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*Career and Management Development*

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## **Bringing Discipline to the Dream**

There is no doubt that we are facing very difficult times in the economy, and that this will bring a serious challenge to the job search. At CareerLeader we feel strongly that the current situation demands that students take a hard look at their attitudes and expectations, but not in a way that is driven by reaction, fear, or a spurious (and elusive) “flight to safety.” We believe this economy calls for students’ and other job seekers’ taking the time to renew their efforts to develop their career vision.

We have something to learn in this regard from the recent past. We faced tough times in the economy in 2002 and 2003. The recession of that period hit the job market hard, and the going was *very* tough. During those years many students voiced some version of the complaint, “I’m going to have to abandon my dreams, my career vision, for the sake of pragmatism and a job.” No doubt there are already people who can relate to this sentiment as the current situation develops.

That was the wrong attitude in 2002 and it is the wrong attitude in 2008. Now, as then, we *need* our dream, our sense of our personal career vision, even more, but we need to bring discipline to the dream. We need to work harder, think deeper and make the vision both more detailed and actionable. What would that mean?

We need to ask ourselves, “In five to seven years, where do we want to be in terms of functional role, industry knowledge, organizational culture, skill acquisition, our relationships with significant others, work/life balance, geographical location, community involvement, our daily expression of our core life values?”

How deeply have we imagined these things? Can we articulate them clearly and concisely to a potential employer, to a significant other, and most importantly, to ourselves? If we have worked hard on this, if our vision has rich detail and is authentic, true to ourselves, we will have a great competitive advantage in the job search, no matter how tough things get. With such a vision, we can ask the essential job search question, “Where will I get the knowledge and experience that will move me closer to bringing my vision to life in five to seven years?”

One important word in that last sentence is “closer.” What we *really* need is the ability to recognize the next learning opportunity that will bring us the specific knowledge and experience

that will “push the ball forward” toward making our particular vision a reality. Those learning opportunities exist in many different places, and in places that we may not have anticipated. If we have done careful work on our vision, we will know how to recognize them.

The least useful form of career vision is “I want to work on Wall Street.” But if we look deeper and see that what we really *need* to be able to make our five-to-seven year career vision a reality is experience in structuring corporate finance deals, we see that we can get valuable exposure to that type of work in a corporate development role in an operating company, not just working for an investment bank.

Maybe our Internet marketing experience will not take place at Google as fantasized, but rather working for a talented marketing manager at a company that is not a household name. But it is still the experience that we need to bring us closer to making our vision a reality.

In addition, we may know places where we really would be able to do what we want to do in five to seven years (be a senior manager at strategy consulting firm, for example). But making the effort now to clarify our vision can lead us to recognize that there are many other places where we can do what we want to be *doing* on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis (working as a consultant within an operating company, for example, or in a strategic planning role).

We need the discipline of analysis to identify the skills and experience we need to advance toward our dream and to explore all of the various work settings where we can gain those skills and experience. If we have our vision before us, to revisit for renewed inspiration, then we won't experience these skillful adjustments as failures or the abandonment of “the dream.” Rather, we'll feel new energy when we see them for what they are: true progress toward something that is real and important, toward what we want to be doing, and to be.

Please excuse us for extending our (very American) sports metaphor, football. In challenging times such as these there may, in fact, be less opportunity for the fantasy play: the eighty-yard touchdown pass (a way in which few games are actually won anyway). That should not distract us from the excitement of running the play that is right *for us, for this moment*. If we know our goal well, there will be just as much excitement and opportunity in executing well and coming that much closer to whatever “winning” means for us, our family, our organization, and our community.

This is a time to dream more deeply and use that dream more skillfully, not dream less.