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WHAT CONTRIBUTION WILL YOU MAKE?

“People who do well in life understand things that other people don’t understand.”

—Georges Doriot

A distinct difference exists between what you know and what you understand. You probably know a great many things based on the courses you’ve taken and what you’ve learned thus far. Understanding, however, comes mostly from time and experience.

Whether you’re entering college, you’ve just graduated, or you are in the first few years of your professional career, you are gaining valuable experiences that contribute to your lifelong “understanding curve.” As you face challenges in your personal life and your academic or professional career, you are beginning to apply what you’ve learned to situations as they occur. You will make your share of mistakes. If you learn from your mistakes, you will benefit a great deal. If you can learn from the mistakes of others, however, you will leapfrog ahead on the “understanding curve.”

Executives, leaders, and superstars in their field have truly “made it” when it comes to professional and personal success. They are at the pinnacle of their careers. Some of their experiences, like mine,

span two generations. Their wisdom, however, is timeless, particularly as companies reinforce many of their core values.

Companies are stressing the importance of delivering value to all constituents—not just stockholders, but also employees, suppliers, and customers. At the same time, companies are vastly different than they were 30, 40, or 50 years ago. Technology has enabled greater connectivity, opening new markets and opportunities while allowing people to work in a number of different ways, from flextime to telecommuting—all at a much greater speed. You're the beneficiary of this change. In this day and age, you are leading my generation in utilizing new technology. Who knows what technological inroads will be made in the future that will change the way we work even more!

So what does that mean to you, the college student or young professional? I firmly believe it has everything to do with you, both as you start your career and as you move through the ranks to become a young manager and maybe an executive some day. To do this, you will need not only technical knowledge, but leadership skills as well. The kind of leadership I'm talking about is based on ethical behavior and recognizing the value of everyone who is involved in the organization, including the employees, the customers, and the stockholders. Above all, you must discover and follow your passion, because this is truly what will carry you forward in your career.

Managing Your Career from Day One

People often ask, "What is the secret to being successful?" Some of them, I'm sure, don't like the answer at first. The best way to manage your career, from Day One, is to focus on the contribution you will make to your employer. In other words, it's not about you. It's about what you can do to further the goals of your company or organization. Admittedly, this type of thinking changes the rules of the game from a contest to be won today into a long-term investment in which you are an integral player.

“Wait a minute,” you’re probably thinking. “I’m not signing on for the Peace Corps or joining some ‘serve-the-greater-good’ organization. I want to get a job, earn money (preferably lots of it), and get ahead. Isn’t that what I went to college for?”

The short answer is yes and no. You can jump on the fast track, catch the brass ring, climb the ladder, and all the other clichés of achievement. But you still may not be successful. Real success stems from the satisfaction of knowing that your work is important, that what you do makes a difference. This runs contrary to what you see on television and read in the press—that success is all about becoming the survivor as a result of climbing over, beating up, outmaneuvering, and manipulating your competition. That’s not how it is in the real world. Effective businesses are collaborative, cooperative, and team-oriented. If you think the way to win is to annihilate the competition, you’re the one who will ultimately be the loser.

Consider the advice of one of the most accomplished executives who ever occupied a corner office: John C. “Jack” Bogle, founder and former chairman of The Vanguard Group. He outlined for young professionals what he calls his two rules for success: “Rule Number 1: Get out of bed in the morning. Get up and get going. Go through the day, and do the right things. Work hard at your job. Do everything you’re asked to do and more. Don’t worry about what’s going to happen ten years from now; focus on getting through the day. I never thought about wanting to be a VP. I was a one-day guy.”

“Rule Number 2,” he added, “is to repeat Rule Number 1 all over again the next day.”¹

Human nature being what it is, however, most people tend to focus too much on the near future and emphasize their goals and objectives to get a better job, to get a promotion, to get a raise, and so forth. Most people fail to understand that their ability to make a meaningful and measurable contribution will distinguish them within a company or organization. The goal, therefore, is to apply yourself—your talent, energy, and ideas—to accomplishing the company’s

goals. Then you will have the satisfaction of knowing you made a difference, and you will greatly increase your chances of achieving your personal objectives as well. It will be a win-win for you and for the company.

Putting others first, ahead of individual accomplishment or self-aggrandizement, is a valued quality in all endeavors, but it's rarely found in some. In professional sports, from women's soccer to the National Football League, in which a few high achievers are elevated to superstar status, it's rarer still. One of the exceptions is Greg Maddux of the Chicago Cubs, a low-key man of high accomplishment, including becoming only the 22nd major-league pitcher to reach 300 career victories. A future Hall of Famer who has won four National League Cy Young Awards, Greg is a star in the world of professional athletics, which you may think is far removed from the corporate arena. Yet, the same attributes of excellence that he embodies are what make someone successful in the business world: working hard, studying the situation, analyzing the alternatives, and always looking to make a contribution to the team's greater good.

Greg's philosophy for putting the team first applies to young people starting their careers: "I realize that without the other 24 guys on the team, I wouldn't have a job. If the team does well, you're most likely doing well." In the corporate world, as in sports, hotshots exist who are clearly most interested in their own gains, even if it's at the expense of the team. From his perspective, Greg has the following advice, which applies equally to the corporations and the sporting teams: "You can't control the efforts that others are putting in. The important thing is that the people around you see that you are doing everything that you can. So be as good as you can be. Remember, talk is cheap, so don't tell them—show them."²

By emphasizing the team first—whether in baseball or at a company—you put your focus on the greater good of the organization. Admittedly, when you are just starting out it may be tricky to identify just how you can contribute to the organization's larger goals. It's not

about trying to make a big splash or getting to the next level quickly. Rather, it's about understanding the organization's goals and aligning your efforts with them based on your own knowledge, skills, and expertise—even your personality.

Making a Contribution at Any Level

Most likely your first job as a recent college graduate will be very narrowly defined. You may be someone's assistant or a junior member of a team. It may seem that you're doing more watching and learning than actual doing in the first few days. Don't be discouraged! Even in this limited context, you can make a difference.

Not only is it okay to excel in the small things, it's essential. Unless you can prove yourself within the context of your assignments and everyday responsibilities, you won't be given larger and more significant tasks and projects. If you disdain your job as beneath you, or you think some tasks shouldn't be assigned to someone with your academic credentials, think again: Nobody is made a manager unless he's been a good team player, and I've never met anyone who was promoted because he complained bitterly about what he was doing every day.

Granted, as a new employee, your day-to-day tasks won't involve major changes to the organization. But if you do your required tasks in the best way possible, you will not only be positively noticed for your efforts, you will be accepted more quickly into the organization.

As you look to your professional future, ask yourself: What contribution do you want to make to *everyone*—not just to those you think are important? If you've already started working, take a look around you. What can you do for others? Can you give a hand to someone in your department occasionally, such as helping figure out a project? Does someone need coaching on a presentation? Can you help him with a technical problem with his computer? These are tangible ways

in which you can contribute to the greater good and not expect anything in return.

As Jack Bogle advises, “Try to contribute to the knowledge, happiness, and welfare of the people around you—your colleagues, those who work for you, and those with whom you work. This is all ‘bread-and-butter’ stuff about living a good life and doing what it is you’re supposed to be doing.”³

This attitude of making a contribution is not only altruistic; it’s also strategic. Robert E. Kelley, Ph.D., who teaches at Carnegie Mellon’s Graduate School of Industrial Administration and consults with major companies, has studied the attitudes and behaviors of “star performers,” who are also the subject of his book *How to Be a Star at Work: Nine Breakthrough Strategies You Need to Succeed*. From Day One, he advises, young professionals need to establish themselves as willing to help others and make a contribution to their team, their department, and their company.

“It’s important to help out others early on, in particular those people you are going to be working with, either in your work group or those who are next to your work group,” Robert said. “This sends a number of messages—first of all, that you are a ‘giver.’ It also tells people that you know how the game is played, that work is not a solo activity.”

Those who don’t understand these unwritten rules of the workplace may be in for a rude awakening when, at some point, they have to turn to others for help or direction. “The first time they go to the network, they are going to get labeled as a ‘taker,’ as opposed to a ‘giver,’” he added.

Even a new employee without much expertise can establish a reputation as a helpful person by sincerely offering assistance to others. “It’s allowing other people to offload some work onto you when they are very busy,” Robert continued. “All you have to say is, ‘I can see you are under the gun. Can I do anything to help you out?’ That

is the first step. The second step is to think about all the things that you know about, which may or may not be directly related to your work, but which could be useful to someone else.”⁴

Your contribution is not defined only by what you do. It’s also impacted by your attitude and how you treat others. Are you a know-it-all trying to impress people with your knowledge, or are you a respectful listener trying to gain understanding? You can’t fake this to win people over. You have to believe in making a contribution for it to become the foundation of your actions and behaviors. Over time, it will be the unconscious influence in how you approach any situation. On a conscious level, it will also help you make career choices that may be against the grain, but that could lead you to better opportunities in the future. Some of those opportunities may be at companies that initially appear to be less than desirable.

Pamela Forbes Lieberman, former president and chief executive officer of TruServ (now known as True Value Company), a cooperative principally of hardware stores, spent time with her team turning around this quality company that has faced difficulties and challenges. She recognized that this situation provided a unique opportunity for young professionals.

“We’d bring people in and say, ‘Here are all our issues. But this is where we’re going.’ Then we’d invite them to be part of the team that gets us there,” Pamela explained. “We’d say to them, ‘Won’t it be exhilarating to see where we’ll go from here?’ For these young professionals, it is a résumé-building opportunity.”⁵

These opportunities may not be the most glamorous jobs. They may involve a turnaround situation, or a company that new management is trying to revive or take in a different direction. Being at the company at that particular point in time, you will be part of the team that turns the organization around. Your payback in the process may not be the immediate satisfaction of a fancy title at a hot company. You’ll have to wait for your gratification, which in time will make it all the better.

“I was given some advice that changed my life and my career, which was to follow your compass, not your clock. Choose the company, not the title and not the money,” said Andrea Jung, chairman of Avon Products.⁶

“That advice changed who I am, where I am. I did not always take the job with the most money. I always took the job because in my heart I knew it was the company and the purpose of that company that I believed in,” added Andrea, who ranks as Number 3 on the *Wall Street Journal*’s 2004 “Top 50 Women to Watch.”⁷

The Value of Delayed Gratification

As you launch your career, sometimes the ideal job for you will not be the one that pays the best or has the most “bragging rights” among your friends, family, and peers. You may choose to work for a low salary today because you will gain valuable experience that will lead to a higher salary later. As a younger person, you can make that trade-off because, presumably, your financial burdens are less than they will be when you are 35 or 45.

The question to ask yourself now is, can you delay gratification—particularly if it means going without a new car for another year or two or living at home instead of on your own—to establish a better future? Would you choose a job where you can make a greater contribution over one that seems more impressive? What if the payoff for delaying gratification turns out to be a highly strategic move for your future? That would make that less-than-glamorous job more appealing, wouldn’t it?

Sound Advice and Delayed Rewards

In my own career, I passed up an opportunity to be part of a very hot company to become a tailor—with a Harvard MBA—at a well-established firm. Here's how it happened: When I was in my MBA program, I actively sought out companies, particularly smaller ones, and I interviewed with recruiters who came to school. Then a friend told me about a great company in California that he thought we should both talk to and offered to set up interviews there for both of us. With the interviews arranged, we got on a plane to talk to this company I had not heard of—Mattel. This toy manufacturer, founded in 1945, made mostly conventional toys until 1959, when it launched the Barbie doll.

When I met with the people at Mattel, you could feel the pulse of the activity. The interviewer told me, “This place is growing so fast, if you sit still you can see the walls expand.”

I left there with the conviction that, if Mattel made me an offer, I would take it. On my way back to Boston, I had a stopover in Chicago to meet with the management of Hart Schaffner & Marx (now Hartmarx Corporation), a very conservative clothing manufacturer, for my senior project. It was at that meeting that I first met John D. “Jack” Gray, who had recently become chairman and CEO of the company. After another Harvard MBA student and I had finished interviewing Jack about the company, he said to us, “We’re looking for young people like you. If you’d like to interview with the company, I hope you’ll consider coming back.”

We thanked him for the offer but in so many words told him “no thanks.”

Back in Boston I told my wife, Jane, about this exciting opportunity at Mattel, assuring her that this would be the most fantastic thing. Always the trusted advisor, Jane listened patiently to all of it and then said, “I think you should think about Hart Schaffner & Marx. At Mattel there is going to be a lot of competition from some very intelligent and ambitious people. But at Hart Schaffner & Marx, they won’t have any other new MBAs on staff to compare you to. You’ll really be able to get noticed there.”

Taking her advice, I did go back to Hart Schaffner & Marx to interview. The opportunity was clear. I would become the first MBA the company had hired in at least a decade. But instead of working in a corner office, I'd have to spend quite a bit of time in the factories, learning every step of the tailoring process from basting to sewing to pressing. Without that hands-on experience, I wouldn't have any insight into how to make the operation more efficient, improve margins, and so forth.

In the end, I had three offers to consider: one from Mattel, one from Hart Schaffner & Marx, and one from Procter & Gamble, where I had worked after graduating from Northwestern University and in the summer while I was at Harvard. I discussed the situation with my mentor and advisor, Professor Doriot. "There is no question," he told me. "The long-term opportunity is better at Hart Schaffner & Marx. It's a good company with a great reputation."

I turned down Mattel and went to work for Hart Schaffner & Marx. My reasons were clear: I hoped to have an opportunity to utilize my newly acquired skills and knowledge, which would benefit the company, while growing rapidly within the organization. Over the next three years, half of my time was spent in the shop learning to become a tailor. My finished product was my own suit that I made myself, which I still have. At the end of four years, I was made a vice president responsible for several thousand people.

The moral of this story is simple: I decided to delay my gratification and gave up the job at the "hot company." Instead, by listening to my trusted advisors, I chose the company where I could learn more and make a bigger contribution. When I got my reward, it was a significant one. I received a vice president's title far more quickly than I would have elsewhere.

Goals, Ambition, and the Greater Good

All of us have goals and ambition. Focusing on the greater good doesn't mean you don't care if you ever get promoted or receive a raise in pay. Of course you have ambition and want to get ahead! But like much in life, this requires a balance. You can focus on the greater good, helping your company achieve its goals, while availing yourself of opportunities that will also help advance your career. The key is what comes first. If you lead with your own ambition, so that everything you do is about you, you'll short-circuit your own success.

Warren Batts has enjoyed an impressive career. He has led numerous companies, including Premark and Tupperware as CEO, and he has served on the boards of 14 major public companies. After working for a few years, he finished college at 29 and received an MBA in 1963. He took his first CEO post in 1967. That's a fast track by anybody's standards. So how did he do it?

Warren had goals and ambition, but he kept them in check by focusing first on what he could do at the organization. "Remember, people are much more willing to help you succeed if ambition isn't dripping from every pore. We all have ambition, but there are people who spend every single moment thinking of themselves and how is this going to help them get ahead," Warren remarked. "With people like that, the organization usually rises up and prevents them from getting ahead or finds a way to slow them down. So if you are always worried about the next step, and you're more interested in your image, position, competition, and one-upmanship than in making a contribution, the whole organization will go to work to try to block your way."⁸

One of the most effective ways to keep a rampant ego and running-away ambition in check is to put your emphasis on your boss, your colleagues, or, if you're a new manager out of graduate school, your direct reports. Making others look good (especially your boss) and helping others do their jobs will increase the impact you make and will get you positive notice.

Welcome to a New World

Young professionals leaving the insular world of academics for their full-time job may have some difficulty with this concept. Students naturally compete with each other, whether in the classroom or on the playing field. At the same time, the collegiate environment is supportive of the individual. If you want to try on an idea for size, college is the place to do it. Individual expression and deviating from the norm are not only tolerated, but also expected.

Not so in the business world, where homogeneity is valued. Certainly some business environments, such as entertainment and advertising, prize creativity and individuality. But in most cases, businesses look for employees who can fit in and help further the company's objectives. Your new employer won't want to hear how you're going to change the whole organization on the first day! The only variance from the norm that companies typically welcome is in the ability to exceed expectations (although limits exist there too).

The business world, compared with the college campus, is an alien environment. When you're in college, you are among a student cohort that is usually internationally diverse and embraces a variety of thoughts, opinions, and ideas. On the other hand, the student body tends to be around the same age.

In the business world, the international diversity may still be present, but usually on a far more limited scale. The same goes for the variance of thoughts, opinions, and ideas. On the other hand, the age range can span 30 or even 40 years. That's usually a big adjustment for young professionals, whose first job may be in a cubicle next to someone who is the same age as their parents. Your supervisor may be someone who is 10 years older than you, while your peers range from roughly the same age to 20 years older. (As you move up the ranks and become a new manager with direct reports who are older than you, it's even more of a challenge, as we'll discuss in later chapters.) Some of the people you'll meet in the work environment will have a Ph.D., and others will not have a college degree at all.

How can you work with people who have so little in common with you on the surface? The answer is simple: by taking “you” out of the equation and focusing on the common goal of accomplishing the organization’s goals and objectives. In the business world, you will be measured by the work you do. That is how your boss will evaluate you and, equally important, how your peers will look at you. As a new employee it’s more important that your colleagues accept you than you accept them. At the same time, they won’t accept you unless you accept them.

“I am really a big believer that you have to have a whopping dose of humility at every level, in the corner office and when you first come into an organization. It goes a long way,” said Andrea Jung, chairman of Avon Products. “One of the ways of demonstrating this is to show that you are committed to learning. At the same time, you need to demonstrate that you are skilled and that you are working hard. But you also have to be open to reinventing yourself all the time. Even today as CEO I have to learn new skills and take it upon myself to commit to continual self-transformation.”⁹

As a new employee fresh out of college or as a new manager out of graduate school, you will have your share of challenges. Among them is to learn from a diverse group of colleagues. Some will be less educated than you but will know far more than you.

The most dramatic examples are ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) students. Upon graduation, they enter the military as officers, even though they are younger and have less experience in uniform than many others. As these young officers prepare to take charge, the most important people they have to win over are the non-commissioned officers (NCOs). They are almost always older than the ROTC-trained officers and not as well educated. But they have twice as much power because they have “local knowledge.” They know how things work and how things get done.

In business, a few people usually exist who are the civilian equivalent of the NCOs, usually a long-term employee who knows

everybody but never shows up on any organizational chart. But if you ask your more experienced colleagues, you'll quickly find out to whom you need to talk to get what you need or to accomplish something. It may be Marian in Human Resources or Bill in Purchasing. These are the people you need to know and whose respect you must earn.

Learning the “Local Knowledge”

In his first job as a manager out of graduate school, Warren Batts had impressive educational credentials as a Harvard MBA. But he lacked an understanding of “how things got done” at his new employer, a textile manufacturer. Left on his own by his boss to figure things out, Warren decided that the best way to learn was to ask everybody he met. “The first thing I did was to go around and interview people,” Warren recalled. “I asked the simple question, ‘What kind of experience have you had dealing with the mills?’”

From that interview process, he came up with a resource list of people to ask if he needed help in a particular area.

In addition, as a new manager, Warren “inherited” an assistant, a very capable woman who had been a major in the Women’s Marine Auxiliary Corps and who had been with the company for many years. “A lot of my guidance came from my assistant—although it seemed at the beginning that I was her assistant! She knew all of her peers in the organization. So if we didn’t have the knowledge that we needed in the corporate office, we could call one of the other plant managers who had a similar experience and make that connection.”¹⁰

It wasn’t Warren’s title that won his assistant’s loyalty. Rather, his respect for her, his humility, and his understanding that she knew far more about the company than he did proved what kind of individual he was. Through mutual respect, a partnership was forged that helped them both work toward accomplishing the company’s goals.

While graduate students may take a job as a new manager, most undergraduates will go into the workforce as entry-level employees

or trainees. It can be an abrupt shift in perspective from where you were in college. You may be coming from an environment in which you were at the top of your class or the recipient of leadership honors. But as the new employee, you'll be the trainee. If you walk around with your degree on your sleeve, you'll surely be miserable in your new environment. You won't do yourself any favors with your colleagues, either. If you adopt the attitude that this is an opportunity to learn how things are done in the organization, you will get to work more quickly and start making a contribution.

Jack Gray, former CEO at Hart Schaffner & Marx, has succinct advice for young professionals today. "It's so simple. You just work hard. Yes, you have to make sure that you dress the way you should; that's an important detail. But the most important thing is to convince everybody that you're not just interested in the money; you're interested in doing the job." He recalled an incident when there was a delay on the holding platform at the factory, and he asked a young manager to go investigate. "You could tell by looking at him that he thought this was beneath his dignity. That finished him," Jack added. "You have to convince people that you are a '1,000-percent' person—that you are willing to pay any normal price for success. Mostly that means having an attitude that is not about wondering whether you're going to be promoted or get a raise. It's the attitude of 'I've got a job to do.'"¹¹

The willing attitude of a contributor also means leaving behind the past glories of your college days for the humbling reality of learning the ropes as a new employee. Consider the story of Jonathon who came from a prestigious East Coast family, was a Princeton undergraduate, and received his MBA. After graduation, he decided to go into retailing. His first job was for a large department store chain working in women's ready-to-wear, a very challenging department that had fast moving inventory. Jonathon knew he had a lot to learn, from purchasing to merchandising.

To succeed, Jonathon had to forget all about his lofty educational background and get down to what he had to learn to do his best on

the job. Along the way, he had some interesting life lessons as well. Three weeks after he took the job, his wife called him at the store. “I’d like to speak with Jonathon So-and-So,” she told the operator. The operator searched, but couldn’t find his name in the company directory. Connected with the women’s ready-to-wear department, Jonathon’s wife spoke with two people there. Neither of them recognized Jonathon’s name. Exasperated, she began to describe him. “He’s about five-foot-ten, dark hair with glasses. He’s new at the company. He’s in the trainee department.”

“Oh!” one of the store employees said. “You mean Johnny, the new kid! I’ll get him.”

Like Jonathon, you go from a world in which you were pursued by recruiters and recognized for your academic achievement and leadership ability to being the “new kid.” This may last a year or at least several months. You’ll know when this initial phase is over: when you begin to make a contribution that others can recognize and respect. (As for Jonathon, learning this lesson has paid off handsomely. He went on to enjoy a very successful career in retailing and more recently as an entrepreneur.)

Making Your “Personal Mosaic”

Focusing on making a contribution is not merely a crash course in humility. It is a lifelong philosophy. I can tell you from personal experience that, when I was Chairman and CEO of Bell & Howell, a New York Stock Exchange-traded information services company (today known as ProQuest), I focused as much on making a contribution to the organization as I did when I was starting out many years before.

Putting the company’s goals first and letting your contribution speak for itself will do more for your career over the long term than any other strategy. I have made this philosophy the centerpiece of my “personal mosaic,” and I invite you to do the same.

Your personal mosaic is composed of many pieces, large and small, shiny and dull, smooth and rough. All of them are valuable. From the many pieces, an image is formed, which is the composite of your life experience, both personal and professional. Each piece, or tile, that is set in place becomes a permanent fixture. It is very hard to chisel out and replace these pieces. Therefore, be highly selective in the tiles you choose. Throughout your life, you will add to this mosaic, a living work of art that reflects who you are and how you have come to understand the world around you. It is a reminder of where you have been, as well as a map to guide you where you are going.

SUCCESS SECRETS

- ▶ **Your long-term success in your career will be rooted in the contribution you make, but it starts with hard work and may require delayed gratification.**
- ▶ **Find what you are truly passionate about, and build your life's work around it.**
- ▶ **Seek out and listen to trusted advisors to help you discern the best choices for your future.**
- ▶ **Having ambition is good; flaunting it is your downfall.**
- ▶ **Remember, no role is too small, no task is insignificant, and even the brightest graduate has much to learn from his or her new co-workers.**

