



## JASON SEIDEN

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How to Self-Destruct | Super Staying Power

### Forget your career path, live your story!

#### Career paths are fictions

- Career paths are not evil, but they are fictions.
- Career paths are designed to make a large number of employees easier to manage – they are tools for managers and HR, not for individuals.
- An analog to the "career path" exists in every organization in which large numbers of people come together: school (grades), military (rank), church (hierarchy), overnight camp (cabins)...
- Career paths allow managers to work with a few select archetypes (based on averages) rather than every individual one-on-one.
- Since no one is average, it's the individual's responsibility to try to obtain accommodations for her individuality. There should be some tension between what the organization wants the archetypes to do and what the individuals want the organization to do.
- School trains employees to be good employees... to follow the path. School does not prepare individuals to challenge the status quo or to take responsibility for themselves (other than what's required to continue along the path). This means many employees are never prepared to create and manage that tension effectively.

#### Career paths cause stress and fear

When the employee can't manage that tension, she internalizes it, where it becomes stress and fear.

- **Stress of failure:** Believing there is one single "path to success" implies that any deviation from that path will result in failure. This is often exacerbated by a feeling of powerlessness and lack of control, which can make career development feel like trying to thread a needle blindfolded.
- **Stress of competition:** By failing to recognize individuality, organizations foster intense competition amongst peers. It also creates frustration, as it forces you to act counter to your innate desire for significance.
- **Fear of loss:** The further you travel along your linear career path, the more you have to lose.
- **Fear of the unknown:** What you know is everywhere you've been... what you don't know is everywhere you have yet to go. Through a glitch in the human psyche, we find the unknown inherently scary... which means, that which you want the most (more success!) is exactly what your subconscious is afraid of!



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### Career paths stymie the most important part of your growth

But wait, it gets worse. By keeping you on a path, career paths rob you of two specific and critical learning opportunities.

- **Handling the unknown:** Career paths provide boundaries and guides to what you're supposed to do... in a way, they turn the work world from a giant essay question into a series of multiple choice questions. While this may create the appearance of faster forward progress, it actually decimates opportunities to handle the type of strategic ambiguity found in top leadership positions.
- **Facing grave doubt:** Courage is one of those things everyone says they have, but hopes they never have to prove. Eventually, leaders have to prove their courage by making tough decisions and facing the doubts of those around them. Career paths – because they often put people into bounded tracks – remove doubt from many decisions and prevent future leaders from preparing for this.

### Freytag's Pyramid

- **Exposition:** The normal state is established.
- **Inciting moment:** Normal goes out the window; the story begins.
- **Rising conflict:** Things get interesting.
- **Climax:** The hero is as close – or as far away – from his or her goal as ever... it's hard to tell.
- **Dénouement:** Loose ends are tied up.
- **Resolution:** The hero rides off into the sunset.

### How this helps

- **Stress of failure:** Stories are about getting back to normal from a state of pending failure. Rather than operating under an illusion of control, many stories begin with the hero losing control over his destiny. He spends the entire story trying to claw back a little slice of control. This inversion flips the ratio of paths to failure vs. paths to success 180°.
- **Stress of competition:** Heroes can collaborate without losing their hero status. They know that they are always the protagonists of their own stories, no matter how much they cooperate.
- **Fear of loss:** Heroes make tough choices, and tough choices – while tough – are still easier to face than loss.
- **Fear of the unknown:** In a story, the unknown is not only expected, but embraced... stories are often judged by how exciting their twists and turns are!



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- **Preparing you for growth:** You don't have to push your story forward as you might have to do with a career path. You can simply let things be. You accept ambiguity and allow things to unfold.

You may still get hurt and the stakes are every bit as real as they were before, but now you can face reality with less stress and less fear, and that alone puts you in a much better situation to win.

### How to do it

- You need to be honest about where and who you are today.
- Fast forward to your 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. Look back over your life and write your current day self a letter. In it, describe the successes you had, what skills you used to achieve them, and what others say about you know that you're approaching the century mark.
- You have now written the beginning and ending of your story...
- Live the middle.

### Nobody likes a whiny protagonist, and other things to keep in mind

- Nobody likes a whiny protagonist. (It bears repeating.)
- The inciting moment is probably out of your control. Don't try to force it.
- Expect problems: no conflict, no story.
- Say, "yes." Stories don't start until you say "yes" to something.
- Being a tragic story doesn't make you any less great. Some of us are dramas, others are adventures, love stories, comedies, or epics. Be open to any ending, enjoy all the forms, but when it comes to your life, live *your* story.

### Get out there and live your story!