

Advice to a Young Professional

By David H. Maister

1. The real keys to success are not smarts or qualifications or belonging to a brand-name firm. Rather, success is derived from courage, drive, energy, passion, ambition, enthusiasm, excitement, initiative, discipline, a dream and enough self-confidence to keep trying.

2. Some people are blessed in being able to find contentment, while some are cursed to pursue happiness. But which do you want? Buddhists believe that all life is suffering, and suffering comes from wanting things (desire). Their solution is to learn to stop wanting. My version is that if you truly can't get something then you're wise to stop wanting it. (It's a pretty good defense mechanism anyway.) But you've got to want something—bad—or you'll never accomplish anything.

3. What do you want to do with the rest of your life? Stupid question. You'll be a different person five years from now. Decide what you want to do with the next three years. Throw yourself into it. If it turns out that it's not for you, you'll move on. Most careers that look like a logical progression were, in fact, a series of unplanned, opportunistic choices.

4. Don't get depressed. It's amazing how many times you can mess up in life and still succeed. George Washington barely won a battle in the Revolutionary War. He triumphed by not losing—just staying in the game ensured victory.

5. Forgive yourself your weaknesses, but not completely. Don't expect perfection today, and not even next year: but make a binding commitment to improve. Apply the same principle to others.

6. If it can be delegated, it must be. Never work on something that someone less experienced than you can do—your career will be on hold and you'll become more and more obsolete with each passing day.

7. Be an individual, not a member of a class or subset. Step up to the plate, and don't sit around bemoaning the disadvantages that your group (class, gender, race, religion) labors under, valid as they might be. No one owes you anything. It's too easy (and useless) to blame others (parents, spouse, boss, co-workers). Take responsibility. When the system oppresses you, you have three choices: give up, fight the system or get to work regardless. I can't say which choice is morally correct, but I do know which choice moves you forward.

8. Logic and rationality will only take you so far; the most important thing you can learn is how to interact with other people. Everything you'll want in professional life (and outside it) will come from another person: a client, a colleague, a superior or a subordinate. Do you know how to get other people to (willingly) give you what you want?

As a good first approximation, think of others as being like you, not as “them.” If you want to influence someone, ask yourself, “Would that approach work on me?”

9. What qualities do you try to show in a romantic relationship? Are you understanding, nurturing, sympathetic, supportive, considerate and kind? Apply the same to everyone you deal with and you’ll get more of what you want from them.

10. When searching for a romantic partner, looks are nice, brains are nice and money is nice, but character is essential. Ultimately, the same is true in all business relationships: character is the most important thing you should look for in a partner, an employee, a client, a boss or a supplier.

11. When dealing with clients, subordinates or anyone else, remember that people are motivated more by meaning than by money. Help them find the drama, the excitement in what they do (or what you want them to do). And never lose sight of the meaning in what you’re doing.

12. People may forgive you for a mistake you’ve made, but they don’t forget. The worst thing is to ignore it and move on. Repair fences when you can. You’ll be working a long time to re-earn lost trust and confidence.

13. It’s never too soon to start getting good at business development. Practice your client relationship skills on every job you do. The better you are at business development, the more choice you’ll have for saying, “Sorry, I’m too busy,” to people you don’t want to work for.

14. Broken promises are remembered more than kept promises. Do what you

say you are going to do. It’s better to have the guts to say up front, “I’m not sure I can get that done on time,” than to accept a task that you can’t deliver on.

15. The worst thing you can do if you want to get somebody to listen to you is to criticize him or her. As human beings, when attacked we attack back. And we attack back even when we are in the wrong. Many of us fall into the trap of thinking, “I know I’m right, so I’m going to tell the others how wrong they are!” It’s tempting, but it doesn’t work. The goal is not to be right; the goal is to get what you want.



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