented with the aromatic smoke of incense sticks. We were led by the monks in the 108 Bows, a traditional Buddhist practice, before beginning our morning meditation. According to the brief introduction we'd been given the night before, we were to sit on the meditation cushion, channeling strength and stillness, and count our breaths from one to ten as we breathed in and out. Once we'd finished, we were to begin again. This would calm the waves of thoughts—or so the theory goes.

I found the exercise tricky that morning. Moved as I was by the spirituality of the temple, the unity of body and mind stubbornly eluded me. I was tired. My thoughts persistently wandered, and I fought hard to resist the lure of sleep. My back ached from sitting up straight on the cushion, an

aftereffect, perhaps, of the hard mattress I'd slept on the night before. I felt twinges of pain in my knees. Chairs were not an option. As I looked around at Jules and the others, seated calmly on their cushions and apparently deeply relaxed, my competitive instinct began to nag at me. What was the secret to this task, anyway? All we needed to do was sit there and think about nothing. What was so hard about it? Why couldn't I do it?

Again and again I strayed into thought, never counting more than five breaths at a time. I began to agonize over my performance; in my head, it became a competitive sport. The pain in my back and knees was getting worse. I began to be consumed by a kind of internal rage. What on earth was I actually doing here? If I'd stayed in my room at the Westin Shosun hotel in Seoul, I'd still be lying in my glorious bed right now. I'd be preparing to enjoy a sumptuous continental breakfast, not the sour-smelling Korean kimchi that was served up here. Besides, I urgently needed to work on a presentation. What was I doing sitting here on the floor, surrounded by temple paraphernalia, playing at being a weekend monk? Why?! I was close to getting up and walking out in indignation.

## What Remains When Everything Is Stripped Away?

As I inwardly fumed, it occurred to me suddenly that the morning rain had subsided. I listened; only a few birds could be heard beyond the temple walls. The room was blanketed in an intense silence. There was no city clamor, no cell phones, no television, no radio. It felt as though the world around me had stopped, as if somebody had pressed the pause button. At first, this brought about a deep sense of calm, and then, from nowhere, an inner voice spoke loud and clear. *Who are you now?* it said. *What are you when you're not chasing success? Who are you away from your job and family?* A part of me disappeared momentarily. I was empty, standing at the edge of an abyss, clinging on for dear life. *Let go,* continued the voice, calmly. *Take a step forward. Nothing bad is going to happen.* The intense panic that gripped me was broken only by the gong signaling the end of meditation. At once relieved and confused, I filed out of the temple with the others. *What on earth just happened?* I asked myself. *Did they put something in the incense sticks?!* I didn't mention it to the others.

The afternoon brought an invitation to a tea ceremony with the abbot of the monastery, a speaker of flawless English who possessed a calm

charisma and a pleasant voice. He focused diligently on preparing the tea leaves and placing the cups on the low table. When he spoke, it was with a mixture of wit and incisiveness. He gazed at us for a long time after we'd finished our tea. "You shouldn't meditate so much," he said, his face serious. "When you stand still, you run the risk of remembering who you really are." He laughed out loud upon delivering this slice of wisdom. Perhaps it was pure coincidence, but he seemed to be looking straight at me. I sat on the floor, shocked and stock-still. *What is going on?* I thought to myself.

The ceremony over, we packed up our things and said goodbye. A monk drove us to the nearest bus stop in a rickety minibus. We had only yesterday gotten to know each other, but it felt as though it had been much longer. We didn't have long to wait: the bus to Seoul came twenty minutes later. Some of the group shared their reflections on the meditation during the journey. "I don't know if I want to stand still and remember who I really am," said Jules, laughing. "I've done pretty well without knowing so far." I stared out of the bus window and watched the green hills disappear into the distance.

## Hamburg, September 11, 2021: Working from Home

I had been invited to a summer party hosted by a former consultant colleague: one of the first in-person events I'd attended since lockdown. Since everything was taking place outdoors with strict hygiene precautions, we were permitted to enjoy the evening without masks. Among the attendees, there was a tangible happiness at being able, finally, to congregate in person once more. I saw many familiar faces.

I was approached by Luca, a friend and former colleague. "Have a minute to catch up?" he asked me. We'd known each other for a number of years, having endured night shifts together on a very intensive project early in our consultancy careers. Today Luca is a partner at a private equity firm, and his long career has been a distinguished and exemplary one. That evening was our first meeting in a long time. Having chatted together with the jazz pianist who had just performed—Luca and I share the same passion for music—we were now standing companionably on the terrace, each of us

with a beer in hand. We looked out onto the Elbe and admired the maritime landscape: a truly magnificent view.

## What Remains When the World Stops Turning?

Luca glanced around him to make sure we wouldn't be disturbed, his face suddenly serious and contemplative. "Let's keep this between us, please," he implored me. "I want to leave the company next year. I'm not sure what I'm going to do afterward; that's something I need to think about for now. You're a coach now, aren't you? Can I get in touch for some support?"

"Any time," I said. "It'd be my pleasure. But what's the issue? Is success slower than it used to be?"

"Actually, no. Business is better than ever; we're on track for a record year."

"Oh," I said. "What's not working, then? Work/life balance?"

Luca laughed. "Oh, you know me. For sure there are times when things are hectic. We all worked more in lockdown than we ever had before. But if that were the only issue, I'd have left a long time ago."

"So, what, then?" I persisted. "Leaving without a destination? There must be a good reason for that, if it's you that's doing it."

Luca thought carefully and took a sip from his bottle of Flensburger. "Yes, I suppose you could say that. I've been thinking a lot recently, perhaps because I've found myself with more time at home. I haven't had so much quality family time in years, and work's been going pretty well. Actually, life is pretty much perfect. But, I don't know. . . . Things at work feel different than before. When lockdown happened, it was like the merry-go-round I was on just stopped. I started asking myself why I'd been doing it all—you know, the hunt for a new deal every year. I've realized that my heart's not really in it anymore. I think I'm only still doing it because I don't know any different. I don't know what comes next."

"What do you mean by the merry-go-round stopping?" I asked.

"Well, the travel, for instance," he answered. "The taxis, the flights, the conference rooms, the relentless grind. I'd never had time to think about it before. Suddenly it was all gone, and I was just sitting at home in front of a screen. Like the world had come to a standstill, and only the TV was still going."

## Leaving without a Destination

“Standstill”—a notion I’d encountered often during coaching sessions in the weeks prior. There was the young manager at an automotive group who had described feeling like his engine was worn out; the IT manager experiencing her own personal system shutdown; the investment banker who found himself feeling stuck. The list was long. I would have three more conversations about it on the evening of the party alone.

Many of my clients described wanting to leave their jobs and do something completely different. Some were even prepared to quit without having a new job lined up: leaving without a destination, as it were. It seemed they were not the only ones. A recent article on the subject had talked of a “talent tsunami” and a “great resignation.” It seemed as though the pandemic had changed our attitudes and brought about a shift in our priorities and values. Prior to the world shutting down, many of us lived lives in the fast lane. There was a desire to always go faster and further; a daily stream of offices, taxis, and airplanes. It was clear that these things were integral to a common understanding of success. All at once, for many of us, these glittering careers were confined to four walls and a screen. The world stood still; the news flashed surreal images of deserted airports, train stations, and streets. Success itself—or at least the many colorful manifestations of it we had come to recognize—seemed to have taken some time off. The world, spinning so fast on its axis just a moment before, had come to an emergency brake.

“It felt as though I had screeched to a halt and life was hurtling toward me from behind,” a client described it. “Like a rear-end collision.” Without the vibrant distractions of the world outside, it was no longer possible to escape long-neglected questions. Why are we so obsessed with chasing success? What do we mean by “success,” anyway—and who are we, really, if we depend on it to define ourselves? Collectively, we had reached a standstill and been forced to think about who we were—just like I was in Korea fourteen years ago.

As many continue to ponder these uncomfortable questions, the signal to stop thinking and resume doing is being sounded ahead. Like the gong that marked the end of meditation, it tells us that the standstill is over and the world is turning once more. Back to the fast lane, back to the road to so-called success. Yet our personal engines are not cooperating. A splutter

here, a creak there—something is not quite as it was before the break. There are questions we can't simply banish from our heads. We feel driven to look under the hood and to contemplate our own success more closely. What if there were a guide to doing just that?

## Hamburg

“And what if you can't find the answer?” I asked Luca. “If you can't figure out where you're supposed to go, what'll you do then?”

“I've been thinking about that for weeks,” he replied, “but honestly, I don't have the answer. I'm going around in circles.” He paused. “But even if the pandemic is over and I still have no idea what I'm supposed to do, I think I'm going to quit anyway. This part of my life ends here; I'm sure about that.”

We both looked at the Elbe for a short while longer. A huge container ship chugged past and momentarily blocked the view. We would meet in the coming weeks to talk more.





## Teetering between Success and Surrender

You might say in one sense that this book is about failure. More accurately, though, it's about the moments in which personal success becomes elusive—in which we can't seem to get back to succeeding no matter what we try. It's like success has packed a bag and gone on vacation. *Be back soon, and all best wishes!* reads the imaginary postcard. How brazen! How could it take such a liberty? That wasn't what was agreed—was it?

Many a book has been written on success. In three steps, the authors promise us, we can go from student apprentice to CEO, from consultant to partner, or—in the more contemporary variant—from university dropout to millionaire entrepreneur. I've read a large number of these works. What's strange, however, is that nobody has ever mentioned them in a coaching session. *I'm currently on step number two!* the imaginary conversation might go. *I just wanted to get in touch and say that everything's going according to plan.* For some reason, that is a phone call I have yet to receive.

On the contrary: my clients often want to speak to me precisely because things *aren't* going to plan. Rather than progressing in a linear trajectory, we commonly experience unexpected hold-ups on the career highway due to misfirings of our engine for success. Such problems have become more widespread in recent years. When I look under the hood with clients, I notice broader patterns, and I fear these may be “serial errors” in the way we as humans engage with ourselves. The transition from one career phase to the next is a particularly common stumbling block; indeed, my own career has faltered at such junctures in the past. For those whose careers are already advanced, it is much too late to return to the metaphorical showroom and start again. It's time, then, for a self-help guide for those moments when success becomes elusive. It is precisely these moments that have the potential to become our most important turning points thus far.

To start, it makes sense to clarify what we mean by “success” and “career.”

## Success in Times of New Work and Pandemics

Shortly before completing my mechanical engineering degree in 1993, I found myself in a department store holding a book entitled *Die 100 Gesetze erfolgreicher Karriereplanung* (*The 100 Laws of Successful Career Planning*; Kerler and von Windau 1992). Like a book of mathematical formulas, it laid out the one hundred guiding principles one should apply in order to build a distinguished career. The systematic concept and no-nonsense structure of the book appealed to my engineer's brain, and I grabbed a copy to take home. Covering topics such as personality types, training, family, opportunities, promotion, and more, the book—in keeping with the times—presented the notion of “career” as a series of advancements in one's personal and professional circumstances. “Success” was measured by whether and how quickly such advancements took place, and its currency naturally took the form of power, prestige, and money. It was a philosophy for “yuppies” (young urban professionals), the careerists of the 1990s, for whom rapid professional advancement was the primary goal of life and whose worst excesses were embodied by characters like Gordon Gekko from the 1987 film *Wall Street*. Success was gauged by one's bank balance and business card. Thirty years have passed since then, and our understanding of success has changed radically.

My first boss ascended from the ranks of development engineer to member of the board without ever moving to a different building. His was a traditional career trajectory along a linear path. Such career paths are no more. Today, those who wish to move up professionally must forge an individual path in an ever more complex world. Those one hundred laws have evolved to become the two hundred principles of success detailed in Ray Dalio's (2019) best-selling book *Die Prinzipien des Erfolgs* [*Principles*]. Personal success now encompasses more than merely what we do at work and, accordingly, is measured not solely by money but by fulfillment as well. Wisdom, wonder, giving, and well-being all belong to the altogether more holistic definition of success presented in Arianna Huffington's (2014) fantastic book *Thrive*. Both Dalio and Huffington talk often of their practice of transcendental meditation, a discipline heretofore best known from the Beatles' journey to the Maharishi ashram back in the sixties. Thirty years ago, such a revelation would surely have ended the career of any top manager. Today, however, success means taking active steps to avoid burnout and to maintain a balanced life. In times of “new work”—in which freedom

and self-determination are central tenets even as the boundaries between the personal and professional become increasingly blurred—physical and mental health are the new imperatives for a life successfully lived. Today, personal success is also judged by the fitness data on our smartphone apps.

## Redefining Success for Times of Radical Change

Like other major historical events before it—the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the financial crises of 1929 and 2008—the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world in lasting ways. Nowhere have these changes been more radically felt than in the world of work. Working from home was established as an alternative to the office at a breathtaking pace and on a global scale. We use videoconferencing apps like Zoom and Teams as matter-of-factly as we use an electric toothbrush. In parallel, the way we think—including and especially our understanding of success—has shifted. In this respect, the pandemic acted as a kind of catalyst, accelerating a trend that had already taken root.

We are living through a time of radical change, one that has been described as a “talent tsunami.” At the beginning of 2021, a widely shared Microsoft study claimed that more than 40 percent of employees worldwide were planning a job change in the medium term (Microsoft 2021). By the end of that same year, changes in the US had borne out this gloomy business prognosis. An MIT study showed that more than 24 million US Americans quit their jobs between April and September 2021, an all-time high. Innovation-focused companies—those who typically employ a large proportion of highly talented employees with above-average education levels—bore the heaviest losses. Such companies include tech firms, consultancies, and investment banks, all of which have seen dramatically increased rates of quitting over the last two years. Even prior to the pandemic, one in four start-up employees were quitting within a year (Founders Circle Capital 2022). What’s going on?

Perhaps surprisingly, it’s not about dissatisfaction with bonus payments or lack of promotion but about issues such as corporate culture, workload, and work/life balance. Employees are rejecting the dearth of appreciation at work, the inability to take breaks without feeling guilty for it, and the lack of opportunities to get adequate sleep or spend time with family. While from a human perspective the importance of these factors is self-evident, they have nonetheless been often neglected at the types of workplaces just

described, whose oversight is now coming back to bite them. Per my conversations with start-ups, corporations, and professional services firms in Germany, the trend has also begun to establish itself there. Post-pandemic, employees' willingness to compromise quality of life and health for the sake of their careers has decreased significantly, including and especially among top talent. "Career at any cost" has had its day. Today, success is just as much predicated on one's (job-independent) sense of personal worth.

## Beyond Career Planning

It goes without saying that similar trends have come and gone at times in the past. The one crucial respect in which the present economic cycle differs fundamentally from any other is that today, up to two-thirds of employees are prepared to quit without having their next job lined up (De Smet et al. 2021). As German comedian Hape Kerkeling famously titled his bestselling pilgrimage diary, *Ich bin dann mal weg (I'm Off Then)*; Kerkeling 2006). I must admit that such a situation would have caused me sleepless nights. This, however, is due at least in part to my personality type and my generation, not to mention the absence of pandemics at any time during my active career.

It is perhaps those starting out in their careers whose perspective differs most from their counterparts in the past. In times of lockdowns, this is perfectly understandable. If one's first two years in the working world are spent in front of a screen at home, with no in-person contact with a company, jobs become as interchangeable as Netflix series. Similarly, if the next job offer is never more than a click away, the psychological barrier to a period of joblessness is reduced. (This effect is compounded in Germany by the existence of the *Erbengeneration* [generation of heirs], the cohort of individuals who, thanks to a complex combination of political and socio-economic circumstances, are due to receive substantial individual inheritances and can thus afford to worry less about long-term financial provision. Those who have already inherited a grandparent's property have understandably fewer inhibitions about spending time without a job.)

But career starters are not the only ones. As I see time and again in my coaching, even longer-serving members of the working world are willing to countenance the idea of quitting without a firm plan. This is rooted in a change in perspective. For some, the "deal" simply no longer makes sense.

Without in-person meetings with colleagues and customers, without the Senator Lounge and business hotel, without the “VIP traveler” status satirized by many a comedian, and without fancy offices, many a dream job loses its appeal. It becomes “work hard, play hard,” but without the play.

For others, the relentless mental and physical strain of lockdowns combined with endless hours at the screen has given them pause. Without real-life contact with like-minded workaholics at the office, many have—for the first time—come to appreciate the absurdity of the life they lead. The ability to work from home in close proximity to friends and family has reinforced this feeling. As it turns out, it *does* make a difference whether I, as a consultant, graft away all evening in a business hotel in New York, or whether I sit in the kitchen on a videoconference at midnight while loved ones enjoy a glass of wine next door.

Naturally, such revelations give rise to a desire to break out of the rat race and “jump off the moving train,” so to speak, even if it isn’t clear how soft the landing or how long the walk to the next station will be. Since the arrival of the pandemic, planning ahead has proven to be a waste of time. Why agonize and toil over a plan that may never come to fruition? Today, success also means having the freedom to take some time out.

## A New Understanding of Success and Career

This mindset shift is indicative of our desire for greater self-determination with respect to what our careers look like. Today, scarcely anyone stays at one company for life. We are increasingly unwilling to allow the direction and pace of our development to be dictated by arbitrary hierarchies. Whereas in the past, promotion in itself was the benchmark for success, predefined career stages were to be checked off at any cost, and deviations from this path were regarded as career setbacks, it is gradually becoming less taboo to accumulate (ostensibly) unrelated periods of professional experience in a series of distinct career chapters. These may only become a coherent part of the narrative in retrospect and confer meaning to one’s path *ex post*. Careers are sketched out freehand, not by the paint-by-numbers path of the past.

Such an approach gives rise to new career models with surprising twists and turns—and with happy endings. In a famous speech at Stanford in 2005, Steve Jobs described this approach as “connecting the dots.” He is

far from the only example of how great success stories can happen despite a supposedly unorthodox resume. Increasingly, unconventional job histories may even confer an advantage. Take a former colleague of mine who quit an established career, founded a start-up, sold it successfully, and then spent a year caring for his family before joining the board at a major retail group. Many candidates with a “model resume” may wait forever for such an offer to come their way. Careers today are different. Personal success is predicated on development and fulfillment—and this includes time out from the mainstream rat race.

## When Success Turns to a Standstill

An experienced coach and trainer once told me that “your development as a leader occurs in three stages.” He was referring to a model of leadership popularized by energy giant GE, among others (Charan, Drotter, and Noel 2001). “You first learn to lead yourself, then to lead others, and finally to lead your organization. Which of these do you think is most important?” I thought of how challenging it must be to lead a large organization and all its many members. “The third,” I answered.

“It’s the first,” he said. “To be able to lead, you must first understand who you are and who you are not. Some people spend their whole lives trying and failing to figure this out, even when they already hold important leadership roles.”

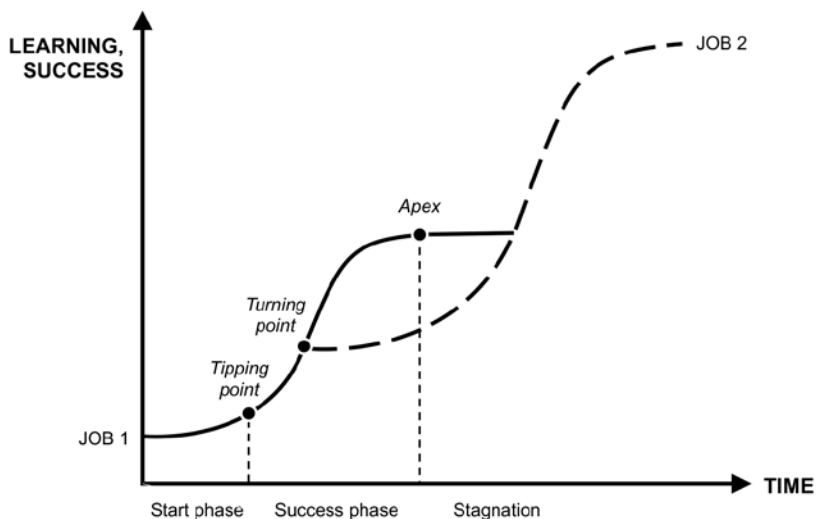
It’s not for nothing that the words “Know thyself” are inscribed above the entrance to the temple of Apollo at Delphi. It could be argued that they are even more relevant now than they were two millennia ago. If personal success is to be defined in terms of fulfillment, self-development, and self-actualization—and if, on this basis, we are to embrace greater responsibility for our own professional development—it is critical to understand who we are and who we are not. Whether we wish to launch our own e-car start-up à la Elon Musk or to simply progress better as an employee in a corporate setting, there can be no getting away from the importance of personality type. If we, too, are to “find our thing” and achieve something approaching professional fulfillment, it is vital that we first reflect honestly on a number of things: what gets us out of bed in the morning, which skills and tasks we have mastered to perfection, which we would rather avoid, when we need to give ourselves a kick in the pants, and how we know when

we need to take a break. In short: to be able to lead ourselves, we need to get to know ourselves better. We must also understand that this learning process is not linear, but rather progresses in cycles.

## The “Performance Curve” of Our Personal Engine for Success

We enter the working world with a plethora of ambitions, hopes, fears, and illusions, yet with relatively little knowledge about ourselves. There is no manual to refer to when things go awry; rather, we must develop our own set of guiding principles over time. As we progress through each rung of a professional career, we gain expertise and experience in a particular field, but we also learn what our talents are, what motivates us, what is important to us, and, just as crucially, what we are not so good at. This learning process is often visualized in the form of an S-curve, as can be seen in the book *Disrupt Yourself* by Whitney Johnson (2019) as well as in the aforementioned *Die 100 Gesetze erfolgreicher Karriereplanung* (Kerler and von Windau 1992) from some thirty years prior. Our career progression follows the same curve, since logically, the degree to which we amass expertise and learn about ourselves also determines the extent of our success.

The first portion of the curve is flat. In this phase, we are finding our feet in a new professional environment. We learn slowly and are correspondingly slow to achieve success. After some time, we reach what has been described as the “tipping point” (Gladwell 2001), which represents a breakthrough, the start of a new phase in which we have fully understood how our job works and discovered new talents and strengths. Our personal “engine for success” gears up to full capacity, the curve moves steeply upward, and—typically—we experience a high degree of personal fulfillment. Sometime later, we reach a turning point, after which the learning curve slowly plateaus, a sense of routine creeps in, and we may begin to feel occasionally stifled or bored. This phase continues until we reach the apex. After this, success stagnates, each day feels the same as the one before, and our job ceases to be “fun.” This is the time for the next rung of the ladder and the next career cycle to begin. With each passing cycle, our baseline level of knowledge increases and we learn more and more about ourselves. It is by passing through several of these cycles in succession, perhaps with the occasional break in between, that we achieve a fulfilled professional life.



The career cycle

The progression of the S-curve also reveals how our personal engine for success functions in each of the previously described phases. Consider the analogy of driving a car. When we move from one rung of the career ladder to the next, it is important that we don't attempt to engage the next gear forcefully without bothering to use the clutch. Similarly, we must not attempt to force the car from the first gear directly into the fourth. Either of these courses of action would risk stalling the engine. Instead, we must ease our way through the phases smoothly and gradually, shifting up and down through the gears one by one. In practice, this means mentally initiating the change not at the apex, but at the turning point: when things are still progressing satisfactorily, but we feel intuitively that we will soon be ready for the next challenge. It is at this point that we have sufficient energy and motivation to think productively about the future—and sufficient time



to prepare thoroughly and ensure that we're qualified for the next phase. By taking this approach, we can succeed in moving up the gears without unwelcome thuds and clunks. Indeed, we see such an approach adopted at the very top levels of management, where successor candidates for a CEO position "warm up" for a year or more before taking over the top job. We now have an idea of the theory and best practice. In the real world, of course, bumps in the road are commonplace, and I recognize these as much from my clients as from my own experience in the corporate world.

## When the Engine Stutters

I'll preface this section by saying that in regard to my own life, I have very little grounds for complaint. My professional trajectory has mostly progressed without complications; for great distances, the engine powering my own career has passed smoothly through the cycles just described. Still, though, there are certain times and places in which it has ground to an unexpected and unwelcome halt. My trusted formulas for success ceased to bring the results I was used to, and business did not go as hoped. I was beset by a feeling that I was failing to fulfill the expectations placed upon me, and as a result, I worked longer, harder, and with greater self-pressure than before. Whatever I tried, my previous success seemed to elude me. My engine stuttered and I was stuck, immobile, on the success curve. This happened most often after big career jumps: periods when I was trying to move up through the metaphorical gears. It was at these times that I had to shake things up internally and get the engine going again, hoping I had not burnt it out.

There were other defining moments, too—moments in which things were going ostensibly well and in which, by all accounts, I should have felt satisfied, if only I didn't have the nagging sense that I was moving in the wrong direction. At the time, these moments also felt like precursors to a standstill of success. I later realized that this initial assessment was mistaken. The longer I thought about it, the clearer it became that, actually, my personal definition of success was evolving. My values had shifted; the relative importance of things in my life had changed. Mathematically

speaking, you could say that the axes of the S-curve had been redefined. Instead of approaching a new point on the old curve, I found myself on a completely different graph. What had felt like the start of a plateau had in fact been a new beginning.

Looking back, I can identify two distinct triggers for these shifts. The first of these was radical experiences; the second, the opportunity to devote significant time to introspection and reflection. “When the mind is quiet,” a Zen master once told me, “the truth of the world will reveal itself.” “Unexpected behavior,” a mechanic would say. What does this mean in regard to our engine use?

## A Look under the Hood

In the course of conducting “under the hood” explorations with my coaching clients, I came to a realization. Many of them were complaining of the same problems I had once faced myself: their engines for success were stuttering at the same familiar junctures. Clear patterns were observable. *Aha!* I thought. These cases weren’t a question of improper engine use per se, but of “serial errors” in us as humans. Upon further examination, I identified six main reasons for the career-stalling engine issues I was encountering repeatedly in these exchanges:

**Reason 1:** The inability to manage our own resources

**Reason 2:** Blind spots and an unawareness of our own driving forces

**Reason 3:** The inability to let go of old models of success

**Reason 4:** Difficulty adopting new habits

**Reason 5:** A lack of courage to reinvent ourselves in line with the times

**Reason 6:** Naivete in tackling a career restart

### Reason 1: The Inability to Manage Our Own Resources

When an engine is run at top speed for a long time, it becomes hot. Sooner or later, it gives up completely. The relevance of this analogy for us is clear. Those who want to avoid burning out by age thirty must treat their own resources with prudence and care. It is an unfortunate fact of life that we frequently overestimate ourselves. We drive long stretches

with our foot to the floor, neglecting to take breaks or pay heed to the warning lights. It's little wonder, then, that the engine burns out when we least expect it.

## **Reason 2: Blind Spots and an Unawareness of Our Own Driving Forces**

There are two stories told about any given one of us: the one we tell about ourselves and the one devised by others. Insofar as we have a means of obtaining honest feedback and are willing to accept it, we are able to reconcile the two stories, eliminate blind spots, and acquire new knowledge. If we do not, we run the risk of failure; worse still, of being unable to understand why we have failed. By the same token, there will always be situations in which we struggle to implement such feedback. In these cases, we must delve deeper into the “engine compartment” to recognize the covert driving forces that motivate us. There, more often than not, lies the root of the problem. Without this knowledge, we might as well be fighting a ghost.

## **Reason 3: The Inability to Let Go of Old Models of Success**

Success can render us blind. When we are successful, we move up the career ladder. It stands to reason, then, that we continue to do what got us there and to remain faithful to our existing principles. The problem is that when we do this, we risk becoming presumptuous and resistant to criticism, adopting a veneer of infallibility based on our previous success. Eventually, like Icarus flying too close to the sun, we fall out of the sky and meet an unenviable end. To avoid such pitfalls and remain truly open to new ideas, we must ask questions of ourselves in each new phase of our career and be prepared to leave behind the habits and principles that got us there. If this seems paradoxical, it's because it is—and it's not easy to accept or to implement.

## **Reason 4: Difficulty Adopting New Habits**

Just as we replace worn or broken parts in a car, we must acquire new skills and habits from time to time. The old ones have simply run their course, and it is incumbent upon us to evolve accordingly. This isn't so easy,