

The Pragmatist's Rules for Work (Excerpt)

Career Paths Vol. 2: Completing the Picture on
Getting Ahead at Work

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A Fine Idea

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Make Sure You're Not Missing Half the Formula for Success at Work

Do you want to hear the real truth of the matter? Then you must put aside wishful thinking and fantasy and focus on what works

Greetings readers! Niccolò here, writing through my trusty amanuensis James.

I suppose I should be thankful. After five hundred years' rest, I was disturbed awake by the first volume of the Career Paths series, **Thriving at Work**. It's not that James's tips for success at work are wrong. They're just *incomplete*.

If you want to succeed in your endeavors, you need more than half the formula. That's where I felt compelled to speak across the centuries. A lot has changed since I've been away. But I can already see that human nature is not one of them.

Having had even more time to think over all I've learned about people and their motivations, and considered it with care, I want to share my learnings with a new generation.

Am I pleased that at least one of my books is still being read and my name has become an adjective? Yes, of course. But I do regret people thinking following my advice means they are devious, scheming, or unscrupulous.

My goal in writing *The Prince* was simple pragmatism: To explain what works and why. That's also my goal with *The Pragmatist's Rules for Work*, with an emphasis on behaviors that work. I won't sugarcoat the lessons either.

Since my aim was to write something useful for anyone interested, I felt it would be appropriate to go to the real truth of the matter, not to repeat other people's fantasies. — Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Because a society's success now takes the effort of many, I am writing not just to the world's Princes but to all of you. With the Pragmatist's Rules, I will complete the picture James started in *Thriving at Work*.

I won't tell you whether to follow James's advice or my advice or some combination of the two. Chances are, you will find yourself applying tips from both ends of the spectrum as circumstances warrant.

And if that makes you cunning, artful, and sly, it will also make you a winner.

Until next time.

Work well and win.

Chapter One

Go Ahead and Be Arrogant

Arrogance is nothing more than confidence expressed publicly. Confidence is the beginning and end of your credibility

Arrogance is nothing more than confidence expressed publicly. Confidence is the beginning and end of your credibility. And credibility drives your career.

You are always performing. Your audience is comprised of either fools or foes. The first group includes laypersons, unable to judge your substantive competence. They rely entirely on how you come across when you interact with them to judge your performance.

Everyone sees what you seem to be, few have experience of who you really are. — Machiavelli, *The Prince*

- When you answer a question, are you hesitant, unsure, or halting? That must mean you don't know what you're talking about.
- Do you look down, hunch your shoulders, and speak under your breath? I think I'll keep looking.
- I want my counterpart to look me in the eye, stand tall, and project

confidence.

Your foes include everyone you face across the negotiation table. The numbers of your foes include all those you're competing against. You're competing not just with other experts, but with everyone who wants to come across as competent.

Some of your foes are positioned to know when you're bluffing. This could be because they're also subject matter experts or because they're prone to bluff themselves.

But tell yourself they'll never figure it out from your demeanor. And if you maintain absolute consistency in your confidence, no one else will see through your façade.

Here are some examples to inspire us

Here's how James says he heard former GE General Counsel Ben Heineman describe his approach:

Often wrong, never in doubt.

That's the right attitude. Although I suspect Mr. Heineman was only pretending to be humble in saying he was often wrong. His confidence comes through clearly. Even though he knows he sometimes will be wrong, he projects confidence absolutely. Follow his example.

I can give you further inspiration from my side of the mortal plane. A friend with the unfortunate nickname Dizzy joined us more recently. Mr. Dean explained to me how he became famous not just for his pitching but for his confidence in how well he and his brother would perform.

How can you not love his bravado:

It ain't bragging if you can do it.

And that's even more right. The **single best way to be confident is to be competent**. To know you can back up your words with action.

This takes us to the wisdom in James's earlier advice to show Ambition in the sense that you desire to get better. You should always be working to improve. This will give you the skills to back up your words with actions.

In summary

Do the hard work necessary to develop competence in core areas of expertise. Leverage that competence to get used to feeling confident. Then expand on the situations where you feel confident.

Be clear in your mind that you are a winner, you know what you're talking about, and you will succeed. Project your confidence like a standing wave around you and watch the dominoes fall.

Until next time.

Work well and win.

Chapter Two

It Is Sometimes Necessary To Be a Bastard

To recognize what each situation demands is simple survival. Help others when it helps you. You will both benefit

Be a bastard. To know the wisdom of this statement is to ask yourself two questions:

- How much do you think other people truly care about your success?
- And, perhaps as illuminating, how much do you care about others' success?

I am sure you can think of many people who've supported you in your career. Bosses, mentors, and colleagues who gave you precious assistance when you needed it. But did any of them do so at a cost to themselves?

Now consider your answer to the second question. Doubtless, you can think of many times when you aided a colleague. Perhaps you count as one of your core values helping others to succeed. All well and good.

How does your behavior hold up when you are forced to choose between helping others and advancing your own interests? It is easy to help others when you are in fact helping yourself, or at least not incurring any sacrifice.

To recognize what each situation demands is simple survival. Help others when it helps you. You will both benefit. But to help another when it advances them at your cost is a fool's game.

If you want to advance your career, that means taking advantage of opportunities that may appear but rarely. You must be able to tell the difference between altruism and sacrifice and adapt your behavior accordingly:

What matters is that he [a ruler] has the sort of character that can change tack as luck and circumstances demand ... stick to the good if he can but know how to be bad when the occasion demands. —
Machiavelli, *The Prince*

When you give heed to your own interests, people may think of you as selfish. When you put your interests ahead of those who would jump ahead of you, they might even call you a bastard.

But wouldn't you rather dispense your own assistance from a position of power than rely upon the goodwill of others that can evaporate when it suits them?

How does this play out in practice?

Your colleagues in competition with you will not hesitate to advance their interests when they can. Management will test your motivation and question your ability. Even when you demonstrate your ambition, they may not credit your capability.

Your task is to demonstrate an unwavering conviction that others' faith in you is well-placed:

The general public's mood will swing. It's easy to convince people of something, but hard to keep them convinced. So when they stop believing in you, you must be in a position to force them to believe.
— Machiavelli, *The Prince*

James's earlier advice was to have Belief in the sense that you cultivate the self-confidence that you will succeed. This is excellent advice. Today's lesson just takes the natural step further — you must also *act* in accordance with your belief.

If you believe you are not only up to the job, but the best person for the role, then it is appropriate for you to do whatever is necessary to keep advancing towards the role and then staying in the role.

In summary

By all means, help others whenever you can. Develop a reputation as a caring, generous mentor. But make sure that your help never comes at the cost of your own advancement.

Remember that no one will look out for your interests as well as you. Even if they would be so foolish as to sacrifice for you, they don't know your inner desires and fears.

You can navigate these waters safely, provided you recognize the truth of where you are sailing. You are the captain of your ship. Being a responsible captain means taking the hard decisions as needed.

Getting the ship safely to shore means applying a fair, but disciplined hand. Court martials, keelhauls, and even walking the plank are all part of the captain's duty.

Just remember whose interests come first, and you will succeed.

Until next time.

Work well and win.

Chapter Three

Take Credit Whenever You Can

When your actions have contributed to the outcome, you may always take credit and must do so

Who exactly will tell you that it is selfish to take credit for your work? That we should play nicely with one another and leave our egos aside?

Chances are these subversive ideas come from someone who has already ascended to a position of power and wishes to remain there. Either that or someone who sees little prospect of advancement by their own efforts and wants to ride your coattails.

Let me explain some simple truths about how the world works. These truths make clear why it is appropriate to take credit in every circumstance where the opportunity presents itself.

First, consider the role of chance in many outcomes at work. We plan, we toil, and we respond to unpredictable circumstances. How likely is it that anyone foresees everything that occurs?

Luck decides the half of what we do, but it leaves the other half, more or less, to us. — Machiavelli, The Prince

When no one has a clear idea of what is happening at the time and no one has perfect insight into what results their actions might bring, you must take credit for everything that goes your way.

The logic of this conclusion is inescapable. If you are humble, if you downplay that your actions had the intended consequences, you will not be considered a hero. No, people will not even realize that you are being selfless:

It would be nice to be seen as generous. All the same, being generous just to be seen to be so will damage you. Generosity practiced out of real good will, as it should be, risks passing unnoticed. — Machiavelli, The Prince

There is something even worse than seeing your own selflessness go unrecognized. Consider that while the outcomes of our actions are unpredictable, the behavior of others is not.

The second truth I want you to see is that your colleagues will seek to take credit for lucky outcomes. Into the space left by your generosity, a person practicing the lessons from last time (Bastard) will happily step in.

Be careful, though; there are dangers in taking credit

Some lessons flow from simple rules, whose application we can be confident will always give the desired result. Being aware of one's self-interest and acting accordingly is one such rule.

The rules around taking credit are not so simple. Here is what we can say with certainty.

- When your actions have contributed to the outcome, you may always take credit and must do so
- When luck has played a role in the outcome, you must be vigilant for the opportunity to take credit, especially when others will do so
- When others' actions are responsible for the outcome, you may not claim credit for their work, at least not directly. You will not only make

an enemy but cause others to mistrust you

Even though another's deeds may have carried the day, you still have opportunities to swing admiration in your favor. This is particularly so when you can take responsibility for any part of the composition of the team or their decisions:

The quality of the ministers will reflect [the ruler's] good sense or lack of it and give people their first impression of the way the ruler's mind is working. If his ministers are capable and loyal, people will always reckon a ruler astute, because he was able to recognize their ability and command their loyalty. — Machiavelli, *The Prince*

You want to be seen assembling a high-performing team and directing their efforts towards the desired outcome. When it is clear you were the organizing force, then you can take *indirect* credit by lavishly praising the work of the team. After all, it was you who brought them together and created the conditions for their good work.

And if you keep the team working well by instilling in them the desire to cooperate, by telling them that it is selfish to take credit for individual efforts, you have learned this week's lesson well.

In summary

James's earlier advice was to practice Continuous Improvement. I agree that slow and steady progress will advance you unstoppably towards your goals.

One of the best ways to capitalize on that progress is to make sure others recognize what you've done. This is so whether success comes through blind luck, through your own actions, or that of others.

Take credit where credit is due and remember that you always deserve to take credit.

Until next time.

Work well and win.

Chapter Four

Demand What You Deserve

The most enlightened boss and the most supportive work environment will miss out on chances to meet your needs. Unless you demand it

In our previous lesson about the importance of taking Credit for successful outcomes, I noted that luck often plays a role in life. Today I want to expand on this idea because understanding how to work with luck is vital for any leader.

Average performers think luck is responsible for people's success. This is not so. Luck randomly and variably presents opportunities. It is always up to the leader to first recognize and then capitalize on those opportunities:

The only part luck played was in giving them an initial opportunity: They were granted the raw material and had the chance to mold it into whatever shape they wanted. Without this opportunity their talent would have gone unused, and without their talent the opportunity would have gone begging. — Machiavelli, The Prince

It is a combination of unpredictable circumstances (i.e., luck) and your own talent that creates successful leaders. Your task thus becomes recognizing opportunities and shaping them to your favor via the application of your abilities.

Because luck is unpredictable, you need to be alert to a wide variety of potential opportunities. This is particularly so when you consider that your workplace will thwart you as often as it helps you.

As I've noted previously, no one knows your interests as well as you do. The most enlightened boss and the most supportive work environment will thus miss out on chances to meet your needs. Unless you demand it, that is.

Here are things that you should demand, as opportunities present themselves:

- To work on projects that are important to the company
- Ways to demonstrate your skills and talents in settings where management will see them
- Tools and the time appropriate to allow you to develop your skills to become more useful and competitive
- To receive recognition for your work that reflects the value you bring
- To be paid competitively without having to use up precious bargaining power
- To be cherished, mentored, and assisted in your career
- To be promoted in ways that give rise to new opportunities.

This is a partial list to inspire you. Your demands will be as broad as your personal interests require.

Everyone is capable of helping meet your demands

You need not limit your demands to management. Indeed, you will not be successful unless you learn to make demands of peers and subordinates as well.

What demands? Respect for your time. Gratitude for your assistance. Acknowledgement of opportunities given and care in making use of them. Recognition of where common interests lie, and loyalty as a consequence.

Among everyone you interact with, you will identify a small number whose opinions matter most. This may be because they are unusually intelligent or

perceptive. Or by virtue of their experience and tenure, other people in power listen to their opinions.

Make it your habit to consult with your informal counsel of advisors. No one ever said a mentor relationship had to be formal, or that assistance had to be volunteered. Having identified your cadre, you must demand their opinions:

The ruler should ask his ministers about everything and listen to their opinions, then make up his mind on his own, following his own criteria. In responding to these advisers, as a group or separately, he should make it clear that the more openly they speak, the more welcome their advice will be. — Machiavelli, The Prince

The more often people around you hear your demands, the more they will become habituated to responding when called.

In summary

James's advice in *Thriving at Work* was to practice Diversity in our thinking. He suggested keeping an open mind to the idea you could be wrong, for example in pursuit of a better way. Here I must respectfully disagree.

There may be a better way, and perhaps your advisors will point one out to you. If you choose to change course, let it be your choice. But the way you choose to proceed is *by definition* the best way. To allow anyone to think otherwise is to invite doubt about your competence.

If you feel uncertainty, then let it be in your private thoughts. Uncertainty publicly expressed only invites mischief from ambitious people who don't know any better than you but are willing to demand a chance to try their hand.

Ayn Rand had the right sentiment when she wrote, "The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me."

When you demand what you want, you are also insisting that everyone go along with your demand. Otherwise, your wishes are merely a request that they can safely ignore.

Until next time.

Work well and win.

Chapter Five

The Only Expectations That Should Concern You

The people who have taken stock of their honest desires are a force to be reckoned with

Previously we talked about how it is necessary to Demand what you want to advance at work. Today I will continue this theme by discussing how to think about expectations. We will explore how to deal with your expectations and others' expectations.

I suggest you start by examining closely your desires. What is it that you truly want? Do you want to be admired as a role model? Do you wish to be remembered as a kind, helpful person? Or do you wish to advance your career?

If your desire is to advance, then you must be realistic and pragmatic. The articles in the Pragmatist's Rules for Work describe the world as it is, not as we wish it would be. They provide guidance for working with the rules of the system to gain an advantage.

None of it will serve you well if that's not what you want. I don't know your inner thoughts and it is not necessary that I do so. What matters is that *you know them* and are honest about what you want.

Few people can stomach looking deeply at their hidden desires. Why does it embarrass us to acknowledge our ambitions? I say if you cannot be honest, even with yourself, you cannot lead.

And know this. The people who have taken stock of their honest desires are a force to be reckoned with. If they also learn the rules of the game they are playing, the only question is whether they are willing to pay the price to achieve what they want.

For this reason, you can never trust what people say about their intentions. They either do not know, because they have shied away from deep reflection, or they do know and thus cannot share the unvarnished truth:

Sincere words are not sweet and sweet words are not sincere. — Tao
Te Ching 81, Lao Tzu

The only thing that remains to guide you is your expectations. What do you truly want? How can you expect others to behave to get what they want? Once you acknowledge these things, you are prepared to be a sincere student in pursuit of what you want.

Be careful letting others' expectations shape your behavior

Whether stated or silent, conscious or unconscious, people have expectations of their leaders. It is necessary for you to understand those expectations, but not necessarily to live up to them. Why is that?

First and foremost, you must survive in your role. A deposed leader can do nothing for their subjects. Individuals' expectations are contradictory and unreasonable. They want everything delivered to them, but they do not wish to pay the full price. They want their leader to be all-powerful but at the same time kind and malleable.

If you cannot satisfy competing expectations, you should be aware of indulging those that will lead to your downfall:

If you always want to play the good man in a world where most people are not good, you'll end up badly. Hence if a ruler wants to survive, he'll have to learn to stop being good, at least when the occasion demands. — Machiavelli, The Prince

Because people do not know what they want, they will expect unreasonable things from their leaders. Again, you are left only with your expectations to guide you. You must expect, therefore, that it will be necessary to frustrate people's expectations to deliver what you understand they need, and not what they say they want.

In summary

James's advice in *Thriving at Work* was to find Equanimity by learning to keep our cool when situations are getting hot. It is true that a leader must never lose their self-possession. No matter what emotions they are displaying, they have firm control over them.

This is even more important when we consider the minds of all those we are engaging with. People are either woefully unaware of their true desires, and so will hold all manner of unreasonable expectations of you. Or they are fully aware of their desires and perhaps dangerously willing to pursue them.

The only safe course for the leader is to substitute their expectations for all others and behave accordingly.

Until next time.

Work well and win.

Chapter Six

Failure Is Only Fatal to the Unprepared

People fail and projects fail. Nothing could be more obvious. You must always be looking for the dangers that lie in wait

Expect failure and plan accordingly

Previously, we talked about how success requires us to understand our own Expectations and those of others. Today we focus our survival skills on one of work's unavoidable aspects. That is, you will encounter failures.

People fail and projects fail. Nothing could be more obvious. I saw failures aplenty in my time. A glance at the headlines makes clear that humanity's technological progress has not taught humility.

Why do people make plans assuming they will encounter ideal conditions? This only sets them up for frustration when random chance, to say nothing of deliberate sabotage, obstacles, and delays.

You must never practice naïve optimism. You must never think your project is safe. You must always be looking for the dangers that lie in wait.

It is in the nature of things that every time you try to avoid one danger you run into another. Good sense consists in being able to assess the dangers and choose the lesser of various evils. — Machiavelli, The Prince

Of all my lessons, this one will be second nature to in-house counsel. Their very purpose is to raise warnings of pitfalls, to curb the unreasonable enthusiasm of foolhardy colleagues.

Dealing with your own impending failures

Never forget that we are subject to the same blindness our colleagues suffer from. Continuously ask yourself what dangers imperil your projects.

There are two principles in particular you must follow: Engage in firsthand observation and take quick action as soon as trouble rears its head.

The whole point of having teams is to amplify your potential. Many hands can do more work, and they can do so around the clock while you focus on other tasks.

But beware of the trouble that lurks in unsupervised teams. They will not see when the seeds of failure have taken root. Worse, *you* will not see when team members exercise independence in unwanted ways.

When you're actually there, you can see when things start going wrong and nip rebellion in the bud; when you're far away you only find out about it when it's too late. — Machiavelli, The Prince

This does not mean you become a micromanager. You must have eyes and ears in every project, but they need not be only your eyes and ears. So long as you cultivate sources of inside information, you can be alert to signs of danger.

And you must be alert because your team will be slow to act once signs are on the ground. This is human nature: To ignore warnings, to deny reality, to pretend everything is fine. You may not indulge in these luxuries.

Seen in advance, trouble is easily dealt with; wait until it's on top of you and your reaction will come too late, the malaise is already irreversible. ... in its early stages it's easy to cure and hard to diagnose, but if you don't spot and treat it, as time goes by it gets easy to diagnose and hard to cure. — Machiavelli, The Prince

People and projects fail because the world is uncertain. You will fail less when you accept the prospect of failure by being hyper-alert to its early signs.

Turning others' failures to your advantage

It is not just team members who ignore incipient failure. Team leaders do so as well.

There are two tools one can employ to help ensure another team leader is lulled into complacency until the damage has grown large. The first is to lavish praise and accentuate the positive. The second is to point out trouble brewing elsewhere.

Because we are insecure, we are easily taken in by praise. Best of all is to provide genuine praise for aspects of a project that are going well. An exceptional team member, a milestone met. There is always something positive to highlight, and focusing a manager on the positive helps them miss little failings.

Senior managers are like magpies. Always on the lookout for shiny objects (a profitable opportunity), but easily distracted by the risk of harm. You can use this utterly predictable tendency to your advantage.

Help management to focus attention away from your troubles and onto others by pointing out risks or failures in someone else's project. You are just trying to help.

The project manager will immediately get defensive, which puts management on the alert. No matter what happens, you have accomplished your objective, which is keeping the project manager distracted.

You may also profit from others' projects when they appear to be succeeding. This is because even when everything goes well in a project, it will have unintended consequences. For all the planned good a project does, it will also create inevitable friction and disruption. Isn't that failure by another name?

Call out those unintended consequences as failures. Suggest obvious ways (in hindsight) that you could have avoided them.

Never mind that your workaround would have created other problems. You are making clear that the project gave rise to new problems and so failed in key respects.

In summary

James's advice in *Thriving at Work* was to practice Fakery by displaying self-confidence in appropriate situations and recognizing when others are employing fakery themselves.

I endorse this advice. The common thread between what James counsels and what I write today is this: You must accurately perceive the world to master your circumstances.

Your task is not seeking to avoid failures. Rather, your task is to accept, nay embrace, that failures will occur. Here is a statement I rather like from a modern financier:

I think being successful is just about not making mistakes. It's not about having correct judgment. It's about avoiding incorrect judgments. — Naval Ravikant

You must see failures forming far in advance and position yourself accordingly. Excise early on troublemakers in your own projects. Ensure that you are not harmed in a project's collapse and that your rivals are no matter how their projects fare.

Seen this way failure presents you with as many or more opportunities to shine than success.

Until next time.

Work well and win.