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When Success Turns to a Standstill

A repair manual for your career

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When Success Turns to a Standstill

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

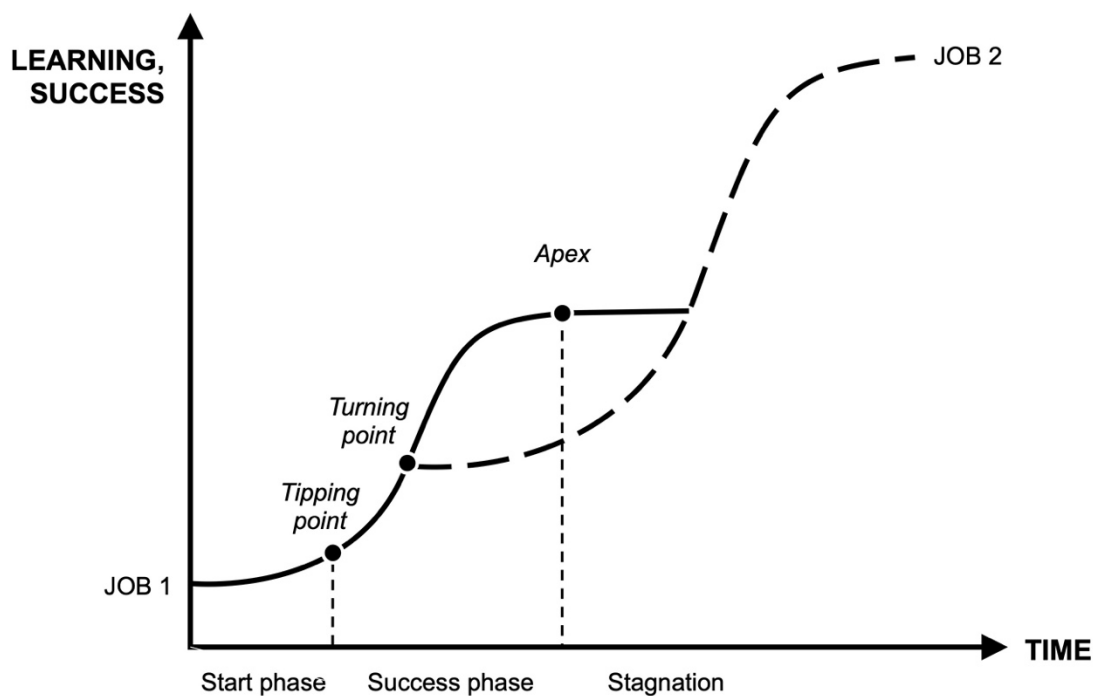
“It’s actually the first,” he said. “To be able to lead yourself, you must first understand who you are and who you are not. Some people spend their whole lives trying in vain to succeed at this stage, even if they are already leaders of large companies.”

It is 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 today than they were two millennia ago. If personal success is to be defined in terms of fulfilment, self-development and self-actualisation – 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 one wishes to echo the success of Elon Musk by launching one’s own e-car start-up or to better progress one’s career as an employee in a major enterprise, there can be no getting away from the importance of personality type. If you, too, are to “find your thing” and achieve something approaching professional fulfilment, it is vital that you first reflect honestly on what gets you out of bed in the morning, which skills and tasks you have mastered to perfection, which you would rather give a wide berth, when you need to give yourself a shake-up, and how you know when you need to take a break. In short: to be able to manage yourself, you need to get to know yourself better. What you must also understand is that this learning process is not linear, but rather progresses in cycles.

The ‘operating curve’ of your own 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 visualised in the form of an S-curve, as can be seen in the book *Disrupt Yourself* by US author Whitney Johnson (Johnson 2019) as well as in the German work *100 Gesetzen erfolgreicher Karriereplanung* [*100 Laws of Successful Career Planning*] from some 30 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 Career Cycle

The first portion of the curve is flat. In this phase, we are finding our feet in a new professional environment. We learn only slowly, and success is correspondingly slow to be achieved. After some time, we reach what has been described as the ‘tipping point’ (Gladwell 2001), which represents a breakthrough. This marks the start of a new phase in which we have fully understood how our job works and have discovered new talents and strengths. Our personal ‘engine for success’ gears up to full capacity, the curve moves steeply upwards and – typically – we experience a high degree of personal fulfilment. 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 bored. This phase continues until we reach the apex, after which success stagnates, each day feels the same as the next, and our job ceases to feel like ‘fun’. It is now

time for the next rung of the ladder and the next career cycle to begin. As each cycle passes, we learn more and more about ourselves. It is by passing by through several of these cycles in succession, perhaps with the occasional break in between, that we achieve a fulfilled professional life.

The progression of the S-curve also reveals how our personal ‘engine for success’ is functioning in each of the above-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 do not 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 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 we are 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.

Thus, we have examined the theory and the examples of good practice. In the real world, however, bumps in the road are commonplace – and I recognise these as much from my clients as from my own experience in the corporate world.

When the engine stutters to a halt

I’ll preface this section by saying that in regards to my own life, I have very little grounds for complaint. My professional trajectory has mostly progressed smoothly; for great distances, the engine powering my own career has passed reliably through the cycles described above. 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; business did not go as hoped. I was beset by a feeling that I was failing to fulfil the expectations placed upon me – and as a result, I worked longer, harder and with greater self-pressure than before. Yet 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. Might I have burnt it out? There were also other defining moments: moments in which things were going ostensibly well and in which, by all accounts, I should have felt satisfied. At first, these moments, too, felt like precursors to a standstill of success. I later realised that I had been mistaken. The longer I thought about it, the clearer it became that my personal definition of success was evolving. My values had shifted; the relative importance of things in my life had changed. Mathematically speaking, one could say that axes of the S-curve had been redefined. I suddenly found myself on a new curve altogether. What had once felt like the seeds of a slump had in fact been a new beginning.

Looking back, there seem to have been two distinct triggers for this shift. 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 behaviour,” a mechanic would say. Another sign of improper engine use?

A look under the bonnet

In “looking under the bonnet” in discussions with my coaching clients, I eventually came to a realisation. Many of them were coming to me with the same problems I had once faced myself; namely, their engines for success seemed all to be stuttering in the same place. Clear patterns were observable. “Ah!” I thought. “It wasn’t a question of incorrect use, but a serial fault!” Upon further examination, I identified six main reasons for the career-stalling engine problems I was encountering repeatedly in these exchanges.

Reason 1: A lack of ability to manage one’s own resources

Reason 2: Blind spots and an unawareness of one’s 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 oneself in line with the times

Reason 6: Naivety in tackling a career restart

Reason 1: A lack of ability to manage one's 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 30 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. Little wonder, then, that the engine burns out when we least expect it.

Reason 2: Blind spots and an unawareness of one's 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 room" to recognise 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 in the world. It stands to reason, then, that we continue to do what got us there and to remain faithful to our existing principles. A sustainable model? No. 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 is easy neither to accept nor to implement.

Reason 4: Difficulty adopting new habits

Just as we replace worn or broken parts in a car, we must from time to time acquire new skills and habits. The old ones have simply had their time; it is incumbent upon us to evolve accordingly. This, however, is often not so easy, because good will alone is not sufficient. We

are prone to fall repeatedly into the same trap; namely, we resolve to do something with the best of intentions – for example, to speak to colleagues or customers more often – and keep it up for two weeks before becoming mired in a sea of excuses. Before long, the good intention is forgotten. To establish and maintain new habits, we must secure them like nuts after changing a wheel; otherwise, they will simply fall off again.

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

Hard work leads to success in equal measure. Or does it? Our brain loves systems that behave in a linear fashion; those in which cause and effect are directly correlated. When things become more nuanced, we struggle – as the S-shaped success curve succinctly shows. When the curve is rising steeply, it is difficult for us to truly grasp that a plateau is just around the corner. “Is it really necessary to trouble ourselves with thoughts of the future – right now, when everything is going so well?” we ask. “Who knows: maybe next year will be even better!” Granted, we are occasionally troubled by a feeling of inner emptiness – but to proactively reinvent ourselves? That seems the far greater of two evils. After all, the job is still a good fit; even our families, friends and colleagues think so. So great is our ability to dither and procrastinate that we inadvertently sail past our own sell-by date.

Reason 6: Naivety in tackling a career restart

Sometimes, success is put on pause because we’re taking a break from work itself. Perhaps we’ve elected to take a sabbatical or, unfortunately, lost a job. Perhaps we’ve reached the third phase of life – the end of “regular” work – and are taking a break before starting again with something new. Finding our way back to the road to success can require an effort that is not to be underestimated. The inevitable truth is that no-one will have waited for us and the world will have continued to turn: only our engine has stood still in the meantime. Our task is now to restart the flywheel – and that can require us to push harder than we think.

A repair manual for emergencies

What are we to do when success turns to a standstill? The answer, simply put, is to let go – of precisely those things that made us successful in the past. Put an end to carelessly maxing out your resources. Relinquish to the conviction that you know yourself well: it’s nothing more than an illusion. Surrender old formulas for success: they’ve had their time, now lay them to

rest. Let go of the belief we can achieve anything with willpower alone: it's never been realistic, so it's best to accept it. Say goodbye to the notion of professional identity: it's last year's model in last year's clothes. Detach yourself from the belief that the world can't do without you: it's more than a little arrogant and untrue to boot. "Okay," you might be thinking, "and how to achieve all this?" To explain that, I'd like to tell you a story.

The Author

Christian Greiser is an executive coach and management consultant. In his work as a “career mechanic”, he guides thought-leaders, designers, decision-makers and entrepreneurs on their own personal development journeys, helping them figure out their values, talents and strengths. As he does so, he brings not only his perspective as a senior strategy consultant with operational leadership experience, but an intuitive understanding for the role of personality in business. Prior to establishing his own consultancy, Christian held the role of Senior Partner at the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and oversaw one of the largest practice groups worldwide. An engineer by education, he occupied managerial roles at German industrial conglomerate Mannesmann AG before entering the world of business and management. He studied in Braunschweig, Paris and London and is a Fellow of the Institute of Coaching (McLean, Affililate of Harvard Medical School).

Christian Greiser and his wife divide their time between the German town of Meerbusch near Düsseldorf and the Greek island of Corfu. Christian has been practising meditation with Zen masters of Europe and Asia for more than 15 years and is founder of a global mindfulness network. Insights from this meditation practice are also incorporated into his coaching.

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