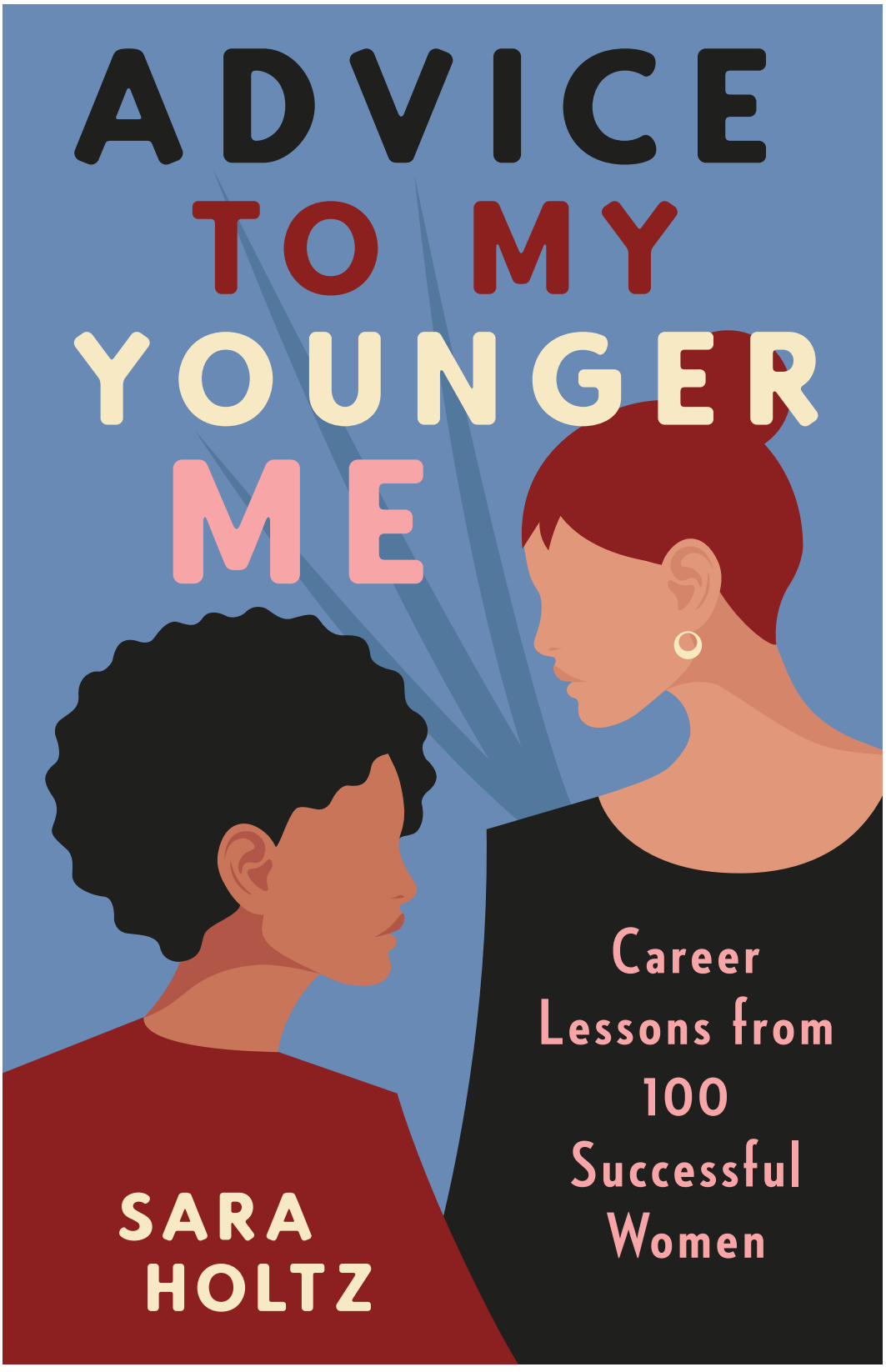

ADVICE
TO MY
YOUNGER
ME
Career
Lessons from
100
Successful
Women
SARA
HOLTZ

Chapter 1

Be the Architect of Your Career

When I was in my late thirties, in the late 1980s, I was a Vice-President at a Fortune 500 company. At that time, there were very few women at that level in any major company. The head of HR at my company organized a presentation by the company's four most senior women, of which I was one, to speak to the more junior women about our careers. I walked into a room full of smart, ambitious, and attentive women, dressed in suits and high heels. They were there eager to learn our "secrets" to career success.

When it came time for me to speak about my career, I described it as a sort of haphazard "I did good work, and one thing led to another" journey. No vision, no plan, no ownership, no risks. Just a mixture of smarts, head-down hard work, and luck.

Looking back, I am appalled at the picture I chose to paint that day. It was a message of such passivity. I was uncomfortable acknowledging my ambition (that would have been so distasteful!) and the intentionality with which I had navigated my career (that would have seemed so calculating!). Somehow, it seemed preferable to project the image of someone who had gotten where I was because of a combination of long hours and good fortune.

But the truth was, I had been ambitious. I had strategically built and leveraged my network. I had been politically savvy in dealing with the organizations in which I worked. I had taken some significant risks. In short, I had taken responsibility for how my career progressed.

If I could rewind the clock and deliver that presentation again, I would say, "It's your career. How it unfolds is your responsibility. No one will care about your career as much as you should. Be intentional and craft the career that you want."

Take Charge of Your Career

Many women abdicate ownership of their careers. They ride the wave of what is happening and wait for opportunities to come along. Shellye Archambeau, former tech CEO, public company board member and author of *Unapologetically Ambitious: Take Risks, Break Barriers and Create Success on Your Own Terms*, shared this analogy:

> You would never spend thousands of dollars for an airline ticket, put your dog in the kennel, pack your bags, get to the airport, board the plane, and then ask the pilot, "So where are we going?" But we do that all the time with our careers. We spend tens, if not hundreds of thousands, of dollars on our education, on training, on coaches, on conferences, on all these things to help us, and then we abdicate control of our career.

This passive attitude is like being in the passenger seat, rather than the driver's seat, of your career. Being in the passenger seat is certainly more comfortable, but it may not take you where you want to go.

One of my clients, Deanna, always wanted to be a teacher. But when she went to sign up for a major in education, she was told that there were only a limited number of spots available, and male students were being given preference because of the shortage of male elementary school teachers. She accepted that explanation and picked English as her major. After college, she found a job as a legal secretary, was quickly promoted to being a paralegal, and ultimately became a lawyer. She had a successful big-firm legal career, made a lot of money, and garnered a lot of respect. But to this day, she wishes that she hadn't let herself be so easily talked out of getting her teaching degree. Despite all the benefits that came with being a lawyer (including a large salary), she feels that being a teacher would have been a more satisfying and meaningful career.

Taking ownership of how your career unfolds is key to having the career you dream of. As Dana Look-Arimoto, executive coach and author of *Stop Settling, Settle Smart: Rethinking Work-Life Balance, Redesign Your Busy Life*, urges, "Make your career choices by design, not default."

You don't need someone else's permission to tell you that you are ready for that stretch assignment or promotion. You can ask for it. You don't need someone else to tell others about your stellar work. You can make your accomplishments visible. You don't need to wait for someone to give you a raise. You can make the case that you deserve it. You don't need to hope that when the time comes to look for a new job, you'll know the right people to alert you to opportunities. You can intentionally build a network to support your career goals. You can be the architect of your career.

Define Your Version of Success

The first step in being the architect of your career is to decide what career success looks like for you. For example:

- Do you want to reach the C-suite in a big company? Or is your ultimate goal to be a founder of a start-up?
- What role does money play in your version of success?
- Do you want a job that has a lot of variety or is predictability important?
- Do you want a career that is compatible with being home for dinner every night? Or do you want a job that sends you flying all over the world working in different time zones and cultures?
- Is status or recognition important to you? Or do you measure success in terms of the impact on those you serve?
- Do you want a job that provides a secure paycheck? Or are you willing to take greater risks in the hope of greater rewards?
- Do you want to work as a member of a team or as an individual contributor?

- Is the culture of the company or its location important to you? Or will you accept any position that gives you the right opportunities?

The questions can go on and on.

Too often, when we talk about success, we focus only on money and titles, but as the above list makes clear, there are many more aspects to work that make you excited to get out of bed each day to go to work. Defining success as ascending to the C-suite of a company, making partner at a consulting firm, or becoming department head of your medical specialty may be what will make you happy. Making lots of money is a worthy goal if that is what is important to you. But the important thing is that your version of success be *your* version of success.

Tune Out Other Voices

Developing a vision of what your successful career looks like seems like it would be relatively easy, but in my experience, it's not. Since you were very young, you have been receiving messages about what career you should pursue. Your parents, teachers, friends, co-workers, bosses, and even the media all have opinions about what a bright woman like you should want. Your father tells you that the best job for you is as an accountant in a big accounting firm, with a stable income, an excellent 401(k), and regular promotions. Your mother says that being a lawyer is too demanding a job to combine with motherhood. Your roommate cautions you that her sister, who works in tech, hates it because it's such a boy's club. The articles you read tell you that you should want to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the founder of a tech start-up. Your favorite TV show paints a picture of the unmarried female doctor as miserable and lonely.

A study by KPMG, a global tax, audit, and advisory services firm, asked 3,000 college-aged and professional women what messages they received growing up.[i] The four most common answers were:

- Be nice to others (86 percent)
- Be a good student (86 percent)
- Be respectful of authority figures or elders (85 percent)
- Be helpful (77 percent)

At the bottom of the list?

- Share your point of view (34 percent)
- Be a good leader (44 percent)

Messages like these are certainly not consistent with being a successful business executive!

Others' opinions about what career you should pursue can be useful data. As Eileen McDargh, executive coach, Founder and CEO of the Resiliency Group and author of *Burnout to Breakthrough: Building Resilience to Refuel, Recharge, and Reclaim What Matters*, says, "Sometimes people see things in you that you don't see in yourself." But others' views should not limit or define your career decisions.

The well-intentioned advice from others may be right in the abstract, but it may not be right for you. They don't know what your big, unspoken dreams are. They don't know what excites you and what you find boring. They don't know what you are doing when time flies and what you are doing when you can't stop watching the clock. And most importantly, they don't have to live with the consequences of the decisions you make.

The career of one of my podcast guests, Melanie Vetter, illustrates the power of these early messages to lead to a less-than-satisfying career. Melanie was the child of immigrant parents who believed that the path to financial security and a happy life was by becoming a prestigious professional. As a child, she dreamed of being a chef, an art historian, or a

theatrical make-up artist (notice the theme of creativity). But she followed her parents' urgings and went to Harvard Law School. Unsurprisingly, while she was successful as a lawyer, she did not find the work fulfilling. After many twists and turns in her career, she figured out what she really wanted to do was use her creative talents to help people find a deep connection with themselves and others through writing. She invented the job of "transformational writing coach." She founded Wellfleet Circle, where she teaches people how to get clarity around their values and purpose through journaling.

I had a client, Pauline, who was a brilliant litigator, consistently ranked among the best of the best—smart, strategic, no-nonsense. But she didn't start out her career as a lawyer. She started out as a social worker. The first time she told me this, I literally burst out laughing. Her strong personality and brilliant analytical skills didn't seem like a good match for being a social worker.

When I asked why she had thought that being a social worker was a good idea, she said that when she was in college, she didn't have a clear picture of what a woman with her talents could do. She had a college professor who told her he thought she would make a great social worker. Here was this older, experienced professor who saw a clear career path for her. She chose to follow his advice.

Despite all the well-intentioned advice you get from others, only you can make the choice about the right career path for you. Spend some time identifying the messages you've received about the career you should pursue and question whether those narratives serve you well now. Tune out those voices that do not serve you well and develop your own picture of what success means for you.

Draw on Your Definition of Success

Your definition of success provides you with a framework to fashion your short- and long-term goals. You can use it to develop the "big picture" goals that you hope to accomplish over the next few years, such as getting promoted to director, getting your real estate

license, or polishing your communication skills. You can then use those goals to develop your monthly or quarterly goals, such as read a book on becoming a better manager, research on-line real estate license courses, or participate in Toastmasters.

Your definition of success can also serve as a benchmark as you measure your progress towards your goals. It's tempting to feel unsuccessful when you hear that your roommate from college has just been promoted to Vice-President, and you are still a Manager. When your sister buys a house, it can make you feel like a failure if you only have $2,000 in your savings account. But if your definition of success has nothing to do with titles or home ownership, there's no reason to feel diminished by their accomplishments.

Clarity around your definition of success can also help you make tough decisions—like whether to move across the country for a big promotion, leave your boring but well-paying job for the adventure of a start-up, or go back to school to get your PhD in robotics.

Shortly after I left my corporate job as General Counsel at a Fortune 500 company in California, I got a phone call from a headhunter about a job in a small city on the East Coast. It paid twice what I'd been making at my old job. Initially, I was tempted to interview for the job. After all, it was so much money!

But I'd recently worked with a career coach to help me figure out what my next career move should be. After weeks of conversation and much thought, I'd come up with my personal definition of career success at that point in my life. It included:

- Spending most of my day doing what I considered my "Right Work" (we'll address Right Work in Chapter 2)

- Managing as few people as possible

- Making enough money to have a comfortable lifestyle and save for my children's college education and my retirement

- Leveraging what I'd already accomplished
- Having the flexibility to be actively involved in parenting my two young sons
- Traveling overnight on business no more than once a month
- Working with other talented women
- Being respected for the work I did
- Living in a place I loved
- Having a positive impact on the lives of others

When I reviewed my definition of success, I realized that no matter how much money was involved in this new job, it met few of my criteria. I would be spending a lot of time away from home on business travel, and I wouldn't have flexibility in where and when I did my work. I'm a big city girl and doubted I would adapt well to living in a small town, far away from family and friends.

I can't say it was easy, but I called the headhunter back and said I wasn't interested in the position. There were plenty of people who thought I was crazy. But because I had such clarity around what success meant to me, I was comfortable with the decision, and I've never regretted it.

Don't Worry If You Don't Know What You Want

What if you don't have a crystal-clear definition of your version of success? Take a deep breath and don't beat yourself up. I know a woman who knew exactly what she wanted to do since she was four years old. She wanted to be a doctor, have two children, and live in New York City. And that's exactly what she did. But I have known many more women who

were not sure what they wanted to do when they were thirty. Yet, all of them have wound up with successful careers.

A key tenet of one of my favorite career-planning resources, the book *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life* by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, is that there is no one, best career. Many jobs would bring you satisfaction, draw on your strengths and interests, and pay you well. Feeling that you need to figure out the "perfect career" may get in the way of finding a very good one.

Oftentimes you need experience in the real world to figure out what you do and don't want out of your career. It may be that, only by working in a male-dominated, competitive organization, you come to realize that it's important to you to work in a collaborative environment. Or you may discover from a calendar full of business trips that business travel is exhausting and not nearly as glamourous as you thought.

Further, your definition of success will likely evolve over time, as your opportunities, family situation, and experiences change. At the outset of my career, I was all about titles and recognition. I wanted to be seen as a trailblazer. I wanted validating promotions and a salary that indicated that my contributions were being valued. Once I had children, my definition of success changed dramatically. Success was a "balanced" life of meaningful work that drew on my strengths, a flexible schedule so that I could spend time with my family, and enough money for a comfortable lifestyle. After my kids were launched in their own careers, my definition of career success once again morphed to being laser-focused on helping younger women succeed in the workplace.

Embrace the Idea of Multiple Careers

I often say that "Careers are long but rarely linear." It's unlikely that your career will be "one and done." Try as you might, you can't predict today the path your life will take as your career unfolds. You may go to graduate school thinking you know the career you want to pursue. You may be successful at it, only to discover later that you want to do work more

aligned with your strengths and interests. You may follow the love of your life to a new city and find it hard to get a job in your current field, so you make a pivot to a new role. You may have kids and discover your super-demanding job no longer works for you, so you look for a career with more flexibility. You may find it's too hard to make a living doing the job you thought you would love, so you have to look for one that pays better. (By the way, all of those things happened to me!)

Former lawyer, Brenda Bernstein, says the best piece of career advice she ever received was that people have an average of three careers in their lives. "It was so helpful to learn that shifting careers was a normal thing that a lot of people do. It allowed me, after ten years as a lawyer, to give myself permission to embark on an entirely different career." She has since founded the Essay Expert, a company that helps executives write stellar resumes and LinkedIn profiles.

Shifting careers—sometimes dramatically—was a common theme among the women I interviewed. Nora McInerny went from being an advertising copywriter to an author and podcast host. Kelly Hoey started out as a corporate lawyer and is now a renowned expert on networking. Shasta Nelson started out as a minister and ended up founding a company supporting women's friendships.

Been There, Learned This: Careers Are Rarely Linear

Nancy Davis Kho, author of *The Thank-You Project: Cultivating Happiness One Letter of Gratitude at a Time*, who went from international product management, to being a writer, to returning to the corporate world in a business development role, gave this advice about what she calls "twisty" career paths:

You may think you're going to be doing the thing that you're doing right now for the rest of your life, and maybe you will. But if you start feeling pulled in another direction, don't panic. Listen to that voice.

I had two degrees in international management. In my twenties, you could never have convinced me that I was going to be anything other than an international Captain of the Universe. And then, as I was coming up to forty, based on nothing, I thought, *Wait a minute. I think I'm a writer*. So, I started taking some writing classes, and lo and behold, that's what I wound up doing.

I've seen this pattern with so many of my friends who start off on path A, and now they're on path B, or maybe even path C. Just give yourself grace and listen to what you're curious about. You may think that the stuff you learn in your first career would never apply to your second or third career, but it does. The things you learn travel along with you.

It's simply not realistic to think you can make a decision today that will withstand the passage of time, given cultural and technological changes that are sure to occur during your lifetime. The last job you have before you retire may not even exist today!

Stay Ambitious

Women often are ambivalent about being (or at least being perceived as being) ambitious. But if you are going to have your best possible career, you need to get comfortable with being ambitious—and letting others know that you are.

Research shows that over the course of a career, women tend to lose their ambition. In one study conducted by the global management consulting firm, Bain & Company, women with MBAs who were in their first two years of working were asked whether they aspired to top management within their companies. "The women gave a resounding yes," said Julie Coffman, a Partner and Global Head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practice at Bain. "The women both wanted it and felt confident it could happen. In fact, they had higher aspirations than their male peers." But that changed quickly. "By three years into their careers, women's aspirations and confidence in achieving top roles plummeted, down by

50–60 percent." Coffman continued. "By then, only 16 percent of women had top management aspirations."

The blame for this diminution in ambition is usually placed on women having children. But the Bain researchers examined the data to see if this was the cause. "It turns out that is not the case," Coffman continued. "Marital or parental status did not predict who aspired to top roles and who no longer did." A McKinsey/LeanIn Women in the Workplace study reported, "Women are not leaving their companies at higher rates than men, and very few [women] plan to leave the workforce to focus on family."[ii] In fact, another Women in the Workplace study found that women with children were 15 percent more likely to aspire to being a top executive than women without children.[iii]

According to the Bain study, three factors contributed to women's loss of ambition:[iv]

- Not seeing a path to being successful in their companies
- Not having a manager that supported their success with training, mentorship, and stretch opportunities
- Not seeing other women in senior roles in the company

The takeaway: if you want to maintain your ambition (and you should), look to work in organizations in which there are women in senior roles and seek out bosses who are supportive of your career goals. If you find yourself in a job or in an organization that doesn't do that, consider moving on to one that does. If that's not possible, be aware that being in an organization without women at the top or without a boss who supports your career advancement can sap your ambition. Be cognizant of your need to consciously maintain your ambition, despite the dearth of successful women around you.

A loss of ambition may not only be attributable to an unsupportive company culture. Sometimes lessened ambition is the result of self-limiting thoughts. Valerie Young, author

of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*, and an internationally recognized authority on the impostor syndrome, described an experience she had speaking to a large audience of professional women:

> A woman raised her hand and said she was "kind of thinking about" positioning herself for an executive role, but she was concerned that executives worked a lot of hours. She didn't want to do that.
>
> When I dug deeper, what was really behind her reluctance was she didn't think she could do the job. It was a confidence issue. She felt like an impostor.
>
> My advice to her: "Go for it. Go find out that you really can do it. You can always change your mind later. You can always step back. But it's harder to step up if you've lost your chance."

In my coaching practice, I often heard from women who didn't want to go for the "big job"—whether it was a partner in a law firm or an executive in a company. They would say, "I look at the women who are more senior than I am, and I don't want their lives. They talk about how stressed out they are and they always look sleep deprived." My advice paralleled Young's: "Go get the big job. See whether you can do it differently. Maybe the reason they look so sleep deprived is because they haven't made sleep a priority. Maybe they've defined the job in such a way that it is all-consuming, but it doesn't necessarily have to be done that way. Sometimes the more senior you are, the more flexibility you have in the way you do your work."

Challenge the reasons you may have for lessening your ambitions. See if they are based in fact or on unexamined assumptions about what's required to be successful in a senior position.

Invest Time and Money in Your Career

Over the years, I've noticed that women are often reluctant to invest their own time and money in their careers. They hesitate to spend their out-of-work hours learning critical

business skills—like how to read a financial statement, or how to be an inclusive leader—that are beyond the scope of their current job, even though these skills would contribute to their professional growth. They hesitate to spend their money on career-enhancing investments, like dues for a professional organization or the cost of a workshop on time management. They reason that if their company won't foot the bill, why should they?

Robin Farmanfarmaian, author of *The Thought Leader Formula: Strategically Leverage Your Expertise to Drive Business & Career Goals*, points out that most people have the mistaken assumption that when they finish their formal education, they can stop investing in their careers:

> They say, "Now that I have my college or graduate degree, I'm done paying for my education." You know what? Your career needs to be looked at as a business. There isn't a single successful business that doesn't spend money to support their business. Even if you work for a company, you've got to pay to learn things and you've got to have a marketing budget to market yourself.

I had a client, Elena, who worked in banking in New York City. As one of our coaching calls was ending, she told me she was about to head out to a long-anticipated lunch with a potential client. Casually, I said, "Don't forget to pick up the check."

A bit taken aback, she responded, "You know, lunch in New York is really expensive, and the company won't pay for it."

I responded, "You've worked really hard and waited months to get this lunch appointment. If the person you're meeting with leaves feeling even slightly put off by the fact that you didn't pay for lunch, you've lost somebody who's potentially a client, a mentor, or an important addition to your network. That's a risk you shouldn't take. You need to realize that sometimes you have to spend your own money as an investment in your career."

Don't be short-sighted about investing your time and money in your career. It's an investment that will pay off!

Key Takeaways

Lewis Carroll wrote in *Alice in Wonderland*, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." The inverse is equally true. If you want to get somewhere in your career, however you define that "somewhere," you need to figure out which road you should travel. And then, you need to take responsibility for taking the steps necessary to get you where you want to go.

You need to be both good at your job and good at your career. The choices you make and the actions you take today—the way you nurture your network, the risks you take, and the help you ask for—will have important ramifications for your future success.

How to do those things successfully is what the rest of this book is about.

Coaching Assignments: Put This Chapter into Action

1. **Reflect on the messages you received** growing up about what your career aspirations should be. Which of these messages serve you well when envisioning the career of your dreams? Which of these messages don't?

   Write down a list of the unhelpful messages. Every time you find yourself reluctant to make a career-enhancing move, think about whether one of those unhelpful messages is getting in the way of you taking that action. If so, challenge that thought to see if it is really true.

2. **Develop your definition of success**. Carve out time to do some deep work on defining what your version of a successful career looks like. Refer to some of the questions raised on page XX. You can probably come up with even more that are relevant to you.

Write down what you come up with. Don't worry if your definition isn't perfect. You can revise it as you continue to think about it more.

3. **Stay ambitious.** Commit in writing to doing one thing in the next year that will move your career forward. It should be big enough to scare you a little—like asking for a raise or a promotion, seeking a stretch assignment, or enlisting a mentor.

4. **Set up a budget for career investments**. Set aside money that you will spend on building your skills or your network. What professional organization could you join and actively participate in? Who could you take out to lunch to ask for career advice? What professional conference could you attend to inspire you? Then spend that money investing in your career.

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[i] "KPMG Women's Leadership Study: Moving Women Forward into Leadership Roles," KPMG, 2015, https://home.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/ph/pdf/ThoughtLeadershipPublications/KPMGWomensLeadershipStudy.pdf.

[ii] Sarah Coury et al., "Women in the Workplace," McKinsey & Company, September 30, 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace.

[iii] "Women in the Workplace: 2015," McKinsey & Company, http://witi.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Women-in-the-Workplace-2015.pdf.

[iv] Julie Coffman and Bill Neuenfeldt, "Everyday Moments of Truth: Frontline Managers Are Key to Women's Career Aspirations," Bain & Company, June 17, 2014, https://www.bain.com/insights/everyday-moments-of-truth.