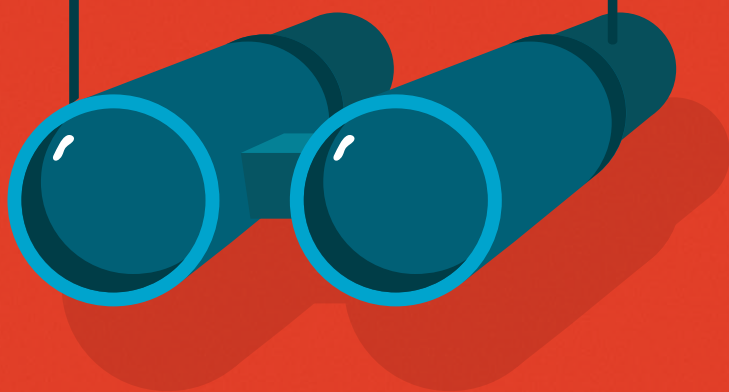


LESSONS & INSIGHTS FROM PROFESSIONALS WHO  
HAVE TRIED IT ALL, SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

# CAREER IN SIGHT



PUTTING ON THE RIGHT LENS FOR SUCCESS

**ELLIOT LEE**

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## **Foreword**

*By Dr Sally Rundle*

I met Elliot many years ago in Singapore, where we both attended an international training program. From our first encounter, I immediately realised three things.

Firstly, we were both passionate about learning and discovering human potential. Secondly, we were committed to professional and personal development and wanted to contribute positively to people's lives. The third is that Elliot is someone who genuinely cares for others, wants the best for people and would go out of his way to help them.

As I got to know Elliot more, I came to appreciate his insatiable curiosity and desire to learn, sharing his valuable knowledge and expertise with others.

While I've spent the past twenty years focusing on leadership and wellbeing, Elliot has been applying his thought leadership skills to create environments where people can take the next step to excel in their careers. He brings a wealth of experience in learning and development, talent, people and culture.

Elliot is a life-long learner and gifted teacher. Throughout his leadership journey, he has mentored countless individuals by helping them view their career trajectories through different lenses. This has helped them discover their true talents and tap into their highest potential.

This book is the culmination of his career research and experience to date. Specifically, he has created a guidebook and toolbox for working professionals who want to climb the corporate ladder successfully.

He delves into how professionals can become better versions of themselves, empathise with and understand their peers, and examine their career journeys to set themselves up for success.

He also offers practical strategies for navigating the pitfalls and opportunities that will invariably appear along their journey.

I have watched him, with admiration, push beyond his comfort zone to grow and develop his skills and talents. He has blended his academic learning with practical skills and tacit know-how to write this amazingly eye-opening book, "Career In-Sight", and now, I look forward to seeing it impact individuals who want to make a difference in their careers.

Sally J Rundle PhD

Leadership coach, educator, and author.

## **Acknowledgements**

As I stepped into the corporate world, I realised that the environment was fast-paced and dynamic. Without a guide, I would be lost entirely. So I want to thank my buddy Enrico Varella for guiding me through the ins and outs of the corporate world, pushing me to be a better trainer and connecting me to my mentors.

To my mentors, Dr Jason Tan, Gary Yardley, Jan Kelly and Sally Rundle, you have expanded my view of the world, challenged my limiting beliefs and played a huge part in moulding my identity. Thank you for providing me with the lenses that have shaped me into becoming the person I am today.

The aspiration to capture my tacit experiences has been with me for many years. However, it was not until the prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns that I came across the course by Kok Hwa on becoming an author. Thank you, Kok Hwa, for reigniting my dreams of being an author.

Thank you to all my contributors who have inspired and informed my career; this book would not have been possible without your stories. I hope the stories and wisdom you've shared with me will impact other aspiring professionals and shape their lives, as you did mine.

To Sara, Zamrooth and Merlin, my editors and designers, thank you for testing my ideas to their limit and being an integral part of bringing this book to life. Special thanks to Stories of Asia for connecting me to the resources I needed.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to Andrea, my dearest wife, who has loved and supported me every step of the way for more than 20 years.

Above all, I thank God for His Grace.

## Words From The Author

I grew up in a *kampong*.

The Saturdays of my childhood consisted of running along back streets playing 'catching', helping my parents out in the market and playing marbles near busy train tracks in 1970s Singapore.

My parents ran a retail shop selling clothes, towels and school uniforms—and I was their designated sales assistant. Sometimes I would set up a booth on the streets that ran along the tracks to help my parents get more sales. When the school holidays came, I took odd jobs, from being a retail assistant and making door-to-door sales to carpentry work.

If someone had told me I would become the Global Head for Sales Learning and Development in a prestigious MNC, working with talented people from countries such as Belgium, Saudi Arabia and China, I would not have believed it at the time.

You see, I always thought I would live my life doing what my parents did. I didn't think about doing well at school or getting into higher education. I didn't know my potential or what I could contribute to others. I didn't think about my future.

Till I was forced to.

When I was 15 years old, my parents realised we would have to move out of the shophouse we were staying in because the business wasn't doing well. My dad had to scramble to find a new job quickly, as the additional 2-3 jobs my mum took on



didn't provide enough. We were in real danger of becoming homeless. Thankfully, my Aunt Angie housed my family during those tough years, and I am very grateful to her to this day.

Singapore today is vastly different from what it was fifty years ago. Thanks to the welfare institutions in place today, you're unlikely to end up homeless. But back then, when Singapore was still a young nation, not having a roof over your head or a place to sleep was a very possible reality.

That sobering reality made me seriously think about my future and how I would survive, shaking me out of my rosy illusion that I would be able to get by doing odd jobs.

It was the wake-up call I needed. It was a painful truth to accept, but it was very humbling. From that moment, my perspective changed drastically.

Let's pause for a bit. Take a moment to visualise something with me:

Imagine that you've lived all your life wearing a pair of dark lenses.

That means you wake up every morning with a pair of dark lenses on. These lenses shade your vision from any harshness. When you wake up, the sun never glares at you. Your surroundings may be dim, but it feels safe. When night falls, however, it gets incredibly dark. You try to gauge your path, get a rough feel of your surroundings, stumble sometimes and

essentially struggle to find your way, but that's how it's always been.

One day, you wake up and find the dark lenses are gone.

This is a massive shock to your system. Everything seems blindingly bright at first; your eyes water all the time and it hurts to look at anything. It all feels too much. But slowly, you realise you can see everything you missed. Now, you can walk on a clear path and find the items you need with clarity. Of course, daytime still hurts, but over time, you realise it's better without dark lenses as the pain is only temporary until your eyes acclimatise.

Now let's compare the analogy to my reality.

The wake-up call I needed, faced with potential homelessness, made me realise that I had been viewing the world with dark lenses. Even though my prospects were dim, I was unaware and I continued through with life thinking it was okay because that's how it always was and will be.

When the dark lenses were forcibly removed, I had to face my harsh reality in all its stark, eye-watering clarity. But, more importantly, I knew I had to adjust. But where do I start? What could I do?

I was failing most of my subjects at school and I knew that I had to do better, so I started there. It was something that I had the power and means to change. I started going to study groups more often and learning with more effort.

Unsurprisingly, I had 'dark nights' where I stumbled and tripped, unable to find or access resources simply because I couldn't see them and felt like I wasn't able to confide in my friends for support.

I had a plethora of friends in school from various backgrounds. Some were from the A-class who were high achievers, while some were from the 'notorious' classes where students were not as serious about their studies and were more playful.

Social tensions arose when I was made the school councillor and eventually the Head of Student Councillors. My A-class friends said that I should not spend too much time with friends from the 'notorious' classes. How was I supposed to manage the role and gain credibility, while keeping my friends from both classes?

I knew I had to stay true to myself. This meant becoming the mentor I needed to my friends from the 'notorious' classes. After all, my first responsibility as a student councillor was to be a student role model. As I helped my friends understand the shift that happened within me and helped them with their own realisations, they started doing better in school and getting good grades. The tipping point occurred when some of my 'notorious' buddies were selected to become school councillors.

In a way, empathising with my buddies, seeing it from their perspective and helping them become better and achieve their goals ended up helping me a lot.

Years later, when I started working in the Singapore Air Force, I began to seriously consider and visualise possible paths for my

career trajectory and find out the next steps I could take to make my goals a reality.

The insights from my intense self-reflection led me to take several years of night classes. All of this was incredibly tiring and laborious, but it opened doors for me to improve my skills and connect with people.

Thankfully, I connected with a friend in night school who introduced me to his mentor. His mentor saw my potential and taught me various frameworks or 'lenses' so that I could accelerate my development and growth.

Think of it this way: I had been acclimatising my eyes to live without my dark lenses over the last few years, and I thought I got it figured enough to be in a good space. But I just got told that by putting on the right lenses, I would be able to learn the critical insights that would quickly help me grow my career.

As such, I equipped myself with various lenses for various situations.

Problems that were extremely difficult and seemed impossible to solve started to appear achievable with my new lens. Where I only saw dead ends before, I discovered opportunities and possibilities.

With the right sight and enough effort, I successfully climbed the corporate ladder and worked as a business consultant in mergers & acquisitions, organisational development, and many other areas.

That being said, climbing the ladder was not my biggest focus. I placed the highest importance on learning and mentorship, to help as many people as possible. After all, without mentorship and the right lens to equip myself, I would still be stuck where I was, working me.

If not for that wake-up call I had when we were nearly homeless, I wouldn't be surprised if I didn't make it past secondary school.

However, I understand that not everyone can find and have access to a mentor who gives them insights they can't get from school or textbooks.

That is why I'm writing this book — This book is filled with my stories as well as the stories of professionals and experts who have been through challenges in their careers.

Don't just take it from me and my experience. Take it from the stories that are inspired by the experiences of the many established corporate leaders I've interviewed in this book.

You'll notice that each chapter comes tagged with a unique lens or perspective-shifting tool that will help you with your career. These tools are designed to help you be successful in your unique situation, no matter what you are facing at work.

If you are reading this book, I know that you are determined to make something of yourself, and you can!

What I *don't* believe in is making knowledge inaccessible to people. I was given much love and care from my mentors, and in return, I love giving back and passing the wisdom forward. This book is one of the ways I am doing that.

So here's to equipping yourself with the right lens for success, gaining the career insights you need, and having your dream career in-sight!

Elliot Lee

## **How To Use This Book**

### *Seeing Through Your Career*

There are opportunities, pitfalls, and dead ends in the business world. So your ability to put on the 'right lenses' in your professional life will determine how far you go in your career. The wise executive is equipped with the right lens, which will help them observe and analyse what is happening around them.

Let's break it down.

Your lens is how you perceive the world. With the right lens, you can figure out the unspoken rules of the corporate world. This will help you empathise with people better, understand them on a deeper level, and work with them in a way you might not have thought possible.

Most importantly, the right lens doesn't just help you with your environment or the people around you – they help you examine yourself. Only when you look within yourself can you assess and discover what you are truly capable of achieving.

You'll find that as you read this book, you will learn insights and strategies that don't just apply to your career but also to other areas of your life.

## **Putting On The Right Lens For Success**

I believe that learning happens best through stories and taking action.

So enjoy the stories and make use of the reflection questions at the end of every chapter. After all, the lessons you learn from reading someone's story are not your own until you apply them in your life.

Let's get started.

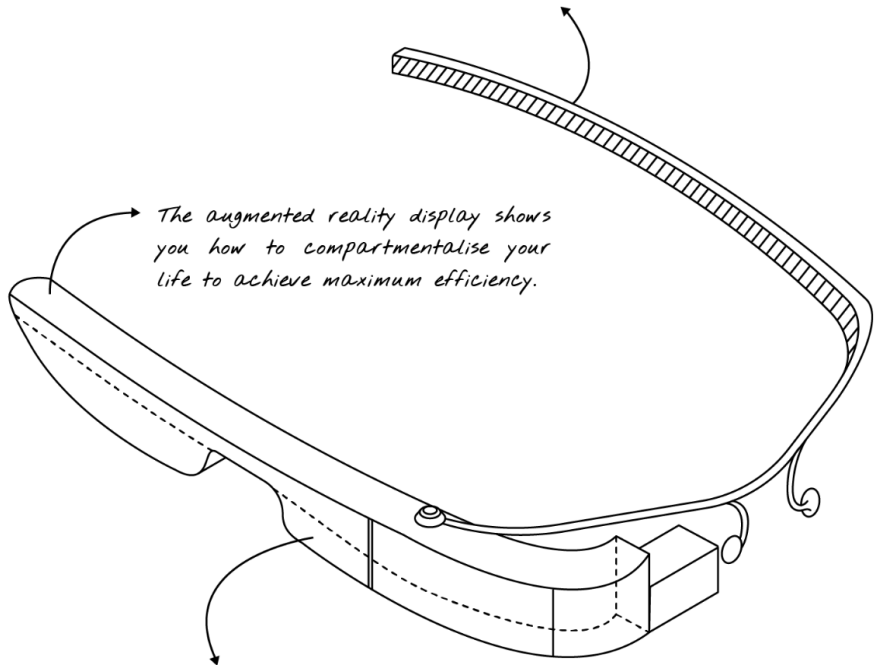


# MANAGING A NEVERENDING WORKLOAD

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Does your workload feel neverending no matter how much you do? Here's how these nifty AI-powered augmented reality glasses can help you.

*The built-in AI uses machine learning to understand each task and how much time should be spent on it. Tip: It gets better the more you use and experiment with it!*



*Caution: Prolonged use may cause the user to become overly transactional and have difficulty resting. Use moderately and take plenty of breaks to achieve optimal results.*

FIG. 1

## **Will's Story**

For almost all his life, Will felt his workload was never-ending. There was always an urgent deadline, a long list of tasks to tackle, people whose needs had to be met, and no shortage of things to do.

In the back of his mind, Will always wondered if it was his fault. He was still new to the corporate world and had worked in two MNCs since the start of his journey three years ago. So, there was a possibility he wasn't handling it well.

Will poured all his extra hours into work and worked as hard as he could. He knew he wanted to marry soon; now was the time to grind. He had to climb the career ladder early to earn more and eventually support his family.

Will maximised every hour of the day to be as productive as possible. He usually came into the office earlier to get a head start at work and often stayed back three to four hours doing overtime. He spent every lunch hour working on his projects and would eat instant noodles if he got hungry. Food wasn't worth the time or money; what was important was progress in his work.

When Will observed his colleagues, however, he noticed that not everyone worked as hard. Most of the time, the senior leaders stayed in office till late, but they had an unhurried air, even when they had so much to do. Most of the colleagues on his level of seniority often didn't work as long as he did. Instead, they often chatted with co-workers, sipping on coffee, lingering

at the water cooler. Will wondered if they ever got any work done on Fridays.

What was their secret? How did they get by and still get promoted without putting in the hours? Why did life have to be so unfair?

Will always felt an uneasiness in him. He knew it was because deep inside, he didn't understand why he had to struggle so much to get so few gains while everyone else seemed to be doing the bare minimum. He kept telling himself that if he gave 150% every day, he would surely catch up, and there would come a day when he could finally rest a little easier.

Eventually, they would see how effective he was at work. They would see how much he was progressing. Finally, they would promote him, and then he would get less groundwork and more free time as he moved into a leadership position. Or at least, that was what he hoped.

As reality had it, Will did get promoted a year later. His superiors saw his effort and gave him a promotion with a raise. He transitioned into more managerial work and had opportunities to lead projects. However, he found himself with less time than ever.

This cycle continued over the years — promotion, then more work. Will spent less and less time with his girlfriend and family. Most of his attention and effort went into helping his colleagues and subordinates. There were even more meetings for him to attend, and many of these stretched late into the night.

One night, when Will was spending his off day with his family, his mum pointed out that he was more irritable these days. Will didn't realise it at first, but it was true.

He felt a little burnt out. His life had been full of deadlines, and he had five others to think about as soon as he met one. He enjoyed his work but it felt hard to feel fulfilled when he was often working 14-16 hours a day.

He felt heavy. When would this get better? Self-help books, productivity tips, and his mentors had been able to move him forward to a certain extent, but he felt like he had hit a wall.

It didn't matter if he focused on uni-tasking instead of multi-tasking or if he used the 4Ds of productivity, choosing to do, delegate, delay, or drop his tasks. It also didn't matter that he had a support system to encourage and give him emotional support.

The bottom line was that he felt unhappy, burned out, and stuck to the point he could not escape. One evening, his girlfriend, who had been cheering him on for many months, floated an idea that seemed like it could help him.

What if he became his own boss? What if he worked hard enough for at least five years—long enough to gain a good reputation, portfolio, and contacts, then started his own business?

It appealed to him. He had always wanted to do something that created more impact, especially after climbing to a certain point on the career ladder.

It would be challenging initially, but if he did well, he could take breaks on his own accord. And eventually, he could scale up the business, build a team to support him, and finally work fewer hours, focusing on his family and personal life.

So Will took the leap of faith.

A few years into his entrepreneurship journey as a consultant, his business started yielding him plenty of profits. Sure, it started small, but as he worked on his branding and reputation, the client referrals kept rolling in.

This time, things were different. Yes, he was battling a never-ending workflow as an entrepreneur, but it was meaningful work. Moreover, it felt good because he knew he was working for himself.

Eventually, he got so overbooked and busy with projects that he realised it was time to expand the team. Very soon, he managed a team of 20 people. He developed the best people in his team to become leaders, so he wouldn't need to help everyone individually. Then, he started taking a step back to let others lead.

This was where things should have gotten easier. But, somehow, even though Will was doing less groundwork, work still crept into every corner of his life and stole the hours away.

## *Managing A Never-Ending Workload*

Hiring quality talent was challenging and expensive. There were always fires to fight, and he had to step in if the team made mistakes.

Will was starting to see there was no real end to the race. Work was going to keep piling on and on. He wondered how many more years he'd have to work before being able to take a real break. It was a depressing thought.

Will reflected on his life. If he kept growing, expanding, and trying to aim higher, the amount of work that would come in would increase proportionally. When could he ever cut back?

The answer struck him as clear as day. He could cut back if he wanted to. Instead, he drew a massive workload to himself like a magnet because he never set boundaries.

He knew he had to change something. Nothing too drastic because he did enjoy his work and wanted to have a hand in directing the business, but he did not want to live to work.

Life was more than that. Family meant the world to him, and his health was essential too. He mulled over how to draw his boundaries better. One day, he got an unexpected breakthrough.

He had joined a team brainstorming session for one of the more significant projects they undertook. They had set aside two hours for the meeting. Twenty minutes into the meeting, the client abruptly called and asked for a presentation within the hour.

Everyone started panicking, but despite the short time frame, they decided to push through. Everyone minimised the bouncing back of ideas and quickly settled on one strategy. They immediately set clear milestones and quickly delegated the tasks so that they could work concurrently.

When they were done, they all came together to review the presentation. However, the team didn't have enough time to do a dry run, just a simple briefing before joining the client call.

Thankfully, the client found their work satisfactory. They discussed how to move forward with the project when Will's phone started receiving a series of calls and messages.

Peeking at his phone, Will realised that there was a family emergency. His grandfather had been admitted to the hospital with a severe ailment, and no one was sure what would happen. Will excused himself and left his teammates to take the lead while he rushed to the hospital.

His grandfather was stable by the time he reached. They had diagnosed and warded him to monitor his condition. The rest of Will's family was there too, and they went to have an early dinner. As everyone chatted and shared the food, Will told his family about what happened that day and reflected.

Previously he thought he needed to pour as much of his time and effort as possible if he wanted to make leaps and bounds in growing his business. He had always taken a scarcity mindset and thought that he simply didn't have enough time in a day to do all the things he wanted.

When he started looking at time as a resource, he realised he could compartmentalise his time. What if the client never called and demanded an early meeting? His team would have spent two to three hours perfecting the deck.

What if he hadn't had to leave for a family emergency? Will was sure he would still be in the office, thinking things would fall behind if he didn't join the meeting. He had been seeing things wrongly and missing out on the tangible items that made an impact.

Here's how Will managed his never-ending workload and how you can too.

### **1. Identifying Crucial Tasks**

That week, Will started tracking all the tasks he did. For example, how many of them took longer than they should, and how long did he need to stay at work?

Slowly, he started drawing the line more clearly for himself and left the office by 5 PM each day. Previously, he would have thought that would have been ridiculous.

He spent mornings at home with his family, doing the chores before he left the house so he could give his 100% at work. He started trusting his teammates more and more, stepping in only when necessary.

Will started to see more pockets of time open up as he filtered his tasks and time commitments.



## **2. Time Blocking**

As a natural workaholic, Will wanted to fill every bit of time with something productive. As he brainstormed how to use his time best, Will figured out a simple compartmentalising system. Like how one might organise their timetable in school, Will tried categorising his activities and allotting time for each activity.

Monday mornings were the time to catch up with his teammates and ensure everything was on track for the week. Wednesdays were the go-to days for client meetings in town, so he didn't have to commute too much throughout the week. Friday nights became non-negotiable date nights, and Saturdays were fixed family days.

But given his heavy workload, he decided to make Sunday nights his time to catch up with miscellaneous work and get up to speed for the upcoming work week.

He also made time slots for enriching himself. For example, he used the drive to and from the office to listen to audiobooks. The time he spent on public transport was used to reading the news or catching up with friends and loved ones over text. He also did workouts three times a week, using a habit tracker to ensure he met his minimum amount.

Now and then, his work bled into his personal life. He would allow it to happen, but not for it to steal the entire evening unless it was an absolute emergency.

### **3. Prioritising Time Blocks**

As his business expanded, he saw how he occasionally had to take business trips, which would eat up two to three days of this time — still, work would go on fine. It was just a matter of swapping and moving his compartmentalised blocks of time.

With that in mind, he felt at peace scheduling half or even full days to spend time with his family. His three biggest priorities were his family, his business's success, and his health, including enough sleep.

His other priorities were being able to work out, going out with friends, travelling and having some downtime when he did absolutely nothing.

He realised that these blocks of time were all essential to have. But it was truly a matter of how he organised everything. Some blocks of time were draining for him, while others refreshed and gave him energy.

For example, he found that spending an hour shopping for new work clothes when needed energised him for a week of back-to-back client meetings. In the past, shopping was a chore he needed to get done, but now with his new perspective of compartmentalising and maximising his time, it was a tool to boost his energy.

Will also experimented with how elastic his compartmentalised time blocks were. For instance, if he was going out with his friends, and they decided to continue hanging out late into the

night, he knew where to draw the line and leave early. Previously he would go with the flow and regret it later.

However, that didn't mean he had to be extremely rigid. On the contrary, depending on the circumstance, he would be flexible with his time. For instance, if he were taking his parents out for dinner, he would allocate extra time if they wanted to walk around after dinner or go elsewhere.

Sometimes, things would crop up out of the blue, so Will made sure to give himself a buffer so he could still balance his time well.

Will's approach to accepting and time blocking his tasks has helped him better manage his never-ending workload. As a result, he can now enjoy life more easily, knowing that his work has been organised according to his boundaries and comfort level.

This story is inspired by Sam Neo.

*As a serial entrepreneur, Sam is currently a founder of 3 start-ups. The first is People Mentality Inc, one of APAC's top 10 HR and Employer Branding consultancy firms. His second company, Stories of Asia, is a Storyteller Incubator set up to empower the Asian community with a voice through storytelling. Finally, his latest tech venture, StoryBuddy, is an AI-powered storytelling tool that seeks to change how people communicate and create content.*

## **Making It Happen**

### Getting Your Augmented Reality Glasses On

I love what Will does with filtering his tasks, time blocking and prioritising his time. Like an AI that does machine learning, Will also learned how to better organise his time by trying and testing.

For example, how long should a client meeting take? By blocking his time for only half an hour, he tests how much he can compress the meeting. In the worst-case scenario, he would have to extend the session or conduct a follow-up meeting on another day.

He also splits his time between work, family, and personal time. Within each category, he has additional filters that inform him how important each task is.

For instance, in the family category, Will might have booked four to five hours to go to the zoo, but if his son asks to see a movie afterwards, Will can compare and weigh the other time blocks he has in his day and see if he could make a compromise.

Another example would be that he could do the report he's reviewing the following morning if he woke up earlier. Alternatively, he could ask someone to take his place for a meeting to save an extra hour.

Taking time to reflect on your tasks and figure out how to manage them better will help you in the long run, giving you a sense of control over your list of seemingly never-ending tasks.

Now, take a piece of paper and try these reflection questions below to help you get started.

### **Reflection Questions**

- How much time are you spending on each task? Is it necessary to spend that much time?
- What resources do you need to finish a task more quickly?
- Are you able to group similar tasks?
- How would you benefit from compartmentalising your time?
- What are your priorities in life? Based on these priorities, how would you compartmentalise your time into 3, 5, or 7 blocks?
- Which time blocks are non-negotiable for you?
- Which time blocks are flexible?
- What activities are a must-have, what is good to have, and what is not necessary to have?

### **Action Step**

Now that you've listed out all your tasks and your boundaries with time blocking and prioritisation, what are the top 3 things you can do now to help you manage your tasks better? Get started on that.

# MANAGING A HIGHLY STRESSFUL SITUATION

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*When tensions rise, your vision can get a little clouded. These unassuming glasses let you enjoy clear vision, enabling you to do your work effectively.*

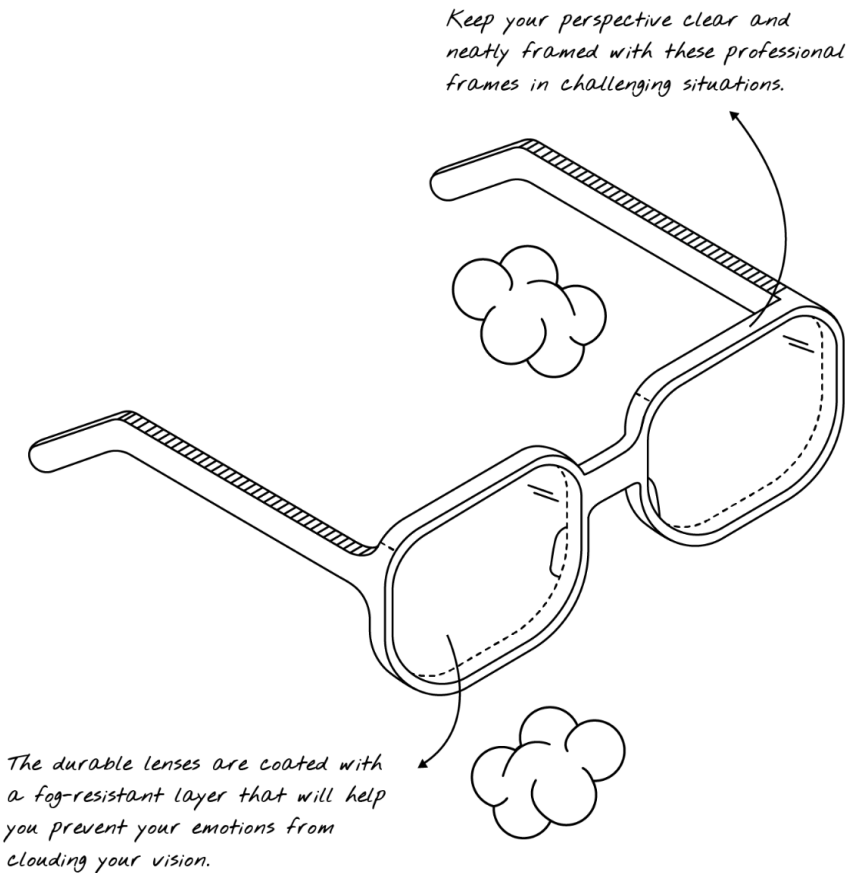


FIG. 2

## **Royce's Story**

Royce worked as a vendor for large corporations, providing logistical support to them.

His role as the operations manager involved managing a large group of warehouse staff and balancing their interests with his management style and the needs of their customers. There was never a dull moment.

Something always needed to be done; an employee would need help or clarification on a task, a client might have concerns about the logistical details, or there might be some issue with the shipment. Anything could crop up at any hour, and Royce constantly had to be on the ball and solve crises as they arose.

He was a young manager, but he was entrusted with the role, and he took it conscientiously, always figuring out how to do the balancing act of managing everyone's expectations.

One day, during a major national holiday, when most of his staff were off celebrating, the volume of work spiked as an urgent, massive order came in. Suddenly, they had a considerable amount of work and very little manpower.

Royce could feel his stress levels rising. No matter how much work they had, it was always critical to finish the job for the day. It didn't matter how late they had to work; they had to get it done. That's how it had always been.

## *Managing A Highly Stressful Situation*

This time, however, the order was so massive that Royce wasn't sure they could make it. Although they were almost done, they still had to finish labelling the boxes—a small but essential detail. If he didn't complete it, his client would be furious.

They had to load the truck by 9 PM, and he tried his best to delay the truck from leaving, but the latest they could push it to was 9.30 PM. After that, the truck had to deliver the cargo to a flight, which couldn't be delayed.

“Boss, what do we tell the driver now?” asked one of his colleagues. Royce took a few deep breaths to calm himself. His mind was racing with worst-case scenarios.

Delaying the trip was one option. However, that would mean the truck would leave empty today and only collect the goods the next day. That would cause a massive delay for the client and impact their customers.

The other option was to send the shipment anyway, with the unfinished product. However, that would also negatively impact the client, as they wouldn't be able to find the products they needed without the labels.

Were there other options? He could try to call the men back to work, but it was not ethical, and it was already late.

Thinking it through, Royce saw that the second option, to send the unfinished product, would be worse for the client, even though it meant the product would be sent faster.



Knowing that his decision was the best he could make in this situation, Royce put down his clipboard and joined his men to help finish labelling the boxes. It was going to be a long night, but at least he was doing something right in the bigger picture.

Even though they could not meet the target of sending out the boxes by the end of the day, Royce grimly took solace in knowing that he had done his best and was ready to face the consequences of his decision.

This story was inspired by James Chua.

*As a passionate broad-based professional with 20 years of collective experience in the logistics industry, James Chua is constantly improving himself with new skills, adopting best practices in the industry to lead inclusively.*

## **Making It Happen**

### Seeing Clearly In Stressful Situations

There are times in your life when issues arise, and there is no straightforward solution. So what do you do when you are headed towards a cliff?

The bitter truth is that you must make the most of the situation as much as possible. It's about focusing on the present and seeing what you can do to impact the future.

To do that, you must remember that your lens will get clouded when a situation becomes highly stressful and tensions rise. Your thoughts will naturally start racing; you'll think of the worst

## *Managing A Highly Stressful Situation*

possible scenarios and panic. That cripples your ability to see clearly.

There are two main ways you can deal with this. The first way is to have a list of go-to grounding activities to engage in when a stressful situation arises. The second way is to be mentally prepared for the situation as much as possible, helping you effectively manage them when they occur.

### **Grounding Exercises**

Suppose you are dealing with a stressful situation and want to prevent emotions from clouding your vision. You can keep your lenses clean by using these grounding activities to stay as rational as possible.

- Take a moment to breathe slowly.
- Focus on what is in your control compared to what is beyond your control.
- Firmly identify the objectives you want to achieve.
- Choose emotions that will enable you to stay focused and be empowered.
- Pick a course of action that leads to the least negative consequences.
- Gather the resources you need, whether it's staffing, time, or asking for favours.
- If you have the time, take 5 to 15 minutes to do a brain dump. Many thoughts are probably swirling in your head, and it helps to journal or talk about them with a friend.

It's not easy to deal with crises as they happen. Most people go into panic mode and cease to think effectively, and that's completely normal. It's tough to deal with, and that's why grounding exercises help. Pick one that resonates with you and works for you, and use it whenever you feel things are spiralling out of control.

Of course, if you have more time to plan for crises and can anticipate the type of crisis you might face, here's a second method you can follow.

### **1. Work Out Your Values And Emotions**

What values and emotions will help you better overcome the situation? Simply listing them down and mentally preparing yourself creates a path you can follow when the time comes. Here are some suggested values you can adopt in stressful situations.

- *Composure* - You are someone who keeps calm and level-headed, even when others are losing it.
- *Discernment* - When tensions are high, many people cannot see clearly. If you keep a discerning eye, you'd be able to add value to the team by identifying blind spots and solutions.
- *Decisiveness* - When your team looks to you to make a decision, being decisive rather than confused will reassure your team and move things along.
- *Endurance* - Stressful situations can often last hours or even days. Keeping resilient and persevering is crucial to managing a crisis.

Preparing a plan during calmer times is always better than scrambling to make a plan in stressful situations. Imagine if you didn't have these values laid out beforehand to guide you. You would still have these values within yourself, but you wouldn't be able to articulate them clearly. As a result, you'd enter crisis mode and respond very differently from what you believe is the right thing to do.

When you know your values, you know your identity and how to respond when situations change.

### **2. Establish Your Mental Model**

Your mental model is a combination of your attitude, self-talk and reflection. Your attitude is the mental state you embody when facing stress.

Your self-talk is what you tell yourself as you go through your day. For instance, if you're facing a challenge and tell yourself, "You're never going to be able to do this," that's negative self-talk. Or if you tell yourself, "I got this. I have the strength to pull through," that's positive self-talk. Self-talk is that tiny voice in your head that tells you what to think. Regulating your self-talk is one of the biggest things you can do to manage your stress.

In Royce's situation, his self-talk was positive but not necessarily helpful: "No matter how late they had to work, they had to get it done." Royce's self-talk here embodies a can-do attitude. However, it was impossible to work late to get it done, as the truck had to leave at a particular time.

Would working extremely late help or hurt his team? Would getting it done later in the day still mean they could meet the quality standards? Should Royce have better managed his client's expectations when the order came in at the last minute?

As you can see, we might think positive self-talk is always good, but if it is overly optimistic to the point where it creates a blind spot, it is better to adjust your self-talk.

Lastly, reflection refers to how you learn after a stressful event.

### **3. Respond, Don't React**

Now that you've established your mental model, you need to respond in a manner whereby your behaviours reflect your values.

In a worst-case scenario, you'd be trying to figure out what to do on the spot when a crisis hits. You might feel overwhelmed by what's happening, and you may react emotionally based on the habits you built in the past.

This is why it is crucial for you to respond and not react.

Responding means taking a pause. Process the situation, assess it for what it is, not what you feel, and then find a calm, collected, and well-thought solution.

If you are relatively new to dealing with crises, you're more likely to react instead of respond. In this case, how do you ensure that

## *Managing A Highly Stressful Situation*

you behave in a manner that aligns with your values? You need to come prepared.

Prepare by taking a block of time to reflect on potential problems that may arise. Assess the current direction of the project and its trajectory. What are some blind spots that you may have missed out on? What are common concerns or questions your team or your stakeholders may have?

Write them down and think thoroughly before answering those questions.

You don't need to have the complete answer to everything. Working on solutions and figuring things out as you go is okay. This exercise will help you shed light on scenarios you may have missed.

As you come up with answers to these questions, visualise how you would act in a crisis. Only then, you can use these answers to help you plan. This is how you build response tactics in your mind so that when bad situations arise, you have already given it enough thought that you have a good idea of how to proceed.

## **Reflection Questions**

- What are your existing values and emotions?
- What values and emotions do you hope to embody?
- What is your current mental model?
- What attitudes, self-talk, and reflections will help you grow instead?
- How do you usually react in stressful situations?
- How do you hope to respond in stressful situations instead?

## **Action Step**

Now that you've listed out your existing values, mental model and behaviours, make a comparison with the values, mental model and behaviours that you hope to embody. What are the top 3 changes you can put into practice today? Get started on that.

## BEATING BURNOUT

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Dry eyes may cause your eyes to feel tired and irritated, blurring your vision and clouding your perspective. Continuing to use your eyes in this state will only worsen things. If you're in this state and your eyes feel overworked and dried out, you'll need something to soothe your eyes.

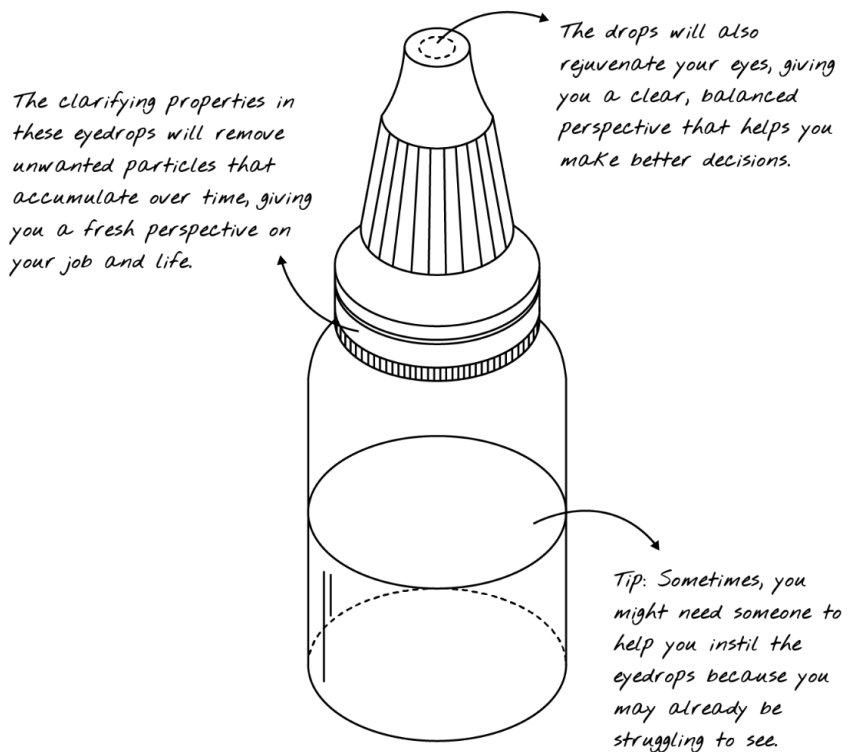


FIG. 3



## **Maggie's Story**

Maggie shifted nervously in her new office chair. It was day one of her new job at a local bank and her first time working in the private sector.

After the introduction with HR, Maggie met Larry, who would be her mentor during her probation period at the bank. Earlier that morning, she was told that Larry would fly off to China for a sabbatical in two weeks.

Larry welcomed her to the job, sharing information about the company and the office and answering any questions she had. After the quick introduction, Maggie was able to start working on her first assigned task.

At first, time passed slowly. But as the assignments and responsibilities stacked up over the next few days, Maggie felt the days blurring together.

One day, she'd be knees-deep sorting out documents for clients. Next, she'd be working on a slide deck for her team. The day after, she'd find herself working on a report for her senior, helping him organise and make sense of a data set.

She was working on newer and bigger tasks every day. She never felt like she could catch a break, it was always one thing after the other, and more tasks kept piling in. It was the same for everyone.

## *Beating Burnout*

There was a clique of girls Maggie joined for lunch. Every day was a complaining session about the workload, gossiping about bad teammates and bosses, and some regular chit-chat.

It had been two months working at the bank, and Maggie was in a weird space where she felt oddly focused at work but disengaged with everything else.

She did meet her close friends in the first month of work for moral support and to share what was going on with her in her new job, but as she adjusted to the workload, she spent more time focusing on her job and stuck to texting her friends instead.

At the end of each workday, Maggie felt physically exhausted and emotionally drained. She would be the earliest person in and the last one to leave the office.

But no matter how much work she did or how early she came in, she still felt like she could not complete all the duties assigned. Working this hard was taking a toll on her.

“Maggie, you have potential,” said Larry. He was back from China about six months after Maggie joined the team. Larry wasn’t working on or overseeing any of Maggie’s projects right now, but he was still there to guide her.

“You need to know that working hard is not the same as working smart,” he said. Maggie nodded quietly, eye bags under her eyes. “Some people who get the most done don’t stay in the office late. It’s all about planning.”

Maggie wasn't sure how much planning could help. She had planned, organised and maximised her time as much as possible. But in a high-pressure environment, everyone had a tonne of work to do, and they had to make sacrifices.

Also, wasn't it kind of unfair for him to say that? He was supposed to have helped her with on-the-job training in her first couple of months, but she had to learn and struggle on her own till she finally got the hang of it.

"Maggie, you need to take care of yourself. I come from a place of care. You don't look too good. You need to take time to eat and sleep well. It doesn't look good to the clients when you've got eyebags like that," he said.

"Thanks, Larry, I know." Her days were filled with work, and thanks to inefficiencies in the team or SOPs, she often had to spend more time cleaning up the messes of others. But, according to her lunch clique at work, this was normal.

Another thing that had become normal for her was barely sleeping six hours a night. Even if she got home a little earlier, at around 8.30 PM, she would spend the night watching shows, mindlessly scrolling through her phone, or going for a run to keep her mind off things. After all, she needed some time for herself, right?

Maggie looked Larry straight in the eyes. "I will work on being better, Larry. I don't want to let you or the team down. I'm trying to take time to rest outside of work and get things done faster.

## *Beating Burnout*

It's just that sometimes, a lot of new tasks crop up. So, for example, if someone makes an error, I have to spend time correcting it, or my manager gives me additional projects to take on, I can't say no. So I try to organise my time better and do what I can."

"That's good," said Larry, looking like he was about to deliver a much longer lecture. But he shook his head and said, "I hope your next performance review will be better."

Maggie cringed. She was thoroughly criticised in her annual performance review for not performing up to speed. But she wasn't sure what was wrong. She was giving it her best.

Jen, the girl from her lunch group, had told her casually, "If it's not just you struggling, and everyone else around you is also struggling, then it's not your issue." Jen left the company shortly after. She was one of many — the turnaround rate in this company was pretty high.

Still, Maggie saw veterans like Larry and several other senior employees who had stayed on for years. She wasn't sure if she wanted to stay that long but knew she didn't want to leave as a failure. She thanked Larry again for the advice and returned to her desk.

She couldn't ignore the tightness in the centre of her brain anymore. Whenever she turned her head or stretched her neck, she'd feel muscle pains shooting down her back.

Even though she had her friends at work who stuck together, and her teammates also worked hard to succeed, Maggie felt like she was all alone. She couldn't talk to her colleagues about this because then they'd know what a failure she was.

She also couldn't talk to her friends outside of work as she had already spent the first year at work giving it her all and neglecting her friends.

Katie, her best friend, still kept in touch with Maggie, but she could sense a wall between them. Katie was free-spirited and worked in an art studio as an instructor after graduating with a degree in humanities and arts. She could try to empathise, but she could never understand how trapped Maggie felt being part of the corporate world.

Every day felt like a loop in some demented, boring nightmare of paperwork and projects. But to be fair, Maggie liked the idea of working in a bustling environment in a prestigious bank, and she also enjoyed being able to learn new things every day.

She was stretched to do more than she could, but it would make her resilient. Right?

While that was what she thought, her mentor and seniors seemed to look at her like she was a liability. That scarring performance review knocked her down, and now she felt empty.

Her previous job wasn't like this. But it also wasn't at a high-profile company in the private sector like this one. She felt so

## *Beating Burnout*

exhausted all the time. At the same time, she felt guilty about complaining because it had been the same routine for the last two years.

Work 12 hours a day. Follow up with urgent emails and group chat messages on the weekend, asking her friends to meet in a cafe to work rather than going out properly, and doing ad-hoc tasks on the fly.

Maggie felt useless because everything she thought she could be, was only an empty shell. She used to be vibrant. Maggie used to be happy and full of laughter. She used to eat and slept well. So the question is, why couldn't she be like that again?

A little voice spoke in her head. A memory of what Jen said to her, "If it's not just you struggling, and everyone else around you is also struggling, then it's not your issue."

Maggie peered at her colleagues on either side of her cubicle. Peter and Simone. Peter was on a call, looking stressed and taking notes fervently as he updated some slides. Simone looked like she was buried under a mountain of paperwork. She was plugged into her headphones so she could focus, and her tired eyes reminded Maggie of her own.

Suddenly, Maggie saw them in a new light. Previously, she thought of them as tireless troopers who gave their all to the company and succeeded. But here's the question, how many of them were actually doing okay? How many of them were also suffering sleepless nights like her? How many of them were quietly suffering through the same grind as her?

Maggie suddenly felt very overwhelmed. Her life was her career. But she knew she needed to leave. Even if she was marked as a failure, she needed to go. She knew it in her heart, even if she would never admit it.

Fingers trembling, she pulled up a private internet browser and searched "resignation letter samples".

This story is inspired by Adeline Huang.

*As an experienced Human Resources Business Partner, Adeline directs a company's HR agenda to ensure that it closely supports its organisational goals. She is also a firm believer that learning is a continuous journey and age is just a number.*

## **Making It Happen**

### **Clear The Debris And Rejuvenate Yourself**

For Maggie, recovering from burnout involved helping others and being productive and useful. For others, what might help is mentorship, relooking the workload, open communication with bosses, or maybe even a sabbatical.

After going through her own burnout and talking to others who had experienced the same thing, the most important things she learned were that she was not alone and that there were always other options. It's just a matter of whether she could see and accept them.

Here's how you can beat burnout.

## **1. Clear The Debris In Your Sight**

Good eyedrops help wash away debris that may have been irritating your eyes. It is difficult to see when your eyes have dirt and dust.

A clean city's PSI is easily around 20 - 50. Anything above a PSI of 100 is considered unhealthy for the lungs. I once had to live in a city where the PSI was more than 400.

In that environment, my eyes were constantly irritated, and even when I returned home, they continued hurting from all the tiny particles. There was nothing better than using clarifying eyedrops that cleansed everything.

Burnout is a little like that. Over the years, you accumulate 'debris', and they irritate you. As the irritation compounds, you become more and more sensitive to even the tiniest bit of agitation. Additionally, when you clear the debris, you no longer have spots in your vision.

Similarly, when you are burned out, you are easily affected by negative factors, more so than usual. As a result, your perspective can also become a little skewed.

Whenever you receive a bad performance scorecard, negative comments, or bad news, it becomes very easy to feel like you are being persecuted or targeted.

It might be true that you are a victim in certain situations, but it doesn't help your mental state to fixate on that. Instead, accept



that it's true, then find your eyedrops to clarify your perspective.

Remove irritants that affect your mood so you can focus on what matters; finding peace and success for yourself without burning out.

So here's a question for you, how do you clarify your sight? By being aware of all the debris affecting your outlook and mood, listing them down, and then intentionally focusing on your goals. The debris doesn't always need to be an external factor. Sometimes, it's your internal self-talk that may be bogging you down. Examine that too.

## **2. Rejuvenate & Recuperate**

Secondly, eyedrops are great for rejuvenating and soothing your eyes. Your eyes often become dry when irritated, and the simplest actions you might usually enjoy, like reading a book or scrolling through social media, may become annoying or painful.

Similarly, not many things feel enjoyable when you're burned out. Even if you have the option to do fun activities or self-care, you might feel like you'd rather just lay in bed all day.

In such situations, you should focus on anything that creates true joy for you. It could be something as simple as eating a muffin you love, spending time with your cat, or going to a party.

Of course, there's bound to be some inertia, especially when you feel like you're pressed for time and energy, but I assure

you—by taking a little bit of time to apply a drop of 'eyedrops' every day, you are on your way to rejuvenating yourself.

At the same time, nothing is better than taking the time to rest your eyes so that they can heal properly. If you have become completely burned out, sometimes you just have to take the time to recuperate so that you can get back on track.

### **3. Get Others To Help You**

If you're unable to do your favourite things or pursue your hobbies, another thing that may help is finding someone who can help you. It's like getting your friend to help you administer the eye drops.

How does it work? Get a close friend to hold space for you and listen to your problems. It will be cathartic, even if it's just for a short time.

If you prefer not to talk to a friend, you could share your story anonymously by posting it in online threads. Plenty of people do it these days, and it's very liberating.

Alternatively, you can also talk to a therapist. It does not have to be expensive. There are many resources available online, in your neighbourhood or even in your country. Do some research and see what best suits your needs and your budget.

Rejuvenation is essential when you're so distracted and drained by focusing on your work, delivering value or meeting targets,

as we tend to miss the things that give life colour and it starts becoming dull.

Doing something you love, pursuing your hobbies, or seeking support from others will help you rejuvenate and recover from burnout.

In essence, clarify your perspective and rejuvenate yourself to deal with burnout. Like with real eyedrops, taking regular care of yourself is critical to returning to your best self again.

### **Reflection Questions**

- Are you able to tell what is causing your burnout?
- What adds to your feeling of burnout? This can be your workload, bad habits such as poor diet, or a lack of a sound support system.
- What might help to alleviate your burnout? This can be your hobby, meeting friends, talking to your superior about your situation, or more.
- Objectively speaking, what needs to be done to stop or prevent your burnout?
- Are you taking adequate care of yourself?

### **Action Step**

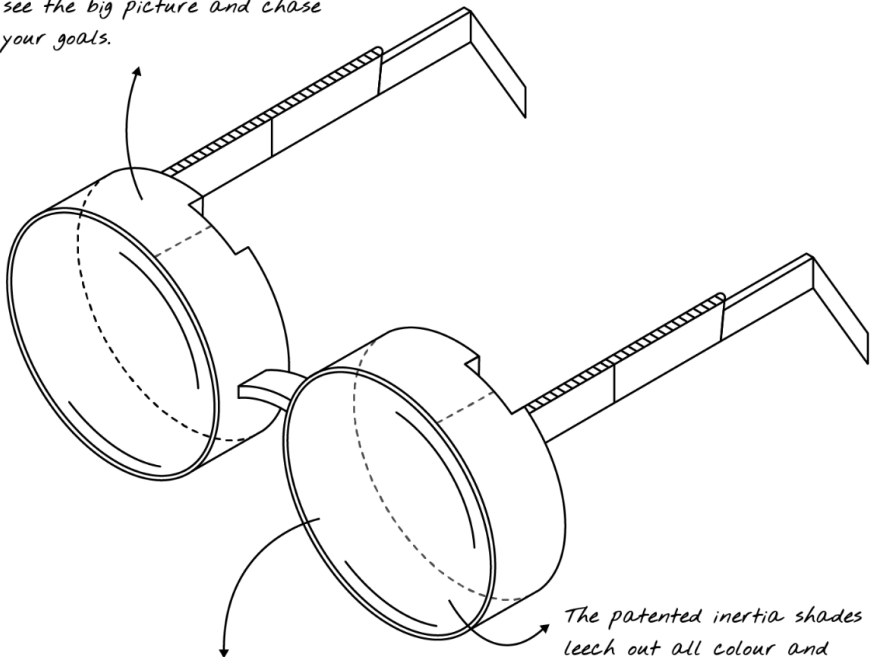
Now that you've listed all the factors contributing to your burnout, what are the top easiest 3 things you can do to start alleviating your burnout? Get started on that.

# OVERCOMING CAREER INERTIA

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Have you been feeling unmotivated or stuck in your career lately? You may feel like there is no point in trying to do better or looking for better opportunities. Just doing the bare minimum is more than enough. If that's the case, you may have career inertia. It's time to take these lenses off.

*The thick rims ensure tunnel vision, making it difficult to see the big picture and chase your goals.*



*Over time, these lenses become exceedingly comfortable, making you complacent. As a result, you may pass on opportunities you should have pursued.*

*The patented inertia shades leech out all colour and excitement from life, leaving you unmotivated.*

FIG. 4

## **Timothy's Story**

Timothy's job as a Business Development Executive was to find clients and bring in sales for the company.

It was his first job as a fresh graduate, and it was at a highly reputable company. He was determined to do his best and was full of energy and enthusiasm, especially in the first couple of months. However, Timothy found that while his strengths were in connecting with people, he wasn't as proficient in all aspects of sales yet.

In sales, gatekeepers, influencers, and decision-makers affect whether you make a sale or not. First, gatekeepers are the ones who get to decide whether you'll even meet with the influencers and decision-makers. The influencers are the ones who, as you might have guessed, influence decision-makers. Lastly, the decision-makers are the ones who make the final decision on the purchase.

As a young, eager and friendly fresh grad, Timothy was an ace when it came to dealing with gatekeepers, who were often the receptionists of the client's company. He was always warm and friendly and a great conversationalist, even offering to buy them coffee. The receptionists often loved speaking to him and would eventually give him valuable insights that ensured he landed a meeting with the influencers and decision-makers.

The difficulty started when he did gain access to the decision-makers, and everything started to go downhill.

## *Overcoming Career Inertia*

The receptionists were often sunny, friendly, and craved good conversation. Therefore, Timothy devised scripts that he could use on receptionists to persuade them to help him. It didn't matter which office building he went to; his method worked 90% of the time.

However, speaking with decision-makers was very different. They were often senior executives from different cultures around the world, and Timothy found it challenging to be on the same wavelength as them. In addition, looking at the client base he acquired with 60-80 prospects, he realised they all had different needs and perspectives, coming from diverse backgrounds.

There was no script that he could use to win all of them over.

It was a challenge for Timothy as it would take more than his relationship-building skills to establish himself as a trusted business advisor. To convert his prospects into customers, he knew that much more effort was needed to resonate with his clients and understand their real needs.

Timothy felt motivated to interact with people he could get along with, as they were on the same frequency. However, he felt like he had hit a wall with his clients. Subconsciously, he was unwilling to do what it took to improve himself. Instead, he was discouraged and disengaged from his work. Whether he knew it or not at the time, his internal engine was slowing down.

He took the time to hang out with his colleagues in the nearby coffee shops. He could do that since an empty desk in the

business development department meant the employee was out meeting clients. Timothy spent his days chilling with his colleagues between their meetings, trying to ignore the challenges he was facing.

When submitting his monthly report, he took the time to be extra kind to his manager, buying her a cup of coffee or complimenting her. Unfortunately, without realising it, his manager reviewed his report with a biased lens.

He did enough to get by but never pushed himself to do better. Timothy felt it would be all right if his life continued this way. His basic pay was already good enough to provide a comfortable life. With the occasional commissions he earned, he was making more than enough.

When people first join a company, they are usually in full gear. But as time passes and things get comfortable, they take a step back and slowly lose upward momentum.

Before he knew it, Timothy was not giving his best. It wasn't because he was burned out or demotivated. It was because he allowed himself to take a step back, little by little.

It felt like he was slowly sinking into a pit. The more he allowed this to continue, the more inertia there was. However, it was a comfortable pit, and he didn't want to get out.

While Timothy didn't realise it at the time, he faced inertia in his job and career. Had there been no external influence, Timothy

## *Overcoming Career Inertia*

would have likely continued working in that same office or another company in a similar role all his life.

Luckily, a new sales programme role opened up in the regional office of his company. Thanks to the time he spent bonding and building relationships with his colleagues and boss, they all liked him enough to nominate and promote him to work in the new department.

However, his new boss was a senior executive from Germany. This time, Timothy had to confront the wall he faced; there was no running or hiding away. He had to work in a regional role with people of different cultures.

As he actively connected with his global colleagues, he built relationships and learned how to work better with them. Slowly, the wall he faced started to crumble bit by bit.

Fast forward through the years, Timothy successfully climbed up the career ladder. With the strong relationships he built, he was able to move on to better jobs and improve his earning potential.

As a result, he was headhunted for several senior leadership roles in various companies, including a popular tech e-commerce company.



This story was inspired by Kevin Tay.

*The former Head of Talent Development at Lazada, Kevin is a man with a deep passion for learning, dedicated to seeing the strengths in others and developing people to reach their fullest potential.*

## **Making It Happen**

### Finding Your Path & Purpose

When you start a new job, there is always an initial thrill. The nerves may get to you, but the motivation and desire to perform and give it your best will drive you.

Some might call it the honeymoon phase when everything seems rosy and glowy. However, when a few months pass, the rosy glow can fade. So what do you do when the initial motivation for a job wears thin and you start to lose momentum?

You remove your shades.

Inertia feels like a heavy haze that settles around you, leaving you demotivated and unclear about where to go. However, when you take off your shades, you will understand that inertia happens due to two main reasons.

## **1. Having A Purpose**

Your purpose is your drive and hunger to succeed. It can't be a weak purpose, or it won't drive you at all. Your purpose can be linked to your desire for independence, the dream of starting your own business, or even the goal of achieving a comfortable lifestyle.

When your purpose is weak, you will find little drive to propel yourself further because you have become comfortable with where you are. Here's where we reach a paradox.

To do well and be comfortable, you will need to struggle first. It's a paradox that I experienced myself.

When I was younger, my family and I had to deal with the need to survive, as we were in poverty. Before I realised how dire my situation was, I was happy to live as I was, without any motivation. When the survival instincts kicked in, I had an awakening — an immense hunger to be stable, safe, and comfortable in my life.

You'll find that the most substantial purposes are those linked to your and your loved ones' well-being. What matters most in life to you? Link your purpose to that.

## **2. Knowing Your Path**

Your path is the game plan to fulfil the tasks you need, which will guide your next steps.

If you don't have a clear path to clear your tasks, you might feel daunted by the list of things to do and feel incapable of executing your duties.

Your path could be the technical skills required to complete your job well. It could also be the career progression opportunities available in your current career or access to information. Your path is anything that gives you a way to progress.

Both purpose and path are equally important. You could have a burning ambition but lack the approach to achieve it. That would lead to failure very quickly.

### **Reflection Questions**

Here are some questions to help you identify if you are currently experiencing career inertia and how to work through it.

- What is your purpose?
- What drives you to do better each day?
- What are the goals you are currently actively working towards?
- Where do you see yourself in six months to a year?
- How can you identify or pave a path to enable this?
- Are there any skills you need to acquire to make this path easier for you?
- What is one self-limiting belief that is keeping you stuck?
- What are some ways you can overcome this self-limiting belief?

### **Action Step**

Now that you've identified your purpose, path and self-limiting beliefs, what are 3 simple things you can do to overcome career inertia? Get started on that.

# THE ART OF LEADING LARGE PROJECTS

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Leading a huge project for the first time with its various moving parts can feel overwhelming. So while it's easy for you to plan the big-picture strategy, how do you ensure that the details are taken care of? You'll have to use a precise microscope to get to the details.

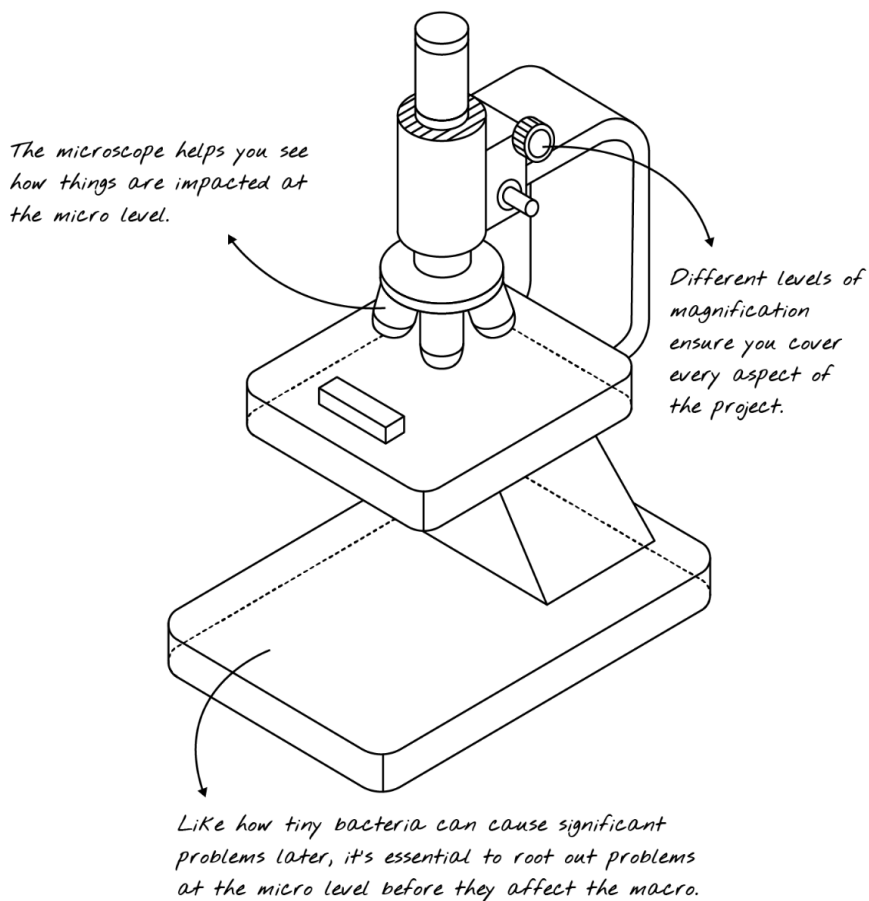


FIG. 5

## **Linda's Story**

Linda was a Cabin Services Vice President in a young and upcoming airline brand that was taking Asia by storm. The airline, SwiftAir, was loved by everyone for its fun, fresh, and bold branding. People were snapping up the brand's airline tickets every time they had flash sales.

Their website hits were extremely high thanks to the marketing team's efforts of going the extra mile by creating itineraries, guides, and listicles for customers. Internally, the people were fun, vibrant and fresh.

Linda loved working at SwiftAir and enjoyed helping the employees of the company, from the office workers to the cabin crew, lead their best professional lives.

Then, it was announced that SwiftAir was to be merged with a competitor, Stork Airlines, which their parent company had recently acquired.

Linda was tasked with managing everything and ensuring the transition went smoothly. This was the biggest project she had taken on in her career.

Although Linda felt grateful that she was given the opportunity, team and resources to make it happen, a small part of her did feel a little anxious.

Looking at the facts, she couldn't help but note all the differences between SwiftAir and Stork Airlines.

SwiftAir was a young, up-and-coming brand, just four years old, building its identity with experimental, fun campaigns and “party” flights with disco lights.

Stork Airlines was a company that had been in the industry for more than a decade. They had a no-frills approach to everything and never tried anything outlandishly creative, sticking to the methods that were proven to work.

SwiftAir was filled with young and travel-thirsty cabin crews who loved being able to see the world and travel to new countries on long-haul flights. Their average age was 24.

In contrast, the average employee age at Stork Airlines was 42. The cabin crew enjoyed short-haul flights, meaning they didn’t stay in the countries they travelled to, so they could return home to their families each night. The crew chose to work at Stork Airlines so that they could have this privilege.

The SwiftAir employees who got to stay in 4 or 5-star hotels considered themselves worldly and sophisticated and felt like they couldn’t click with Stork Airlines employees. SwiftAir employees were also paid more due to travel allowances despite being juniors when considering their experience levels in comparison to Stork Airlines employees.

Stork Airlines employees were used to smaller passenger groups, about half the number of passengers on a SwiftAir flight. Their culture and work DNA were entirely different.

## *The Art of Leading Large Projects*

Worse still, the flights had to merge, meaning that the employees would have to do both short and long-haul flights since they were one entity.

It would be a logistical nightmare to manage; there was no sugarcoating it. However, the biggest challenge would be managing the people, not the logistics.

Linda's head was pounding. The list of challenges seemed to pile on, and some of the issues affected her directly. For instance, this project was something she had to do in addition to her regular responsibilities. It would require her to invest hours for months while still meeting her other deliverables.

Stork Airline's organisational chart and set-up were a mirror image of what SwiftAir had. That meant everyone in her management team had a direct counterpart in Stork Airlines and that there was another Cabin Services Vice President in Stork Airlines doing the same thing Linda was.

Thankfully, there were still two positive aspects that helped. Firstly, Linda was given complete control of the reins, meaning she had the right to lead everyone without anybody from either airline disputing that fact.

Secondly, the senior leaders had promised not to retrench anybody for the first year. This allowed everyone to keep their rice bowl for a while and seek other opportunities if needed. It also made people less tense and more open to the transition.



With that sorted, Linda dived into the project. She started learning about the employees, understanding their needs, wants, career goals, and what kept them motivated at their job. No detail was too minor. No one's issue was too small to overlook.

As a leader, she was also responsible for developing the strategy to merge the two brands. The different airlines and crews needed to be integrated in a way that appeared seamless to the customer's eyes. In addition, she had to ensure that the employees adopted the new brand as their own and took pride in it.

She focused on driving the message that they had a common objective—to make their mark as an international player in the airline industry. They would have trouble achieving that if they remained separate small companies, especially with more prominent players on the rise.

Linda ensured that they merged and launched the brand with a big bang, using a new style of uniforms and a unified menu. Internally, she helped sort out the manuals, training guides, and remuneration packages so that employees wouldn't have to face an income disparity.

She also made it her priority to meet every crew member face to face. A meaningful way to achieve that was to conduct training sessions that helped the employees assimilate into the new company culture.

## *The Art of Leading Large Projects*

Linda presented a deck that helped her share what was going on with the company, how they would move forward, and what was expected of the employees. She also took time to hold space for the employees, asking them about their concerns and addressing them individually.

This was repeated for a workforce of hundreds of people, meaning that she conducted four to five training sessions per day over six months with her team. But again, this was on top of her existing projects, which made it a challenging period for her.

However, the work was worth it. It wasn't just about communicating a message. It was also about good leadership. The employees cared more about seeing their leaders in action and seeing that they cared, more than the messages they had to communicate. They valued how she took the time to listen to their concerns.

One time, two chefs from different airlines had a spat which surfaced during the training session. They couldn't see eye-to-eye on anything. They had different views on what kind of food needed to be cooked, the methods for preparing it, the volume to prepare, and what to do with leftovers.

Linda was initially bewildered, but as she asked more questions and understood the situation, it became clear that it all boiled down to different working styles. Hence, she asked them to do something difficult.

“Take a flight together,” she told them. “Both of you need to work in the same kitchen.” The chefs were upset and didn’t want to do it. “And after the flight, both of you will share a hotel room,” Linda insisted.

The chefs protested, but after her encouragement and insistence, they agreed. The rest of the employees in the room joked about the trip and said only one would survive the journey. Linda laughed along but maintained that it was important for people to empathise and work together.

So the two chefs took a trip to Japan, shared the same hotel room and had plenty of time to hash their differences out. When they came back, everyone who wasn’t on the flight was curious to know how it went.

It turned out that the chefs had several heart-to-heart talks, understood each other’s perspectives, and even travelled around Tokyo together, bonding over delicious Japanese food.

It was incredible, and they served as a great example of teamwork and collaboration despite all the transitional challenges.

Sadly, there were some worrying developments in the project. Not every employee liked or adapted to the changes and the new terms of their employment.

As such, people started leaving Stork Airlines in droves as the transition occurred. Not everyone liked Linda’s leadership

## *The Art of Leading Large Projects*

either. They didn't always agree with her values or style of doing things, and either felt disgruntled or left the company.

It was painful, but Linda learned not to take it personally. It's not that they didn't like her as a person. They just disagreed with her leadership values.

Were the values she held intrinsically bad? No. They were just different from what they were used to; at the same time, these values were necessary to drive the company forward.

Linda decided to buckle down and go full force with what she believed. She created a social media account to keep track of all the initiatives in place.

For example, she would take a selfie with all the employees after every workshop, and she made sure to tag everyone as best as she could.

When employees achieved something notable, she would post a photo to celebrate them, and when team bonding events took place, she also captured memories of them on the account.

It was an extra responsibility. She didn't need to do it and wasn't being paid extra for the effort of maintaining a social media account. However, she saw the power of building a community which was effective in helping the employees feel a sense of belonging.

In addition to helping employees on the ground, Linda also paid particular attention to the managers helping her. Led by a

Japanese phrase she heard as a young executive, *it's always darkest under the lighthouse*" Linda recognised the importance of paying attention to those nearest to her.

While things may seem alright on the surface, we may not always know what is brewing under the surface. After all, if she couldn't see the problem, how would she be able to attempt to solve it?

So Linda organised weekly catch-up sessions and monthly team bonding sessions with those in leadership positions so that they could better help the employees. They were incredibly insightful in raising issues she wouldn't have been able to see on her own.

After a year, the transition was fully complete. The result? Happy, closely bonded employees who fit into the culture and loved what they were doing. Those who were unhappy were given enough time to find a better fit elsewhere. Those who remained flourished with their new friendships and the work they enjoyed.

This story was inspired by Ju Li Ng.

*Leading the M&A between Singapore Airlines and the then start-up, Scoot Airlines, which involved a business unit of 1000 people, Ju Li is an HR professional with several years of service experience under her belt. She is currently the Founder of Uplearn and an Adjunct lecturer.*

## **Making It Happen**

### **Zooming Into The Micro**

Looking at the big picture is essential, but what many leaders lose sight of is the details. Decisions made on a macro level without knowing how it affects things at the micro level will result in negative consequences.

Linda took on a different perspective, in addition to knowing the big picture by using a microscope to identify some finer details. She did it in a way where she did not get lost in the details but used them to help her project become more successful.

Here's how you can emulate her technique by using a 'microscope' of your own.

#### **1. Start By Understanding People**

Linda started by understanding the 'why' of her team. Then she learned what drove them, their needs, wants, motivations and career goals. What was exceptional about her was that she believed no one's issue was too small to overlook.

Most leaders believe in looking at the big picture only. But there is power in knowing the small details. This information is the foundation for effective problem-solving when leading a project.

## **2. Creating A Common Goal**

A team objective is something everyone on the project should have in common. While there will be differences in the team, the project objective will serve as a north star.

Linda had an objective she needed to deliver to her bosses: ensuring a successful merger. However, the directions from upper management do not always translate neatly to a common objective for the team, which is fair since most employees focus on their needs first rather than the company's goals.

As such, she repositioned their objective as making a mark as an international player in the airline industry. This was a smart move since the employees now recognised that they needed to work together to survive in the global market. They needed to work together to ensure the success of their careers.

Imagine if she proceeded with a 'common objective' of creating a smooth merger instead. That would not have inspired as much camaraderie or action from employees on the ground.

## **3. Show Up And Listen**

Linda could find out all she wanted to about the employees and bring them together for a common goal, but it wouldn't have mattered as much if she didn't show up personally for her employees. She took the time to meet each cabin crew personally and gave them a space to share their concerns.

She wasn't guaranteeing that each of their problems would be solved, but she did ensure a listening ear for everyone. It greatly impacts employees when they see their leaders making an effort and showing that they care. I would go as far as to say that her actions here were what sparked a lot more engagement and loyalty to the company.

#### **4. Let Your Leaders Lead**

Linda had to give up much of her time working on the project. Naturally, she was not able to do everything by herself, so her strategy was to meet up with the leaders and line managers so that they could help lead the smaller teams effectively.

They were able to see things she couldn't and give her a different perspective. It is prudent to connect with team leaders more often to gather information and train them on how to help the employees best.



## **Reflection Questions**

- What are some of the finer details you might be overlooking?
- How can you better understand the people impacted by the project?
- What common objective will draw everyone together?
- How can you show up for your team members or employees?
- How can you best help your leaders and supervisors lead their teams?
- Are there any blind spots you are missing that you can cover by checking in with other parties?
- What do you hope to achieve with this project?
- How can you add value to the project?

## **Action Step**

Now that you've listed what you hope to achieve with the project and the team members or departments most likely to be impacted by it, what are 3 ideas you have that might help them navigate the situation better? Then, write out how you might bring those ideas to life.

## DEALING WITH VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS

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*You've finally been promoted to leadership after years of climbing the corporate ladder. Now you need to manage your stakeholders' points of view in addition to your teams'. How can you adapt to this jump and manage your newfound responsibilities?*

*By putting on your 3D glasses, you'll learn to bring together various lenses and perspectives to create a holistic viewing experience.*

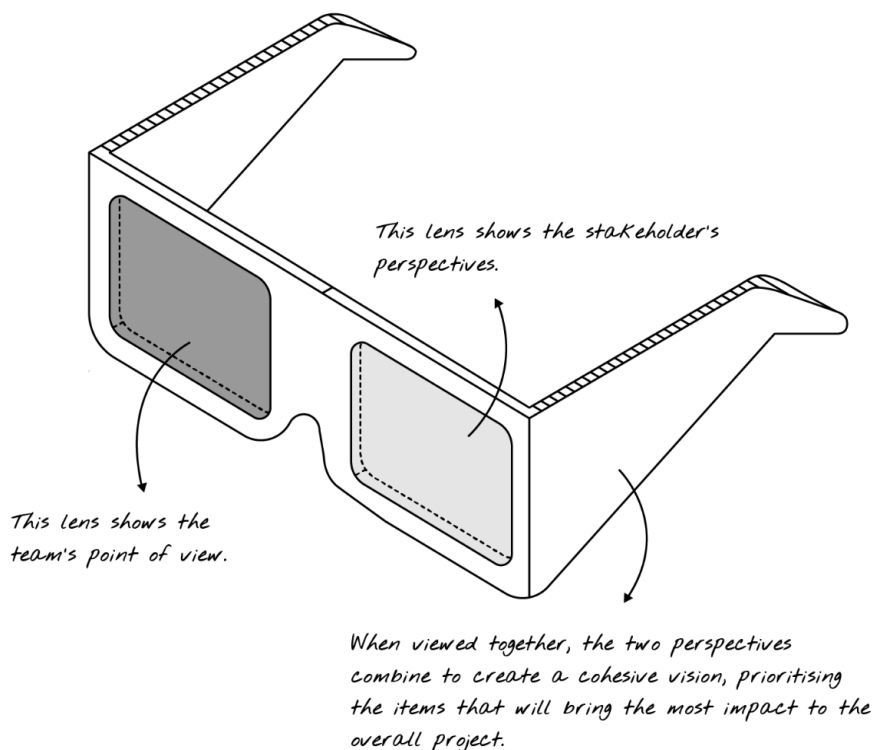


FIG. 6

## **Jonathan's Story**

After six years of working in one of Australia's national banks as a business partner, Jonathan received an opportunity that would change the course of his life. He was asked to be a product owner and project manager at one of the leading banks in Vietnam.

Working as a newly recruited expat in Vietnam was sure to come with its challenges and rewards. However, he wondered if he would be equipped to lead a large team in a working culture that was unfamiliar to him.

His new role was to drive the employee value proposition of the bank — the aspects that would help attract, retain, and engage employees effectively. It was a challenging project for various reasons.

Firstly, the project was trying to solve a complex problem that had existed for a long time; attracting quality talent and retaining them so that competitors wouldn't poach them. He also had to keep the employees engaged to stay motivated and actively contribute to the bank.

Failing to do so would heavily cost the company in lost talent, especially when competitors readily offered competitive salaries and benefits. That being said, monetary incentives alone would not solve the problem.

## *Dealing With Various Stakeholders*

Though the problem was old, the concept and solution they were using to solve it, the employee value proposition, was new. That meant that there were bound to be new hurdles.

Secondly, the project had many different stages, aspects, and stakeholders. He had to work with multiple sub-teams and vendors remotely, including hitting various milestones. He had to see the project through from conceptualisation and strategy to execution and measuring the project's outcome.

Thirdly, though a project like this should have taken at least a year, management had required it to be sorted within a few months.

Lastly, unlike a specialised project where the onus is on the subject matter experts to deliver, this project was open to others' interpretations and opinions.

Since Jonathan's project impacted the employee experience, it naturally invited a lot of opinions from stakeholders and various levels of management, even if they didn't have the subject matter expertise.

Like the old saying, "too many cooks spoil the broth", too many stakeholders were bound to complicate the project. The project could have been managed much more quickly if it weren't for this last factor.

Sadly, that wasn't the case for Jonathan; the reality was that this would be an uphill battle. But Jonathan was mentally ready for the challenge, which helped make all the difference.

Here's how Jonathan dealt with the various challenges and how you can too.

### **Working Closely With The Team**

The first thing Jonathan did was reframe his mindset. Knowing that more challenges were likely to crop up, he dedicated himself to doing whatever he needed to ensure the project succeeded, be it time or labour.

The second thing was to ensure he created a high-performing team by encouraging as many diverse perspectives as possible. Jonathan realised that for complex projects, it was crucial to include people who saw things differently from him.

Jonathan gave importance to the opinions of everyone, showing them that he valued them. Having people who think differently may seem counterintuitive. However, he knew that as long as the project's purpose was aligned with the team's diverse perspectives, it was still possible to be in sync and deliver on project outcomes.

The work environment was highly stressful and demanding, with daily alignment meetings in the morning and other meetings that lasted till late at night. Jonathan soon realised that the team's momentum and motivation were tied to how each member viewed the benefits of working on the project.

He took the time to bond with his teammates, celebrating milestones, meeting each other's families, and showing that he cared about them. That helped them build trust, knowing they

## *Dealing With Various Stakeholders*

could rely on each other and have challenging conversations when necessary.

### **Dealing With Stakeholders**

Jonathan was able to build a solid foundational relationship with the team. However, stakeholders were another matter. There was rigorous governance, monitoring and reporting structures for senior management.

Going through the layers of management, Jonathan would encounter different opinions and go back and forth about how to execute the project best.

In addition, everyone had something to add that was conceptually easy to understand but functionally very hard to synthesise, but that was still meaningful and reflective of the project's true purpose.

To overcome this, Jonathan held on to one main philosophy. To effectively manage stakeholders, you need to respect their thoughts and opinions. When applying this lens in his work, he realised he needed to let go of his biases and perceptions and try to understand the stakeholders' points of view.

That made it a lot easier to work together with the stakeholders. Rather than seeing it as battling against someone who disagreed with him, it was about understanding and compromising.

He made it about ensuring the end purpose is ultimately achieved and that there was unity in the project's vision. When

he constantly tied back this goal to teammates and stakeholders, it was much easier to progress.

The most rewarding thing for Jonathan was not the completion nor the recognition he received when the project was completed successfully. Instead, it was about building a solid connection with his team and creating a tangible product he believed in.

After all, he wouldn't remember the project's technical details years down the road. Nor would he remember what he said to various stakeholders or vice versa.

Instead, he would remember how it felt to lead a successful project with one of the best teams he had the privilege to work with. Likewise, he knew that his teammates would also remember the legacy of this project by recalling how they felt working on it and with the team.

As the famous Maya Angelou quote says, "... people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

This story was inspired by Steven Tran.

*As a successful HR transformation leader with several years of experience in the finance industry, Steven is focused on improving the employee experience by creating opportunities that will make a lasting impact, enabling people to focus on what matters to them.*

## **Making It Happen**

### **Drawing On Different Perspectives For A Common Goal**

As a leader, you will inevitably have to deal with various stakeholders in and out of the team. Even though you could have a clear objective, timeline, and the best people to help the project succeed, it could still fall flat if the stakeholders are not managed properly.

For instance, the client might have different expectations from the team. Or the team might have a different viewpoint from the stakeholders.

Given that it is a huge project, it's also likely that the team might burn out, and as a leader, you need to be able to foresee and put certain measures in place to manage that.

I could describe the different pitfalls, but in this particular area, you don't need a microscope to look into the details. Instead, you'll need your 3D lenses to help you merge two differing perspectives.

Here are some examples of the two personas or lenses you may encounter and what drives them:



## **1. Team Members**

Tends to deep dive into project specifics and details, is operationally engaged, and mindful of achieving the deliverables.

## **2. Stakeholders**

Tend to be focused on the big picture, driven by how the project helps the stakeholders achieve their KPIs. Usually less likely to feel the pulse of the working teams and have a lesser level of engagement with the project.

### **Commonalities:**

Both personas contribute directly to the organisation, departmental & individual goals.

### **How You Can Bridge The Gap:**

Highlight how the project benefits each of the departments, directly and indirectly. It is important to give recognition to both the team and the stakeholders and engage them appropriately.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to do that and become an effective leader:

## **Reflection Questions**

- What impact do you want to have on your teammates?  
How do you want to make them feel when they work with you?
- What impact do you want to have on your stakeholders?  
How do you want to make them feel when they work with you?
- What do your teammates and stakeholders have in common? How can you use that to synergise both parties and lead them?
- How do your team members and stakeholders differ?  
How can you bridge the gaps using the commonalities they have?

## **Action Step**

Now that you've listed how you would like to lead your team and manage your stakeholders, what is one main philosophy you should have that will anchor you as you lead your project? Write that down.

## MANAGING UP

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You might think you need fancy lenses or gadgets to have a better relationship with your boss. But the truth is, you only need to give them a second perspective and watch out for their blind spots.

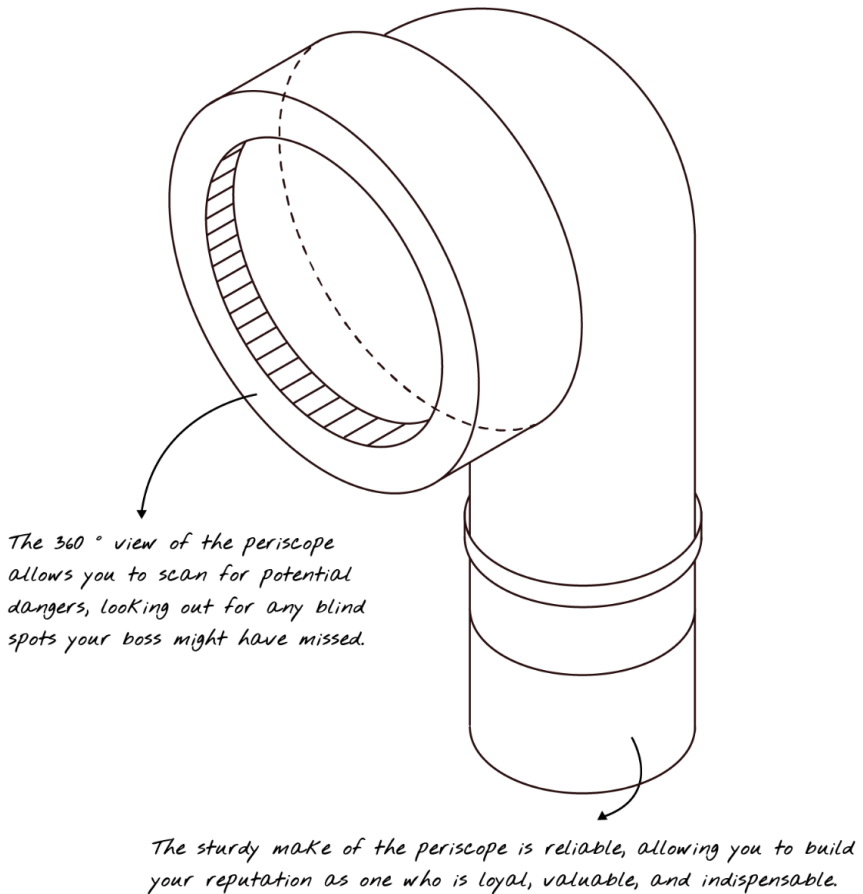


FIG. 7

## **Charles' Story**

Charles loved working with his boss. He had just moved to China to take over a team in Shanghai. It was a huge role, and he was nervous because it was his first time living in China, and he wasn't used to the culture.

The team he would be managing was larger than any other he had taken on before. On top of that, the team was disengaged and underperforming at work, meaning that it was his job to lead them, encourage them, make them feel engaged with their work, and perform better.

In addition, Charles didn't have much time to adapt or prepare. He started this post immediately and had to hit the ground running. So, Charles relied on his regular working style and leadership.

Unfortunately, his colleagues ended up disliking him and couldn't see why he was chosen to be the leader. Thankfully, Charles' boss Chen, the General Manager for China, understood his situation clearly and came to the rescue, offering support in a non-intrusive and respectful way.

For instance, Charles' team of quantitative researchers kept showing slides filled with numbers and data, which made presentations very dry.

The presentation was meant to be shown to their client, and Charles told them that the heavy usage of statistics would not be easy for the client to digest.

The teammates were affronted and did not listen to his advice. They felt that since they had been interacting with the client much longer, they knew better. Charles pushed back as their leader, but the team stuck to what they believed.

Charles felt stuck and tried to resolve the problem, but Chen, who noticed the issue asked Charles to prepare a template for the slide deck. Chen then publicly approved the slide template, which gave the team no room to disagree with using it.

Chen was very empathetic and wanted Charles to succeed, especially since others before him had failed. Therefore, Chen gave Charles opportunities to grow with the right level of support.

He was never blunt or dismissive; he was a graceful boss. Chen became a teacher, friend, leader and mentor. He helped Charles succeed and grow like he never did before.

Charles' secondment to the Shanghai office was initially agreed to for a fixed two-year period, but he stayed for 10 years until he took on a new assignment.

Charles didn't expect to stay that long, but he found himself wanting to, despite the rough patches the company had to go through. At some points, the business wasn't doing too well, the number of local shareholders lessened, and many new talents and leadership came in to rescue the company.

Through all of it, Charles remained focused on aligning his vision with Chen's. Whatever Chen did, Charles focused on supporting

rather than disrupting — unless certain issues needed to be highlighted.

In addition, Charles ensured he surrounded himself with the right people who cared about others and the team. Over time, he created an environment where the team naturally cared for one another, and it became a lot easier as his colleagues observed how he treated his boss and mirrored him.

One of the moments that stuck with him most was his birthday. It happened to be a hectic day at the office, and everyone had to work overtime.

Still, the team made time to throw a surprise party for him with a cake and had a small performance with props and costumes. Charles teared up when Chen and his teammates shared their heartfelt wishes.

The lessons Chen taught him are still as valuable today as they were then. Even today, Charles still chats with Chen and turns to him for advice.

Charles knew how fortunate he was to work with a boss like that. The above is one of those lovely cases when someone encounters a great boss. You could struggle with your role, but they understand your challenges and guide you to succeed.

A few years later, Charles' situation changed. He got a promotion and was now reporting directly to the China CEO. Unfortunately, the CEO, Benjamin, did not like hearing different

viewpoints. He believed effective leadership came from having power, and power came from fear.

So, Benjamin instilled fear in all his employees at every opportunity. He didn't care what his people wanted and didn't show concern when they worked long hours — he worked them to the bone. Even when people fell sick, he asked them to stop slacking off and be more committed to their work.

Researchers who had spent years tirelessly working at the company every day were asked to do the work of data analysts, which was outside their job scope. If they disagreed, they were called irresponsible and told they weren't good or loyal employees.

Benjamin liked to surround himself with yes-men and women. When making decisions, he did so behind closed doors and only with people he knew would endorse his point of view. The business needed a new direction, but he was unwilling to change the status quo.

As Benjamin's newly appointed right-hand man, Charles felt he was not privy to important discussions because he had a different point of view. However, Charles knew that if he were to try to talk things through with Benjamin, he would be outraged.

You see, Benjamin was very insecure, despite being the CEO. He was uncomfortable in a diverse environment and had trouble being open to differing perspectives. In addition, Benjamin was

unwilling to learn because he was not humble enough to acknowledge his limitations.

While humility is necessary when working for a boss, Charles knew humility and submission were not the same. Someone that shows humility is willing to listen and take suggestions onboard. Charles' ideas weren't superficial or groundless. They were based on his years of experience.

Charles did his best to package his ideas well, putting them across in a way that was as palatable as possible to Benjamin. Charles also sought the help of his colleagues.

He brought them into meetings as much as possible, showing Benjamin that the idea was a team effort since doing it in a group created more validity. However, Benjamin still discarded all of Charles' ideas and efforts.

Working with Benjamin was frustrating and disheartening. In addition, his leadership style led to complacency in the workplace and a lack of transparency, resulting in distrust and disengagement.

Over time, Charles saw capable senior personnel leave, one by one. As a result, the business also started to decline. Disheartened and feeling like there was nothing more he could convince or do, Charles left to join a competitor.

Charles felt incredibly sad to do so, as he loved the company and its people dearly. However, it came to a point where he was



no longer being valued or put in a position where he could contribute.

While working in Benjamin's ecosystem, there was no two-way relationship and no mentorship or validation of his skills.

As much as Charles tried to have a better working relationship with Benjamin, it did not make sense for him to stay in an environment that continued to stunt his growth.

Charles knew he had the right attitude to build a good relationship with his boss. He believed in making his boss' job easier by understanding him as a colleague and person.

However, if one party does their best to improve the relationship while the other continues to sabotage it, it will not work out.

This story was inspired by Javier Calvar.

*Javier has handled countless mergers and acquisitions as a veteran with over 30 years in the consulting industry. He is an expert at delicately balancing internal and external stakeholders' interests while still keeping in line with the project or merger outcomes. His passion is to help brands and businesses create value and grow responsibly.*

## **Making It Happen**

### **Working Well With Any Boss**

Sometimes bad bosses like Benjamin can't be helped. They may never be receptive to your ideas and the value you have to provide. But, at the same time, you may also meet bosses like Chen, who will be a mentor and eventually a lifelong friend. Like Charles, you must focus on doing your best until you can't.

Managing up is about making your supervisor's job easier and adapting your behaviour to match your boss's management style, which allows you to work well with (almost) any boss.

Here are some things you can do to manage up.

#### **1. Understanding Your Boss**

Knowing your bosses' goals will help you better understand them and their motivations. This will allow you to better anticipate which projects matter more to your boss, allowing you to prioritise, deliver and provide solutions that matter the most.

#### **2. Figure Out Their Communication Style**

Does your boss like to communicate over email or text? What are the times they are most responsive? Getting a good grasp of their communication style will allow you to get the answers you need quickly. You'll also be able to provide them with important updates and keep them in the loop.

### **3. Always Offer Solutions, Not Problems**

Don't get me wrong; problems are inevitable in the workplace. However, instead of constantly going to your boss about a problem and asking them to fix it, you can bring up the situation and offer potential solutions, asking them which solution they prefer. This casts you in a good light and shows that you are proactive and initiated.

### **4. Make Your Boss Look Good**

Take a moment to see how you can make your boss's life easier. For example, do they have a report coming up? You could prepare the raw data needed for that report. Try to anticipate your boss's needs to make their work easier and get their job done well. When you make your boss look good, you look good too.

### **Reflection Questions**

Here are some questions to help you 'manage up' and better work with your boss.

- Are you aware of your boss's job scope and KPIs?
  - What can you do to help them hit their KPIs?
  - What can you do to lessen their workload?
- Are you aware of your boss's perception of my work?
  - When was the last time you had a chat about aligning with your boss?
  - Have you asked them what you could do to improve?
- What are some of your boss's weaknesses?
  - How can you help complement their weaknesses with your strengths?
- What is your boss's 'love language'? What do they respond to the most at work? Is it when they are praised, thanked, given a gift, asked for advice, have their work done efficiently, or something else?

### **Action Step**

Now that you've gotten a better understanding of how your boss works, what are 3 things you can do to make their job easier? Get started on that.

# WORKING WITH DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

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When you work with a lot of different people, it is going to get messy. You might want things as clear and straightforward as possible and even force your way to make it happen.

Spoiler alert: It's not going to work out that way. You can never please everybody, and you can't get your way 100% of the time.

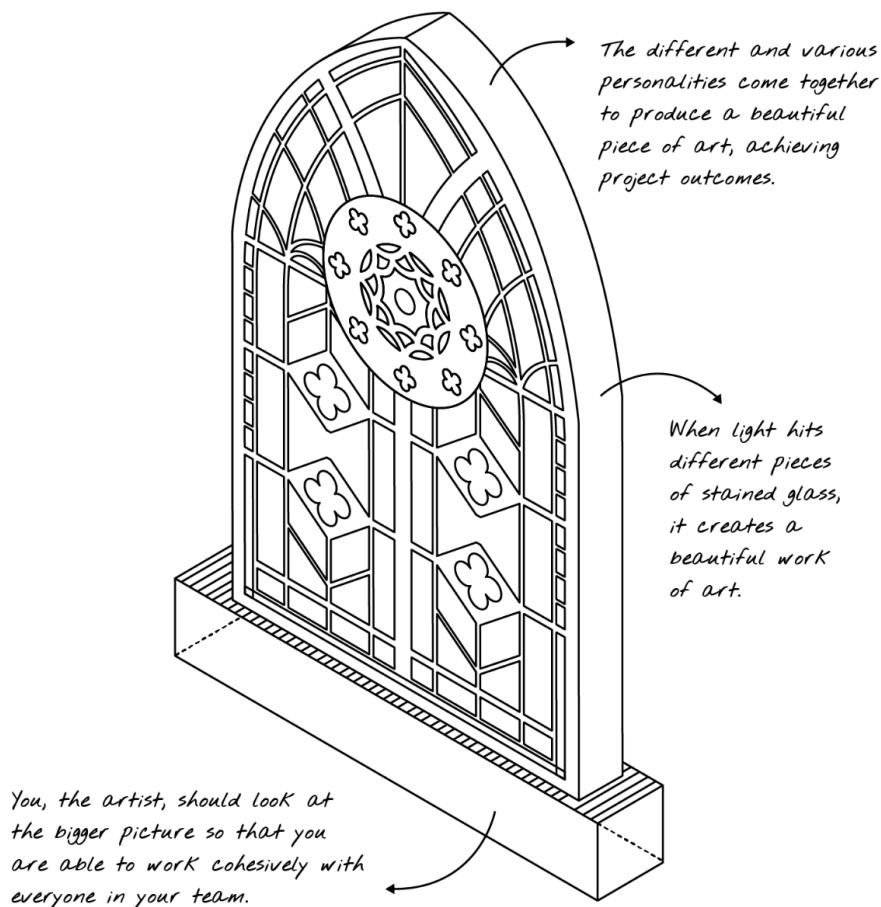


FIG. 8

## **Brandon's Story**

Brandon loved his job. He was in charge of customer experience and operations at one of the world's best airports.

You know how grocery shops put children's treats on lower shelves, where they can be reached easily, and expensive items at adults' eye levels? This is an intentional shaping of the user flow, which impacts how shoppers behave when they enter a grocery store. In this case, the goal was to get them to spend more.

In Brandon's case, he was working in a busy airport. The goal was to make the airport pleasant to be in, convenient to navigate, and luxurious and beautiful, helping it retain its title as one of the world's best airports.

His day-to-day job entailed all sorts of tasks, from sorting out details like how many trolley chains should be placed and where, to large-scale projects like planning the floor layout for shops and amenities in the upcoming terminals.

As someone who is a problem solver by nature and loved seeing how different parts fit together in creative ways, Brandon flourished in his work. The work felt inspiring and sufficiently challenging, but in his early days, he faced a big obstacle: dealing with difficult people.

Just like Brandon, his colleagues were passionate about what they did, sometimes a little 'too' passionate. For example, his colleague Bruce from Retail was very defensive about the

number of shops to be placed in the airport. More shops meant more profits. Whereas, in Bruce's eyes, it was straightforward.

Brandon did recognise that more shops would make the airport remembered for its shopping experience instead of being recognised as a premium luxury airport. It would be no different from a neighbourhood shopping mall packed with shops.

Brandon needed to convince Bruce, but Bruce was determined to bring in more profits. "How can you suggest having more space?" demanded Bruce. "Sure, it looks nice. But is all this space going to bring in money? Can you justify all this space with all the money you're losing for the company?"

Brandon was used to dealing with people charged with emotions, determined to hang on to their viewpoints. Instead of holding his ground and insisting that he was right, Brandon introduced reason and other stakeholders into the picture.

"Listen, Bruce," said Brandon. "I agree with you. We'd lose out on the chance to earn so much money. If we added more shops, we would definitely have more profits."

Bruce started to look appeased and looked ready to end the discussion.

"When we have more shops, though, we don't get to have the luxury and premium user experience. So there needs to be a balance between the profits we bring in and the customer experience while shopping at the airport.

If our user experience drops, fewer customers will be interested in staying at the airport. This means lesser footfall for the retail shops. In addition, our chance of winning awards for our airport also drops significantly. What do you say we have a chat with some of the guys from the quality team? They know how this stuff works."

"I guess we could do that," said Bruce, a little displeased. However, he recognised the importance of maintaining the airport's award-winning reputation and thought it was better to get the opinions of others too.

Bruce was one of the 'easier' people to deal with. Brandon sometimes had to deal with people who acted like hawks. If they ever saw the slightest opportunity to gain an advantage for themselves, they would come swooping in for the kill, even if it was at the disadvantage of others.

Brandon found it painful to work with people like that and he found that the solution lay in meeting their needs and appeasing them to an extent. When he understood why they acted a certain way and their motivations, he found it a lot easier to be kinder and friendlier with them.

It almost became like a game. Every time Brandon encountered a 'hawk', his challenge was to figure out a way to appease and tame it. When they could relax enough not to take things too seriously, they were able to make concessions more easily.

As Brandon spent more time in the organisation, he met all sorts of new people. Some were more open-minded and willing to



listen to other perspectives than others. The more open ones were easier to work with since it was much easier to communicate and come to a logical understanding.

One day, one of his colleagues, Tracy, a lady who had been in the company for a long time and thought herself an expert, obtained several management consultant trainees for her team.

Brandon, being friendly to everyone out of principle, made it a point to chat with the trainees and made them feel welcome. However, he soon realised that Tracy wasn't giving the trainees any work. When asked about it, she said she was busy with other things, even though he knew she had the bandwidth.

Brandon felt a little surprised at that. He figured that even though she wouldn't be convinced to prepare work and a learning plan for them, he could still help. He didn't want to offend or overstep boundaries, but he wanted to make the working environment better for everyone.

So Brandon gave the trainees some additional work to do, which would enrich their working experience. As a result, the trainees felt much happier at work and were encouraged to help other team members as well. Seeing this happen, Tracy knew she couldn't ask them to stop doing work and instead assigned them tasks to work on.

Brandon encountered a lot of negative situations in his work life. One thing that he did differently was to look at people with a different lens. Rather than allowing his innate reaction to be anger, displeasure or grouchiness, he gathered whatever he saw

## *Working With Different Personalities*

in his surroundings and processed it in a way that he could add value the most.

Unreasonable people became challenging puzzles to figure out. Difficult situations become a game where the goal is to de-escalate tension and defuse the 'bomb'.

No matter what he went through, he tried looking at things with the bigger picture in mind and how he could add the most value. That was one of the main factors that made him a lot more likeable and made his colleagues easier to work with.

This story was inspired by Andrew Tan.

*With nearly three decades of experience in the aviation industry, Andrew is the Vice President and Head of the Airport Operations Consultancy as part of the Changi Airport Group. He has also worked in Singapore Airlines, SATS and Jet Airways. He has spent over 12 years in 9 different cities across the world, working with diverse people from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities.*

## **Making It Happen**

### **Looking At The Big Picture**

The people who get along with everybody are some of the most valuable assets to teams and have a great potential to become leaders.

The tricky part is getting over your biases, dislikes and resentment by being more inclusive and open to working with people who pose a challenge to you.

#### **1. Don't Take It Personally**

Don't take your coworker's actions personally as difficult as it is. When your coworker gets worked up over something, there is usually a whole list of factors causing them to react in a certain way.

You should always communicate calmly and concisely, not allowing their behaviour to get the best of you. This will allow you to quickly come to solutions while keeping the big picture or project outcomes in mind.

#### **2. Always Self Regulate**

As challenging as it is, try your best not to lose your cool. Just because a colleague spoke to you with disrespect does not mean that you should act similarly.

Always take the high road and let them know you do not appreciate being treated this way. You should nip the

unacceptable behaviour in the bud before it escalates. However, you should do it in a manner that lets your professionalism shine instead of stooping down to their level.

### **3. Be Self-Aware**

Being self-aware means that you know your strengths and weaknesses. Firstly, you are aware of your emotions, especially in challenging situations and how they affect you. In addition, you are adept at dealing with others' emotions and responding to them appropriately for a mutually beneficial outcome. This allows you to effortlessly manage any challenging situation with poise and skill.

## **Reflection Questions**

Often, dealing with difficult people is more about them and their issues than it is about you. Here are some guiding questions that will help you put things into perspective.

- Are you taking the situation personally?
- What is the disagreement about?
- Are you considering your colleagues' perspectives and points?
- How can you align your difference to the big picture?
- Are you communicating openly and clearly?
- Are you getting emotionally agitated?
- What are some things you can do to self-regulate?
- How would your best self respond in this situation?

## **Action Step**

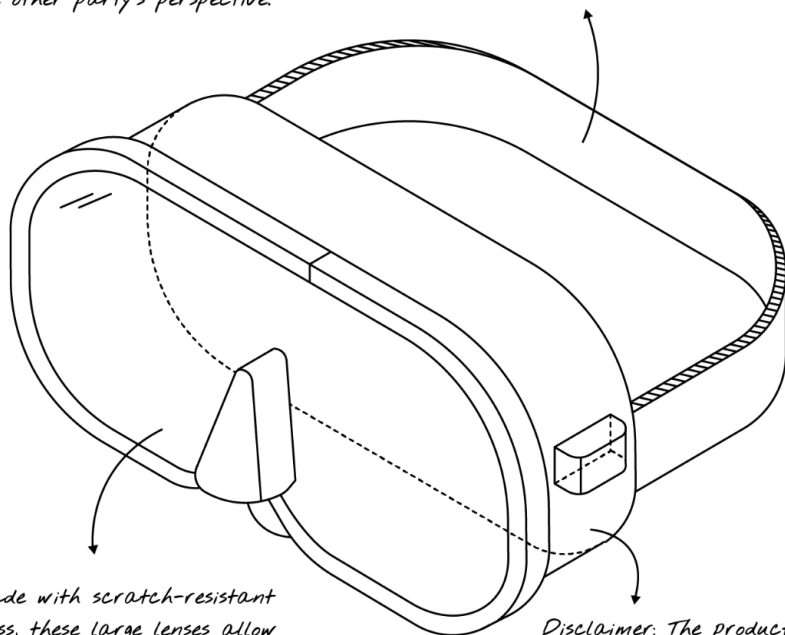
Is there a challenging colleague you have to deal with? How can you approach them to bring about a mutually beneficial outcome? Get brainstorming.

## WORKING EFFECTIVELY ACROSS CULTURES

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Deep diving into a new culture, corporate or otherwise, is like immersing yourself in an unfamiliar ocean. You'll need more than swimming goggles to see clearly. You need to equip yourself with a high-quality dive mask.

*The industry-grade rubber grip keeps your diving mask air-tight and free from leakage, enabling you to stay true to your values and culture while still seeing the other party's perspective.*



*Made with scratch-resistant glass, these large lenses allow you to see clearly into the deep, helping you have a broader view and letting go of narrow mindsets.*

*Disclaimer: The product's effectiveness depends on the user's discretion. While a diving mask will enable you to see clearly, the user's safety and enjoyment depend on their own skills.*

FIG. 9

## **Carl's Story**

Carl had always considered himself multicultural. Growing up in the melting pot of Singapore, he was used to interacting with people from different ethnicities and had friends from various cultures.

Working as a sales professional in a large MNC enabled him to discover other cultures through his colleagues from the UK, Australia, Hong Kong and Japan. He worked in the sales department and had to service a vast database of customers from highly diverse backgrounds.

Their cultures informed how they expected to be treated when he was pitching a product. For instance, in some modern and open cultures, customers would directly tell him they were not interested in the product and would get annoyed if he tried to push the product again. In more conservative cultures, people were indirect about their disinterest in a product.

He took time to observe and research each culture and thought about how to connect with them better and solve their problems. It also helped that he was working in a multicultural environment. As he worked with people from different countries and interacted with them outside of work, he noticed their different mannerisms.

He was mindful not to stereotype and took in the information he learned from each person and used it to form an understanding of their culture. His curiosity deepened his

current friendships as they saw how he sought to understand them on a more meaningful level.

It was this set of values, in addition to his excellent performance at work, that got Carl promoted one day. He was asked to move to Shanghai, one of China's most cosmopolitan and vibrant cities. He would become the Managing Director for the region.

Carl was eager to get started. He had travelled a lot, but this would be the first time he lived outside Singapore. He looked forward to learning from his new colleagues instead of just leading them.

His team comprised people from different parts of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. When he arrived, however, he found that he was considered an 'outsider'.

Carl took on a lens of discovery, understanding and learning to help him succeed in Shanghai. He would have to immerse himself in a variety of Chinese cultures.

Even though he couldn't see the differences between his teammates' cultures at first glance, he knew it would be a mistake to assume everyone worked in similar ways.

Before joining, he did as much research as possible, talking to people, reading cultural reports from trusted sources and diving into different forums on living in China as a foreigner.



He discovered that as Shanghai is a commercial city, people tend to focus on their personal interests, recognition and tangible rewards in their work.

Interpersonal relationships also mattered more to people born and raised in Shanghai, whereas those from Beijing focused more on the country and nationalism. Those from Guangzhou valued relationships more than transactions.

What he did know was that each group of people spoke different languages. For instance, the Taiwanese spoke Mandarin, Hong Kongers spoke Cantonese, and depending on where one came from in mainland China, they could speak Shanghainese or many other dialects.

Thankfully for Carl, China's official business language was Mandarin. Carl had a decent command of Mandarin through his training in his younger days, but his gratitude for it was short-lived as he learned it was almost useless.

Business Mandarin was quite different from the conversational Mandarin that he knew. So he had to unlearn and relearn Mandarin to communicate well with his team and customers.

As he worked on relearning the language, he also started noticing different characteristics of people. For example, when it came to conversations and intonation when speaking, Carl realised that he had misread the hidden meanings of what was being said.

For instance, in more conservative cultures, an outsider might think they were politely stating their opinions when the truth was, they were showing their disapproval.

After he settled in at his job and was familiarised with how things worked at that office, he started focusing on leading the team. But unfortunately, this was where he ran into a wall.

As he tried to lead and connect with his teammates, he discovered no one liked to talk about their process on how they did things.

Carl thought it was strange that when someone did well, and he wanted to congratulate them and find out how they did it, they usually shied away from sharing their answers. He thought perhaps they just preferred to be modest about their success.

Carl continued trying different methods, discarding whatever he discovered didn't work. One of the methods he tried was to hold a meeting with everyone since one-on-one sessions didn't work, asking them to share their feedback on how he could do better.

No one gave a word of constructive criticism. On the contrary, many shared positive feedback. It was bewildering. He tried getting them to submit feedback via an online form, hoping the privacy and anonymity would help. Still, nothing but positive praises. Were they trying to curry favour with him?

Pouring over the form responses, Carl acknowledged that the language barrier could be part of the reason they failed to communicate.

Carl was not the best at business Mandarin yet, and the others from various parts of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, grew up speaking different dialects and had to pick up the working dialect over time.

Reflecting on how his teammates chatted so easily with one another but not him, he wondered if he was doing something wrong that he hadn't identified yet.

However, the other team leaders were doing alright. Local leaders had no trouble communicating with and developing their teams. However, Carl didn't like how self-centred they could sometimes be.

He had observed some local leaders in meetings and noted how the employees did very little talking, just a lot of agreeing. There was a clear difference in levels between them and their employees.

Maybe that was it. It was common in the Chinese culture to focus on hierarchy and power. So perhaps he was expected to do the same?

Maybe his teammates weren't unfriendly or reserved. Instead, they didn't want to look bad in front of him, their leader, by talking about his mistakes or talking in depth about their processes in a language they weren't entirely familiar with.

Carl decided to reframe the situation. Rather than focusing on prying into processes, he focused on leading. He organised

weekly mentoring sessions with his teammates and assigned topics rather than asking them what they wanted to improve on. He taught them various tips and techniques he had learned over the years in sales, sharing his own stories and anecdotes.

He never once asked any of his colleagues to volunteer information and encouraged two-way conversations only when they felt comfortable and initiated one.

As for his colleagues who faced a language barrier, he started teaching them English during the weekly sessions and gave them resources to improve in their own time.

His teammates started walking out of these weekly meetings with a spring in their step. He always encouraged and praised them for the work they did well, and they beamed from the recognition of their boss.

Over the months, his team realised that he never punished anyone for making mistakes and created a safe space for sharing their thoughts. However, people were still reserved and highly polite when expressing their opinions.

Through it all, Carl was humbled by the cultural learning journey. Over time, his colleagues started to see him as a sincere and trustworthy person that was approachable, which was the most rewarding aspect for Carl.

As soon as he took on a broader lens, he was able to see the nuances between people and cultures. With that lens, rather than being focused on being liked, Carl was naturally able to

solve problems and integrate into new cultures quickly while staying true to his values.

This story is inspired by Victor Yeow.

*With more than 15 years of experience and a successful track record in top-level sales, marketing and general management, Victor is the Regional Director of JF Hillebrand, Aisa Pacific, with a passion for attracting and developing talent.*

## **Making It Happen**

### **Deep Diving Into A New Culture**

As you might tell, Carl had a very good 'diving mask' in the workplace. He was constantly facing challenging cultural differences, but rather than getting frustrated, he found a system to manage the situation.

#### **1. Being Self Aware**

Despite diving into a whole new environment, every diver still keeps their own biases. While the ocean might surround them, they still look at their surroundings through an airtight pocket of air.

Carl did the same. He knew he viewed the situation from his culture and biases. But Carl didn't assume that his methods were always correct. When he started work, Carl quickly acknowledged that he was wrong when his perception of how his efforts would be received did not match reality, and he corrected himself.

He wasn't wrong to have his own lens and culture. But Carl was aware of his biases and how they mired his perspective. Everyone brought something different to the table, and Carl just wanted to ensure that everybody could work together smoothly.

## **2. Take On A Wider Perspective**

It's easy to go into a new culture wanting to be liked. However, when you focus on solving problems, helping your peers and making progress at work through your key performance indicators, being liked becomes a byproduct of the process.

Carl used this perspective to obtain and sort out clues objectively. Think of when he did research, observed the people around him, or reflected on the reason for his teammates' behaviour. He then used those clues to help him understand their culture.

If you focus on solving problems and delivering value rather than worrying about whether or why people may not like you, you will be able to adapt to the new work culture.

What can you do to widen your perspective and better understand your new work environment? Here are some questions to guide you.

## **Reflection Questions**

- What are some biases that you have?
- Is there a method or way of working that you think is best?
- Is the culture you come from more extroverted and hierarchically flat?
- Is it normal to speak your mind when having differing perspectives?
- What are some of the norms and beliefs in your new environment and culture?
  - How do people lead?
  - How do people work together?
  - What encourages people or gives them their drive?
  - What is considered to be a job well done?
- What are some of the norms or beliefs you have that might be causing friction in this new environment?

## **Action Step**

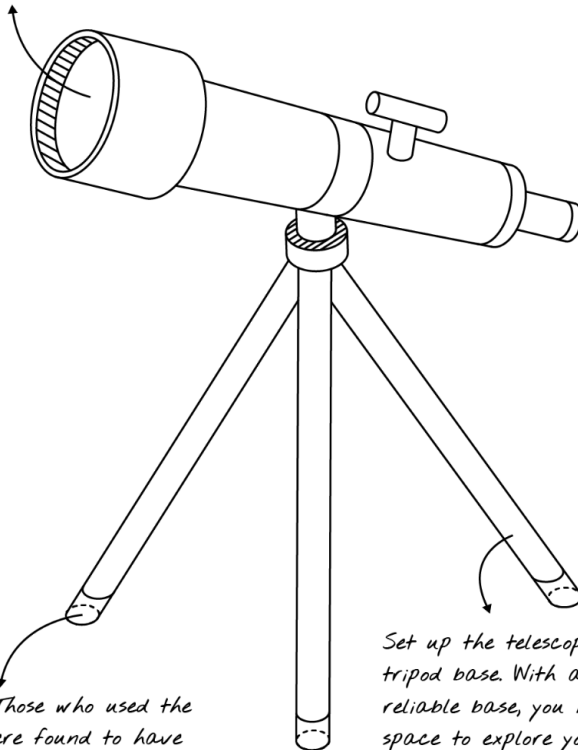
Now that you've listed your biases and understood what may be causing friction in your new environment, what are the top 3 fixes you can try to improve the situation and widen your perspective? List them down and start making it happen.

# HOW TO PLAN YOUR CAREER

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Many people don't know what they want in their career or what to do to get there. Having a tool to help you see the bigger picture puts things in perspective. Try the telescope to see which stars you want to aim for in your life.

*The multiple lenses help you zoom in on particular stars and constellations. You can view a star, a specific job role you are aiming for, or a constellation, a broader career scope with various opportunities.*



*Fun fact: Those who used the telescope were found to have increased clarity, motivation, and momentum to make their next career move.*

*Set up the telescope on a sturdy tripod base. With a strong and reliable base, you have a safe space to explore your strengths and weaknesses.*

FIG. 10



## **Ryan's Story**

Ryan started his journey as a management trainee in a local logistics company. After five to six years of hard work and a career move or two, he landed a regional role in one of the leading tech companies in the world.

The way he achieved this career jump was not by chance. There was a lot of planning, mindset shift and deliberate actions taken to get there.

### **Taking An Active Role**

As a management trainee, he was given the opportunity to experience various organisational roles. Ryan knew that this role would set the foundation for everything to come in his career.

Even though he had a specific set of responsibilities, he strived to expose himself to various assignments, knowing that each task would deepen his knowledge and understanding of the industry and clients.

As he gained more experience, Ryan started focusing on what he didn't know more than what he knew, which allowed him to identify the skills he needed to ascend the corporate ladder.

He then spent his free time building the skills he was missing. It was the key he needed to secure further career advancements.

While Ryan honed his skills, he also loved being able to deliver excellence for his clients, exceeding their expectations. While

working closely with them, Ryan noticed that he felt intrinsically curious about their businesses and how they function.

### **Going After Growth Opportunities**

Fuelled by the desire to deepen his business knowledge, he decided to join an MNC in the commercial airline industry, where he could work in logistics while contributing to the organisation's business aspects.

Initially, he struggled to cope with the increased complexities and collaboration demanded at the regional and global levels. However, through keeping an open mind, learning on the job and adapting to changes, his days got better, and he soon found himself thriving in his new role.

It also helped that Ryan's boss was open to considering new ideas, letting the team experiment with new initiatives. This gave Ryan a safe space to make mistakes, learn from them and grow.

Eventually, Ryan's hard work paid off. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ryan's strategies helped to pivot the company, generating a huge revenue stream during a time when most of the industry's businesses had been severely affected.

After two years at the company, he knew it was time to make a move. So he took on a more prominent role in one of the world's most famous consumer tech companies.

Looking back on his career, Ryan realised he could easily move toward growth opportunities because he aligned his career goals to his growth.

Earlier in his career, if he hadn't set up a good foundation and soaked up all he could learn, he would have been oblivious to the required skills and how to improve himself.

Firstly, he built himself up with the required foundational knowledge by being adept at his tasks and having firsthand knowledge of complex operational processes. Then, he got a deep understanding of the organisational structure and kept good working relationships with his colleagues.

Once he had equipped himself with foundational knowledge, he shifted gears and focused on learning how to create an impact in the organisation.

His mindset of taking charge of his personal growth and development kept him motivated. Instead of viewing it as climbing the corporate ladder, he focused on improving his skills and bringing more value to his clients and the organisation.

He saw how his future could shift and change with every career move. Recognising that every person's career path and career moves are unique, he worked on deepening his self-awareness, allowing him to gain clarity on what would work best for him.

Deepening his self-awareness did not come as easily as sitting on it and reflecting for a while. It took time. His self-awareness

## *How To Plan Your Career*

came about only when he had clarity on his competencies, capacity, and commitment to the trajectory he wanted to take.

With that mindset, career planning became fun, motivational and meaningful. Searching for the next job was never something to dread but an exciting opportunity to pursue.

This story was inspired by Gareth Yeo.

*Starting as a scholar with a supply chain company Gareth has experience across various industries such as Pharmaceuticals, Medical Devices and FMCG Electronics, meeting both Service Quality and Financial targets. He is focused on intentionally aligning the digital ecosystem to the industry by having a detailed understanding of various Operations Processes. He is currently part of the APAC Logistics team at Apple.*

### **Making It Happen**

#### **Reaching For The Stars**

Career planning can be complex. Some take an active approach to plan their careers. Others may be passive and have a 'just see what comes next' mindset. If you are reading this chapter now, it means you have some interest in taking control of your future, and no, it's not too late.

Here are some guiding questions to get you started. Take your time to genuinely consider these questions and let them set your path.

## **Reflection Questions**

### **1. Identifying Your Passions & Strengths**

- What do you enjoy doing?
- What puts you in a state of flow when you are focused?
- What are some of your professional strengths, skills, and areas of expertise?
- Is there a career or a job title that is a combination of your passions and strengths?
- Can you see yourself doing this job for the next five to ten years?
- What do you intend to get out of your career? E.g. Giving back to the community, helping others in need, helping brands make data-informed decisions? There is no limit here.
- What does job satisfaction look like to you?

### **2. Assessing Your Situation**

- What are the common job descriptions for your desired role?
- What skills do you need that you currently do not possess?
- How long would it take you to get the skills you need for the role?
- Is there a class or online tutorial you can take to bridge that gap?
- Is there someone you know who works in the industry whose advice you can get?

### **3. Looking Beyond**

- What do you hope to be doing one year from now?
- What about three, five, and ten years from now?
- What do you need to do to align yourself to your ultimate goal?
- What milestones do you need to hit or work experiences to gain to get there?
- What's stopping you from hitting the next milestone?  
What can you do to overcome that?

### **Action Step**

To achieve your career goals, you need to identify the gap between where you are now and where you want to be. Now that you've listed your goals and potential careers, what are the 3 easiest things you can do to get started?

## WHEN TO CHANGE YOUR JOB

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When you wear rose-tinted glasses, everything becomes varying shades of pink. You start seeing things only one way, which becomes dangerous with prolonged use. It's time to take these lenses off.

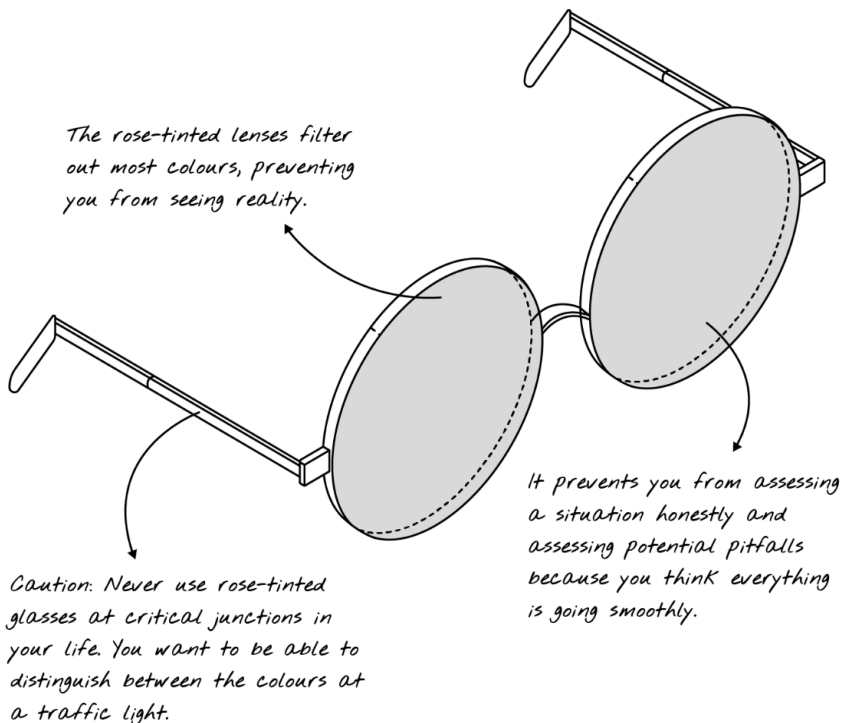


FIG. 11

## **Elliot's Story**

Some people go about their careers by switching jobs every two years or so, not realising that they are running away from a deeper problem.

Some people who should be changing their careers prolong staying in their jobs as they believe leaving would be considered 'running away', and it would not look good on their resume. You don't want to be either of these kinds of people.

You want to be someone who makes their decision clearly, and with a plan in mind. How do you know if you're running away from your job or doing the right thing by quitting?

I'll answer this question with my career story. As someone who has worked in eleven different jobs for eight companies throughout my life, I've had to grapple with the same question.

### **1. It's Not Running Away If It's Part Of Your Career Plan**

I've always been asked, "Are you running away from your job?" at interviews. It was normal for me to receive that question because I did make many career shifts, especially at the beginning of my career.

For some context, I started my career working in the Air Force. I worked for the Air Force for six years since I was bonded to them through my scholarship. The next step I rightfully should have taken if I wanted to follow the same trajectory would have



been to pursue an engineering degree and become an engineering officer.

However, I took business and management courses instead, then became a training and performance consultant.

Anyone from the outside looking in would have said I ran away from a stable and respectable career. However, it was one of my best decisions, and it has made me as successful as I am today.

If I was going by my instinct and felt that I needed a career change because I disliked engineering, or I felt like I was stagnating, then chances were that I was not thinking it through logically.

Instead, I was doing some deep self-reflection. Where do I see myself in the next five to ten years if I were to continue this path? If I climbed the ladder in the public sector, like in the Air Force, I would need management skills and commercial knowledge instead of technical engineering knowledge.

With this line of questioning, I realised it made more sense to learn management than to pursue an engineering degree. So I took business and management courses, learning Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) and experience-oriented management.

These skills became pivotal as they enabled me to become a training and performance consultant. I helped businesses and facilitated workshops for over 2000 people, which I immensely enjoyed.

## **2. It's Not Running Away If You're Searching For Growth**

Over time, I found myself stagnating a little. I enjoyed learning and facilitating training sessions, but I was yearning to acquire new skills and expose myself to more experiences so I could increase my value to future employers.

I wanted to grow and expand beyond my current role. However, I had only been a consultant for about two or three years, so I felt conflicted about making a switch.

So I spoke with my friends to get some advice. They encouraged me to look for other roles that would give me the needed exposure. One of them even referred me to work at an MNC as a regional sales trainer.

Thankfully, I was offered the job at the end of my first interview. I then realised that had I not stepped out of my comfort zone, I would not have explored other possibilities.

## **3. It Is Running Away If You Give Up Without Trying**

When the MNC offered me the job, the thought of 'running away' returned. I did not have experience in sales, even more so in training and developing sales professionals.

Despite the hiring manager's reassurances that I was the right candidate for the job, I was doubtful of my own capabilities. Nevertheless, trusting the hiring manager's judgement, I took up the role.

My first project was to facilitate a global functions workshop. The goal was to bring functional leaders from the finance and business operations team to create a single management tool that would allow them to track their team's performance effectively.

The project had dragged on for years, passed on from one person to another. Now I was assigned to complete the project once and for all. However, since the project was not related to sales training, I started to doubt myself and lose confidence.

I just wanted to 'run away' so I would not have to deal with it.

I've seen friends, colleagues and mentees feel disempowered when they think of changing their jobs. They may want to change their jobs, but as they do, there are a lot of doubts that arise.

Perhaps they start doubting their capabilities or wonder if they are leaving prematurely. Some start wondering if they are being disloyal or making a choice that will impact their career negatively.

Negative thoughts like these are bound to bubble up. The last thing you should do is let them reign over you. Think about it. You have gotten this far based on your own merits. You know much more now than when you started your first job.

#### **4. It Is Not Running Away If Its For Your Health**

Years later, I was headhunted to be in an organisational development role, helping the head of HR and administration. In addition, I was also given the post-merger management role for the China office.

It was an exhilarating yet mentally and physically demanding experience. I worked fourteen-hour days, seven days a week, for over six months. This took a toll on my personal and family life.

I was conscious that if I continued with this rhythm for the next twelve months, it would have irreparable effects on my physical and mental health, which would also affect my family.

I had to make a call, so I tendered and started looking for opportunities elsewhere.

### **Making It Happen**

#### **The Best Time To Leave Your Job Or Career**

So, how do you see your situation clearly? Take off the rose-tinted lenses, and assess the situation unbiasedly. Here are several critical questions to help you do that.

#### **1. Identify Your Push Factors**

What's propelling you to leave this job?

- You are stagnating at the job.
- You can't stand the work or the industry.

- You're bored with the work.
- There's a toxic culture at the workplace.
- There are no opportunities for growth.

## **2. Identify Your Pull Factors**

What's compelling you to leave a job and join another company?

What do you look forward to in a new job?

- You are excited by growth opportunities.
- You are passionate about exploring a different industry.
- You look forward to working on certain projects.
- The culture is incredible and healthy.
- There are flexible working options at the company.
- You have plotted your career trajectory and identified that you need to make a shift in jobs to hit your career goal.

Looking at these pointers closely, you'll see that push and pull factors are opposite sides of the same coin. You can experience both a push and a pull at the same time, and that's okay.

However, you should be concerned about whether you are pushed and pulled every time there is a setback. For example, do you try to run away when there's a setback at your workplace? Or do you try to push through it?

Your actions depend on what you deem important concerning what you want in a career.

## *When To Change Your Job*

For example, let's take a look at 'Laura'. Laura believes it's essential to have good harmony in the workplace. So if her colleagues are snappy, gossipy, or rude towards her, it's very easy for her to feel like she needs to move away from her job.

On the other hand, let's look at 'Dora'. She works in the same workplace as Laura, and what's most important to her is not harmony with colleagues but flexible work hours to take care of her children.

So when Dora encounters rude or gossipy colleagues, she is taken aback, but not as much as Laura. If Dora were asked to return to the office permanently, that would be enough to push her away to a different workplace.

## **Reflection Questions**

Different people have different thresholds. To figure out if your boundaries or thresholds are reasonable or not, ask yourself these questions:

- How much can you accept factors you don't like at the workplace? Where do you draw the line?
- What are the time, opportunity and cultural costs you need to pay when you take this job?
- Looking at your strengths and weaknesses, which industries would you thrive in?
- Do you want to change jobs after the first setback, or is this something you are trying to tackle and resolve?

Often it may be better for you to work through the challenges you are facing, but there are times when it is more prudent to walk away.

## **Action Step**

Instead of 'running away', think about running towards your dreams and aspirations. What are the main things that are bothering you right now at work? Identify whether it warrants quitting your job or what you should do to tackle the situation. Then get started on potential solutions or a resignation letter.

Remember, there is no judgement here. You need to do what's best for your overall career trajectory.

## REBOUNDED FROM CAREER SETBACKS

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*In a harsh winter, the weather is out of your control, and your environment is blindingly bright, making it almost impossible to see. When life inevitably happens, it can feel out of control, even unfair. These snow goggles will help you gain perspective.*

*These adjustable straps allow you to stay protected yet remain adaptable despite external conditions.*

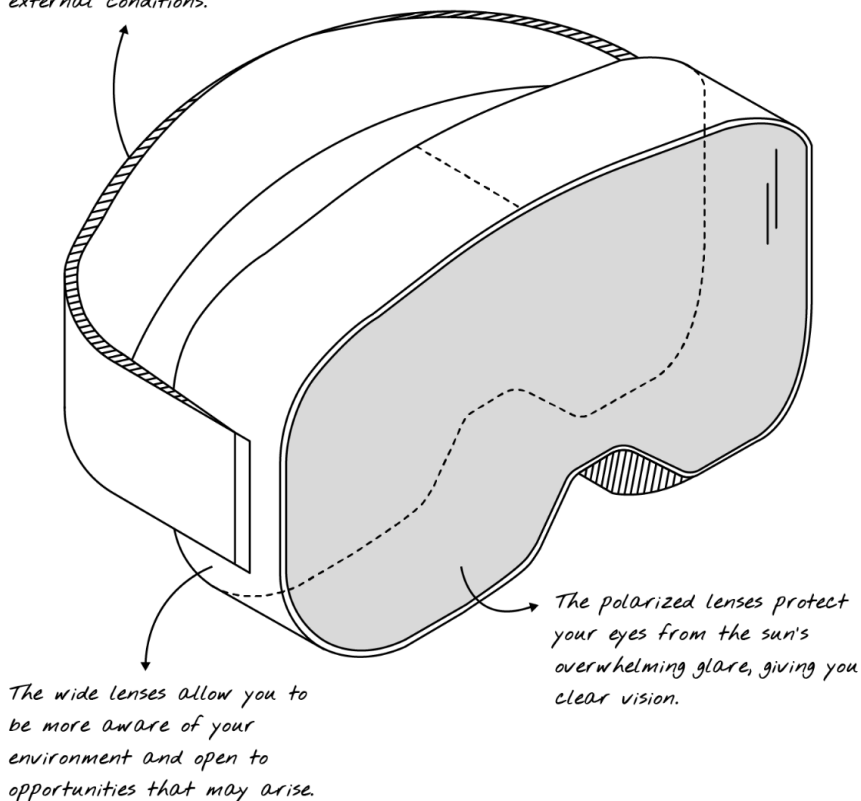


FIG. 12



## **Taylor's Story**

Taylor's career journey was not linear. When she was young, she thought it would be simple. Her dream was to be a doctor so that she could help people.

However, when she was seven years old, her father passed away. As a result, her mother struggled single-handedly to raise her and her siblings.

When it came time for Taylor to go to university, her mother told her the heartbreaking words: "I'm sorry, but I have no money to afford your university. You need to work after your 'A' Levels."

Taylor's heart shattered. Her hopes and dreams were broken, which filled her with so much resentment. She had planned to become a doctor her whole life and even chose the subjects that would make it easier for her to gain a spot in studying medicine.

While an 'A' Level certificate was great for increasing her chances of admission into a university, it was useless in helping her progress in the working world.

With just an 'A' Level certificate, her options were entry-level jobs with poor prospects for climbing the company ladder or menial jobs that wouldn't bring in much income.

As a science stream student back in the 80s, upskilling options were unavailable. The only path Taylor could take was to be

## *Rebounding From Career Setbacks*

attached to an accounting firm as an articled clerk, studying part-time to become a qualified accountant.

It was against everything she wanted, but it was better than working in a job with no specific goal or few prospects.

After gaining her certification as an accountant, Taylor eventually moved on to various roles in multiple sectors - hospitality, offshore banking, self-regulated organisations, exchange and asset management, finally settling into the financial industry.

It was a painful reality to swallow. When Taylor was younger, Taylor told her mum that she would never be a banker, yet here she was years later. Thankfully, she realised it wasn't as bad as she initially thought.

There were different opportunities within the bank. By exploring various functions such as finance, risk management, loan restructuring, compliance, and business management, to name a few, she realised that she could shine in this industry.

Even though this industry was wildly different from what she wanted to do, staying adaptable and being able to easily grasp complex financial knowledge set her apart.

As 'luck' would have it, in 2012, a few major banks were fined for poor anti-money laundering controls. This opened doors for Taylor into the world of financial crime compliance, which has since become a much sought-after skill set in many financial institutions.

Her worldview widened as she met more people and networked with young professionals globally. She started identifying areas she could grow in and became a trusted subject matter expert in financial crime compliance.

Eventually, people started turning to her for financial advice and mentorship. She realised she could still impact and help people, especially as a mentor to young professionals or a subject matter expert in risk management and financial crime compliance.

She took on personal projects such as learning Python, a computer programming language and never saying no to any opportunity to learn and grow. Taylor did not have a background in IT but kept an open mind and was willing to upgrade herself, which landed her the role of Head of Compliance in a fintech startup.

She had the opportunity to travel to many developing countries in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia through her work and volunteering with Bankers without Borders.

She volunteered in the Philippines and Bhutan conducting corporate governance and risk management workshops for senior leadership in micro-financing institutions. These opportunities opened her eyes to what she could do to help others as a banker.

At work, her responsibilities involved working to prevent bad actors from accessing the company's financial system to launder

## *Rebounding From Career Setbacks*

their ill-gotten gains through vice activities like drug trafficking, human trafficking, and more.

Taylor could use her talents to do 'skillanthropy'—philanthropy using her skills. Her superpower was the ability to use the skills she learned throughout her entire career journey to promote financial inclusion initiatives and help the less fortunate.

Thirty years later, things have come a full circle. Despite feeling like she started her career on the wrong foot, Taylor saw how her career journey was not as straightforward as others, but it still led her to her initial aspiration of helping others. Now she could help them improve their lives financially, if not physically.

This story was inspired by Julia Chin.

*As a multi-lingual seasoned financial industry professional with over 25 years of experience in policy implementation, Julia has worked in consultancy, global banking and regulatory entities such as Standard Chartered Bank, HSBC, Deutsche Bank, KLOFFE and KPMG. In addition, she has considerable experience in implementing and designing standards of control frameworks in Asia and the Middle East. She is currently the Head of Compliance at Hugosave SG.*

## **Making It Happen**

### **Staying Adaptable In Tough Circumstances**

Taylor had weathered harsh conditions in her life, more so than the average person. But, as life happened, she had to learn to

adapt. She wore her snow goggles which helped her see better and adapt to her harsh new reality.

The moment kept an open mind and put on her snow goggles, she realised that she could survive and even thrive in her new environment.

There were all these other opportunities she didn't see earlier because she was fixated on the path of becoming a doctor. So here's how you can stay on the path despite your circumstances.

### **1. Identify Your Purpose**

Taylor's primary purpose was to help people, especially the less fortunate. She derived her satisfaction from knowing that she had made an impact. Therefore, it was a non-negotiable that in whatever she did, she wanted to be in a place where she could give back to society.

As long as that was her goal, she could widen the opportunities to those she hadn't considered before. She started out wanting just one career, but she ended up with a journey of multiple meaningful careers.

Your purpose is not tied to a job or a career goal. It is tied to what change you want to make in this world or how you'd like to give back to society. It is the why behind doing what you do.

## **2. Stay Adaptable**

Sometimes in life, things happen that are way beyond our control. We may have done everything right to achieve our aspirations, dreams and expectations, but still, not everything goes according to plan.

The key to success is staying adaptable and resilient by correcting your course as your situation changes.

It is only natural to get anxious and frustrated when your plans change due to external factors. Unfortunately, most people try to force their old plans onto the new situation instead of adapting.

I believe that when one door closes, another opens, even if it may not seem apparent at the time. There is a high chance that life is directing you to a different path. Be open to exploring, and gather the skills and knowledge to help you keep moving forward in your life journey.

## **3. Be Open to Opportunities**

In tough times, it is easy to succumb to tunnel vision. Opportunities you would have otherwise pursued look like dead ends, and you can feel stuck in a loop.

In the corporate world, being curious to learn and always being willing to explore will open you to opportunities you may not have considered.

This mindset is critical, as most professionals focus on achieving a particular goal without considering other lateral or diagonal moves.

Many think finding the best job is a matter of accumulating all your resources and finding the perfect job. But instead, it is about finding a suitable job, connecting with great mentors, and picking up skills, knowledge, and experience along the way.

Ultimately, it's about understanding ourselves — our strengths and weaknesses, our values and motivations, and deciding how much energy we are willing to invest to achieve what we want. These are the main factors to consider when picking the right job opportunity.

### **Reflection Questions**

There will always be challenges in life, and things might not go according to plan. So how can you adapt and make the most out of what life throws you? It's time to put on your snow goggles.

- What is your primary purpose?
- What obvious career paths allow you to reach your purpose and goals?
- What are the current opportunities that are present to you right now?
- With these opportunities, are you still able to serve your purpose? What would that look like?
- If you've hit a snag in your career, what are some skills you can pick up to put you back on the right path?
- Is there a similar job role you can try in another industry to help you reach your goals?

### **Action Step**

Now that you've come up with potential paths you can take moving forward, narrow down 3 opportunities that you can start on. This may be reaching out to the right people, sending an email to enquire about a job or even researching classes that you can enrol in. Get started on that.

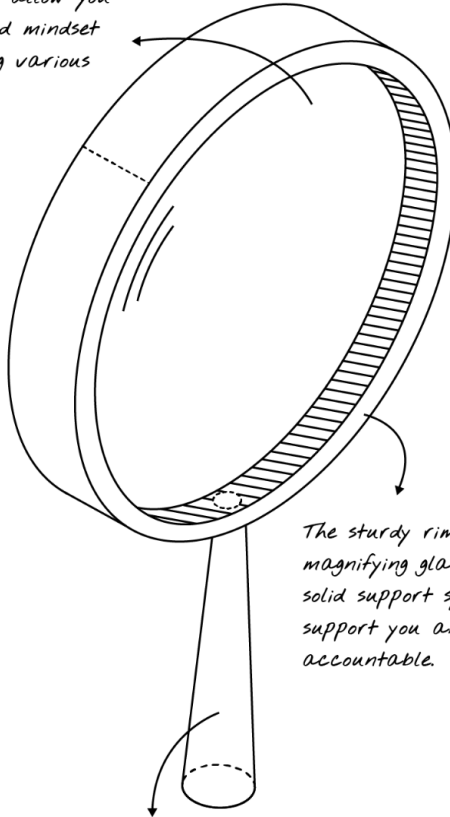


## STANDING OUT AMONG YOUR PEERS

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Magnifying glasses are deceptively simple and effective at what they do, but not everyone uses them to their fullest potential.

*The large lenses allow you to keep a broad mindset while considering various situations.*



*The sturdy rim ensures that magnifying glass is secured. A solid support system will support you and help you stay accountable.*

*Identify & magnify gaps in the workplace that others may miss. It works well at close range when you have time to inspect different areas at work slowly and carefully.*

FIG. 13

## **Elliot's Story**

I've always been an average kid.

If you read the 'Words From The Author' chapter at the beginning of the book, you would know that I was a simple boy who worked at my parents' street-side shop.

Since I wasn't good at my studies, my future was not bright either. I would have most definitely ended up as someone who did menial labour and part-time jobs instead of working in a fancy office.

However, not only did I end up working in the corporate world, I also earned a scholarship and enjoyed various successes in my career. In hindsight, specific factors helped me stand out from my peers, which allowed me to chase my dreams.

These particular factors earned me coveted jobs in global positions at a young age and gave me opportunities to work all around the world, which allowed me to grow in a way I could never have imagined.

In this chapter, I will break down some of these success factors that made me stand out from my peers.

While there are a lot of different factors at play, pick the ones that are most relevant to you and apply them in your life. You will eventually see the results by working on them one at a time.

## **1. Have A Solid Support System**

Not many people know this, but I wasn't doing well in school back in the day. Since my parents' retail business was performing poorly, they struggled to keep a roof over our heads. Naturally, I spent most of my time working at the shop after school and on weekends.

I skipped school a lot, and even when I did go, I did not make a conscious effort to pay attention or do well. What made a difference was the support system I had.

My church friends saw how I was doing and kept inviting me to join their study group. They showed me a lot of concern. They called me out when they saw that I was missing school and helped me go over my missed lessons.

They motivated me when they realised the main thing stopping me from studying was my self-limiting belief that I couldn't achieve anything.

Soon enough, I went to the study group almost daily. When I wasn't studying, I was hanging out with my friends from the group.

They helped me keep a positive mindset and think more about my studies. As a result, I ended up studying more even when I wasn't with them, and my grades started to pick up.

Amazingly, I did well enough that I was able to apply for a scholarship with the Singapore Air Force to pursue an

engineering diploma. That was one of the major turning points which helped me build my career.

I was so thrilled when I got the approval for the scholarship. It meant I didn't have to burden my parents financially, and I would be able to have a proper education and job.

From here on, it was a matter of compounding one success factor with another.

Tip: Look for people who can support you or be your accountability buddies. They can be friends, family, churchmates, or even colleagues you trust.

## **2. Gain The Knowledge You Need, Even When It's Tough**

The real challenge came at my first job at the Air Force. There was a superior who was disliked by almost everybody else. He had a reputation for screaming his lungs out and insulting his colleagues whenever he got angry.

Even though he was one of the most senior and knowledgeable people in his field, everyone wanted to avoid him. If anybody had a shift assigned to him, they tried their best to get out of it.

Being a fresh electrical engineer still wet behind the ears, it was extremely intimidating to work with him. He said many hurtful things whenever I made any mistakes and insulted me without thinking twice.

As I did my work, I realised that what I studied did not always apply to real life, and often there were more efficient ways to do things than what I was taught at school. I needed a mentor and supervisor with years of experience to teach me what they knew.

I knew that the mean supervisor was the best person who could help me in this situation. So, biting my tongue, I took on a mindset of suffering first and enjoying later and did whatever I could to get as many shifts as possible with him.

The supervisor didn't treat me differently from anyone else. On the contrary, he pushed me very hard, making me grow. Over time, I got rid of my bitter feelings toward him for constantly scolding me. Instead, I focused on working conscientiously, developing my skill set, and staying professional no matter what.

Soon, my colleagues ended up respecting me even more. They approached me for advice when they saw my expertise grow, mainly because I was more approachable than my supervisor.

However, working with my supervisor continued to be difficult, as he would constantly put me down and scold me in front of everyone. That didn't faze me anymore. It only made me hungrier to improve myself so much that I could leave the situation and go someplace better.

So I put some of my salary towards night classes learning business and management.

Tip: Search for the talented people in your organisation. Often, the people who can add the most value to you are not as easy to access or build relationships with. However, you can gain leverage by spotting the right people you can learn from and working with them.

### **3. Learn New Skills & Expand Your Network**

Through the night classes, I made amazing lifelong friends, and they even introduced me to my current mentor, who shared skills such as Experience Orientated Management (EOM) and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).

Through these courses, I increased my skill set more than I could have done alone. I got equipped with many lenses that enabled me to observe my environment keenly and generate insights that could help me solve problems. With my mentor's help, I could practice the skills in real life and not just learn them in theory.

Even though those skills were entirely new to me, they excited me a lot. Little did I know that they would be part of why I landed my next job.

My friends from the night classes recommended that I try for the Regional Sales Training Manager role at DHL. The various reasons why I was unsuitable for the position started running through my head.

First of all, I had no corporate work experience. Second, I have no experience in selling. Third, there would be so many other

qualified people fighting for this role. Still, I didn't want to throw away an opportunity and decided to go for the interview with the encouragement of my friends and mentor.

When I went for the interview, the interviewer told me that he firmly believed in NLP and its benefits. After a three-hour-long interview, he offered me the job on the spot. I was honestly surprised and asked him why he did that.

He said that many people have sales theory, but not everybody can use NLP and put it into practice. He also mentioned that it didn't matter that I didn't have business knowledge or experience, as that was something that I could pick up on the job.

Who would have thought that going for business night classes would lead me to meet the right people who would then show me the skills I needed to be equipped with?

Many people spend their time searching their way up a linear career ladder. Perhaps we instead need to keep our eyes open to opportunities that seem so tiny and insignificant at first glance.

Tip: Look out for opportunities to help you connect with relevant people, mentors, courses or skills that make you more valuable and expand your future potential.

#### **4. Make & Leave An Impression**

Thus, I started my job as a regional manager of sales training. My job scope included building rapport with regional and country stakeholders, listening to their concerns and helping them receive the resources they need.

After settling into the role, I invited my global boss to visit some of the countries in Asia to see the work we have been doing. She was based in Belgium, and I knew she would be fascinated by the work in China.

I ensured that she had a fruitful trip during her time there and showed her the various global initiatives that were in place. Furthermore, I highlighted to her how the work we did in China had vast potential to impact people around the world.

Since then, I became the first person she turned to whenever she needed to learn more about Asia Pacific countries. At the time, I didn't think much of it. I just thought of it as doing my job well. But when my global boss tendered her resignation, she recommended me as her replacement. That was how I ended up becoming a manager in a global role at the young age of 32.

Tip: You never know what opportunities your colleagues and superiors have to offer you. Always make sure you make an impact on them, even if it's in a small way, as they will remember you for it.



## **5. Be The Person They Need**

When I started working in a global role, I felt a lot of stress and nervousness. How was I supposed to stand out here? Do I try to shine with the amount of knowledge or skills I have? Or do I try to build relationships?

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that none of those answers was correct. What mattered was pulling out my magnifying glass and identifying where I could add value to the team.

The team consisted of two groups of people. One group was good at providing unique ideas, and another group of people was very good at encouraging others and boosting morale when things got tough.

However, no one was taking these ideas and building the process and plans to make these ideas a reality. I realised that this is where I could add value the most.

As an engineer, I was most comfortable with doing rather than ideating or encouraging. This made me stand out in the team very quickly as the one who could bring the projects to life.

Tip: Identify the type(s) of people in your team, and work on being the person they need. Do they need someone who can help boost morale? Do they need someone to provide fresh ideas and perspectives? Perhaps they need someone who gives direction or keeps everyone on task. When you do what everyone else fails to do, you will start to shine.

## **Making It Happen**

### **Standing Out From The Crowd**

Many people mistakenly think that to stand out, they need to focus on one area of their passion and seize as many opportunities as possible until they make it big.

On the contrary, standing out is all about having the right perspective, the grit and the effort to do what is required, and most importantly, making small changes that will create a big impact.

Standing out is not about showing off. It's about seeing the gaps you can fill, which will make you a valuable team member, allowing you to stand out naturally.

## **Reflection Questions**

- Firstly, check yourself: Is standing out what you need to focus on at work right now? Why?
- What are the gaps in your team or workplace right now?
- How can you use your strengths to fill those gaps?
- What skills do you need to develop to give you an edge over your team members?
- How can you transform the knowledge that you already have into expertise?

## **Action Step**

Now that you've listed out the gaps in your team and workplace, what are 3 things you can do to fill that gap? Get started on making those changes a reality.

## **Closing Words**

I trust that the book has polished your existing lenses and equipped you with more valuable lenses as you journey through your life and career.

We often have aspirations such as earning a lot of money, having a beautiful and loving family and being in the best of health. However, there may be a huge gap between where we are currently and our aspirations. This can easily affect our confidence and self-esteem.

If you share the same sentiments, take heart and keep your aspirational lens on. So often, the issue lies with not having a clear path in pursuit of your goals.

Here's a caveat: just because you have a plan does not mean that life will go as you want it. You have to be open to roadblocks and manoeuvres along your journey but trust that you will get to your destination no matter what.

Having a mentor and a coach is priceless. Learning from their collective years of experience will teach you how you can overcome challenges and, perhaps, even jump over specific life lessons thanks to their wisdom.

I hope this book has been a coach, mentor and guide to you in your pursuit of climbing the corporate ladder. So believe, be bold and be courageous. You got this.

*Onwards!*

**Career In-Sight is a professional development book written with real-life stories of industry veterans and corporate professionals on how they overcome various challenges in their workplace.**

*This book is about seeing your career for what it is and can be—navigating through the pitfalls and opportunities to succeed in your career.*

*We spend most of our lives at work, dealing with neverending workloads, challenging colleagues and even nightmare bosses. Some of us don't even have a plan for our careers.*

*Wouldn't it be great if you could tap into the minds of those with years of experience to give you valuable insights to better navigate your career?*

*At the end of each chapter, we walk you through crafting practical, actionable solutions that you can implement immediately.*

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