

Reflections on Careers: Ten Non-Commandments

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Excerpt from a speech given by Dr. Biller at the American Society for Public Administration 1982 National Conference Honolulu, Hawaii. Dr. Biller was Vice President and Vice Provost at the University of Southern California, Professor, and former Dean of the School of Public Administration. His professional background included personnel administration, training, and teaching.)

As I live my life, I keep discovering things I thought to be true that turned out to be false. I have also discovered things I thought were false, that are in fact quite true. These are my 10 non-commandments which I have changed my mind about over the course of my working life.

1. **There is no career ladder to climb.** A career is named retrospectively, not created prospectively. When I was 21, I thought that you created a career; that you moved from job to job; and that you climbed the ladder; and that you prepared for it. The reason that I now think that there are no careers or career ladders is that from my own experience, I have never done anything that I prepared to do. Fortunately, by the end of our lives, everyone can look back and describe his career; so he will have one when it is over. But don't worry about creating it, it creates itself.
2. **Don't copy.** Trying to copy gets you into immense trouble. For me, everything I have copied, I have gotten it wrong. It is very hard to copy because you never get all of the context right. Learn from people, but don't copy. This is why things like mentor-ships are so important. Mentors are people who can explain to you what is going on and these relationships are never formal. Mentors are colleagues and friends. They are often people for whom you work.
3. **Recognize that you are always working in the structure of a particular set of fields which represent problems, opportunities, and work that needs to be done.** Look for opportunities for you to work on, where the discrepancy between what you can see and what everyone else can see is large.
4. **Don't feel strange or guilty about committing yourself or working hard.** There have been times in my life when I have felt this way. For me, at least, that was always a mistake. When you do something, go at it hammer and tongs. Work at it, commit yourself to it, and believe in it. Whether it works or not, it provides a source of energy for yourself rather than standing back at the edge and saying, "I'm not sure if this is really good for me." Commit yourself to it, and it will get you past all types of hard spots.
5. **Don't expect to be rewarded for what you do, because you never are.** The only person who can reward you is you! The reasons that you do work had better be because you think it is worthwhile. You may be rewarded, but the rewards you receive are for reasons you never understand; and the reason you are rewarded is never the one you thought it would be. So forget about it. Do things because you believe in them, because they are fun, and because you think they are worth doing; not because you expect to be rewarded.
6. **Don't seek out jobs; let them seek you.** I thought that you built a career by choosing jobs and then applying for them. In my experience, the only job that I applied for was the first one. Since then, that has not worked for me. Every job that I have set out to get, I haven't gotten. Every job that I have gotten since the very first one, has sought me rather than me seeking it. Opportunities seek you. Do things and people will seek you.
7. **Professional activities are not just "fringes" to getting ahead.** I thought that you got ahead by doing your job and that things like professional activities were the cream. I now understand that very differently. You want to be professionally active because that is how you can do your job. You always want to choose a pair of associations, a first and a second. In my experience, it has always been one broad and one narrow. Go for something that is general. It allows you to scan broadly and to apply yourself.

8. **Don't take status too seriously, especially your own, and also other people's.** Status gets nothing done. Status is a consequence, not a cause. Don't shy away from people because you think they have status. They are just human beings; go up and introduce yourself.
9. **Recognize that nobody knows what they are doing.** I can't tell you what a blinding insight this was when it came to me, and what a fool I felt for this being a blinding insight. For most of my life and at least one-half of my professional work life, I thought people knew what they were doing. I thought that because people held jobs that were organizationally related, they had a grasp of what was going on and were making decisions. In retrospect, I believed people knew what they were doing because they could always explain what was going on (and I never met a person who couldn't). Finally, it became quite clear to me that it was all hocus. Nobody knows what's going on. Nobody understands what other people are doing, much less why. If you need to get something done, reach out and do it. Construct a way and bring other people in on it.
10. **Learn how to do things by doing them.** For many years, I thought that you learned how to do things by learning how to do them. In my experience, you never do. The only way that you learn how to do something is to do it dumb. Do it crude. In the doing of it, you learn how to do it better. It is amazing how quickly you learn to do the most elegant things. You do that by doing it, not by learning how to do it. So put yourself in situations where you can accomplish goals.

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