

Career Reflections: Thoughts for My Younger Self

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I loved my forty-year career as a faculty member at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business. An immediate first career reflection is that the school was the perfect place for me to land and flourish. Subsequent reflections are naturally prompted by the question that this project poses for each of us: *Knowing what you now know, what would you tell your younger self?* Of course, answers to that question are partly a function of values, ambitions, interests, and formative experiences. What follows are my core reflections intended to be beneficial to almost anyone pursuing a rewarding career in any field, at any organization.

The second-most immediate reflection is that I enjoyed working with all the colleagues—friends—who contributed to this book. They are world class in many dimensions, and I respect each of them for what they brought to our institution, its many stakeholders, and to me personally. The insights they share are sure to withstand the test of time, and all their points are worthy of readers' consideration.

Reflection #1 : Depth *and* Breadth

A little over ten years into my career, I came across the notion of T-shaped skills in a book titled *Delivering Exceptional Performance* (Jones et. al., 1996). The book introduced me to the concept of T-shaped skills: The T's vertical bar represents deep expertise in one area, with the horizontal bar representing a broad range of knowledge and abilities in additional areas. The call to develop professional depth *and* breadth has had staying power in the marketplace (a simple Google search produces numerous results), and to a large extent it undergirded many of my career decisions and the mindsets I sought to adopt.

Depth is the expertise that we bring to our work. It is what we strive to be primarily known for and to use. Expertise can rightly foster a sense of excellence, uniqueness, drive, and an awareness of comparative advantage. A word of caution is warranted in this regard, however. Lurking just around the corner from such positive attributes lies the unappealing and counterproductive possibilities of pride, arrogance, and condescension. To protect yourself from these traps, self-awareness and/or feedback from a trusted colleague is critical for preventing any such potential tendencies taking root. In addition, professional success and accomplishment can easily mask or reinforce relational blind spots. Sincere humility, a clear sense of what one does and does not know, and an openness to questions enhances expertise and success with an appealing aura of kindness, approachability, and collegiality.

Breadth is what helps contextualize and integrate expertise with other organizational functions and people. For me, breadth significantly fueled my enjoyment of a decades-long career. Breadth requires seeking and seizing opportunities to venture beyond the comfort zone of what you currently know and do. It is exploring new domains and developing a basic competence therein. The more you venture out, the easier it becomes and the more robust and interesting the accumulated capabilities you can then integrate across existing and newly acquired insights and opportunities. Letting it be known that you are amenable to new tasks, new assignments, or new roles facilitates building organizational and professional bridges across which interesting and new possibilities can flow. In addition, don't just dabble in a new arena or be a complainer in a familiar arena. Offer to take a lead role in refining ideas, studying options, crafting pertinent recommendations, or spearheading implementations.

Depth and breadth are complementary. Expertise is our primary and lifelong focus while breadth is the result of exploring new avenues resident within the larger setting where we operate. Pursuing both enhances both.

Reflection #2 : More Than One Way

When we are successful and known for our field-specific expertise, it is not uncommon to extrapolate that vantage point to other issues and arenas—organizational policy, personnel, and processes issues, for example; and it becomes easy to believe our ideas/plans in those arenas are the best. But that mindset, even if unspoken, can preclude open discussion and leave assumptions unchallenged. In life, and at work, there is often more than one way, more than my way, of addressing an issue and generating worthwhile outcomes. As your reputation and prominence grow, it is important to dampen any recurring tendency for “my-way-is-the-best-way” thinking to emerge.

How do you foster an open-mindedness that sincerely considers the real possibility that others also have good (or even better) ideas?

First, it is important to conscientiously commit to being open-minded and to believing that others often have ideas worthy of consideration and pursuit.

Second, whole-heartedly joining work-related teams, task forces, committees, partnerships, and other joint endeavors provides great opportunities to work with talented colleagues. They get to know you. You get to know them. Observe and study what makes for fruitful discussion, effective collaboration, interesting learning, breakthrough ideas, and empowered initiative. Take to heart the insights gleaned from those observations. Such venues provide an opportunity to observe real-time “best practices” as well as those that are not. Those venues often feel like an inefficient use of time, but there is almost always a worthwhile

interpersonal insight or actionable idea to be gleaned during the interactions that take place in those collaborations.

Third, offer ideas and suggestions in good faith and without hubris or subtle derision toward any offered by others. If your idea garners support, express appreciation, invite collaboration, and look for a moment to acknowledge how someone else's idea has made or can make yours better. If your idea is not selected or seems to be received in a lukewarm manner, graciously and authentically endorse someone else's, and offer your support in explicit ways. No matter how expert or successful someone might be, they do not have a monopoly on good ideas. There is usually a bandwidth of varied paths that can lead to favorable outcomes.

Reflection #3 : Integrate Life and Work

My UVA Darden School career occupied 14,600 days of my life. Wow, that's a big number! I am a bit embarrassed to note that it was about day 7,300 that I figured out it was not just okay, but important and beneficial, to integrate my work life and my non-work life. There was no need or reason to maintain a bifurcated existence. Experiences and lessons learned in one arena could benefit the other. For example, at work, I learned the importance of listening and the power of good questions—and brought that to interactions with family and friends. At home, I learned the value of relationally affirming, encouraging, celebrating, and assisting those closest to me—and took that to my work world, striving to be less transactional in dealing with others. With my friends, I focused on their strengths as opposed to their shortcomings—and took that to my work world. In my neighborhood, I learned the pleasure of interacting with, respecting, and befriending neighbors who had backgrounds and careers quite different from mine—and took that mindset to work, too. At work, I learned the merits of traditions and of careful change—and sought to balance that tension in other parts of my life. At home and with friends, I saw and experienced the blessings of being vulnerable—and at work I learned to say “I don't know” and “I would welcome your help”. Importantly, in both worlds I learned the blessing of authentically and respectfully sharing my faith with those who asked, wondered, or appeared open to hearing. As a result, deeply meaningful conversations and friendships blossomed. At work, I sought to be more alert to opportunities for bringing to bear the Christian concepts of grace, forgiveness, redemption, and love—ideas not often espoused or prevalent in work settings. And in both worlds, I learned to practice as best as I could the art of looking someone in the eye and saying thank you. Indeed, I took to heart that “gratitude is an appropriate response to almost everything” (Houston, 2019, p. 233).

Compose a Career

I began my career-capstone management book, *What If You Tried This At Work?* (Haskins, 2024), with a fitting quote used by a young man trying to become a real ranching, hard-working Montana cowboy. I'll use that passage again here to underscore the importance of shared reflections: "In school you get the lesson first and then the test. In life you get the test and then the lesson" (Groneberg, 2003, p. 65). I have found this maxim to be very true. In fact, I think this collection of essay reflections attests to it. Moreover, as to a lifelong career, it is hard to envision at its outset how it will ultimately unfold. Plan with an open hand. Live expectantly, but with few rigid expectations. Learn from career disappointments and derailments because valuable "experience is what you get when you don't get what you want" (Feherty, 2021).

Mary Catherine Bateson's (1989) phrase, "composing a life" poses an appropriate framing for a career. The mindset of composing a career raises possibilities and nuances beyond the traditional notion of "building a career"—adding credentials and accomplishments to a resume. Similar to composing notable musical scores, poems, or paintings, composing a career conveys an interest in accomplishment along with an interest in the richness, tone, flow, beauty, emotion, harmony, movement, integration, authenticity, and story pertaining to an ever-evolving career. A richly rewarding career can embrace all such dimensions. The best ones, do.

References

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