



# Wisdom that Works

50 insightful, inspirational (sometimes funny) lessons  
to help guide your transition from college to career



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# Hi!

I don't know about you, but I'm not a natural people person. Computers, on the other hand, make sense to me, which is why I gravitated to them at such a young age. Computers are governed by math and logic. Given the same input, the output is deterministic. People, on the other hand, are governed by emotion, impulse, mood, money, altruism, status, group thinking, magical thinking, and other factors that make their behavior non-deterministic. Given that organizations are comprised of groups of people, they behave even more strangely and are governed by their own idiosyncrasies.

As my career progressed, I transitioned from spending all of my time with computers to spending all of my time with people and organizations. Ultimately, I've learned I both like, and am fascinated by, how people and organizations work. That said, despite having studied them for years, understanding people and organizations is an engineering challenge I'll never be able to fully solve. I do keep trying though — which was how I came up with the basis for a LinkedIn blog I published in October 2020, “75 Things I Wish I Knew About People and Organizations at the Start of My Career.” The writing process forced me to think about all the mistakes I made at the beginning of my career journey — but, at the same time, it also reminded me of all the people who helped me and the lessons I learned along the way. After I finished the piece, I wished someone had given me a similar guide and saved me from so much stress over the years.

That blog is what led to the idea for this book. I figured if I could gather lessons from the diverse individuals across the commercetools organization, I would be able to provide valuable insight from multiple perspectives and truly help individuals like you, who are just starting their career journey.

So, my team and I asked questions, conducted interviews, and collected stories from a wide range of individuals. People who have been working for under 2 years and ones who've put in over 20 years. People who have master's degrees, and others who didn't go to college. There are funny stories, frustrating stories, and powerful stories — each one is authentic, honest, and we hope, enlightening.

All of us at commercetools hope you will read this little book of wisdom and use it as a resource to navigate your career and the business world.

**Good luck out there!**

**Enjoy!**

**KELLY GOESTCH**

CHAPTER 1

# You're Never Done Learning



“Self-awareness is the most important skill you can develop.”

— MELINDA FEKETE, PRODUCT MANAGER IN TRAINING  
Northern Italy, MSc in Computer Science

It's likely you'll have more than one career and fulfill many different professional roles within your lifetime, and that's a wonderful thing. If you're one of the many young people who are struggling to decide what, who and how to be — it's a liberating feeling to acknowledge this as truth.

I initially studied Business and Market Research. I started my career as a Department Manager at a large retailer, only to learn within the space of a few months that the environment really didn't suit my strengths and personal values. This led me to go back to school to pursue a degree in Computer Science. I ended up working as a Software Engineer for 5 years. This was already a much better fit, but I couldn't help but feel I wasn't making the most of my interpersonal skills. A few months ago, I started my third career as a Product Manager, and for the first time, I feel like all the pieces are beginning to fall into place.

Regardless of the career you choose, dedicate your first couple of years to learning about yourself. The most important skill you can begin to develop during this time is self-awareness. To quote one of my favorite business thinkers, Peter Drucker, “Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong”. What he means is that recognizing your true strengths and weaknesses is by no means an easy feat. In fact, it's not uncommon for people to not really know where they belong well past their late twenties.

If you feel lost, you're not alone. Remember, that there is no one way to be anything and no one true path to any career. If you try something and you don't like it, reflect on what you've learned from the experience and move on, keeping in mind that the same role can look very different from company to company. Once you identify your greatest strengths and most 'dangerous' weaknesses, find out how you best learn, how you like to work with others, and what your most intrinsic values are. Only then can you look for the type of work environment where you'll be able to make the greatest contribution.





“To be good at your job, you need to read a lot and organize what you read.”

— **FULTON BYRNE**, SITE RELIABILITY ENGINEER  
Atlanta, GA. Bachelor of Science

When I first started as a software engineer, I realized there were a lot of things I didn't know, but also a lot of things I did know. I found that while I was comfortable doing the things I did know, I was constantly being put in situations where I didn't know things.

Reading, finding the time to read, and finding the right things to read, really made it so that I was able to operate on a fairly high level. I was even able to make decisions with more senior engineers early on. The first book anyone should read is a book called, “How to Read a Book.” People tend to think you need to read a whole book, but if it's a technical book, you really don't need to read the entire thing. You just need to read the things that are important to you, and you need to be able to find those things easily. Then I would say, read O'Reilly books. I don't mean to give a pitch, but those really helped me. You might find other books from other publishers. Look for books that can help you get started quickly and that aren't difficult to use or read.

Even if you are using something like Google Sheets. You can struggle through it on your own, but a book will show you the whole picture and guide you to awesome features you might not otherwise discover yourself.

Most of us think we are prepared for the work world when you get out of school, but honestly, you probably won't know how to do the job you need to do. You might have some good theory, especially computer science-wise, but regardless of what company you end up working for, you're not going to know how to use the tools people are using day to day. Say, I decided I wanted to take a new job at another company now, they are probably using totally different tools than we use at commercetools. If you've gotten in the habit of reading and have a system that helps you learn new things easily, you'll be able to adapt to any situation you might find yourself in.



**“Learn how to learn. Take the time to learn different things, People like to see that, they like to hire that.”**

— **ROB SENN**, ENGINEERING MANAGER  
Newberry, SC. College Degree

Your education is not your destiny. It's not as if you don't need to educate yourself, but your degree doesn't necessarily have to match your career path. I have an English degree, and while I enjoyed learning it because I like to read, it's not a terribly useful degree when it comes to getting an actual job.

I'm now a software engineer. The way I got here was a combination of things, but mostly it was because I took opportunities not only to learn software on my own time but also in school even though it wasn't my major. I took time to learn other things as well. I think this approach gets overlooked a lot by people. They think if you want to go into business, you need a business degree and if you want to go into software, you need a software degree. What I've found is that the one skill that is really important is learning how to learn. Then you have to make yourself learn different things. Even if it's something outside your comfort zone or that doesn't seem directly related to what your goals are, I think it's good for your brain.

Since I pursued English, I was exposed to a lot of great literature. This was important not only because it improved my own writing skills, but it also gave me some perspective on how people work and think that I may not have gotten if I had focused solely on computers and software.

I came to this realization when I started looking for a job after college. I had taken some software classes, but most of what I knew was because it was a hobby of mine. When I got into interviews, people would often say, “Well, you have an English degree. Why did you apply for this?” Then, I would have to defend my decision. I felt because I spent time learning other stuff, I could present myself as well-rounded and always willing to learn.

Here, at commercetools, for example, we don't hire brilliant jerks. They know that just because you're really good at software, it doesn't mean you're going to be a good team player. It's important to show that you're a well-rounded individual, one who understands people and how they work (or at least tries to), and that you're willing to learn things on your own — these are skills more and more companies are looking for when they're hiring today.



“If you don’t have a skill you need for your job, find a way to learn it.”

— MOLLY JONES, CLOUD SUPPORT ENGINEER  
Asheville, NC. Some college

I used to be in customer support. I didn’t have a technical degree when I switched over to technical support, so I had to do a lot of self-training. What I learned is that there isn’t much you can’t learn if you make the effort. You can take online classes, you can Google and do research. You can learn as you go.

I taught myself by reading books, reading websites, and taking tutorials. Another option is to reach out to your teammates. You may be a little intimidated by thinking that you don’t know as much as these people know, but you would be surprised. Other people might know more than you about one thing, but you know more about something else. So, there’s really no reason to not lean on your co-workers. All you have to do is say, “Look, I’m struggling with this, would you mind going over it with me?” In the real-world work scenario, people actually want to see you succeed and they will help you.

Even if you have a formal degree, you’ll find that every company you work for has their own approach, uses different software and tools, and has a different style of management. Each time you change jobs, you’re going to have to be flexible. Accept that you’re always going to have to learn new things over and over again in your career. Being self-motivated to do the work to learn what you need to know is a very useful skill to have.

Remember, no one expects you to know everything. Self-training is a great way to overcome the imposter syndrome — that negative belief you're not good enough or not going to be successful. It's also a good way to gain confidence, especially if you decide you want to go work at a different company or change career paths. If you prove to yourself that you can learn stuff from scratch and start over — and do it without having to go back to school and get another degree — you'll always be able to say, "I can do this!"



“ It is OK to make mistakes. Each mistake, you learn something from it.”

— **BARBARA KOCH**, HEAD OF TALENT ACQUISITION AND EMPLOYER BRANDING. Munich, Germany, B.S. degree in Business and Psychology

My career started in an environment where you were not allowed to make mistakes. We were all pushed to always be faster and better than the competition. If you made a mistake, you were basically singled out as the weakest link in the group. Early on, it really bothered me, I asked myself where does this attitude come from? Why can't we make mistakes? Why is failure bad? It was like a social thing at this company. If you failed, it was bad. There was always the fear, what happens to the employees who make mistakes?

The experience I had working for that company taught me to really look at the details to make sure everything was right. That should be a positive thing, but it was really a way to ensure I didn't make any mistakes. I think it's more important for companies to cultivate a healthy mistake culture. To present the understanding that mistakes are going to happen. If there weren't mistakes made, there would be no innovation. To me, making mistakes is a part of life, and each one is an opportunity to learn.

The lesson isn't about choosing a company that lets you make mistakes though; it's about allowing yourself to make mistakes. Of course, sometimes they cause problems, but you can't beat yourself up over every little mishap. Even if it doesn't look like it, each mistake you make brings you more expertise and experience. In my current position at

commercetools, I'm building a new team to run a new division. There's a lot of trial and error, and it's OK. The only way we are going to learn what works, what we need to improve, and what we need to do differently, is by looking at the things that don't work and trying something different. Even when we finally get it right, we're always going to be trying new things, and making new mistakes.





**“Create your own professional path. Don’t feel like you have to compare yourself to others to determine if you are successful or not.”**

— **NESTOR ABAD RODRIGUEZ**, SOLUTIONS ENGINEER  
Bilbao, Spain. Bachelor’s Degree

I’ve worked in IT since graduating college. We all know that IT is a constantly evolving and growing industry — and that new tech easily becomes outdated within a few years — lately, even more quickly. This cycle of continual improvement also applies to the people who work in IT. Since technology is constantly evolving, the professionals who work in the industry must constantly evolve well.

As a young graduate or professional, it’s easy to identify gaps between the skills and knowledge you have and the ones you still need. This is a positive thing, since it helps you identify where you need improvement, which technologies you need to learn, etc. At the same time, in IT, it can be self-defeating because no matter how much time you put into learning and improving, there is always going to be new technology you need to learn and new skills you need to acquire. Basically, you’re never done learning.

I realized this truth after few years of working in the industry. I kept encountering things I didn’t know and finding professionals who had specific knowledge I didn’t have (but wanted to have). I developed an envy mindset. I thought if I gained the same skills or did the same kind of work as the individuals whom I admired, I’d finally become a completely competent professional. I’ve never been more mistaken.

It took years of frustration to learn there is always going to be someone “better” than me. While frustration can be useful in small doses, since it can force us to improve or change things, too much frustration can completely drown your goals. I finally discovered (it was not a day or a specific moment, more of a mix of lessons learned over the time) that, if you focus on the professional gap, you’re going to find where you fall short, rather than where you excel.

I started looking at myself and other professionals in a different way, focusing on competencies, not incompetencies. I saw that each person I thought I should be copying, also had some incompetencies. I changed my focus to me, to what I knew and my skills, both the ones I already had, and the ones I thought I still needed.

It was a long process full of deception, but I wouldn’t replace any of the lessons I learned along the way. Not only have I become the professional I want to be, I also enjoy my work life more. I’ve achieved goals I hadn’t even considered before. Most importantly, before I saw my gaps of knowledge and the distance to my goals as bad, as something I needed to fix. Now, I enjoy them. I think of them as challenges —and how big, complex, or “ugly” they are — is something I get to decide.

I swapped my frustrated “I’ve got too much to do” mindset for a “Cool, I’ve got tons of challenges to tackle” attitude. I empowered myself to enjoy the fact that my industry requires continual learning with the knowledge that the only person who can tell me which skills I need to be successful is myself.

CHAPTER 2

# Step in the Right Direction



**“You do all this work to prepare for a career, but when you finally get to that point and you’re ready, all the sudden your mentality reverses. Instead of realizing how much you have to offer, you think, “I hope they hire me.”**”

— CHRIS PIEPER, ENGINEERING MANAGER FOR SREs  
Austin, TX, B.S. degree, Physics/Computer Science

What you should be thinking is, “Do I want to work here?” A job is such an assumption — you go to school, graduate, interview with different companies, answer the questions they ask, and wait for a call. Very rarely though, do you interview the company. I think that’s critical.

“People often chase the fancy name, but it’s really important to consider if the company is a good fit for you.” When I was in college, I did a test project for a company everyone knows. It’s a bright, shiny company – free games, free drinks, chill out spaces — they speak to people as people not resources. At the same time, you come to find out that they make sure everything you need is onsite, laundry facilities, daycare, a cafeteria. I realized they basically removed every reason for you to have to leave and have a life outside of the office.

My first job was with a defense contractor. It was a great opportunity. It gave me the chance to live in Stuttgart. All the fun and experiences that were provided were fantastic, but they were all outside of work. The work itself was not that fun, the conditions were not great, and I worked all the time. The assumption was that I was young, without children, or responsibilities. Eventually I got homesick and moved back to the states.

Sometimes a job can check all the boxes you think it should, but the role isn't fulfilling, or you find the company cares very little about their individual employees. For example, my second job, I got hired by a major company to work on a contract. After less than a year, the contract got renegotiated. I was sent home and told to log on the company job site and look for another job. I was like, "but I have a job." It was left to me to find another role at the company, ultimately, I had to quit because they didn't have anything for me.

I see people at commercetools getting moved around all the time with zero baggage. It's a real testament to the company.

### **A couple other things I've learned along the way:**

- 1. Burnout is a real thing:** If you wake up in the morning dreading going to work, that's not wholly normal. Sure, no one wants to go to work on Monday morning, but if you truly dread it, you are probably burned out.
- 2. Don't burn bridges:** Some people are always chasing the next promotion or notoriety. Do your job well, do work beyond what you're hired for, but don't step on others' toes. Don't adopt the mentality, "I can't climb if you stand in my way." It's toxic.
- 3. Money isn't everything:** You can have all the money in the world, but you are a basket case of anxiety because you are playing into the imposter syndrome and don't feel you can confide in any of your peers, you're not going to be able to enjoy that money. You are going to spend a lot of it trying to fill the hole you've dug.
- 4. Learn together, grow together, it's infinitely better.**



**“Be nice. Have an open mind. Do things outside of your box — and use them as learning experiences.”**

— NICOLE HAYWORTH, TALENT ACQUISITION MANAGER  
Leawood, KS. Bachelor's degree

Corporate America is a much smaller circle than you think it is, pretty much everyone knows everyone. Given this, it's very important to leave positive, lasting impressions on your colleagues. You never know how the people you meet can impact you later on in your career or in your life, so the smartest thing you can do is just be nice and work hard. Everyone knows someone, who knows someone, who knows you. So, if you're going to let your reputation precede you, make it a great one!

Be willing to do things beyond your job description if you're asked. When you do, you'll find that you are able to learn and grow from those, pick up new skill sets, and discover what fuels you.

For example, when I was working at my former employer, most of their Human Resources staff left at the same time. They asked me to step in until they hired someone. The role that didn't require many of the same skill sets as my recruiting role but since HR was something I had been considering moving into as a full-time career, I gladly accepted. Once I did, I discovered I don't actually like HR. At the same time, it reinvigorated my passion for recruiting. By taking on those responsibilities, I was able to identify what it is that I like about recruiting, what I like about my job, and what I was missing from those additional duties. Now I know for the

future what is really fundamentally important to me. For me, that's people – I want to be involved with people, I want to learn about people, I'm a naturally curious person. In HR, you are kind of behind the people - it's more about paperwork, laws, and regulations, and I didn't know that until I had that experience.

### **A few extra tips (from a recruiter's perspective)**

1. If you're applying for jobs, make sure you check your spam folder. A lot of companies use automated systems to send out emails to candidates. Your email may filter them as spam, so you could miss out on some great opportunities if you're not tracking your spam folder.
2. Know your worth. This is especially important you are just coming out of school. Don't just take whatever salary is offered to you. Do your research so you know the appropriate salary range for the position you are seeking. Also, realize it's going to be different if you live in New York City than if you live in a small town. Remember though, you have to be realistic, you can't expect a high salary if you have no experience. At the same time, know your worth and own it!



“If you take a good look at the experience and skills you do have, and the ones you still want to gain, choosing a career direction becomes less daunting.”

— YI ZHUANG, CHEW, SOLUTIONS ENGINEER  
Singapore, Bachelor of Engineering Computer Engineering

I started my career in technology consulting to gain exposure to the industry. As a consultant, you tend to be assigned to very varied roles depending on the engagement agreement with the customer. Over time, I got very good at picking up enough knowledge to consult across different customers, technologies, types of projects, and roles. At the same time, I was a little lost as to how all this experience could help me in the long run. I was always working on something new, and it didn't seem like I was becoming an expert in anything.

**I sought out a mentor, and he suggested I use 4 pillars to guide my career:**

**Industry:** Retail, Travel, Finance, Telecommunications, Manufacturing etc.

**Domain:** Commerce, Accounting, CRM, Marketing, HR etc.

**Technology:** Backend, Frontend, Languages, Software preferences etc.

**Role:** Sales, Customer Success, Services, Marketing, Operations etc.

With this advice, I started looking for the commonalities, transferable knowledge, and skills I gained from each engagement. This approach helped me select engagements that fit me best as well as helped



guide the career changes I pursued. This lesson led me to deciding to pursue a career with commercetools. The company and the position checked quite a few of the pillars. First, it fit my **Domain** experience. I had worked on multiple digital transformation engagements surrounding the customer experience space in the areas of customer relationship management, customer service, marketing, and commerce. I enjoyed working on these initiatives to improve customer experiences and hence joining commercetools where we're all about commerce was perfect for me. Second, it aligned with my **Technology** background. I had been architecting solutions with SaaS (Software-as-a-Service) technologies. I see a good SaaS architect as someone who both understands the platform and the business and can use that understanding to craft the right solution for the business. I enjoyed doing that and hence decided to explore commercetools which was SaaS based. The **Role** also made sense. In the earlier parts of my career, I had been involved with multiple proposals, gaining skills in architecting, crafting decks and POCs, etc. to assist in elaborating an architecture, a concept, or telling a story. Solutions engineering requires a blend of technical skills as well as the ability to explain the technicalities to mixed audiences (customers/ partners etc.). This is what they were looking for, and I had these core skills.

Using these pillars made choosing a career less daunting for me. I wanted to share it to show others that it doesn't have to be for them either. If you can identify the blend of different interests and expertise that you have and include new ones that you are keen to learn and explore, use this information along with the pillars to assist you in building on the career of your choice. Good luck!



**“It’s okay to not know what you want to do after college, you have to just start somewhere. The things you learn along the way will guide your path.”**

— **DAVIS KEENAN**, ENTERPRISE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT REPRESENTATIVE. Hickory, NC, Bachelor of Science in Communication, East Carolina University

I changed my major 4 times in college. I was always searching for “my calling”. My career path has been just as winding so far but I’ve settled into a working world I really enjoy. You can talk about how you’re going to climb mountains all day long but it’s pointless if you haven’t even started walking.

I spent lots of days and nights reading article after article about “what job is right for you” and taking personality test after personality test to pick the perfect career path. Here’s what I learned — it’s okay to not have that figured out. The best-laid plans always have a way of changing anyway. I had friends in college that had their entire careers planned out to retirement — all of them changed in some way within a few years. There are hundreds of jobs and career paths that you never learn about before you enter the working world.

So, don’t waste time trying to define your entire path — find the best starting point and go from there. Here’s what I learned from my experiences:

- 1.** Make a list of the things you enjoy doing and skills you have, then hit LinkedIn Jobs and read job descriptions. Find industries that seem interesting and companies with good reputations and smart people. If it seems like a good fit, apply. Even if you don't fit all the criteria perfectly, apply.
- 2.** Don't take rejection personally. Be grateful when someone takes a chance on you. Give every job your absolute best. Even if you don't like the job, or your life priorities change, or any number of things happen that make you realize you're ready to make a change, recognize that you've picked up skills, knowledge, and connections along the way that will help educate your next step.
- 3.** Be curious, be confident, be grateful, be hard-working, and be open. Everyone's path is winding, even if they knew where they wanted to go since the beginning of the journey.



**“Choose a career you love and work hard to get good at your job. That’s how to make money and be happy.”**

— **JIM CURTIS**, HEAD OF SALES, AMERICAS  
Annapolis, MD. BS in Accounting, CPA

After I graduated college with an accounting degree, I went to work at a CPA firm. I worked really long hours, probably double what most of my friends were working. I’m pretty sure I got the equivalent of 8 years of experience in half the time they did. I had a goal to be in the top 10% of my field — and I knew to get there, I had to outwork others — I also knew in the end, the compensation would be there.

Ultimately, I decided if I was going to work as hard as I felt I should, I would rather do it in a profession that was more enjoyable. That’s what led me to software sales. It was a big career shift. I was afraid to fail, and I had a lot of catching up to do. So, again, I worked my tail off. I continually rose to the top 10% at the companies where I worked. I enjoyed what I was doing, loved the people I worked with, and I had a lot of fun. The long hours and hard work were worth it to me because I was much happier in sales than I had been in accounting. The compensation followed — because that’s what happens once you get to the top 10 percent of your profession.

Since then, I’ve learned that this lesson isn’t just something I came up with on my own. Malcom Gladwell came up with the 10,000 Hour Rule. His theory is that to truly master a profession you need to put in the time, and that requires a minimum of 10,000 hours of intensive practice.

So, no matter what you do, if you strive to be the best you can be, the money will follow. There's no real need to focus on where the money is, instead focus on what you enjoy. Then, put in the time, separate yourself from the pack, and rise to the top. Remember, the more you practice, the more skills you gain, and the more pay you can get. If you are doing something you don't like, you will eventually hate the grind, burn out, and never get good at it.

Remember though, different professions have different levels of competition. If your goal is to be the best, recognize it's harder to be the best in some fields than it is in others. For example, if you make it to the NFL, you will be amongst the best in your field, and you will be well paid, but to get to the "best" position, is still really hard. Pick something that interests you and fits your skill sets, and then practice, practice, practice — that's why you will be happy on your journey to the top 10 percent.

CHAPTER 3

# Perspective is Everything



**“If someone tells you can’t do something, don’t just walk away and hang your head. You’ve got to be tough.”**

— **MARGARET REA**, Irvine, CA.

Bachelor’s degree, International Business & Marketing

My first job out of college was with a software technology company in Silicon Valley. I was looking for an international company, but I didn’t really understand the scope of high tech. So, I got this job, and the majority of the employees had a technical degree or background. I got promoted into a product marketing job, which was kind of unheard of since I didn’t have a technical degree. One of my managers sat me down and told me, “You will never become a product marketing manager.” To me, that was a challenge. So, I figured out what I needed to do to prove him wrong. I spent a ton of time with the engineering team. I had them whiteboard things to a point that I became very proficient in our product, and how to message and market it to a technical audience. Eventually, I was traveling internationally to pitch our product to scores of engineers.

My attitude is probably a product of how I grew up. In Minnesota, there’s a huge value placed on working hard and being tough. My dad’s favorite phrase was, “you’ve got to get tougher.” It’s helped me a lot, but the thing you have to learn in the real world is that it’s not always about hunkering down and working really hard. A lot of it has to do with thinking. Thinking about what needs to be done and not waiting for someone to tell you to go do it. At this same company, there was another person I worked with who was kind of a renegade. He would always be doing things without

approval. I would ask him, “Really? Are you sure you should be doing this?” His response was always, “I’m just going to do it, and if someone doesn’t like me doing it, then I’ll change.” It took me a while to realize that you can do that — and you should do — if you want to get ahead. You just have to take leaps like that.

My father was always wondering how I could get along in a big global company coming from the small place I came from. He would ask me, “So, when you’re in a big meeting, how many other women are in the meeting?” For a great part of my career, I was the only woman in the room — whether there were 20, 50 or 100 people. The thing is, I never noticed. I never said to myself, “Gosh, you’re the only female.” I was just part of the group, part of the team, part of the community. I didn’t highlight the fact. Again, it’s probably because of the way I was raised. My mom did the same work my dad did, she worked right alongside him.

The lesson here is that you can do anything you want to, you just have to be tough. If it’s something you want to do, then you have to dive in and figure out how to do it. You have to believe in yourself.





## “Be passionate and be your authentic self.”

— HARRY KIMPEL, SENIOR SOLUTION ENGINEER  
Garmisch-Partenkirchen/Germany, MS Computer Science

Looking back, I still remember being 14 years old and buying my first computer with money I had saved. My parents thought I was crazy to spend such a huge amount of money on what they referred to as a “toy”. To me, my computer was much more than that. Sure, I played games on it — Zak McKracken, Monkey Island, Prince of Persia, Need for Speed, and many others— but what excited me most was the ability to program on it. I would buy computer magazines that printed source code and I would copy it, modify it, and play around with it. Programming was fascinating to me; I knew I wanted to learn more. A few years later, I enrolled in university to study computer science. At the time, many people asked me why the heck did I choose such a boring topic with not much of a future.

I have never once regretted my decision. I am as passionate about technology, specifically software engineering, today as I was when I was 14.

So, the lesson I want to share is — follow your passion. Do what makes you happy. Don’t worry about what others think is important or consider to be a presumably “safe bet” for your future career. It really does not matter what others do, what skills they have (and think you should get), or how they feel about your choices. At the end of the day, it’s more important to be true to yourself and what you want to do with your life.

I've followed this path for many years now. Along the way, I've had the opportunity to work in many different roles and positions, which leads me to another lesson. In most organizations, there is an implied rule that says you must climb the career ladder, you must constantly move up from one level to the next. It's this shared consensus that the only path to success is to step up to a management position, increase your responsibilities, lead a team, etc. For me, I made the decision to stay in the role of an individual contributor. I wanted to stay close to technology and have a career – but my passion was never to be in a leadership position. What was most important to me was to do what makes me happy and what I am passionate about.

I think it's important to understand that you do not “need” to climb the ladder if you don't want to. You don't have to become a team leader or a project/product manager to grow your career unless, of course, it is your passion. There is a huge breadth of roles available out there that will allow you to do what you love to do. In my opinion, if you do what you love, you will be successful and good at it by default, you will thrive because you followed your passion.



“There are many things I wish I had understood in the beginning of my career. Looking back, I am grateful to have learned so much along the way.”

— SCOTT MALOFF, PRODUCT MANAGER B2B  
Syracuse NY BA, Political Science

I was asked to share one lesson, but I can't choose just one. So, here are the ones that are closest to my heart.

### **Don't be part of the problem**

I've learned you can't control other people, but you can control how you yourself treat others. So, if you hate being treated a certain way, don't adopt the behavior yourself. For example, if you hate being ghosted, don't ghost anyone. Ever\*. If you don't do it, that's one less person doing it. If enough others follow suit, we can wipe out the scourge of ghosting as a common practice. As a Product Manager and consultant, I've worked in too many (meaning more than 1) organizations where people within that org and sometimes within the same team didn't bother to respond after someone reached out. I'm talking about a professional question or inquiry — whether via phone, text, or email. Or someone didn't show up at a meeting to which they accepted a calendar invitation. Aside from being inconsiderate, it shows an aggressive refusal to even acknowledge someone's existence and humanity. It's flat out unprofessional and is often an abuse of power. No one is too “busy” to be polite, it can take less than 10 seconds.

I absolutely hated it. So, I promised that I would never do it. And I also promised that when I ran a team, none of my team would ever do it either.

While I'm not perfect, I have a close to perfect record on responding to everything. It's a point of pride to me that others know they can depend upon me and furthermore I can sleep at night knowing that I'm not a part of adding negativity and stress to other people's lives. I'm sure everyone has enough of that already. While I can't change the others, I can lead by example.

\* No, you don't have to respond to cold calls or texts or to someone you've already turned down. In fact, you shouldn't. It's rewarding another aggressive behavior that no one likes. By not rewarding this behavior, you're making the world a better place.

### **Leave your bubble**

I am convinced everyone should go out into the world and live somewhere completely different from where they were born, raised, and are comfortable. You can always come back. When you do, I promise you'll be happier and more content knowing you live where you live by choice, rather than because of a lack of choices.

Live in a city for a year at minimum. If you can, make it overseas. Do it while you are still a student if you can. People love helping students so you may as well take full advantage of the opportunities available to students. Want to make your own movie, market a new product, try working in various industries? Do it and you'll begin to figure out what career direction is best for you. You may think you like doing X but once you get there, you find you like Y, or something you never thought about even better. The minute you're not a student, you're competition.

I mention going overseas because it gives you the opportunity to grasp the size of our world. It gives you an understanding that there are billions of others who do things and see things in a way that is completely different

from what you know. When I went to live in London, my entire perspective and life changed. I learned the lessons above in a profound way. There is no way to accomplish this other than to experience it firsthand. I had the privilege of interning for a member of British Parliament. They cannot hire an American in the British government. But as a student, not only did I get to work in this position, but I also got to do things adults with 20 years of experience still can't do.

### **Money doesn't equal happiness**

It's been proven. Sure, you do need a certain amount because the lack of it can increase stress and dissatisfaction. Studies have shown that happiness levels off at a much lower amount than one would think. Some say \$95K, some \$105K, and I've seen one that says \$250K — the point is that one doesn't need to be a billionaire to be happy. Wealth is relative. You will always find someone with more money, things, or status than you. I know a person worth \$20M who genuinely thinks he's poor. His business serves billionaires, so in comparison to them, in his mind, he is poor. The lesson here is that even though he has \$20M, he isn't close to happy because of his own made-up constructs and comparisons to others.

Do you like to help people? Do you like competition? Do you like solving problems? Do you like quiet solitude? Do you like high energy environments? If you like your work, and by like, I mean feel good about what you're doing, then your life will be incrementally happier. This is far more important than being a billionaire.



**“Say yes to opportunities. Be confident about what you do know, honest about what you don’t know, and willing to learn what you need to know.”**

— **RAYMOND USSERY**, VP PROFESSIONAL SERVICES  
Seattle, Washington. Bachelor of Arts, Arizona State University

If I know I can do 60% of a job, and the opportunity is offered to me, I’m going to say yes. I have to trust that the people hiring me have some insight into my skill set. I have to trust what they see in me. As long as I can do 60% of what they’re asking me to do, I have to trust that I can figure the rest out.

I was in sales a very long time ago. On weekends, for fun, I would manage seminars. I would plan these 3-day events because I just loved figuring out all the logistics. Eventually, I transitioned from sales to training. I figured in sales you talk a lot and in training you talk a lot — so, as long as I knew my material and presented it with confidence, it would all work out. I loved what I was doing and in the process of expanding my training role, I ended up authoring some training materials for Hybris. Then I was presented with an opportunity to manage an eCommerce project. I actually said aloud, “I understand you want me to do this, but I’m not sure I can do it.” They basically told me they really needed my help. That’s when I started making a mental checklist, and said to myself, “Well, I can do 60% of this, the other 40%, well, I’ve got to be able to figure it out.” I also realized the company had a vested interest in me doing well so they were not going to leave me dangling out there to fail — I figured they would support me as much as possible— and that’s exactly what happened.

The key is to manage your time at work to address the learning curve. Be honest about what you don't know and figure out what you need to learn. I definitely had some long days, frustration, maybe some profanities, but I persevered. A decade later, I look back at all the things I've done through my career along with what I've done for volunteer work and fun, and I can clearly see that program management and leadership was the perfect career for me to land on.



“Don’t give up. Pursue your dreams. You can achieve your goals.”

— **BARBARA PALUMBO**, SOFTWARE DEVELOPER  
Bari, Italy. Lives in: Berlin, Germany

Where I grew up, there is a very patriarchal mentality. Women are not supposed to pursue intellectual fields, they are supposed to stay home, cook, clean, and raise families. I did not want to do that. I studied computer programming in high school because I had a passion for it.

In 2001, there was a lot of change going on in our country because we were converting all our currency over to the Euro. This opened the door to getting my first job — as an apprentice at a small company that needed help changing over all of their code to the Euro. The work was tedious and boring, so I found another job as a Developer. I was handling most of the company’s customers. My new boss was demanding and abusive. He thought he could take advantage of me because I was a woman. I tolerated it for four years, and then I left.

I found a new job in a different sector but after a few years, I decided I really needed to study programming. I told myself to give it a try. I started learning PHP and made the decision to move to Berlin. Now that I am here, I am learning Java, and I am exposed to so many new opportunities. When I look back, I realize the lesson was about always having trust in myself and moving on when I had to. No one should think they have to give up their dreams, especially not because they are a woman or a person of color.

In my life, I have spoken up for myself and some people haven’t liked it. Women have brains. We have the same rights as men, just because we are different, we are still strong, we have the capacity to be just as successful and independent. You’ve just got to keep going and trust in yourself.





**“It may sound cliché, but when you don’t sweat the small stuff, often no one else does either.”**

— MELISSA MAKHOUL, PEOPLE OPERATIONS MANAGER  
Mebane, NC (originally from Pasadena, CA), BA in Literature

This may be super generic, but I’ve learned to not let the little things bother me, especially in my line of work. It took me a while to truly understand that most things are just not worth getting worked up over, because the moment in your life that is upsetting you — especially when it comes to work — is only temporary. I can’t recall when I first learned this lesson, but I can say that the older I get and the more I move up in my career, the easier it is for me to follow this line. Experience and confidence go a long way.

I’m a completely different person now than I was when I first started my career as an HR Assistant. Back then I allowed little things to negatively affect me, which made me less than a joy to be around. I don’t know when I realized throwing my hands up and going into panic mode every time I felt stressed, frustrated, or overwhelmed was not working in my favor. Working in HR, my job is to help when others are upset and have a problem that they need help solving.

Once I was able to recognize the difference between a small issue and a real problem, then I was able to remind myself that the little things didn’t matter and stop them from becoming larger than life. I started sharing this piece of advice with others, and I’ve found it useful in talking people off the ledge. I try to help them to realize that while the issue may seem huge

to them at the moment, in the grand scheme of their life it's temporary. This perspective helps to calm them down and see the bigger picture, thus giving them the clarity to move past the issue. I would have never progressed in my career, nor would I have made many friends along the way.



**“Accept the things you cannot change, have courage to change the things you can, and have wisdom to understand the difference.”**

— **ANGIE ARLINGTON**, SENIOR ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE  
Ft. Worth, TX

The quote is a modification of the Serenity Prayer, which is the way I started each day of the week during my high school days at a Catholic all-girls school. Little did I know my Catholic education would stick with me into my sales career. Why?

Going back to the words of the prayer brings me back to a conversation I had with my first SaaS sales manager when I was around 28 years old. At the time, I was getting really worked up with other sales colleagues for a variety of reasons. Seeing them screw up a sale and lose it, seeing someone get a hot new lead that closed quickly, and getting worked up by continuously looking at the leaderboard numbers. He told me, “Angie, just focus on you, your deals, your strategies, you. It doesn’t matter what anyone else is doing as long as you are doing what you need to do.”

Being successful in sales does mean you most likely have a competitive nature. What you can’t do if you work in sales, is let the competitive nature in you ruin your own success. It’s easy to get jealous of a hot new lead, a large deal that someone else is working, you name it. Whether your actions and attitude in response are positive or negative, they affect everyone around you. If you’re positive, others around you will reflect that. If you are negative, others around you feed off that and it can bring them down as well. That negativity isn’t good for anyone individually nor is it good for

the team. In sales, it's important to stick together. If you help your team members succeed, at the end of the day, everyone wins. Every new client logo the team brings to the table helps you close your next deal.

This advice from my manager has always stuck with me. If you start looking at the things you can't control, and dwelling on them, it translates to a negative impact on your attitude, your work ethic, and frankly your overall feelings in life. Focus on what **you can control**, make sure you are **doing your best**, and at the end of the day, if you know you've given your job your very best effort, you can feel good about yourself and rest easy at night. A positive attitude not only makes all the difference in your relationships at work, but it also transfers to your attitude and your happiness at home. Dwelling on the negative or things outside of your control takes you on a path downwards and can be contagious to the rest of your team, and your family. Who wants to live that way? **Have the wisdom** to know that even if you didn't get that hot lead or that big sale, there's more to be had out there. **Have the courage** to get up the next morning and get up and try again. After all, the Serenity Prayer has been around a long time — and it got its name for good reason.

The background features a repeating pattern of teal and white geometric shapes, resembling interlocking triangles and hexagons. The teal shapes form a grid-like structure, while the white shapes fill the spaces between them.

CHAPTER 4

# Communication, Patience & Understanding



**“If you are going to be late on a deadline, give your superiors the courtesy of giving them plenty of advance notice. If possible, provide the same amount of notice as the amount of extra time you need.”**

— DINA SCHWEISTHAL, ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE  
Chicago, IL, Masters, Training Development

Example: If you are working on a project and you know it’s going to take 2 weeks longer than the due date, you should let your manager know 2 weeks BEFORE the due date.

I think a lot of people panic when they realize they are not going to be able to meet a deadline, so they wait until the very last second to share this information. What they don’t realize is that by not speaking up, they end up creating unnecessary stress and pressure on themselves, everyone on their team, and the managers above them. If you speak up early, usually you can get more help, an adjustment in the timeline can be made, or another solution can be found.

I learned this lesson in 2015 when I was working at a company called Bandwidth 2015. The CEO, David Morken presented this lesson to us in a meeting. He explained that he expected his employees, most of whom were constantly tasked with delivering projects against timelines, to follow this directive.

It made so much sense to me. I use this lesson all the time as I am building my project completion dates. I try to estimate the amount of time correctly but with all the contributing factors in the mix, whether it's changed in scope, additional people brought in, etc., sometimes it's impossible. This approach takes off the added stress of having to complete a project by the originally given deadline. While you can't always give the exact same amount of advance notice, the key is not to wait until the last minute to let people know. It will never reflect well on you. In the long run, asking for an extension in advance is always going to earn you more respect.



**“After 20 years in commerce and customer engagement, the best advice I can give is to LISTEN.”**

— PAUL WILLIAMS, SOLUTIONS ARCHITECT

I started my career as a developer, working through many agencies, and eventually starting my own commerce agency business that I later sold. I've learned when you are talking, you are not listening. When you first start your career, you have so much to learn. While you may be excited to show what you know, when you start attending meetings or join conversations, listen first. Don't say anything, watch what happens, watch the body language of people, how they react, and what they say. You will be amazed by what you learn — and by how much it will help you in dealing with people, solving problems, and being a leader in the future.

This lesson was further reinforced for me later in life when I participated in a leadership training course. The course was about how to better understand your colleagues and employees, as well as the people who are part of your everyday life. We covered many topics and discussed tactics for being better leaders. The two lessons that stuck with me the most were “S.C.A.R.F.” and the “Ladder of Inference.” Both solidified my approach to Listening.

S.C.A.R.F. stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. These terms refer to the core emotions that can be triggered either in yourself or in others during any type of interaction. When you have a conversation with someone, it typically triggers one or more of



them, in either a positive or negative way. For example, when someone is told they're not getting a pay raise, this may trigger their "Status" and "Fairness" buttons. They may say to themselves, "I am not appreciated. This isn't fair. I've worked hard all year," and so on. If the person delivering this message has an awareness of these emotions, they are better equipped to respond in a way that results in a positive outcome.

S.C.A.R.F has not only given me a better awareness of how people react to what I say, it has also impacted the way I choose to phrase my comments. Figuring out which emotions I am triggering helps me empathize with the person's reaction and often helps me choose what to say next if I want to persuade them to consider my way of thinking or at least get them to acknowledge it. I've found recognizing which SCARF buttons I'm pushing when I talk to people increases their level of trust with me and has helped me build better working relationships. It's a powerful tool that you can turn to time and time again.

The Ladder of Inference is also based on taking the time to listen before taking actions. The idea is to step up the ladder by recognizing the reality, facts, assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs you automatically apply to a specific situation before you enter it. By working your way up the ladder, you can ultimately ensure you're drawing the right conclusions or taking the right actions. It's especially useful when you need to have a difficult conversation or are trying to solve a complex problem on a project. Before you begin, first consider what you know about the situation along with experiences you've had in the past with similar situations, what actions were taken, and what data, values, and beliefs you have going into it. Use this knowledge to guide your words and actions. We all know once something has been said you cannot take it back. The Ladder approach can help avoid that issue.

These are just two things I've learned along my career path. I've found both to be useful tools I use every day to ensure my thinking, my actions, and my conversations with people come from a place of empathy and knowledge, not snap judgment, or bias.

SCARF Model: <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/SCARF.htm>

Ladder of Inference (How to avoid jumping to conclusions):

[https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC\\_91.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_91.htm)



**“Speak up! Even when you’re the new guy/girl, fresh out of school, without much experience, remember the company you’re working for chose you because they felt you had the potential to add value.”**

— **JOHN FORD**, BACKEND DEVELOPER. Employee for 1 year  
Titusville, FL. Master of Science in Bioinformatics, Bachelor  
of Science in Computer Science

You should never be afraid to speak up and share your ideas and perspectives in the workplace. It doesn’t matter whether it’s your first day, your first meeting with the CEO, or on a call with a lot of senior executives, you need to remind yourself your knowledge, opinions, and ideas have merit.

As a newcomer to the professional workforce, I’ve had firsthand experiences when I just didn’t have the confidence to participate in the discussion. I would think about it, work out what I wanted to say in my head, and look for a good moment to speak, but ultimately, I would stay silent.

About a month into my first professional job after graduating from college, I was invited to a meeting. There was a discussion underway regarding how we could speed up a process that was taking too long. Many people were explaining why the process took so long. Some were offering excuses

of why there was no viable solution. I had an idea for a possible solution, but I was too afraid to speak up. In my head, I told myself that maybe I didn't understand the situation fully or didn't have all the information I needed. My excuses for not speaking up were all fear based. After a week of witnessing additional internal discussions about the issue, another member of the team proposed the same solution that I had been keeping to myself. There was nothing I could do but agree with him. Had I spoken up, I would not only have gotten credit for coming up with the solution, but I would also have saved a week's worth of discussions on the topic.

Now I realize how easy it is for any new employee — whether they're a recent college grad or just new to the company — to overlook their value and not realize what they can bring to the table. Often, it's these people who can bring the fresh ideas that are needed. The people who have spent years in a particular industry or company, get stuck in their ways, and when faced with change, sometimes can't see its value, and will fight it. Companies cannot grow without change, they need innovation, ideas, and modern ways of thinking about old problems. Your fresh ideas can be invaluable, yet imposter syndrome can keep new hires from sharing them. Don't let it!



**“If you don’t communicate your expectations to others, you can’t be disappointed when they don’t deliver on those expectations.”**

— IVO BRONSVELD, HEAD OF INTEGRATIONS  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands. College

A shorter way to explain my greatest lesson is simply to say, “I realized the world doesn’t revolve around me.” I think kids are supposed to learn this lesson in kindergarten, but I didn’t learn it until later in life. Sometimes I would get agitated and impatient with people when they didn’t do what I expected or did something I didn’t agree with. Whether it was the way someone responded to an email I wrote them that made it very clear they didn’t “get” what I was asking, or the way a manager handled something that I thought was a bad decision, my reaction was, “What’s wrong with them?” or “Why aren’t things going the way I think they should?”

For example, earlier in my career I was working at a company and since I was just starting out, I felt I had to prove myself — and I felt I was proving myself. There was a position available that would have been a promotion for me, and I thought I should be considered for it. I was disappointed when it wasn’t offered to me. Ultimately, I realized I didn’t ask for the promotion, instead I expected them to know I wanted it, which was unrealistic. It became an “aha” moment for me; I realized that if I don’t speak up about what I want, I can’t expect people to know what I am thinking or what you want.

Since then, I've focused on being a proactive communicator. It's paid off in many ways. For example, I used to find it super hard to share bad news, but in the end, it's important to take ownership of your responsibilities, and that means communicating good news as well as bad news.

Now, whenever I feel myself reverting to my old ways, I take a step back and ask myself, "is this my ego talking?" I make sure to check that I have a valid reason to be annoyed and it's not my ego creating the issue.

So, as much as all of us would like it to, the world doesn't revolve around you. When you're starting out, it's important to remember that. If you are getting different results than you think you should be, it's probably because you're not communicating your expectations clearly and concisely.



**“My #1 piece of advice is to network. Communicate well with your peers and your boss, and don’t be afraid to ask advice of other people.”**

— **MATT ALBERTS**, VICE PRESIDENT, GLOBAL SOLUTIONS CONSULTING Raleigh, NC. College

By “network,” I don’t mean in the sense of actively seeking to connect with people to try to get a job, but in the way of making the effort to make and keep relationships with the people you work with, the people you work for, and the people who work for you. This includes any vendors that do work for you and anyone that comes in to present a product or service. It’s about making these connections and keeping them alive.

Every job I’ve had, I’ve gotten through my network. I’ve never had success through a large company’s career portal. Each role has been based off a personal relationship where at some point the person would say, “Have you ever considered something like this? Have you ever considered a job like this?”

To get to a place where that kind of thing can happen, you need more than just “water cooler” relationships. You have to talk about more than the day-to-day minutia of your job — that doesn’t get you anywhere in life. You have to have real conversations about what you do, what you enjoy about it, and other things you think you might enjoy.

With my first two jobs, the opportunities came up and I took advantage of them. I never really thought about how it happened. About 10 years into my career, while I was working in IT at a retail brand, I was tasked with buying software. So, I had to go through the buying process. All these vendors came in to present their solutions to me. Ultimately, I selected one and during implementation, I began to build relationships with people at the company. That's when I figured out the importance of networking. It was my first experience with people asking me questions like, "Have you ever thought about selling software? Have you ever thought about working in an implementation context for a software company?" I had never considered either or had anyone present me with different ideas as to the different paths I could take.

That experience started me thinking, what is it that I don't like to do? I looked at my day-to-day life and realized I don't like being called after hours, I don't like working 80-hour weeks or having to put in a 24-hour day to complete an implementation. What do I like? I like budgeting, building teams, going to executive leadership meetings, and having high-value interaction with my peers where we really try to solve business problems. When you start to identify what you really like and don't like fundamentally, you can start doing some goal-oriented planning.

I could have created multiple different opportunities through that network. They could have let me know about a job at another one of their retail clients or with their company. Ultimately the experience led me to switch from working on the customer side to the vendor side because it provides more of what I like and less of what I don't.



Having a network enables you to help others get jobs as well as help your clients and vendors find employees. It also opens the door to creating business-value propositions and partnerships. There are just a lot of upsides to having a group of people you like working with and are familiar with — maybe you see them a couple times a year, maybe you see them once every four years — but either way, you know if you need something or want something, they're part of a network you feel confident you can call on.

CHAPTER 5

# **We're All in This Together**



“ You can show empathy and humility, or you can get impatient with people. Everything is a lot easier if you choose the first route.”

— OLIVIA BROWN, TECHNICAL SUPPORT SPECIALIST  
Charlotte, NC, B.S. Computer Science, Chemistry

Even though I'm relatively new in my career, I continually have opportunities to show empathy and humility. A big part of being able to do that was by learning that I can't be afraid to ask for help myself. Everyone has problems, even the people whom we rely on to solve specific problems have issues to deal with and have people they turn to for help. When you work for a company, you're all in it together, so you've got to help others, rather than get annoyed when they ask for help. I am constantly reminded that nobody comes to me with problems simply to inconvenience me. In fact, most people try their best to solve problems first based on the knowledge they have.

Once I understood that, it became much easier and enjoyable to serve and work with other people. The feeling I get from helping people implement their initiatives and giving them the proper tools never gets old. It's also disarming for all parties involved to see me share their joy in solving a problem and helping them move forward. Instead of working from an adversarial standpoint, I've found it's easier to be open and honest about the pain points that happen and together explore where we can improve on them.

A crucial part of this lesson is discerning how to gauge what's going to matter in 5 minutes, 5 hours, or 5 years. When you do this, it makes the problems of the day seem much trivial in relation to where we go as individuals, teams, and organizations. We're all human, and at some point, we all screw up. By being there for each other, we can make our careers, and life, a lot more bearable.



**“Tackling everything on your own isn’t always the best solution. It’s better for you, and for everyone around you, to remember you’re never alone”**

— **ED DAVIS**, CUSTOMER SUCCESS MANAGER  
Raleigh, NC, BS Business Administration

The most important lesson I’ve learned in my life and my career is to remember I am never alone. There have been times when I’ve felt lonely or overwhelmed with say a complicated customer issue, a big project, an important presentation, or even just the multiple things on my plate in a single day, and I’ve had to remind myself I have friends, family, and coworkers who love and support me through thick and thin. None of us need to carry the weight alone. Sometimes it’s better to share the load.

I first discovered this lesson when I was working for a global equipment manufacturer. I was on one of a 3-person team, and the only one with any tech experience and subject knowledge. I took on way more responsibility than I should have because I felt that leadership was relying on me to get us where we needed to go. I learned the hard way that I could rely on my teammates and needed to trust that they were more than capable of accomplishing whatever tasks I thought only I could handle. When I finally engaged the other team members, I discovered we could execute much faster, and turn around projects that had more impact on the business. Ever since that experience, I’ve focused on being a team player.

Letting go of the “it’s all on me” approach and embracing the “I’m never alone” approach has helped me become more confident in my abilities, while at the same time forcing me to speak up when I’m overwhelmed and put my trust in others when I need support. It’s a vital lesson to anyone, like myself, who doesn’t want to burden others with their problems or issues. This leads to withdrawing from people. Asking for help isn’t an admission that you are not good enough or not worthy of the task at hand. Breaking free of that mindset and being honest when you need help, is always the better choice. “I am never alone” is a catalyst for that change.



“Recognize the value of teamwork, be willing to work with others — that’s how things get done.”

— DONALD BRENNER, TECHNICAL TRAINER  
Chicago, Master of Science in Computer Science,  
Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo

I’ve been a technical trainer for nearly a decade, primarily in the ecommerce arena. Before that, I had a long career as a software developer. One of the most important lessons I ever learned revolved around teamwork and how it gets the job done. I learned it from one of the best managers I have ever worked with.

Just after getting my master’s in computer science, I got a job with a startup. My manager there was a very smart, hardworking, inspirational guy. He was brought in to manage the project because it was floundering – multiple people were trying to control various parts of it; there were competing political factions; conflict between various teams at the client site; and everyone had their own specific designs and priorities.

The new manager instituted weekly meetings with representatives from all the groups. Everyone did a form of what is now commonly known as a daily standup or scrum meeting. Everyone stood up and answered the same questions.

“What did you do last week?”

“What are you going to do this week?”

“What issues are holding you back?”

At first our manager used those meeting to make sure specific tasks were getting done, later in the project, his focus changed to keeping everyone moving in the right direction. During a meeting, at a time when the project was coming together, problems were being solved, and we were nearing completion — people started arguing about next steps. He stepped in and offered an unexpected but brilliant piece of advice. He said “We don’t have to be right yet – but we all need to be moving in the same direction. Then, if it doesn’t work, we all pivot to the right direction together. It’s a lot easier to change direction than it is to get moving!”

I still remember his words every day. He was so right. With teamwork, things get done. Teams need to share common goals and if the direction isn’t on the mark, change it. But always, always work together, and keep moving toward the goal.





**“Create a network. The connections you make can sometimes direct your career path.”**

— **ALEXANDRA FUSSMAN**, PARTNER MANAGER  
Chicago, IL, Bachelor's degree from Michigan State University

When I first started in commerce I was in a very fast paced environment. My responsibilities required me to work in multiple different areas of the business (Marketing, Business Development, HR, etc.). I spent every day with different people across the business and getting to learn how each business unit worked. This gave me the opportunity to meet with many executives who were leading different teams — at the time I didn't realize how making these connections could impact my career path.

Now I know how important it is to build trusted relationships. You don't just do that during the regular workday, it happens at work-related events and dinners. That's when you have the time to get to know colleagues, ask questions, share your story and your goals. It's also makes you realize we are all in this together, and we are able to help each other thrive in our careers. Today, I've built a strong network of people I've met along the way whom I respect and who respect me. Now when I need career advice, a moment of check in, or direction, I have a network to reach out to that is always willing to listen and help. Someone in network led me to my current job at commercetools.

So, the lesson I have to offer is that you can't be shy. You can't just go to work 9 to 5 and go home. If you want to grow in your career, it's important to put yourself out there. Go to events and happy hours. Introduce yourself to people, ask questions, build relationships, and stay in touch. You just never know who you will meet—and if they are in the same industry, will probably cross paths with them again — and chances you will benefit from the connection in the long run. If you start building a strong ecosystem at the beginning of your career, it will give you so many more options and opportunities in the future. It did for me.



**“We are equal in the fact that we are all different. I think we should take time to consider this. We need to share our emotions, respect others’ emotions, and respect each other’s differences.”**

— **ADINA LÜTGE**, TECHNICAL WRITER  
Berlin, Germany

The lesson here is not to judge people or label people. Don’t assume anything based on a person’s age, sex, ethnic background, etc. You have to work with different people, learn how to handle the differences of others and embrace your own.

I got my first leading role in an office at the age of 19 and I founded my first business at 22. I had a lot of experience with bias. I’m tall, skinny, and dark-haired. I was strong, tough, and focused.

People created their own perceptions of me, to them, I was obsessed with my career, unemotional, rude, a feminist. So, at 24, I was working as head of a documentation department and bias was all around me. I wanted to show everyone who I really was. We had a holiday party and there was a talent show. I decided to act and sing on the stage. I chose an Italian song that was about a very tall woman with a very short partner. I performed with another person. We made the act into a parody and had a lot of fun with it. Afterwards, everyone at the company had a different perception of me.

They saw that I wasn't so serious and business focused. They saw I had a humorous side — that I was a person who could laugh at herself and could embrace making a fool of herself for entertainment's sake.



**“When you’re focused on building your career, it’s easy to get caught up in chasing the dollar. Caring about your customer, their problems, and how your product can help, goes a long way in creating my own success.”**

— **RACHEL ZIMMERMAN**, ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE  
Chapel Hill, NC BS in Psychology

Care. I don’t know how to say this differently, it’s really important to care. I’m sure you’ve heard that it’s much harder to sell a product you don’t believe in, but I think there is more to it than just caring about the product. You need to care about the people you are trying to sell. You need to care about the business problems your prospects are trying to solve and the challenges they face. You have to care enough to find a solution that they will feel good about, instead of trying to convince your prospect to dismiss their concerns.

Being in sales is an extremely powerful thing: you can either be slimy and take advantage of people or you can be the solution that removes real pressure. Of course, it’s easier just to make the sale, forget about it and move on to the next customer. At the end of the day though, — and especially at the end of a long career, you want to be able to put your head down on the pillow and be happy with how you contributed to this world. I’ve found that the best way to do that is simply to care.

I worked on a sale years ago. I was pitching a prospect who ran a religious non-profit whose mission was feeding hungry children in the name of Christ. My company had a product that could help them further their mission in aspects they hadn't even yet considered, not just fill the specific request they brought us. We flew in to meet them, brought some of our brightest minds and ended up brainstorming with them. We were able to find solutions to problems they hadn't even brought to any of the other vendors. At the end of the day, because we genuinely cared about their mission, we found additional use cases to provide as examples and we were able to help them make the most out of their investment. Today, this organization is feeding more impoverished children because I took a step beyond just selling them a product. I rest easy at night knowing I didn't take the easy route. In the end, the solutions my company provided created a long-term customer, supported the organization's needs better, and generated more revenue for our company. Not only is it easier to turn a prospect into a customer when you truly care, you'll find that ultimately makes a greater positive impact across the board.

CHAPTER 6

# Forge Your Own Path



**“This is a lesson about optimism and confidence. It’s about listening, learning quickly from the lesson being offered to you, and being a little bit courageous.”**

— MICHAEL HARTWIG, LEAD TECHNICAL TRAINER

It was 1991, and I was working part-time as a database administrator at a law firm. I took the job while I was still in school to earn a little bit extra pocket money. At this time, I had completed my Bachelor/Masters study. I continued to work for the firm for a while after receiving my master’s and already working on my PhD. I was raised in the Eastern part of Germany and had grown up under socialist rule and at the time, I was working, studying, and learning to live and survive in the new (capitalist) world.

One day, I decided to approach Dr. Schaffner, one of the CEOs of the law firm, to ask for a pay raise. I planned my argument in advance. Once I had his attention, I explained that the hourly rate I was making was a student rate and since I had completed my master’s, I deserved an increase.

Dr. Schaffner’s response was, “Maybe. We can talk about that.” Then he said to me, “Michael, we need one more report for our reporting...can you do this?” He showed me what he was looking for, and I quickly answered, “Sure, easy. I pull from this table, combine with that table, and do this. Done.”



I was proud I figured it out so quickly. I thought Dr. Schaffner would be impressed. Instead, he said, “Michael, you cannot come to me and say, “I want a pay raise” and then say, everything is easy.” He then explained to me what he wanted to hear, which was, “Dr. Schaffner, this is an interesting task. I will do some research about it and do my very best to get it done. Yes, I will get it done but I need to work on it.”

I still didn't get the lesson he was trying to teach me as I thought it was a very straightforward task. Thankfully, Dr. Schaffner gave me another chance. He said to me, “It is up to you. I have to go to a meeting now. Can you do it until the end of the week? Think carefully!” While I almost immediately said, “Sure, it is easy,” I stopped for a moment before responding. “I think I can have it done for you. However, I need to consult someone and look into something to make sure it is done correctly. I promise to do my best.”

Dr. Schaffner's response? “Do it. And apply the new rate to your monthly bill.”

I have never forgotten that conversation with Dr. Schaffner. I was sitting on my chair while he stood next to me. That day I learned that you can be brave and optimistic. You can stand up and be proud of your work. Anybody you work with and who interviews you in job applications is also a very human being and does not know everything. Present your work with a smile but be firm.

In 2000, I left Germany with my family and worked for 11 years abroad in Malaysia, Botswana, then Mongolia. I had to apply for a new job nearly every second year. My job duties changed from teacher trainer

to management support to e-commerce software development. I had to have the courage to apply for those jobs and go for many interview sessions, but I got to live my dream of working in and exploring different countries (remember, I am originally from the socialist part of Germany during a time when travel was nearly impossible!). I came back to Germany in 2011 and am pleased with where I've been and where I am now.

I will always be thankful for this lesson. I teach my students in my own classes today. I tell them to do your best! Don't undersell yourself. Present your work with a smile and full confidence!



**“There is no right way. There is no singular path to success. Your career is yours alone and it is up to you to define.”**

— **MARC STRACUZZA**, PRODUCT MANAGER  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL. BS Computer Engineering,  
University of Florida

Time and time again over the course of our lives we are taught the “right way” to do something. My parents taught me the right way to fold a towel and the right way to sit at the kitchen table. My teachers taught me the right way to solve a math problem as well as the right way to decipher a poem. These lessons are important as they frame expectations and provide examples on how to solve problems — but I’ve learned there is no actual “right way”. Perhaps, the way is the most accepted way, possibly the simplest way, or maybe it is just the way that person knows how to do it.

School reinforces this “right way” behavior. If you solve a problem using a different method, you may not get credit on your test. Test scores lead to good grades which lead to opportunities to attend good colleges. Similarly, society tells a story on the path to success. Do well in school, go to a good college, get a degree in a high paying field, get a job, perform well, grow your salary, grow your role, and eventually retire happy and successful.

It is very easy to get caught up in this “right way” approach and forget that we are allowed to take different paths. It is even easier to allow the external definition of success to drive our decision making when building

out our careers. But what if you change your mind and decide you want to explore a different job role or industry? What if you decide to not chase career advancement because you are happy doing the job you have? What if you don't chase the money and take a lower paying job that will make you happier? Is any of this the wrong way?

A few years ago, I was offered a significant pay raise to switch jobs. This money would have been very helpful as I was a relatively new parent and kids bring on expenses. But the job I was being offered was going to be demanding. I could earn more money, but at the sacrifice of time with my family. I decided to turn down the offer and have never regretted it. My time with my kids is infinitely more valuable to me than the extra money I could have earned.

I am a trained software engineer. I have a degree in it. I have years of experience doing it. But my current role is as a Product Manager. I've also taken roles that could be perceived as a demotion. I transitioned because I found interest in doing something else. I'm leveraging my engineering experience in my new role and have found joy learning to do something different. The opportunity to learn and grow my skills and knowledge is more important to me than career continuity.

None of my decisions were mistakes, though they may not align with what others thought were right. I am defining my career and am not beholden to what others may deem correct. Similarly, your career is yours alone. You get to decide what is right for you. Find the goals that you want in life and the job that facilitates those goals.



**“There are so many paths you can go down in computer science. It’s more than just programming, there is so much more to it.”**

— **LAURA LUIZ ESCORIZA**, ENGINEERING MANAGER  
Barcelona, Spain. Master in Informatics Engineering

When I started studying computer science, I didn’t know exactly what kind of job I wanted. I could imagine that I’d be doing some sort of programming, but I wasn’t able to picture what kind of role that career would lead me to. All I knew was that I loved computers since I was four, and being a girl, that was very unlikely at that time.

Then I got into my career, and that’s when I started seeing there are many different paths in computer science. It was not straightforward, but eventually I made my own path, one that so far has led me into managing a team. I think not having a specific career path in mind was best for me because I took everything in with passion and didn’t shut myself off from anything.

So, my advice is don’t feel like you have to know exactly what you want to do while you are in school, just pick a subject that you like. Don’t worry about what your future job will be. A lot of young people seem so lost and unsure of what they want to do. That’s OK, you won’t really know all the options until you’re actually in the working world. The most important thing is to pick something you like, for me, it was computer science. If you do that, once you’re actually doing it, you’re going to ace it anyway.



**“To all the girls out there, don’t settle for less. Have your own purpose and work relentlessly towards it!”**

— **HETVI MISTRY**, SOLUTIONS ARCHITECT, AMERICAS  
Originally from India, currently living in the USA Bachelors in Computer Science, MBA

I was born and raised in a small town in India. Growing up, my life was pretty simple. There was no internet or exposure to the outside world. So, I didn’t have a clear pathway into what exactly I wanted to do after completing my formal education. However, if there was something very clear from childhood, it was that I wanted a career of my own. I wanted to be independent and able to make my own life choices, be it career or anything else. This thought process was supported by my parents, whom both played a major role in where I am today in my professional career. My mother, now retired, set an example for me, by working while taking care of our family.

Where I’m from, social norms, culture, and family play a big role in shaping the majority of one’s life. At times, the “rules” make it more difficult for women to navigate and focus on individual goals. Women are advised on every aspect of life — from what to study, when to get married, when to have kids — and when to focus on family versus your own life. Although the situation has improved a lot in recent years, the majority of the responsibilities of the home and family still fall on the woman, who are judged if they fail to prioritize family over career. As a result, they often lose track of their professional goals. My advice? Don’t let that happen. Make sure you have clear goals, both short and long-term ones. Choose your own direction, take the driver’s seat, and navigate your own path.

Whether you're a man or a woman, if you want to have a career, you have to make it a priority and be upfront about it when making personal life choices. With women especially though, you can't let others discourage you just because your choices don't fit into societal norms. When I started my first job after graduation, I was learning a new software and would reach out to my manager with questions. After a while he asked me, "Hetvi, why are you so ambitious? In the end, you will end up cooking in the kitchen, what is the point of learning?" I was so shocked that I didn't say anything, maybe I was scared to speak-up. Now, I regret not having given a befitting reply. However, there have been other men, both on personal and professional fronts, who have encouraged and instilled confidence in me to keep going despite hurdles. Know that, while many people along your career journey will offer their opinions, both positive and negative, it's up to you to think and choose your path. Be tough, be a rebel if necessary!

Find a mentor early in your career who can provide guidance and help you navigate your career options. I didn't have any one and I mostly went with the flow, but I firmly believe having a mentor at work and someone outside work can help you avoid making mistakes. Also, while choosing a job, don't focus only on salary, look at the company's overall offering. Examine their work culture and the growth opportunities, etc., as they also play a large role in your success at work. I have mostly learned from my mistakes, but if I could go back in time and do things differently, I would make sure to:

1. Speak-up when needed, don't be afraid
2. Have a mentor
3. Never stop learning — it is key to career growth

While my lesson is specifically about having your own purpose as a woman, it applies to everyone. It's about having priorities, being clear about having goals, and working towards them. Take breaks if you need to but don't give up. Go chase your dreams!



**“You can’t wait around and hope to be noticed. You don’t have to go around tooting your own horn, but you do have to make the choice to be proactive.”**

— **JASON SWEET, SR. ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE**  
Hopkinton, MA, BS, Business Admin and Management  
and MBA, International Business

My first job out of school was a job out of college with a growing division of a global sales organization. Working there, I learned a lot about process, persistence, and having a positive attitude. Most importantly, I found out if I wanted to achieve my goals, I had to be proactive.

What I learned was that if you want to be considered for a promotion/job/industry, start by doing your current job (student/intern/individual contributor/manager/director) exceptionally well. Then pay attention to opportunities to support the company in a new project that might need an extra hand, a committee you can join, and volunteer as much as you can. Request to work on tasks that align you to your goal. If there’s a business process you think you can improve somehow, an initiative you can launch, or a person who needs a mentor — speak up. Add value wherever and whenever you can.

During this time, I was 21, and the average years of experience within the sales ranks was 25 years. I knew if I wanted to excel and make a name for myself, I was going to need to differentiate myself. I noticed there was a gap in new hire mentorship, so I formalized a program. I saw there was



a Global Leadership Development Program (GLDP) that I wanted to be considered for, so I asked one of the heads of the program to be a mentor. During our mentoring sessions, he shared what I would need to do to be considered for the GLDP. Experience was a key requirement, and there was nothing I could do to retroactively add to my experience. We agreed consistent performance and pursuit of an MBA would differentiate me from the applicants and so that is the direction I chose.

If I hadn't been proactive and seized opportunities to get ahead in my career, I wouldn't be where I'm at today. You can wait for your career to happen, or you can take steps to make it happen.

CHAPTER 7

# Trust Your Instincts



**“If you think differently, without limits, and beyond the boundaries, you will always be viewed as the one who has the ability to think past the problems.”**

— **STEPHANIE FORBES**, EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT  
Panama City, Panama, College

During a meeting I attended at a previous company, an executive presented the sales cycle, which I felt was extremely long. I took it upon myself to find out why. As I started to chat with everyone who touched the sales cycle, I heard the same thing repeatedly. “Nothing can change with the process because even when people complain about the problem, no one takes any action to solve it.” While I could have just gone along with the status quo and kept quiet, I was determined to make things better.

Though I took the warning into consideration, I felt as a newbie, it was reasonable for me to ask questions to better understand the sales process. Being new also allowed me to more clearly see the bottlenecks that everyone else already accepted as part of the process. Once I identified where things were being held up, I was able provide solutions that ultimately shaved a few days off the sales cycle.

The main issue was with the VP of Customer Success. While he spent his days in back-to-back Meetings, he was responsible for approving all orders. Often, it would take him over 24 hours to respond to questions from the sales team, check emails, and review orders. Having only one executive with approval power was effectively hurting business.

I suggested the approval process be handed over to the sales team managers. This was a mutually beneficial solution that not only better supported the needs of the sales team and helped speed up the sales cycle, but also allowed customers to launch more quickly.

That experience was the first time I clearly saw the difference with focusing on the solution instead of the problem. This lesson is mainly about changing your perspective. Instead of approaching an issue by pointing out the negative, “we have a problem,” the idea is to turn it into a positive, “I think I have a solution.” I constantly find myself applying this lesson at work and in my personal life.

Even if you are just starting out in your career, don’t feel you just have to go along with the way things have always been done (and complain about it with your colleagues). Instead, explore why it’s done that way, and see if you can identify a better way. By taking the approach you are looking to present a solution rather than rehash an old problem, your input will become more valuable. Even if your solution isn’t embraced, you’ll make a good impression.



**“I probably got lucky a few times in my career. But I definitely always looked for places that wanted to grow.”**

— **HAUKE RAHM**, VICE PRESIDENT OF CUSTOMER SUCCESS  
Berlin, Germany, studied protestant theology up to what equates to a bachelor's degree, then graduated with a degree in Information Technology

When I look back at my career, I realize that the one thing I've done consistently is seek synergy with the company I am working for, if I can't find it, that's how I know I'm not in the right place. I've always looked for jobs which allow me to help a business grow and allow me to grow through the job I do for the company — basically I think it's important for a job to be mutually-beneficial, otherwise it's not fulfilling.

I started at commercetools as a Customer Success (CS) Manager about 4 years ago. The company was much smaller at that time, and it was focused on strategic growth. For a SaaS company to accomplish that goal, I knew it was important to put the customer in the central position of all activities. In my opinion, it's critical. So, looking for ways I could give our customers a voice as well as enhance our relationships with them, became my main objective. The efforts I made continually delivered tangible business value, which got noticed by leadership, and got me quickly promoted to Head of CS and then later to my current position as Vice President CS. I'm certain my career advancements have been a result of my synergy strategy.

I made sure commercetools had a business need I could accomplish at commercetools, and by working towards it, I've been able to reach my own goals, to learn more about my industry, get better at my job, and grow as a leader.



“You have to direct your own path. Do things you enjoy. Make sure you’re either learning, earning, or doing both. If you’re not doing either, it’s time to change course.”

— NIKHIL KULKARNI, SALES DIRECTOR  
Goring, United Kingdom. Master’s Degree, Business Administration

I was born and raised in India. At the age of 17, I became a semi-professional cricket player. As the first overseas cricketer for Barnsley, a town in the UK, I was dropped into a role as a professional in a sport I had been playing for fun. It was a big change, and it taught me my first life lesson — make sure you do things that you enjoy or can find enjoyment in doing. For me, cricket went from being a sports activity I liked to a job. While it came with responsibilities, it was something I had fun doing. That made a huge difference.

Eventually, my cricket career was history. I went back to school, ultimately getting an MBA and deciding to start my own business. I partnered with a friend in India, and together we launched a bioinformatics company. We raised seed capital, angel funding, and grew the business to being valued at \$20m. We were both very driven and we managed to have a lot of fun while building our start up. However, due to various factors, we had to shut our business and find regular jobs. I wasn’t disappointed though because I realized it was a learning experience. That’s my second lesson, always remember, if you **aren’t earning, you are learning**. And this lesson, consciously or unconsciously, has been my pillar in choosing roles, careers, and companies I work for.

After wrapping up the start up, I wanted the experience of working with a large corporation. I joined Microsoft and became a sales representative. It was good for me to gain an understanding of how to sell at enterprise level and the company provided a lot of training, which benefited me immensely. I wasn't earning a lot, but again, I was learning. I moved from Microsoft to HP (to learn consulting) and then to Salesforce (to learn cloud computing). Today, in my role at commercetools, I am still learning. So, my entire career path has been underpinned by this adage. I believe everyone can benefit from remembering it, and recognizing that when you are earning and learning, then you are in a great period of your career. When you are doing neither, you are in a rut. You need to fix it. Either find something new to dive into in your current role, look for a new role at the company, or realize you probably need to look elsewhere.

My advice when I mentor young people — be ruthless in understanding which period you are in. When you are in a role, and you're not sure if you're happy or not. Ask yourself, "Am I learning? If not, am I earning? If the answer is neither, then act fast. Don't just drift along and hope things will be better. You have to run your career as **you.inc**. Unless you are motivated and contributing in the role you're in, you're not being fair to yourself or your company.





**“It’s not always necessary to fit into the mold society defines. There are many paths to success.”**

— **MIKE EASTMAN**, DIRECTOR OF SOLUTIONS  
ENGINEERING, AMERICAS. Medford, Oregon. Self-taught  
GED

There are a lot of predetermined expectations in life that are set up to take you down certain paths. I’ve learned that if you always do what everyone thinks you are supposed to, it might not take you down the path that will bring you the most success and happiness.

When I was in high school, I met a guy who was working for the IT department of the school district. He was a bit quirky and the quiet type without many friends. As I got to know him better, I found out he was working on a project to build the student management software for the school district. Once we became friends, he asked me to help him. I wasn’t really a techie, but I loved technology. So, I asked him, are you going to be able to teach me? Are you going to let me learn from you? I knew he was a brilliant person, so I thought it was worth me taking a chance. My decision started this journey for me that ultimately had me working full time on the project. The school district came to me and said, “We can’t have you go to school here anymore because you have access to discipline records, student grades, sensitive information, etc.” They forced me to stop going to school. At that point, I had to decide, do I continue to follow the mold society has defined for me, or do I take a chance? I took the chance. Within 6 months, instead of being taught by the teachers, I was the one teaching them how to use the software.

The choices I made back then when I was only 16, flipped everything I knew about life on its head, and it gave me such a different view of the structure that life defines for us. I had to ask myself, are these really set in stone or are they more of a guide for us? I was already a straight A student and less than a year from graduating. As part of the deal with my parents, I got my GED, but that piece of paper has never really been important. The experiences I had with my colleague, selling the student management system, presenting it to multiple school districts, and convincing them to change their entire software is what propelled me in my career. I was able to basically walk onto any job I wanted after this experience.

Making that decision at such a young age helped me realize anything's possible. Years later when a consulting company gave me the opportunity to move to Chile with my wife, I was excited to break the mold and live in South America for a couple years. We made lifelong friends and had amazing experiences.

I'm not recommending that people drop out of school, that's definitely not the morale here. The lesson is that you can't be afraid to do things that break the mold. If you pay attention to life around you and leverage the relationships you make, you will find opportunities that may have passed you by otherwise. The choices I've made over the years have allowed me to grow and excel in my career, and I wouldn't change a thing if I could.



**“Trust your actual interests over the conventions and values of your environment.”**

— **NIKOLAUS KÜHN**, VP SUPPORT, DOCUMENTATION & TRAINING. Heidelberg, Germany. Master's, Industrial Engineering

I grew up in a traditional university town. The adults I interacted with in this environment were nearly all doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, artists, teachers, and more. I did well enough in school but was very unsure what I wanted to study. Despite spending hours and nights deconstructing the file system of my rotten 386 computer until I knew it by heart (purpose unknown, maybe I needed disk space for a game) and having perfect grades in computer classes in school, it never occurred to me to study computer science or a related field. I don't think it was that it was considered a bad choice, it was more that I had no connection point to identify with and I didn't know enough to consider it as an option. So, I completed a two-year business apprenticeship, then studied industrial engineering with a focus on mechanical engineering. I ended up switching over to information and communication systems, eventually concentrating most of my studies on computer science in my last years of school. After I graduated, I started a software company.

Looking back, I sometimes ask myself, “Why did I not see and accept my interests from the beginning? Why was it so complicated?” After all, I was even doing web development as a hobby all the time!

I don't have negative feelings about my choices. The other things I learned have value, and I gained a lot of great friends during the time I spent learning them. It would have been a pity though, if I had not taken those many small turns that ultimately steered me in the direction that intrinsically interests me the most. Now that I am older, I feel the wisdom I can share is this, it's not important to do what's "typical" or "expected." It is important to trust and act on your actual actions and intrinsic motivations — and it's never too late to do the next incremental step towards something you like.



**“We spend far too much time working to be unhappy. If you don’t like what you’re doing, take initiative, make a change.”**

— **LISA CASTRANIO**, OFFICE OPERATIONS MANAGER  
Cary, NC, Some college

The most significant lesson I’ve learned since I entered the business world is that you should never stay in a job just because it pays the bills. It’s very easy to become complacent in a job, and make excuses for not looking for something that will make you happier, utilize your skills better, give you more growth opportunities, etc. It’s even harder to take the steps to make a change when you have a busy or demanding home life.

Due to circumstances in my life, I had to quit college and get a full-time job. I was quickly hired in an environmental laboratory where I was responsible for preparing reports for customers. Eventually, the company transferred me to their accounting department where I processed accounts payable. Because I gained that accounting experience, I continued to accept other jobs in accounting, both in payables and receivables.

I was working at a company as an Accounts Payable Clerk when I applied for, and ultimately, landed an Executive Assistant position that was available. I found that I really enjoyed the position and the responsibilities that came with it. The job made me realize just how much my previous accounting jobs did not suit me.

Four years later, the company restructured, and my position was eliminated. A new role was created for me which involved me dedicating half of my hours to working as an Office Coordinator and the other half supporting accounts receivable department. The idea was to allow me to keep some of my executive assistant responsibilities while helping the accounting department which was short staffed. It worked for a short time. Unfortunately, the accounting tasks became more and more time-consuming. This time I wasn't going to just accept it and stay, I knew I wanted something different.

Around the same time COVID-19 happened around, so I didn't actually have to quit. I got laid off. I immediately started searching and applying for Executive Assistant and Office Manager positions. I didn't even consider anything in the accounting world. While I know several people who are well suited to the accounting environment who love what they do, I know it's not for me. I've been the Office Operations Manager at commercetools for four months now, and I am so much happier than I was at my previous job. Even though I don't love every responsibility I have, I get to do things I'm good at and enjoy.

CHAPTER 8

# **It's Not Always Easy**



“Some people get to where they are supposed to be immediately, but for most people, it’s kind of a mountain.”

— MICHAEL ASHE, CLOUD SUPPORT ENGINEER  
Littleton, NC. Bachelor’s degree North Carolina University at Chapel Hill

I’ve learned you need to embrace the journey, even if you’re not necessarily on the path you thought you’d take. Of course, that’s easier said than done, but there are lessons to learn along the way. We inevitably end up where we’re supposed to be, and the experiences that happen during the journey will help you to appreciate where you are.

I spent the first 12 or so years of my career not really enjoying what I was doing. After college, I went home to the small town I grew up in after college and there was nothing happening, so I went back to the retail job I had in high school. It had nothing to do with the degree I earned, but I couldn’t find a job in my field, so I focused on working my way up to retail management.

I made it to retail manager but, after a few years, I started working outside of the stores for a global product brand. As I got into the job, I realized that all the stuff I learned, the headaches and the hardships I had experienced gave me the knowledge I needed to do the job effectively. I could offer insight because I had seen it before, been there before. It still wasn’t the job I wanted, but it showed me that all the experience I’d gained up to that point was useful.



Then my family suffered a traumatic experience when my in-laws suddenly passed away. It was a catalyst for me that made me realize I wanted to change my approach to work and my professional career. I didn't want to reach the end of my career and realize that I didn't enjoy any of it. That led me to look into the tech industry and, despite my intimidation, led me to educate myself to secure a career within the industry.

I'm 41 years old — that's not really that old — but when I'm talking to a 22-year-old I just want to tell them to slow down a bit. When I was younger, I wanted to be at the end of the road immediately, but I learned quickly that it doesn't work that way. You must pace yourself. When you are climbing a mountain, sometimes you hit places in the journey you are not too happy with, the terrain shifts and the path gets difficult, but as you keep climbing, the experience and wisdom you gain along the way is going to help you move upward. Also, despite what you might think about how much time is going by, it's never too late to pursue your goals or follow your passion. I was 38 when I graduated from web development bootcamp and it empowered me to make a change in my life. I had a job in the industry 3 weeks after I finished the classes and I'm finally at a point where I really enjoy what I do. When I look back, I realize all those things I experienced made me a better person even if it didn't feel like it when I was in the trenches.



“Don’t lose focus by obsessing over the details. The bigger picture is way more fun.”

— **MELLE DE RONDE**, MARKETING MANAGER, BENELUX  
Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Bachelor’s degree in Tourism  
Management

A few jobs ago, I was working in the marketing department of a company. My manager was razor-focused on every small detail involved in a project. No matter whether we were working on a promotional campaign, a product launch, or an event, we would spend hours in meetings discussing colors, logo placements, copy, the list goes on. We even debated on the music play list for a staff party. In my manager’s opinion, all these details were extremely important and could make or break the success of a campaign or an event. Since these individual decisions were so critical to my boss, I ended up adopting this same mindset.

When I left that company, I took my new obsession over details with me to my next job — and to the job after that. At some point, I finally realized that it was hindering progress. While in some cases, the small details really matter, other times, the overall outcome is far more important. I actively chose to unlearn this behavior. Now, my focus is on the big picture. I can launch new projects more quickly as well as get them done faster. I’ve let go of having to control every detail and can delegate small decisions to others.

I have learned the details can often consume you in a negative way. I used to get upset easily if one little thing didn't go right, or exactly the way I had planned it. Now, I don't let these things bother me. If something isn't quite right, I think of it as an opportunity to improve the next campaign, event, or project. It is so much more fun to focus on the bigger picture and see improvements and wins made over time.



## “Don’t be afraid of going outside of your lane.”

— **CHRISTOPHER HOUGH**, SOLUTIONS ARCHITECT  
Charlotte, NC. Bachelor of Science in Computer Science

When I graduated college, it was right after the dot-com bubble burst. It wasn’t a great time to have a degree in computer science. The job market was a little rough. The only good thing was I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do anyways. I took a position doing engineering project management for the Department of Transportation. The job was nothing even remotely related to my degree. They had this awful project management system that we worked on. It was built by whoever made the lowest bid. Everybody hated it. So, I took it upon myself to build an alternative and improve upon it. The department started using my system. That segued into a position more closely aligned to my degree. I got to work in planning and business intelligence in the executive office. So, by taking the initiative to do something like that, not only was I able to springboard my career, but I was also able to help the organization as well.

Especially for younger people, it can be a bit intimidating to stick your neck out there, perhaps stir the pot. Even though you may not have as much experience, you are able to look at things differently than the people who have been doing the same thing for a long time. So, if you see something wrong, or could be improved upon, even if it’s not your job, don’t be scared to speak up and make suggestions. Taking that chance and saying, “hey, there’s a better solution and I can build it,” really set the course for my entire career path. It allowed me to figure out what I wanted to do, and it gave me the experience I needed to follow my path.



“Sometimes no matter how hard you try to make something happen, it comes down to luck and timing.”

— ARTHUR LAWIDA, PRESIDENT US  
BA, Political Science

In 2004, I founded a company that licensed some computer vision technology from ASU. They were working to create an image search algorithm hoping to license it to Google. The software could be trained to recognize images of tigers, then when asked, it could go out on the web and find other pictures of tigers. It worked well.

There are literally hundreds of applications for that kind of technology, but as 9/11 was still on everyone's mind, and budgets for security technology were growing, we focused on that direction. We teamed up with a Canadian company that made infrared cameras and had built a system that could read license plates on cars no matter where they were or how fast they were going. We figured it would have Homeland Security foaming at the mouth.

It turned out we were wrong, solely based on timing. Although there were billions of dollars allocated for homeland security, the vast majority of it was going to figuring out how to make first responder radios and communications devices talk to each other.

We turned our efforts toward the Police, who also showed little interest. We drove to Pennsylvania to do a demo for the state police. We attached cameras to one of our cars, drove around a mall parking lot, and

discovered two stolen vehicles! Home run, right? Turns out police hate finding stolen cars. The paperwork is a headache to fill out. While they really want to catch car thieves, they don't have the time to do stakeouts waiting for criminals to return.

Then, we had the genius idea to pitch it to insurance companies who could also use it to recover stolen cars. Apparently, because of the way insurance works, they would rather the cars stay stolen. Since the cost of a stolen car is already baked into the premium, when a car is recovered, there's lots of paperwork to do, and since it's in bad shape, they usually have to replace it anyway.

We finally found our market with casinos. We installed our cameras in several casinos to monitor the garages and entrances for the "bad guys" the casinos want to keep out as well as alert them when a high roller arrives.

We made some good sales, but not enough to break even. We got our big break with MGM. They asked for a system-wide deal — cameras installed on every MGM property. On the back of that, I had negotiated an additional investment and buyout from a public company. That deal, however, was contingent on the MGM contract closing.

All of our trials were done at the MGM Mirage, and at the time, Siegfried & Roy, was the headliner at the hotel and the highest-grossing show in Las Vegas. The day before the President of MGM was scheduled to sign our contract, a tiger attacked Roy and almost killed him. After working with these tigers literally for years with no issues, on this particular day, something tragic and unforeseen happened. Of course, our hearts went out to Roy when he got attacked. The show had to close indefinitely, which caused the Mirage to lose a million per day in revenue. The next thing we knew, the president shut down all new spending and our deal was history.

Luck and timing. You probably know many great leaders fail because it was the wrong time or the wrong place for them to succeed. Many great companies and products fail for the same reasons. Sometimes it is market timing and sometimes it's just the randomness of the universe. When it happens, you have to remember not to take it personally. The good news is the flipside also happens — good luck and good timing — if you can recognize it, seize the moment, and enjoy.



**“Take the consequences of your failures, but don’t take them to heart. Move on and do better.”**

— **BYRON WALL**, SENIOR SOFTWARE ENGINEER  
Raleigh-Durham, coding bootcamp graduate + Chinese speaker

I grew up way upper middle class. I was very privileged — and I took advantage of that — especially in my early 20’s.

I went to college to study Chinese. I left school to teach English in the far southwest of China. The basis of the economy in the province where I was living was agriculture. It inspired me and it put the belief in my head that sustainable agriculture was the one thing that was going to save and change the world. So instead of coming back and finishing my college degree, I switched schools and enrolled in a sustainable agriculture at a community college. I got a job working at a local farm, I was working hard and ended up getting injured. I got fired because of the injury. I felt like a failure. Then, I picked myself back up and found a job at a sustainable market. I managed to get injured there as well. I even founded 2 start-ups that promoted sustainable farming, but by the time I got them flushed out, there were already other companies doing the same thing. My timing was just too late. Even though I had all these setbacks, I learned a lot along the way.

I finally took the workman’s comp money I got from my second injury and used it to enroll in a coding bootcamp. I felt all my idealistic ideas weren’t working for me, and I needed to do something that was realistic. I discovered I’m really good at it. I think all my language learning made it easy for me to understand it. After all, coding is a language.



People get discouraged when they fail, they blame themselves. You can't do that. You can't let failures, especially ones that are not your fault, like my injuries, make you think that you're a lesser person. It is ok to fail, it's just not ok to give up. You just have to take each failure as a lesson, figure out what you need to do different or better and keep going.

I even had setbacks after I finished coding school, my first two technology jobs just kind of fizzled out. I feel lucky to have my job at commercetools. I'm doing something I enjoy, at a company with a great culture. I look back at everything I've done and just think it was part of my path. I still have a passion for farming and spend time working on farms, but also, I enjoy what I do for work.

CHAPTER 9

# Change is Always Good



**“Don’t be afraid to take risks!”**

— **NAZIA KHAN**, GLOBAL TALENT ACQUISITION  
MANAGER. Tech Bhopal, India, MBA

After working for a decade and establishing my career at a managerial level, I realized I didn’t feel challenged, my learning curve wasn’t growing. I made the decision to figure out “What’s next?”

I always had a huge inclination towards technology. In my job, I was responsible for hiring both tech and non-tech positions. I was far more passionate when I was working on filling tech roles. I started searching for a job as a tech recruiter. Within a month I realized the opportunity just wasn’t there for me in Dubai. I decided to pack up my comfortable life and move to a foreign land. I had always dreamt of starting a new life in a strange land. I decided it was time to bring it to reality.

That’s how I ended up in Berlin in January 2019. I knew it was a tech hub, that it was international, diverse, full of culture, and a place that made it easy to travel across Europe. I didn’t know anything about the culture or speak the language. I didn’t have a job waiting for me and I didn’t know a soul there. When I arrived, I enrolled in a management course. Going back to school after working for 10 years was a challenge but I enjoyed every bit of it. Simultaneously, I started learning German, another challenge as it is a difficult language. Within a year I was speaking German. (I am still super proud of this accomplishment!). By the summer of 2019, I was running out of savings and accepted a 3-month recruiting assignment. Trust me, working 40 hours a week while still in school was hell of a ride, but I did it, finishing my courses by the end of 2019.

Finally, I started searching for a full-time job as a Tech Recruiter. Luckily, Berlin has many opportunities for deserving talent. I knew my previous experience was relevant, but it was more important to me to work for a product-based company than to have a managerial position. I took a mid-level role to get me in the door. This turned out to be a wise decision.

Through this experience, I became fiercer, stronger, more independent. I realized trusting your instincts helps you overcome hurdles in life. It is amazing to me that my risk-taking move changed my life so beautifully. I now work in a field I'm passionate about and my career is moving in the direction I want it to. I get to do work I love and make an impact on people's lives.

Sometimes you must take risks and step out of your comfort zone to get where you want to be. Don't underestimate yourself. If you want to take your life in a different direction, you can't be afraid. You are the only person who can make your dreams reality.



**“When things don’t work out, look at it as an opportunity for growth, not a setback. Have a positive mentality and keep searching for your passion.”**

— **DAN PEROVICH**, SALES ENGINEER  
Round Hill, Va. Bachelor of Science

You might not be passionate about your first job. I’m still searching for my passion, but I know I’m building some killer relationships along the way. I’m facing some challenges along the way too — good, bad, and ugly. I look at them as growing opportunities on the path that will ultimately lead me to the thing I will be most passionate about — the thing I’m going to do for the rest of my life that will make me happy and allow me to support my family.

I started in consulting, I didn’t love it, sometimes I felt like I had 7 bosses, but I caught the ladder climbing bug. I was doing well early, I got promoted, was given a team, became a manager, etc. I thought it was the most important thing, to get the next title, or the next raise, but I can tell you now that it doesn’t lead to happiness. It doesn’t lead you to finding your passion, it often leads to resentment.

One day I was working with a sales engineer on a client project. I really liked working with him and I just asked, “Do you think I could do what you do?” I asked him some questions and realized I really liked the way his job fused together the business and the technical aspects across multiple audiences. 3 weeks later I was a sales engineer. That sales engineer became my personal mentor, and I still turn to him for guidance.

I also switched from working for big corporate organizations to start-ups. It's totally different. I find it really invigorating, though, again, challenging at times. It gives you that opportunity to touch every part of a company instead of just being defined by a single role. You dabble in everything when you work at a start-up. It helped me figure out what I liked and didn't. I would work in product management or product marketing and realize, "not my cup of tea," and that's why I came back to sales engineering. So, it's a good lesson, to not be afraid to step off the paved path. Even if you end up not liking it, it's a growing opportunity.

To me, what's most important is finding your passion, but in doing so, look at the path, even when there are setbacks, with a positive mentality. Look for a personal mentor, someone you can bounce ideas off and who can help guide you when you're struggling. It's been critical for me — it has helped me stay sane and positive. Once you find yours, make sure to stay in touch with them and they'll always be in your corner. One day, you'll be able to do the same.



“No matter what you do in school, no matter what job you’re doing, if you fall out of love with it, it’s ok to shift. You should feel free to start over.”

— **STEVEN WARREN**, ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT MANAGER. Ponka City, OK. 2 Master’s degrees, one in Music and the other is an MBA

I knew in middle school that I wanted to do music. I took a lot of lessons, I practiced all the time, and played all through high school. I got a music scholarship to college and went onto get my Master’s in Music. I chose this path when I was 11 years old, then, all the sudden 23/24-year-old Steve decided it wasn’t working anymore. I still got nervous before performances but playing itself was getting very mundane. I realized it wasn’t my passion anymore.

Problem was, I had zero experience doing anything other than music. One day while I was stuck driving home in traffic from my job at Disneyland and contemplating my life driving home, my best friend called me. She had heard about a job in North Carolina at a non-profit music organization called Kidznotes. She said they were looking for an operations manager and they didn’t need anyone with a lot of experience in operations, but they wanted someone who knew the music scene. I applied, got the job, moved across the country, and took a pretty massive pay cut — but living in North Carolina is significantly cheaper than California.

That job really set off my career working with people, working in finance, and working in operations. I discovered there that working with 300 kids a day wasn't really my passion either. My next job was with a finance company doing office management and operations. I was promoted to HR and worked my way up through the HR department.

At that point, I really wanted to broaden my career and I had to get out of my comfort zone. I had to apply for jobs that I didn't think I was qualified for or that I knew I wasn't qualified for. I got tons of rejections, but thankfully as a musician, I was used to rejection. I found commercetools and I'm really happy here. I got my MBA, and I am working hard to advance my career further.



CHAPTER 10

# Things Leaders Learn



**“Building a golden bridge sounds nice in theory, but who really needs a golden bridge when the purpose of the bridge is to help you continue on your journey.”**

— **JOSHUA DOUGLAS**, CUSTOMER SUCCESS MANAGER  
Jacksonville Beach, FL.

A lesson that has stuck with me in 25+ years in Software as a Service is to be hyper-aware of the tendency of myself and others to create unnecessary complexity by layering in related “nice to have” features when designing solutions for a particular challenge.

A CEO once described this to me as “Building a Golden Bridge”: You and/or your team have reached a small stream blocking your path. You have many options for passing the stream and continuing your journey, but given (seemingly) infinite time and resources, you and your team may end up designing the most appealing solution (the gold-plated bridge) when, in reality, a sturdy piece of plywood would have sufficed! There is almost never a need for a golden bridge.

While this is obviously an extreme decision that you wouldn’t imagine anyone making, you will often find it parallels real-life decisions you may find yourself facing in tasks of all types, from building products and designing processes, to solving support issues, or developing customer strategies. It may be appealing to design solutions that solve for a wide range of related needs and/or are most aesthetically pleasing but doing so often comes at the real cost of tackling more pressing and/or valuable opportunities with your finite resources.

I've found this lesson is useful in evaluating solutions that already exist, as well. You (or others) may have previously overdesigned a solution and in the end, find its tangential features weigh it down. While tear-down and replacement itself has a cost that must be considered, at times doing so ultimately reduces long term costs. By way of example, I once designed a "Revenue by Customer" report for our executives. It was meant to provide a monthly snapshot of our customer size. Perhaps eager to impress or to leverage new technology for fun, I included significant amounts of ancillary data that later became a burden for my team to collect. I later had to redesign the report. Now, I realize that had I gone with the plywood solution the first time around, it would have been more than sufficient.



## “Recognize that experience teaches you a lot of lessons.”

— CAMILO JIMENEZ, HEAD OF DESIGN  
Munich, Germany

I've been working for 24 years. Everything I know comes from experience. There was a period where I was working remotely when only skype was available to chat online. The first thing I learned was that communication is very important. It's harder to communicate when you're not in front of people. Today, many business meetings are carried out online. Despite better technology, the complete body language is missing. In order to communicate successfully in virtual scenarios, you have to listen to others and choose your words wisely.

In the early days of being a leader, I started out managing six people. During this time, the second thing I learned was that leadership is nothing you are born into, it's a learning process. As a leader, the way you communicate to people impacts how everyone perceives you, and how work gets done. In my experience, three types of leaders stand out. Each one with its pros and cons. There are the “dictators”, who tell everyone what to do and expect it to be done. There are the “peacocks” who walk into the room to make sure everybody is aware of their presence. Finally, there are the “buddies”, who work alongside you, and order dinner for you if you are putting in late hours. I had to figure out what kind of leader I wanted to be. From the three I concentrated on the way that best worked for me and the people I work with. I treat others in the way I want to be treated.

The third thing I learned is that the key to successful communication lies in respecting others. By respecting and listening to my colleagues at work I show trust and in return, I gain a lot of trust from them. I'm communicating with my colleagues as often as possible, it's a working relationship.

My past experiences have enabled me to recognize what kind of company I want to work for. I look at what the management is like and what type of work culture it has. This way I make sure I can be happy where I am. Recently, commercetools had us attend a workshop. One of the tasks was to investigate if you were to get a job somewhere else, what would you gain. Honestly, there is nothing that I would gain because I seem to be in the right place.

Young people often take a job simply because it is there. Before you join a company, really think about why you want that job and what's important to you. Look at the work culture and ask yourself, can I accomplish what I want here? Find a place that really suits you.



“Groups of people end up spending most of their time debating small, insignificant issues (color schemes, naming, etc.) due to “The Bike Shed Effect.” Keep groups of people focused on big issues and designate experts to take decisions on small issues.”

— KELLY GOETSCH, CHIEF PRODUCT OFFICER  
BBAI, Entrepreneurship and M.S. Management Information Systems

When I was working at Oracle about 6 years ago, we used to have these product planning meetings and they would always devolve into never-ending arguments about insignificant issues like what to code name a project. After one of these meetings, my mentor introduced me to the concept of the “Bike Shed Effect.”

The “Bike Shed Effect” is an example of Parkinson’s Law of Triviality, a concept C. Northcote Parkinson introduced in 1957. Parkinson’s belief was that people within an organization tend to give disproportionate weight to trivial issues because the barrier to participate is low and because of people’s innate desire to be seen as contributing within an organization. The “Bike Shed” effect was popularized in 1999 by a Danish software developer in a now-infamous email (<http://phk.freebsd.dk/sagas/bikeshed/>) In the email, he said:

Parkinson shows how you can go into the board of directors and get approval for building a multi-million or even billion-dollar atomic power plant, but if you want to build a bike shed you will be tangled up in endless discussions.

Parkinson explains that this is because an atomic plant is so vast, so expensive and so complicated that people cannot grasp it, and rather than try, they fall back on the assumption that somebody else checked all the details before it got this far. Richard P. Feynmann gives a couple of interesting, and very much to the point, examples relating to Los Alamos in his books.

A bike shed on the other hand. Anyone can build one of those over a weekend, and still have time to watch the game on TV. So no matter how well prepared, no matter how reasonable you are with your proposal, somebody will seize the chance to show that he is doing his job, that he is paying attention, that he is \*here\*.

In Denmark we call it “setting your fingerprint”. It is about personal pride and prestige, it is about being able to point somewhere and say “There! \*I\* did that.” It is a strong trait in politicians, but present in most people given the chance. Just think about footsteps in wet cement.

The Bike Shed Effect has taught me to recognize that people want to be seen and heard, but at a certain point as a leader you must shut down discussions when the discussions get disproportionately focused on small issues that don't advance your business objective.

The Bike Shed Effect was in full force in 2020 when the founding members of The MACH Alliance, which included me, were deciding on a logo for the organization. We all knew we needed a logo, what none of us wanted to accept was that we're not graphic designers. Our designer made a logo presentation and then gave everyone the opportunity to comment. The result was that he opened the floor for perpetual debate — on the color, the size, the font, etc. Everyone had an opinion, "It should be a lighter shade of yellow, that line needs to be a little thicker, and on and on." We tasked an expert with the job, and we should have trusted his design decisions. We should have let him make his presentation and then taken a vote on which logo worked best. Instead, it was a long, difficult process to get everyone to agree on a logo and move forward with the next step.

As a manager, I make it a point now to recognize when it makes sense when asking for input in a meeting, and when to just present a plan and request a simple yes or no. I've learned to seek collaboration on major projects, not small tasks. When I walk into a meeting, I want it to go smoothly and have a positive outcome, not leave frustrated with no sense of accomplishment. By applying the lessons of the Bike Shed Effect, I've been able to schedule less meetings, and the ones I hold are more successful.



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