

Introduction

Let me first say that if you are perfectly content in your current job, more interested in scrapbooking or drinking games than in getting ahead at the office, or contemplating life as a cloistered monk, do not buy this book. If, however, you are harboring any thoughts of rising into senior management, read on.

In the early 1970s, when I was in my early twenties, I thought that if I could only reach a point in my career where I would be managing a few people and making the astounding amount of \$100,000 a year, I would be as content as if I were lying under a Tuscan olive tree, being hand-fed peeled and seeded grapes.

But that is not what happens, is it? In a few short years, when I actually *was* managing a few people and making \$100,000 a year, my definition of success had changed. Instead of basking under the olive trees, I was trying to figure out how to jump the next hurdle.

This is a cycle that all ambitious people understand, whether they work for a university, a nonprofit, a newspaper, a partnership, or a Fortune 500 company. Wherever they are, they want to reach the next level, and it's all they want. Then they get the big promotion that's everything they ever wanted. They grow into the job and start doing well at it, and pretty soon they are looking around saying, "Is that all there is?"

It doesn't matter that they have already outstripped their own early definition of success, their families' and neighbors' definitions, too. They are addicted to climbing the ladder. They just can't help it. And the worst thing that can happen to them in a career is to get stuck.

Yet the truth is, once you reach a certain level, the odds are against your rising higher, and there are more and more people standing in your way.



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While I have read hundreds of so-called management, success, and leadership books—some philosophical, some pious, and some just self-aggrandizing—I have not read one that gives any really practical advice for beating those odds and continuing to rise.

Well, I happen to have a lot to say on this subject. In my career, I've had the chance to observe the struggles of smart, talented people trying to break into senior management in dozens of different corporate cultures, as well as at universities, nonprofits, and in government. I began my career in the 1970s in advertising and public relations, and my clients included many of the big forces of the day, such as Gillette, Mobil Oil, and Owens Corning. My employers have also included Citibank and the one-time computer giant Control Data, as well as John Hancock Financial Services, where I became CEO in 2000. In addition, I have served on the boards of many nonprofits.

Along the way, I've seen a lot of people who failed to catch the wind, some who crashed painfully, and others who skillfully gathered the momentum to rise—enough of each to codify a few thoughts about the



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nature of flight when it comes to careers. While my last book offered advice about getting on the road to success, I wrote *Executive Warfare* for those already successful men and women who are nonetheless intent on moving upward—the ones with the courage, stomach, and desire to break out of the middle of the pack and get to the top.

The problem is, it's relatively easy to be successful in the middle. You just have to do the things that were drummed into all of us as children: be smart, hard-working, able to show results. Once you reach a certain point, however, it's no longer enough to be smart, hard-working, able to show results; your rivals are *all* smart, hard-working, able to show results. These qualities are like the ante in a

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high-stakes poker game. Everybody has to pay those dues to play. But a lot of people think that *all* they have to do to win is pay those dues. They are markedly mistaken—and most find this out the hard way and usually too late.

There is also another catch that no one tells you about—not when you're a child, not when you're a college student, not when you're a young and eager employee—not ever, for that matter. It's not just that the pyramid narrows and the competition toughens as you rise. It's that the game changes fundamentally.

At a certain point on the way to the executive suite, the simple chain of command you have worked under for years turns into filigree, and you no longer have just one boss to please. You now have a complex, hazy matrix of hundreds of bosses. And you cannot rise without impressing a good number of them.

These bosses include not just your direct boss, but also the people above him or her to whom you have now become visible, including the organization's chief executive and the board of directors. Your other new bosses include every single person who has any influence over any of these higher-ups.

Chances are good that the higher-ups are listening to your peers. They are also listening to the people in human resources, the general counsel's office, and the accounts payable department that processes your expenses. They may very well be listening to some of your underlings, too, who are probably more prominent themselves than any underlings you've ever had to supervise before.

These bosses are definitely listening to the outsiders you might expect to be influential, such as clients, regulators, and the press. But they're also



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listening to the ones you don't expect: the spouses of the people you work with and the guy at the gym who notices your temper tantrums when you lose a racquetball game.

So now, in addition to getting your job done and done well, you have to develop some very adult skills. You have to manage an incredibly tricky



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network of relationships, simultaneously, in private and in public, and in a way that announces your ability to lead. The experiences that have brought you to this point can in no way have prepared you for the subtle, tortuous, and sometimes crazy-making challenges you'll now face.

This I learned on my third day with the title of vice president. I'd just come to John Hancock as an outsider to run the company's communications. In John Hancock's 122-year history, I was the first vice president ever hired directly from outside the ranks.

It was a big step up for me, and the way I was treated was pretty heady stuff. I was given a gorgeous big office on one of the top floors of the beautiful building Henry Cobb of I.M. Pei & Partners had designed for the company on Boston's Copley Square. Soon, people were arriving with stylish design plans and asking me questions like, "Do you prefer to furnish with antiques or something more contemporary?"

What I'd *been* used to was this: When you took a new job, whatever furniture was in the office when you got there was your furniture. And if there were any delay in your moving into that office, most of the good stuff would have been pilfered by the people in the neighboring offices.

Of course, I didn't understand that just because I'd now have an office fit for a prince, that didn't mean that a few offices over, there weren't half a dozen other princes and princesses thinking very hard about how to block me, use me, or kill me.

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In my new position, I was assigned a whole series of people, and I was on my best behavior meeting my new employees, including one woman who came from Thailand. Let's call her Mali.

I'd just been to Thailand for the first time and had really enjoyed the trip. "Bangkok is a beautiful and fascinating city," I said to her. "Incredibly industrious, wonderful food, intriguing history. . . ."

"I took a tour along the river," I went on in an outpouring of friendliness, "which I really loved, except for the polluted river itself. You must be proud to be from a country with such a unique culture. . . ."

Mali smiled at me and was very animated, and we had a great conversation.

The next thing I knew, I was having the opposite kind of conversation with my new boss—a very unhappy one.

"Mali says she can't work for you," he informed me, "because you have no empathy for her ethnic origins."

"But I told her I *loved* her country," I protested.

"Look, it doesn't really matter what you said. What matters is, she thinks you said she comes from a dirty country, and we don't want this to escalate up to the president. So I'm taking her department away, I'm taking it away now."

I was dumbfounded. I hadn't even had my company physical yet, and I'd already lost a whole department. If the *Guinness Book of World Records* had a contest for "fastest loser of a department," I would have won—hands down.

What had happened was this: There was somebody else at John Hancock who wanted Mali's department, and he resented a newcomer taking it over. So when Mali told him that I'd called a polluted river "polluted,"



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he saw an opportunity to stir up doubts about me in my boss's mind—and seized on it.

I'd been there three entire days. I had no idea that I even *had* rivals. And this was in genteel old Boston, at an old-line company where if you got in, you got in forever. The John Hancock of that era made the Civil Ser-

vice culture look cutthroat. However, I was like a foreign bee that had invaded a long-standing hive, and the other bees were going to do something about it.

That same unpromising week, one of John Hancock's executive vice presidents invited me to lunch. Before we'd unfurled a napkin, he said to me, "The senior officers are taking bets, you know."

"About what?" I asked.

"About how long you're going to last. There's actually a pool. They're giving ten-to-one odds that you don't last six months."

"How's it going?"

"So far, no one's bet for you."

I looked at him. "How did you bet?"

"I make my bet," he said dryly, "after the lunch."

Even at the time, I thought that was pretty funny of him, and I laughed.

He bet against me anyway. And lost, because I went on to run the company, and he eventually worked for me.

I'm actually grateful for that harsh introduction to John Hancock. It taught me a few essential lessons about what it means to move into higher management—and fast. That nobody gives you a honeymoon period.



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That good intentions do not count. That every foolish word out of your mouth is now subject to scrutiny by the people both above and below you. That there is so much at stake—money, prestige, the power to make real decisions—that the competition will be ruthless. That bosses at this level will not put up with anything or anybody who risks embarrassing them. That this is a new game called hardball, and the problem is, you can strike out without even seeing a pitch.

When you are promoted to senior management, my advice is to celebrate the night before you start the job, because there is no celebrating afterward. Just because you've been made a field general and given a spiffy new uniform with epaulettes doesn't mean that you won't have battles to fight.

You'll now have to impress that complex matrix I mentioned earlier, everybody from the commander-in-chief to the lowliest private, from the other generals to the Pentagon correspondent at the *New York Times*. And you can't always expect to be judged fairly.

Some of these people will know you intimately. They may well have worked with you for years. In any case, you've moved into a smaller orbit near the top of the organization. The trouble with that, of course, is that familiarity can breed contempt, and people may discount your hard work and dedication just because they are in the mood for a new face.

Even worse, some of these people will be actively rooting for you to fail. There are your peers, a much smaller group now, some of whom will benefit directly if you go down in flames. There are also those people with nothing to gain, who simply enjoy a crash scene if they stumble across it. Of course, if it's a nuclear event for the organization, that's one thing. But a nuclear event for your career? Don't kid yourself. A lot of people will not mind that at all.



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Consider the case of publisher Judith Regan. Her career at HarperCollins ended in late 2006, thanks in part to the controversy surrounding her acquisition of what many viewed as a confessional book by O. J. Simpson. Regan had brought so many successful books to HarperCollins. You'd



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think that when she was fired, her coworkers would, at a minimum, have mourned the loss of future revenues. Instead, there was no shortage of them willing to share their glee with the press.

And let's admit the truth: Some of the people judging you will inevitably be mean, power-mad, incompetent, or just plain crazy. I've seen people in all kinds of senior management jobs that I wouldn't allow to litter-train my cat. And yet they were responsible for hundreds or thousands of careers.

As you go along, you may also find it very difficult to measure your own success. At a certain level, your bosses cease giving you praise when you do well. High performance is simply expected. And when you do badly, you now have

enough power of your own that you probably won't be killed off directly, unless you do something truly offensive, like date the boss's spouse. Now it's a matter of how many dents you take. You'll take some unavoidably, but you can't take too many—and how many are too many?

You may find it difficult to assess your performance even by your own standards. For most of your career, you've almost certainly succeeded by being an expert of some kind or other—engineer, tax specialist, community organizer, professor of anthropology—and by managing small groups of people on projects you've understood better than anybody else. With a

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move into higher management, however, you're suddenly thrust into a new role, one where you are now managing experts in fields you have no knowledge of. It's a case of the blind leading the sighted, and if that role fails to alarm you, you're either too full of yourself, too immature, or just too plain stupid to be successful.

And when you move up, you'll be represented by people whose names you barely know because you no longer have six or ten people working for you. You now have a hundred or a thousand or five thousand. Yet the quality of your hiring decisions—and the hiring decisions of the people you've hired—looms large as people judge your ability to lead.

What's more, you may well find yourself being blamed for problems that you had no part in creating simply because you are the person now in charge. In organizational life, they *do* sometimes kill the messenger.

Finally, you may find yourself struggling with geopolitical turmoil—redrawn national boundaries or your old commander-in-chief ousted and replaced by a stranger—while you're in the midst of battle.

For example, it's been virtually impossible in recent years to pick up the business pages of any newspaper without seeing scandal after scandal breaking: books cooking, options backdating, lying to Wall Street, lying *on* Wall Street, plus the ever-popular personal peccadilloes story. Every one of these scandals represents career upheaval for more people than you might guess. Even more career plans are thrown off track by mergers and acquisitions and dislocations in the economy, such as the one set in motion by the subprime mortgage crisis.

And in an information age when a single careless comment can live on in infamy, even nonprofits and universities are no longer the calm, secure berths they once were. In late 2005, University of Richmond President William E. Cooper was done in by a moment of excessive honesty when



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he complained that, given the quality of his student body, his institution was only “turning mush into mush.” Soon after, he announced that he’d be stepping down.

You don’t have to flame out yourself, either. Have a boss who flames out, and you may soon follow him or her out the door. You can be rising happily within an organization for two decades, only to find the rug pulled out from under you in an afternoon.

As a result, the very worst thing that can happen to you if you intend to climb is to develop a sense of entitlement just because you’ve been



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somewhere for a long time. You may think, “Look, I’ve put my 15 years in, I’ve come through six jobs, I deserve this next job.” Well, the world does not work that way anymore. It’s no longer useful to have a ten-year plan. Even God had only a seven-day plan.

So you’d better develop the ability to improvise above all.

And the higher you go, the more nimble you have to be. Consider this little statistic: According to Joe Griesedieck of recruiting firm Korn/Ferry International, 40 percent of CEOs fail within their first year or two on the

job. There are species of fruit flies with longer life expectancies. I wrote this book not to alleviate the uncertainty that comes with any move into higher management, but rather to alert you to the things you *should* be worried about—and what to do about them.

In my experience, the single greatest reason why otherwise talented people get stuck in midcareer is because they believe that the same rules that applied for the first part of their career still apply. They don’t. You now have to master a much subtler set of rules.

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You'll need to learn how to acquire the global perspective your peers lack, when and how to deliver bad news, when to take a shot at your rivals and when to be gracious, and most important, how to handle the many new influences on your trajectory.

In *Executive Warfare*, we'll take those influences one by one—including bosses, directors, underlings, peers, and clients—and show you how to deal with them in a way that will get you where you want to go.

Intelligence, imagination, and cunning are all required here—but not underhandedness. You know, thanks to my earlier books, I'm sometimes accused of being too manipulative and Machiavellian in my view of organizational life. That was not true of those books, nor is it true of this one. I don't believe that you need to be devious to succeed. In fact, I think that being excessively political is a mistake. I also don't advise turning yourself into a heartless machine. If you have no humanity, you will inspire no one. And no matter how tough the game gets, you are more likely to win it if you maintain your sense of fun.

That said, you *do* have to be aware of your surroundings.

Defense at this level is largely about trying to figure out where the ball is going. And you are certain to run into some very manipulative people. If you fail to anticipate what the other players are doing, you are not a player. You are why they invented bleachers.

Learn to play this game, however, and the rewards of reaching the top of an organization are more than worth the trouble. The difference between being a vice president and a senior vice president can easily be hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for many years. It can be the difference between actually making the kinds of decisions you've always



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dreamed about making versus merely participating in them.

You will have to take risks to rise, and you will make mistakes. I've made plenty, and I'll share them with you. Through triumphs and stumbles, the essential thing is to make it clearer and clearer to the people around you that you ought to be in charge.

This book will tell you how to lead all your many bosses to the inevitable conclusion that you, and you alone, have what it takes to run the show.