



The Long Journey

by W. Scott Cameron

EARLY IN MY CAREER I WORKED WITH AN EXPERIENCED, highly regarded design engineer who continually stated he would change assignments or companies for a nickel-an-hour salary increase.

I thought this a strange comment, as a nickel an hour didn't seem significant enough to warrant changing jobs, but I was young and hadn't really given much thought to my career path. When I finally asked him about his statement, he explained he was trying to teach me to understand and master my unique set of talents and

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capabilities. This way I could leverage them throughout my career to obtain the best assignments or offers.

Thus, he taught me the need to become a recognized master in what I did. As I made career choices over the years, I came to realize that this advice is what drives me to deliver or exceed my customers' expectations. If I can't do that, then the value of my services diminishes and my negotiation space shrinks on future assignments.

Other mentors would influence my career development, but this engineer's advice, as well as my own learning, has become the main source I draw from when talking to engineers of all career levels.

What do you (really) need?

When I coach and mentor people regarding their career aspirations, one of the areas we discuss in great detail is the short- and long-term "musts" and "wants." In analyzing people's careers I ask them to define and write down one to three things they must have in an assignment, and as many wants as they wish.

We then compare their list to the must and wants of potential assignments to see if there is a match. This has become an interesting and revealing exercise as I see people begin to clarify what is of vital importance to them (a must) and what are they willing to negotiate to get a new assignment (a want).

I was recently working assignment planning with a subordinate and was engaged in the must/want discussion. She indicated her primary must was that she had to have a reduced work schedule assignment. She indicated she was having a hard time finding one. I suggested she apply for a full-time assignment. If after the interview she felt she could do the work on a reduced work schedule, then she should explain to the hiring

manager that if she were offered the job she would only accept it on a reduced work schedule basis. She didn't like my idea, as others had told her the hiring manager considered all the listed job criteria "musts," and if she were offered a full-time job she would have to take it.

She reluctantly decided to try my concept and bid on a full-time assignment she felt was right for her career. During her interview the hiring manager indicated she had the correct skill set for the assignment. He believed that she was the correct person for the job

and he wanted to offer it to her. She then negotiated with him to accept the job, but as a reduced work assignment. The manager indicated he had never thought about the assignment in this way but agreed to her condition/must. Thus, the hiring manager's perceived must was really a want, and there was more room to negotiate the assignment than she had originally perceived.

Do as I say

Sometimes, as managers, mentors, and coaches, we need to re-examine our career "musts" and "wants," and the actions we're taking to achieve them.

I was discussing career coaching with another manager not that long ago, and we talked about our approaches to coaching people regarding assignment planning. We learned that our coaching patterns were similar. And, as the conversation progressed, we discovered we were also both looking for new assignments—but not following any of the advice we were giving to others on how to manage their careers or obtain new assignments. After a long pause in our conversation, we agreed it was time to walk our talk, and follow our own advice.

Career development by definition is a long journey. As we help shape the careers of others, it does us no good to forget that our own careers will continue to develop—whether we take charge of them, or let others shape our future. •



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