

Building a Meaningful Career

We talk a lot about athletes at [Prokit](#), but our foundational goal is to help everyone reach their physical and mental potential, whether as athletes, parents, students, employees, entrepreneurs, or whatever makes you... you. These are the ten career lessons and common threads from people I've seen build deeply meaningful and successful careers.



1. Play to your strengths

But embrace the grunt work...grit

Knowing what you're good at seems like it would be so easy. Yet it's rare to meet someone who can articulate their strengths. To do this requires self reflection. What environment am I most energized in? What specifically am I doing? Who am I with? What size team am I on?

Equally important is understanding what you don't like. What are you doing when you feel the most drained? Who are you with? What's your role? Do you like to be on deadline, or are you at your best in a more open-ended setting?

The logic of playing to your strengths is fairly simple. Let's say you have one year to work on two skills. One of the skills you absolutely love, you fall asleep thinking about it, and when you're done doing it you feel more energized than when you started. The other drains your energy, you dread starting it, and you likely find yourself procrastinating or not able to keep up. You have a really good chance of becoming exceptional at the thing you love. And, you might be *good* at the thing you hate, but there will be someone who loves that same thing and they will be exceptional, running circles around you. Why would you build a career around something you hate just because you think you're supposed to be good at it?

There are a lot of exercises to help you learn more about your strengths. Here's an over-simplified version a great leadership coach gave me.

1. Grab a notebook and for a few weeks write down the things that energize you or drain your energy throughout the day. The little details matter. If you were in a meeting, what was your role? Were you talking or listening? Were you in the details or coming up with a new idea? Who were you with?
2. As you make note of these activities, assign each a number on a scale of 1-10. Activities that are in the 7-10 range on your awesomeness scale are the things you want to do more of. You are fully in the zone at 10. The things that put you in the 1-3 range where you feel drained, frustrated or demotivated you want to do less of.
3. At the end of the few weeks, see what percentage of your time you're spending in the 7-10 range and the 1-3 range, and over time try to design your job so you're spending more time on the 7-10. Communicate this with your manager so you can work together to evolve your role to keep you learning and happy. Revisit this every few months.

If you want to explore your strengths, I've found these books to be helpful: [Designing Your Life](#) by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, and [StandOut 2.0](#) by Marcus Buckingham.

Designing your career around your strengths does not mean running from all the work you don't enjoy, or that your team needs to get done. The grit, determination and follow-through it takes to do the grunt work early on in our careers is often what gives us the skills to succeed years later. If you don't learn how to write a weekly report when you're starting out, how do you think you'll be able to do it when you're a leader presenting your company status to your board, investors or employees? The reporting and admin and goal-setting parts of the job that you might hate in your first several years of your career are the exact skills you might need later on when

you're fighting for increased budget or headcount or the future of your team or company. Learning how to write and communicate in an impactful, clear way are mandatory for almost any job I've seen.

Similarly, playing to strengths doesn't mean jumping from thing to thing. Commit to what you sign up for, what the company needs, and follow-through. Even the best people won't have the impact they want if they're constantly dissatisfied and jumping between teams and projects. A general rule of thumb is to stick to a team or area for at least a year once you've signed up, unless everyone knows it's a shorter-term project when you sign up. Knowing your strengths will also help you know when to take the next project or assignment that's offered to you, or when to go chase it on your own.

2. Meaning and happiness are different

Learn about the trade off

This clearly isn't just relevant to your career. But it's important if you believe you can be better at work when you're more fulfilled as a person.

This involves applying learnings from exercises in self-reflection, understanding your values, and discipline. For the people I've seen who invest more in meaning than happiness, the results seem to be profound. There's a level of irony — it's these people who pursue something bigger than themselves who often find the deeper level of happiness many people are searching for. They are also the people who seem to be the most grounded and present in their careers.

You can think about two sides of a spectrum.

On one hand you have **meaning**. This is made up of things like empathy, gratefulness, doing things for others and being there when people or issues you care about need your help. It's often more long-term oriented and involves short-term sacrifices that give your life a higher purpose.

On the other you have **happiness**. Things that bring you joy, laughter, pleasure, and delight. But the pursuit can get lost with a level of selfishness, narcissism and short-term decisions that could hurt our health, trade-off against our values, or impact our relationships with others.

This is an area that our society often pulls us away from. Invest in learning about this tradeoff.

3. Come with the solution

Not the problem, and don't complain

This starts on day one of your career and never stops. It's one of the biggest indicators of future success I've seen in any department, any type of business, any role. The youngest and most junior people I worked with who came with solutions were almost always the ones who progressed the most quickly, who attracted the best talent as they grew as managers, and who people wanted to work with.

It's easy to complain and say why something is wrong. Offering a solution is harder and requires you to think more broadly about the company, put yourself in the shoes of other people or departments, and think through the pros and cons of a decision on a much deeper level.

Coming with a solution doesn't mean always being able figure things out. It means showing up with a point of view. You probably know more about the thing you're working on than your boss or her boss, and although you might feel distracted now, those distractions will only get worse. Trust yourself, do your research and have a point of view.

A phrase that has stuck with me over the years is, "be a player, not a victim." Players come with solutions and ideas and constructive feedback that is meant to push things forward. Victims make excuses, blame things on other people, and don't hold themselves accountable.

4. Take care of your health

Mental, emotional and physical health all matter

It's tempting to think we can do it all. Most of us are probably pretty good at focusing on one of these things — mental, emotional or physical health — but paying attention to all three gets complicated.

An early mentor told me, "it's a marathon, not a sprint." Even though every day felt like a sprint, the foundation was always to build for the marathon. Without that frame of mind, even though I loved my job, there's no way I would have lasted.

Let's use the marathon analogy. One of the most common reasons people don't finish a marathon is because they don't make it to the starting line. They injure themselves in the weeks or months leading to the event because of things like over-training, not enough sleep, muscle imbalances or improper diet. Your career is no different.

A personal example. I was always good at staying physically active, exercising 5–6 days every week, even if it was just a 25 minute morning jog or bike ride to work to get my blood moving. I had great friends who I tried to see at least once a week, and a super supportive wife and family. I've always been into nutrition so my diet was likely better than average — yes, even before the free food at work. But a few years into building my team at Instagram I started to hit a real wall for the first time in my career. The demands at work were growing, my wife was back in school full-time, and my kids — six and four at the time — needed and deserved a tremendous amount of my mental energy.

I tried to climb this wall by exercising more, carving out time for hobbies, getting into racing bikes, coaching kids soccer, skiing, traveling, setting aside time every night for the kids. But none of it really worked. I just couldn't keep up with work and home. After about a year of struggling with it, I stumbled into a meditation app called [Headspace](#). I had absolutely no free time, but forced myself to find 10–15 minutes every morning to go sit in my backyard at 6:30 am. I only missed a few days of meditating that year.

It was game changing for me. I had mental clarity for the first time in years, and started to learn how to be more present, and more patient — a trait I've always lacked. The benefits of investing in my mental health spread to everything in my life — work, kids, exercise, relationships. Even the hard conversations got easier.

We all have a different story. For me, I invested in my physical health at the expense of my mental health for too long. Keep all three — mental, physical, emotional — in mind and watch for imbalances.

5. Do the extra ten percent

It's not a lot but it makes all the difference

My father-in-law gave me this advice at the start of my career. While I haven't always lived up to it, nothing has held more true when you look at the people who leave their mark early in their careers.

This is roughly what he said, "It's not that hard to be great at work. If you look around, there's a drastic difference between the majority of people who are checking their watch at the end of the day, and the people putting in that extra ten percent. Ten percent is not a lot but it makes all the difference."

I never took this to mean anything about just working more hours. When other people are shopping online at work, be the one that is adding value. When everyone is gossiping in the corner, be the one hitting deadlines and pushing the people around you through your actions. It is not hard to find that extra ten percent. It's usually sitting right in front of you.

6. Playing politics will hurt you

And if it doesn't, you'll feel like shit anyways (I hope)

That about says it all. Don't play politics. And don't facilitate it. If your manager plays politics, he or she likely won't be there for long so don't play along. If your coworker is playing politics, call them on it. Early in your career you'll see people progress and be given promotions who shouldn't. Take the long-view. I promise you will go farther, or at the least be more fulfilled, if you pass on temptations to get involved in politics and backstabbing. You will also be a better manager, mentor and friend.

Not getting involved in politics requires you to do the harder work of learning how to confront difficult people and situations and have the hard conversations. Just like the school bully often has things going on that you're not aware of, the person playing politics could be dealing with issues that have nothing to do with work. This isn't an excuse, but put yourself in their shoes, have empathy, take the drama out of it, and then have the hard conversation.

Learning to have these conversations requires much more space than we have here, and I have a lot more learning to do, but if your intentions are good, trust that it's almost always better to address things directly, and quickly. Talk to your manager, HR, or a mentor about this — continue to learn and ask for feedback, because it's not easy and it takes practice. Staying out of office politics yourself is step one.

7. Do what's right for your company

Not yourself or your team

This can be a guiding principle. No one will be perfect at this, but if you consistently answer questions through the lens of “what’s right for the company,” you will come to better answers, have more rationale and thoughtful conversations, and earn the trust and respect of your peers.

This is not something you can just do when you feel like it. It doesn’t work if you’re out for yourself one day, and trying to have a principled argument about what’s right for the company the next. It’s a belief you hold, and because it’s a belief, it only works if you really believe it. Over time, it’s much easier to fight for things at work if you’ve consistently shown that you’re fighting for the best interests of the company.

This doesn’t mean you don’t speak up when things are happening that you don’t believe in. The opposite; you will be much more effective speaking up because you’ve demonstrated you do it when it really matters and in a way that takes into account more than how something affects just you.

You’ll likely find that the people who consistently do what’s right for the company are often *not* the ones worrying about getting credit. If you’re good, trust that you’ll get credit for your work. I’ve rarely seen great people go unnoticed. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take your performance review seriously; it’s important to capture and be proud of the work you’ve done. Just don’t let it get you down if you don’t think people notice your accomplishments. They likely do.

The most challenging part of “doing what’s right for the company” can be when it has to do with your title or who you report to. There will be times when you’ll be “layered” and put under someone who you don’t think you should report to.

Trying to take the drama out of this situation is hard. Getting layered is usually because of one or a combination of things: 1) you have more personal development areas than you might think and there could be something holding you back; 2) your company is growing and people everywhere are getting layered as the amount and type of work that needs to get done increases (the best problem to have); 3) there is someone above you who causes problems and the management isn’t ready or capable of dealing with it; or 4) the organizational structure needed to change, typically for reasons more complicated than your immediate team.

Some of these things you can control, some you can't. It's best to recognize which and remember it's a marathon. Most importantly, in these situations take a close look at whether you enjoy your job, and are able to play to your strengths and learn from the people around you on most days. If the answer is yes, things are going to work out. Keep doing the extra 10 percent.

8. Diversity matters

Seek it out

Diversity of opinion, diversity of backgrounds, diversity of gender, diversity of race, diversity of age. They all matter. You and your team will make better decisions when you have a diverse set of people contributing. This is backed by all sorts of data, but you don't need to look at the data to understand it. Whether you're in business, hospitality, entertainment, or academics, just look around at the population of people who are using and buying your products, coming into your hospitals, attending your schools, staying at your hotels, reading your stories. They don't all look like you.

It is always easiest to build a team of people who have the same interests, race or gender, or come from the same background or pedigree of school. It's called bias and it's real. But it will not take long to realize you are running into walls, not seeing around corners and not growing as a person or company when your team isn't made up of the people who reflect the world we live in.

Beyond demographic diversity, equally important is diversity of skills, strengths and personality types. For almost any team I've been on, you need the more introverted and analytical person who loves the details; the creative out-of-the-box thinker who can propose the next big idea; the strategic operational mind who knows how to make that idea a reality; and the inquisitive skeptical person who can see around corners to tell you why that idea might not work. You need all of them, and more, to function well as a team. And having all of them is what allows you to focus on playing to your strengths, because there will be a person who loves and thrives on the things you hate.

We all have the responsibility to speak up and lead by our actions on this, even more so if you're the white guy like me.

9. Help your manager out

You own your career

It seems to be a right of passage to assume your manager does nothing, that she just spends all of her time sitting in unnecessary meetings, or that she simply doesn't understand anything about the way you, your team or your product work. This can be true, but fight your urge to think it, because more often than not it's bs.

As soon as you become a people manager you will quickly realize this as you learn how to prioritize which meetings to take. Or how to make the transition from an individual contributor to a position where you're still responsible for doing work while also setting the direction of a team, hiring, managing a budget, or responding to an executive fire-drill.

Your manager's job is to help you solve problems, not solve them for you, and certainly not to come up with all the solutions. Put yourself in his or her shoes. Understand the objectives and goals of your broader team. Are there things happening in the business you could be helping with, are there conversations starting on your team or around the company that your manager should be aware of, are there tangible ideas for things your manager could be doing to make things more efficient or productive for your team? If you have real ideas and constructive feedback, share them. Your manager will almost always appreciate it. And then volunteer to help.

What not to do. Don't come to your manager with empty comments, like, "we've lost all of our momentum, it's no fun to work here, this other team is so annoying."

Instead of that empty statement, how about, "It feels like we're losing momentum and the morale in the company is starting to shift, specifically related to X thing that happened. What do you think about talking about it in the next company meeting? We could have X and X person present on it to help the company understand what's happening and clear up the confusion. I'm happy to help pull it together."

With that example, your conversation with your manager just became productive. You did the following: 1) identified a specific problem; 2) proposed an idea for how management could address it; and 3) offered a bottoms-up solution for clearing up

the confusion. This doesn't mean the manager will be able to use the idea, but you will have a better shot, and your manager will have something clear to react to.

Managers will change, likely a lot. Great managers and mentors will take the time to help you map out your progression and to help hold you accountable for meeting your potential. But there will be many times that doesn't happen. The most helpful things I've seen people do for themselves and their manager is 1) create and communicate your 3, 6, 12 month goals; 2) think bigger than your current job and identify skills or experiences you know you want to have; and 3) go through things like the strengths exercises from the beginning to keep track of how your career is progressing.

10. Be present

Bring your full self to work

Put your phone down in a meeting. Close your computer. Listen, ask questions, take notes. If you ask to be in a meeting, be there. If you shouldn't be there, speak up. If you complained about not having access to information, be present when it's being given.

This is without hesitation one of the biggest issues over the past ten years in the workplace. We're all too busy, in too many places, responsible for too many things. But those are not excuses, and they can be solved in different ways. If you're in a meeting, be there. Add value. Listen and look for opportunities to contribute ideas during or after the meeting. Be the person who volunteers to take notes, even if you're the most junior person and you don't think you'd be able to do a good job. If there's a crisis, excuse yourself from the meeting.

On bringing yourself to work, hopefully you are in an environment that values and appreciates you for who you are. Be yourself. Find your voice. Play to your strengths. Encourage others to do the same. Being vulnerable and bringing yourself to work is what creates the safe space for others to do the same, so lead by example.

PS

1. Don't stop learning. The people who become complacent and stop learning new things are becoming irrelevant at an increasing rate. This shift is accelerating.

2. Be a good friend and mentor to the people around you. You will spend more time working and with your colleagues than just about anything else in your life. Don't forget to have fun, and don't be too hard on yourself. It's a marathon.
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