



THE  
COMPASS  
SOLUTION

A Guide to Winning Your Career

TIM COLE

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This book is dedicated to the many people I encountered on my career journey – and especially those willing to offer guidance and perspective along the way. There are too many to try and name but please know you each had a hand in writing the pages that follow.

It's important I also thank Susan Hart, whose perspective and guidance helped morph a compilation of essays into something much more – as well as take my version of The Compass and make it far better.

Finally, a special thanks to my mom and dad for gifts I did not appreciate until I became a father, to my sons Brandon and David who are each far better equipped for their career story than their old man ever was, and to the little girl I met a long, long time ago who was destined to someday become my wife. Nancy, you've been with me every step of the way. You helped write this great adventure.



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# PREFACE

One hundred thousand hours.

That's what you should estimate the average journey is going to be when you take your first steps onto the job trail; a hundred thousand hours of your life devoted to forging a career path. Do the math yourself.

On the low end—an average of 50 hours per workweek and 45 weeks per year for 40 years. You start when you're 22, and if you're lucky, you hope you're financially able to wrap by the time you're 62. Forty years of your life. The low number is 90,000 hours. The high end is much, much higher. That 50-hour workweek and the golden retirement at 62 are unlikely for most.

Of course, very few think in those terms when they walk through the door with their dreams for the future. Most of us are hardwired to live and breathe for what happens today. And even fewer take the time to understand the lay of the land beyond their immediate job description. I didn't.

Go online today and you will be able to find primers for everything from enduring lightning strikes to navigating zombie apocalypses. But few to none that speak to where most of us devote such a large part of our lives.

This book does. It's the one I wish someone had pushed into my hands the day I walked off my college campus—before I removed the cap and gown, before I put on my first dress shirt, before I walked into my first meeting, and before I ever opened my mouth.

I wish I had it when I encountered my first great career obstacle or when I struggled to endure a supervisor I was convinced was going to ruin my life. It would have saved me a lot of anxious moments and offered me perspective that was not always easy to find.

Maybe this book is for you. It is a candid recounting of lessons learned by one person who navigated the better part of three-plus decades in one of the most highly competitive industries in the world—a diary filled with personal life lessons and journal entries that I’ve taken the time to balance with proven theory. It is the guidebook that could make more difference in your professional life than any resource you will ever read.

My credentials: I spent all that time with one company, through two-dozen plus restructures and downsizings. And when I say one company, I should point out that included five mergers resulting in six different cultures. Six restarts—six new beginnings. The average company tenure in the corporate world is slightly above four years, which means I managed to beat that ninefold.

The firm I went to work for generated \$80 million in sales per year. Before I left, the little portion of the business I personally ran did slightly less than a half of a billion by itself.

I became part of one of the most dramatic company ascensions in the health-care industry, complete with the ebb and flow associated with product pipelines and changing market dynamics. In retrospect, my survival over the course of that many years had about as much probability as winning the lottery on consecutive weeks.

Hold the applause. I was very lucky.

The reality is I made it because I learned a few things along the way that began to increase my chances for survival—lessons I wish someone might have offered me free-of-charge when my journey began.

The pages that follow speak to challenges that are universal to anyone in the corporate world, but they are equally transferrable to almost any field of endeavor. I talk corporate throughout this book because I know corporate. I believe the insights offered here could dramatically change your professional life—regardless of what your field of work happens to be.

My goal is not to prepare you to invest a lifetime with one company—or even one industry. It’s to offer lessons that make certain you have a sustainable and successful career. There is a big difference.



Unlike some books that might attempt to offer similar lessons, I didn't write this from the perspective of a chief executive officer, an outside consultant, or a training expert. I have taken the journey myself—from entry level to senior executive. The industry I chose was and is among the most volatile in the world. My pedigree is forged from being one of the few who managed to emerge unscathed and strong on the other side. The path I describe is battle-tested. I know—I walked it.

If you're reading this, my guess is you have either embarked on or are preparing your own adventure, and for many, that is in the world of corporate.

And let's get something out of the way now. A great many don't think of their jobs as "*corporate*." They don't work on Wall Street and they never walk into a high-rise or commute into the city. For the purposes of this book, corporate is simply intended to describe a group of individuals charged with delivering a product that ensures that organization is sustainable. For most businesses, that product translates to profitability. This book is not limited to blue suits. If you plan to work in order to earn a living there is value in what you are about to read.

Imagine this book to be the personal diary left behind from someone who walked the trail before you. Every chapter and every word is based on my experiences.

I wrote this for three distinct groups of people:

- Those contemplating a career but lacking the savvy to properly understand and navigate that new world (almost everyone walking off a college campus, or exiting military service, or reconsidering their vocational choices).
- Those already in a career and struggling to find their way—which includes over 50 percent of the workforce in the United States alone.
- The leaders who can influence and build the cultures that allow dedicated employees to thrive.

Your career is anything but a four-letter word—at least for those who understand how to navigate it. Like any field, there are markers that will allow you to plot a course. I can help you find them.

Not too long ago I sat down to talk with an employee struggling to cope

with a company restructure, frightened by the prospect that her job might end. When she heard my story she was dumbstruck. “*How,*” she asked, “*could anyone manage to last through all of that?*”

I laughed but then began to think about that comment—a lot. The book you’re reading now began with the question: “*If I could go back in time, what’s the advice I would want to whisper in my own ear?*”

My answer is in the pages that follow.



# INTRODUCTION

This land is far different from the world you dreamed it would be.

The terrain is hard and unforgiving. The tribes that inhabit the neighboring countryside are rumored to be cannibals. Last night, two members of your team didn't make it back to camp. Your chief didn't mention them but everyone knew they are lost. Your group divided the missing teammates' provisions at the campfire, but no one has spoken of them since.

You check the small pouch you carry with you and find the last morsels of food. You didn't sleep last night—only tossed about on your bedroll and waited for the dawn. You look at the other members of your party now as the first strains of sunlight filter through the trees and wonder again why you came here.

Muscle fatigue has given way to a greater exhaustion.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, was it?

You hear someone muttering that the trail only gets tougher from here and you turn to gaze at the mountain that lies ahead.

*"What trail?"* you ask yourself.

You fear falling behind. You lag behind here and chances are good someone else will get your place. They say there are hundreds back there waiting for you to stumble.

Someone should have told you all of this.

Shouldn't they?

Your chief is barking orders about the mountain ahead but the words seem slurred and wrapped in a haze of hot, thick air. You pull your side pouch on and wish again you had thought to refill your canteen when you crossed that stream yesterday. Somewhere up ahead there must be a path you tell yourself. You watch a few others start to wander to their right, and so you fall in behind them. Better to follow someone—even if it's the wrong way—than to be left behind.

And so, a new day for a great many in the corporate world gets underway. The metaphorical license I use here is exaggerated—to a degree—but not quite as much as many would want to believe.

Those feelings of uncertainty are very real for most. You've entered a land driven by productivity and earnings—and trust me when I say the cannibals that devour the weak are out there.

Most of us start our climbs without a great degree of guidance beyond that provided by our assigned chief—and certainly without any sense of direction on a larger scale. We build our own—or we become one of the lost.

I easily could have become one of the wanderers. I accepted a job offer all those years ago because of base pay and benefits. I had no real vision and certainly no counsel. With no map and no mentor I contented myself with making the next step. When I saw others on the trail, I was inclined to fall in behind. There was a mountain to be climbed.

Until I began to realize there were signs out there that could guide me. And like the survivalist in the natural world, I began to develop instincts that changed me. I had to stumble a few times, but I began to learn.

This book offers you the unvarnished truth around what I've learned. Some of it will seem intuitive. Some of it you may disagree with, and that's OK. But these are the practical lessons from my journey—the personal log that began when I first contemplated the mountain.

This is not a book on theory. It is focused on function and application. To that end, I've divided it into two parts. The first section I call the Compass. Remember, no one hands you a map when you embark on your career. But you can form a sense of direction from the very first day. Consider this section the survival foundation that most struggle to figure out. If they don't, they remained locked in their own version of a perpetual career

purgatory. A great many invest their professional lives there.

You don't have to.

Apply the ideas and principles outlined in this portion of the book and you will enjoy advantages most of your peers will never find. You'll be able to seek shelter and you will learn how to effectively "feed yourself" and your career.

The Compass will introduce you to four Cardinal Points essential to that survival. Each took me years to truly comprehend and embrace. They are:

- Personal Accountability
- People
- Process
- Perspective

The lodestar for your compass—Personal Accountability—will become your navigational constant. You will learn to count on it, plan around it, and optimize what it offers you for the rest of your career—or you will abdicate that responsibility and effectively ride the winds.

The other three points of the compass represent either opportunities or obstacles depending on your ability to master the subtleties each offer. Ignore them at your own peril. I watched each drive careers—and sometimes effectively end careers.

The 4 Ps are focused on survival. The short chapters that support each offer foundational points that are then built on over the course of the book—made simple and executable. You'll note that I end each chapter with a Straight Talk summary. Why? Because your time is valuable. I'm not going to pound you with verbiage. I'll share stories, offer experiences, give you the central idea, and then move on.

But when you first contemplated a career you did so with dreams of a better life—not simply subsisting.

Which brings us to the second section—the Key Chain. This is where we introduce you to three Keys that can truly accelerate your career. The chapters that support each offer insight into core competencies that separate the successful from the masses.

These Keys are remarkably simple—and yet I seldom saw them fully optimized over the course of my career. They are:

- Leadership
- Communication
- Learning

Sounds pretty simple doesn't it? How many books have you read on just the subject of leadership alone? And yet every year millions of employees see their careers stall—or their path become terribly clouded.

The value of each of the chapters that support the Keys and the “why” behind this book is simple—there is a big difference between principle and practice in this world. Get used to it. At least some of those theories you discussed in college or carried with you from past experiences may or may not ever become practical reality out here where the game is played.

I write this book as someone who climbed the mountain ahead of you—and experienced the same challenges as you. I condensed the Keys into just three for a reason. These were the ones that were the difference makers. I watched those who mastered them enjoy longevity and success. I watched even more who never understood their intricacies, and continued to stumble until they began to fall. You don't have to be a master of all competencies, but these three are not negotiable.

Yes—they are that important.

Seven secrets gained over 37 years of navigating a career. Why is this book so very valuable for anyone who plans to earn a living? These pages reflect a unique journey; one I was very fortunate to navigate. Maybe somewhere out there is someone who survived more mergers, restructures, and downsizings than me. But frankly, I haven't met them yet.

This is how I did it.