



THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

A Career Manual

How to Advance to the Top

ALEXANDER R. MARGULIS



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AMSTERDAM • BOSTON • HEIDELBERG • LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD
PARIS • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO • SINGAPORE • SYDNEY • TOKYO

Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier



Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier
84 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8RR, UK
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA
525 B Street, Suite 1900, San Diego, California 92101-4495, USA

First edition 2007

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Illustrations by Tom Reese

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalog in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN-13: 978-0-12-370587-7

ISBN-10: 0-12-370587-8

For information on all Academic Press publications
visit our web site at <http://books.elsevier.com>

Typeset in 10/13pt Adobe Garamond by
Charon Tec Ltd (A Macmillan Company), Chennai, India
www.charontec.com
Printed and bound in the USA

07 08 09 10 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword

I have been blessed with many favorable experiences during my career. Foremost among them was the opportunity, early in my medical training, to be a member of the Department of Radiology at the University of California San Francisco chaired by Dr Alexander Margulis. It was readily apparent to those of us working under Alex, that the prestige and excellence of the department was directly related to his unique leadership skills.

We marveled at his ability to get bright, energetic, and otherwise highly competitive people to work together, and his profound insight in making major strategic investments for the future during a time when others feared the risk of failure more than likelihood of success.

Most importantly, at the core of his persona, Alex cared more about our careers and success than he did about his own. He has served as a mentor to me for 30 years and now, in *The Road to Success* he offers the reader some of that same sage advice and counsel that have been invaluable to me in my academic career.

The late Peter Drucker was quoted on the difference between leadership and management:

Management is about doing things right. Leadership is about doing the right things.

In *The Road to Success*, Dr Margulis has elucidated the characteristics of leaders that will guide them to do “the right things.” True to form, rather than extol the virtues of his leadership style, Dr Margulis provides very specific advice and counsel that will be invaluable for those who aspire to rise into positions of leadership.

William R. Brody
President
John Hopkins University

Preface

My previous book, *Be in Charge*, was a success in multiple ways: Many people told me that it helped them in managing their jobs. It received excellent reviews, and was reprinted. Most of all it gave me great pleasure to write it. I also felt an obligation to share my experiences, and those of the people that kindly permitted me to interview them, with the young and inexperienced in their jobs.

The comments I heard about the book made me realize, however, that it may be more important to guide those that have not yet fulfilled their ambitions, than to preach to those that are already advanced in their careers. While lessons in leadership may benefit relatively few, helping people advance in their chosen work paths should reach many more.

It is only fair to emphasize again that my lifelong experience is in academia and as consultant to, and on the board of, several companies. I shall therefore limit my remarks to these two career paths, but as they are so broad, I believe that what follows is more widely applicable.

As it is always prudent not to depend only on one's own experience, I have attempted to review as much pertinent literature as was practicable and again interviewed many achievers in order to gain from their experience and approach. As some of the individuals interviewed have most generously revealed some intimate details about their career ascent, I have followed their wishes, and those of other interviewees, not to disclose names. I am indebted to them all. This book is an attempt to mentor those that are willing to listen and perhaps even modify their ways on how to advance in their chosen careers.

While success is in the mind of those that strive to achieve it, and many are never satisfied with the results, there are certain rules that lead to success, most of the time. I shall attempt to present them and explain why they are important. This book is once more illustrated with the beautiful cartoons by Tom Reese, by intent to bring humor to the points made in the text.

PREFACE

I am deeply grateful to William R. Brody, MD, PhD for writing the warm and flattering foreword. Dr Brody is the President of John Hopkins University, the prestigious institution that was founded as the first research university in the United States of America.

Alexander Margulis

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INTRODUCTION

Integrity, self-respect and ethical behavior should be the basic rules of life on the way up.

Most young people have the ambition to advance in their chosen, or accidentally found, career, to achieve success and security for themselves and their loved ones. This partly stems from the desire to be recognized and respected and also to have parents, family, and friends feel that their faith in them is vindicated. Lack of ambition generally results in lack of achievement and low financial status, unless one inherits or marries wealth. Yet ambition must be based on some reality or it leads to unhappiness and disappointment. You need to realize that achieving success requires dedication, hard work, and sacrifices by you and also by those closest to you. Therefore it is important to ask yourself whether there is a need to go through with the relentless pursuit of advancement, or whether you will be happy to do as little or as much as is needed to be comfortable with your present situation and enjoy life.

To be successful at all costs, however, should not be the leading goal in life. Do not sacrifice the virtues that you have been brought up with. Do not scheme, lie, betray confidence, abandon friends, or plot. Even if any of it results in acceleration of career triumphs, you may regret the lack of respect resulting from your behavior. Remember that everything eventually leaks and becomes public. You also have to face yourself in the mirror every morning as you shave or apply makeup – and you want to have respect for the individual you see in the mirror.

While all of this resembles the boy or girl scout code of ethics, in the long run you will be a lot happier if you cherish your integrity, have self-respect, and do not deviate from what you yourself consider is the right way of behavior. Eventually success also depends to a certain degree on luck, on being at the right place at the right moment in time. Louis Pasteur's dictum still applies, however: 'Chance favors the prepared mind.'

DO YOU WISH TO ADVANCE TO THE TOP?

Mentoring and a sustained drive for improvement can further hone the innate gifts: intelligence, ambition, courage, physical looks, and demeanor under stress.

The advance in one's career depends on many factors, most of which are related to the individual; but many are not, and yet can significantly influence one's progress along the chosen path. To mention just a few of these: war, political turmoil, economic recession, and scandal involving the company or an important member of the university administration. Even when confronted with such external obstacles, the true qualities – talent, industry, the ability to adjust and persevere – may distinguish those that will succeed from those that find excuses for non-achievement. One's attitude, discipline, and dedication are all important. External circumstances can never be an excuse for personal failings.

To advance, an individual must have many qualities; some are intrinsic and some can be learned. Some of the intrinsic qualities are natural gifts: intelligence, ability to work efficiently, attention to detail, ambition, courage, physical looks, and demeanor under stress. Even these can be enhanced and further honed by mentoring and dedicated work toward improvement. Ambition, however, is the basic quality that propels toward advancement; it is a natural trait that generally does not require enhancement but containment, refinement, and even cruel adjustment to reality.

The basic question, however, is: Do you wish to advance in your career more rapidly than the normal path of seniority, which has institutionally determined endpoints? Or do you wish to put in the additional effort and sacrifices to advance to the top of your enterprise? The sacrifices, such as long working hours, intense reading on relevant subjects, taking courses, traveling to out of town conferences, etc., involve not only you but also affect your family or 'significant others.' Are you willing and able to learn to keep silent

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in meetings, until what you have to say makes an impact? Can you try to be diplomatic? Are you willing to suffer fools gladly? Can you refrain from gossiping idly? Are you strong enough to persevere in spite of downturns in your career? Are you willing to impose hardships on your family by moving repeatedly in order to advance? These are questions that test the ambition and that only a few are willing to answer with deeds.

Personal honesty, ethical behavior, respect for moral values, willingness to consider the common good ahead of your own ambition, respect for your colleagues and for the people working for you should be a given and not up for discussion. This may sound unrealistic, as cynics may believe that elbows are the most functional parts of one's anatomy, specifically designed for advancement. Yet individuals that are most successful live naturally by these ethical rules.

How does one match ambition and desire for career advancement to the top, with the cruel reality of one's relatively modest capabilities and possible limitations? The latter may be either due to one's innate qualities or to incompatibility and a poor match with the culture of the work place. One of the most painful experiences one can have in life is to have a mismatch of ambition with reality.

How do you avoid it? To be overly modest is not the solution. One of the ways is to make a list of desirable qualities leading to career success in the particular environment and another list of personal drawbacks. It can be assumed that the good qualities are positive attributes and that the personal drawbacks are negative.

What are the positive assets for promotion and professional success?

Some general attributes

1. Appropriate educational degrees (some university alumni groups have networks that offer powerful support).
2. Record of previous accomplishments (these should be carefully arranged and edited).

Some more specific attributes

In academia:

1. Publications in peer reviewed journals (preferably high impact journals)
2. Grants from prestigious organizations

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3. Lecture invitations by renowned groups
4. Presentations at leading professional meetings
5. Memberships on exclusive national and if possible also international professional committees
6. Reviewer for the best professional journals (as you advance, become a member of editorial boards of these publications)
7. Successes and meritorious accomplishments of associates and students that you mentor.

In business:

1. Supervising successfully a group that before you took over, was a problem
2. Increasing productivity and reducing expenses of the unit that you lead
3. Cutting red tape and bureaucracy while increasing efficiency
4. Appointment to membership in highly ranked planning committees of your company
5. Work on national professional associations and groups in your field of business.

Other important general personal qualities

1. Diligence
2. Accuracy in work
3. Attention to detail
4. Being on time with assignments
5. Always being punctual for meetings.

Tact, discretion, good judgment, being either diplomatic or direct as required by circumstances, articulate yet not loquacious, cultured, neat, and informed etc. will further enhance your image and lead to promotions.

The negatives

*The negatives are the opposite of what was listed as positive attributes and **must** be avoided.*

Sometimes you may not be aware that you are committing errors of judgment and are creating a bad impression. How can you avoid that?

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A colleague with whom you work (it cannot be a competitor) can act as an umpire. Your mentor at work (it is advantageous to have one) could advise you about what mistakes you are committing. You should discuss your daily activities with your partner; he or she is an invaluable asset.

How do you gauge yourself? *You* should not. You are either going to be too lenient or too critical. A good approach is to ask a trusted, long-time friend, who is not competing with you, to dispassionately evaluate your abilities. One of the approaches that works, is to ask that friend as well as your partner to grade you separately on an agreed-upon scale containing as many different evaluation criteria as possible. Realize that the evaluation may temporarily strain your marriage or friendship, but do go ahead anyway. (Do not ask your mother to evaluate you and certainly not your mother-in-law, as you may get opposite results!)



'Number one. What assurances can you give me that you will rise to the top of your profession?'

The scale of grades for each quality is important as some of them carry more weight than others, e.g. the right academic degrees outweigh general culture (sad perhaps, but nevertheless true). Looks are very important (more in business than in academia) and can be enhanced if needed. Originality in ideas and ability to be persuasive are a *sine qua non*. Once you have been graded, and the value of grades are added up, you and your evaluator (if you are still

on speaking terms) should agree on what is the expected level of qualities for the ultimate rung in the hierarchy you are striving for. If the score is marginal, you may not go as high in the present environment as your ambition aims for. The evaluator must be able to judge you by being familiar with your department or company or your university, your colleagues, competitors, superiors and the pervasive culture of the environment. Your spouse or partner, if you have been together happily for at least five years, would usually be knowledgeable enough to do that for you. In addition, as previously pointed out, you must have a trusted friend capable of mastering this task.

I am sure that we all know people that end their life deeply unhappy, because they did not reach the ultimate step in their careers that they dreamed about. However one attempts to console or reassure them, one fails. The rational way to look at such disappointments is to be grateful for the accomplishments and successes already achieved. You did not ask *why me?* when triumphant, yet you do when you fail because of what you perceive as discrimination, enmity or plain bad luck.

What are the qualities required for ascending to the top of an entity in academia or in business? It would be overly simple and inaccurate to generalize, yet some basic differences between successful people and those that fail do stand out. Academia as well as business require from a future chief: courage, good taste in choosing associates, originality, dedication to work, patience, ability to select the right plan for improving the enterprise, strength and perseverance to see it come true. The difference in requirements to achieve the top in business or academia is not major. The basic attributes needed to reach the top are almost identical.

Cynics do not believe that what they call 'boy scout' qualities are the ones that help promote people. They suspect that getting promoted requires not talent but cunning and careful complimenting and cajoling of select superiors. As an example of this cynical attitude is the following mathematical approach to what is understood to be a full effort by an employee. The formula appeared on the Internet authored by an anonymous 'expert:' the language in the version reproduced here is slightly altered in order to make some of it less offensive.

A logical solution

Now here is a problem that finally has a formula for getting to the bottom of an age-old problem of how to get promoted. From a strictly mathematical viewpoint it goes like this:

What makes 100%? What does it mean to give MORE than 100%? Ever wonder about those people who say they are giving more than 100%? We have all been to