Career Day Lessons

Idea In Short

Build relational power before positional power, invest 10,000 hours in your craft and practice gratitude throughout. These three pillars define careers that compound in value and satisfaction over time.

Three Kinds of Power

On the last day of class, career day carries a double meaning. Students complete their course evaluations, which impacts the instructor's career. The instructor also doles out whatever career advice accumulated over 25 years of experience.

There are three kinds of power: relational, expertise and positional. As a newcomer, you have no positional power. That is acceptable because positional power is the most superficial, least fun and last-resort source of influence. Relational and expertise power are what sustain a career.

For those entering professional services, whether consulting, law, tax, audit or marketing, the pyramid structure is unavoidable. Leverage is how these companies make money. They pay you a salary and bill you out at two to three times that amount. This is basic math, not advanced strategy.

This means you should become great at working in teams and embrace the role of an uber-apprentice. Build useful, win-win professional relationships. Some call it networking, but it is really just being a knowledgeable, helpful, curious, available and enjoyable person. People buy from people. 1

Build Relationships and Pass the Ball

Build rapport by finding similarities, going first and being less awkward. Be yourself and be likable, because you can do both. Would you pass the airport test? Are you the kind of person people want to be around? If not, client service may not be the best fit.

Remember how managers think. They want you solving problems, not complaining. Be the John Stockton of your company. Make other people successful. Be the one who consistently passes the ball so others can score. Like your boss and get your boss promoted, then take that job.

Thomas Friedman captured the importance of relational power when he said, "We used to work with our hands for many centuries, then we worked with our heads, and now we're going to have to work with our hearts, because there's one thing machines can not, do not, and never will have, and that's a heart." He coined the expression STEMpathy, combining science, technology, engineering and math with empathy. The lesson is simple: do not be a business robot. 2

Put in 10,000 Hours

Unemployment in the United States was at a 17-year low. Times were good, very good. That does not mean the work is easy. As Seth Godin says, "If your job is easy, you should be worried."

Strong managers should be greedy for work. Find difficult problems that are not being solved. Find the white space between functions and be the glue. Put in the 10,000 hours to be great. The Beatles toiled in German nightclubs for years before they appeared on the Ed Sullivan show.

Think of Cal Newport's advice: be so good they cannot ignore you. Work on your craft. At the end of the day, it is all about value. At your bill rate, are you delivering 10,000 dollars of value a day? The math is simple but the standard is demanding. It is like golf, a game against yourself. 3

Value Your Time

Valuing your own time is easier said than done. Professional services professionals do not value their time enough. Peter Drucker wrote extensively about time. Even Bain has noted how corporations spend enormous money and effort recruiting talent, then waste their time.

Do not hate many things, but do hate the fear of missing out. It makes us uniquely unhappy. Perhaps we should follow Gary Keller's advice and focus on one thing. What is the one thing that will be the first domino in your day? What is the first domino in your life?

Life Is Not a Straight Line

For students, life has been a metronome of spring, fall, spring and fall learning. It is difficult but predictable. When they graduate, they need to write their own syllabus. What is the topic? Who do I team with? What does success look like? When is it due? Do I even need to do this?

This is why feedback matters. We all need a board of directors to keep us honest and focused on our long-term interests. Embrace the S-curves and variability, because that is what makes life interesting.

A consulting partner once suggested asking three questions to evaluate any situation. Strategy: What am I doing and is this what I want to be doing and getting better at? Efficiency: How well am I doing it, am I crushing it or do I suck? Learning: Am I learning, growing and exploring?

Collect Great Stories and Invest in Assets

Be successful in what you do. Be healthy. But what matters most is being the kind of person people want to invite to a dinner party, the person people want to get advice from, the person who has great stories. Everything is storytelling. Have a story-worthy life.

The great thing about consulting, travel, high-powered MBA jobs, reading, listening and learning is that you stay on the path to collecting good stories. The experiences compound, and so does your ability to connect with others.

In the United States, we live in a consumption-based economy. We buy too much, store it, throw it away and fritter time with television. There are four great things to invest in: relationships, memories, passive income and content. Whether it is blogging or taking someone to lunch, do things that last. Invest in relationships and expertise, because those assets appreciate while most purchases depreciate.

The pattern across these investments is compounding. A relationship nurtured over a decade produces opportunities neither party could have predicted. A skill practiced for 10,000 hours opens doors that raw talent never could. Content published online continues to find readers years after you wrote it. Consumption offers immediate gratification that fades. Investment offers delayed gratification that grows.

Be Grateful

This is the main point. For the people reading this, you have friends, families, income, education, health, discernment and grit. There is no reason for discontent. Gratefulness equals happiness. Practice it daily, not just when things go well, because the practice itself reshapes how you see every situation.

- 1Cal Newport: So Good They Can't Ignore You
- 2ORNL: A Conversation with Thomas Friedman
- 3Thomas L. Friedman: Thank You for Being Late

Summary

Career success rests on relationships, deliberate practice and gratitude. Build relational power, put in the hours, value your time, collect great stories and invest in assets that last. Above all, be grateful. Gratefulness equals happiness.