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Shifting Sands at Work

Mountain-climbing metaphors may dominate, but it's the desert that holds lessons for your career.

By Steve Donahue

We live and work in a mountain-climbing culture. We want to reach the peak, see the view from the top, and scale to new heights—such metaphors for goal-setting and goal-getting abound in our lives and careers.

Real life, however, often defies the climb-and-conquer approach. That's because most of our lives' experiences resemble a desert, including our often uncertain and unpredictable careers. We get lost or stuck, and even chase the occasional

mirage. With few clear routes or identifiable peaks, the journey seems endless.

A Saharan adventure

I learned plenty about the desert on the heels of my 20th birthday. With the starry-eyed notion of backpacking through Europe, I sailed for France. A chance encounter in Paris changed my travel plans and, ultimately, my life. I embarked on an overland odyssey across the Sahara, the world's largest desert. Over

the course of 49 days and some 4500 miles, I had the adventure of a lifetime.

In the Sahara, I learned it's impossible to know exactly where you're headed, how you'll get there, or even when you've arrived. While the summit of Mt. Everest is unmistakable, the Sahara offers no surefire mark of arrival—no peak, no sign, no border. In fact, experts can't agree where the desert ends.

And so it is with our careers. Unlike mountains, we can't easily set a course to conquer them because there are no precise paths or peaks. Our careers resist planning, preparation, and past experience.

Think of it this way: Changing jobs is a mountain, but changing careers is a desert. Getting the promotion is a mountain, but being a leader is a desert. Acquiring a competitor is a mountain, but merging two cultures is a desert.

A matter of terrain

Why is it important to distinguish between mountains and deserts? First, the rules of travel vary greatly depending on the terrain. On the desert's scorching and shifting sands, wearing stiff alpine boots or plotting a start-to-finish route spells trouble.

Likewise, no planning can prepare you for the news that your company is downsizing or being acquired by another organization. During the recent merger of AOL and Time Warner, for example, the organizations' mountain-climbing executives were triumphant in conquering the "summit" of the deal, but they were ill-equipped for crossing the desert of merging two profoundly different cultures. In just two-years' time, the company announced a loss of more than US\$100 billion—the largest in corporate history—with AOL dropped from its name.

Rules of desert travel

How can you travel wisely in the deserts of your career? You must follow a different set of rules. While surprisingly counterintuitive, the rules are also vital to finding

meaning and direction in a seemingly endless and often inhospitable terrain.

Follow a compass. Across the featureless terrain of the Sahara, a compass functions without fail—even in pitch darkness or during relentless sandstorms. For your career, a compass—an innermost sense of purpose—can guide you even when you're lost or uncertain. It isn't a goal or a plan, but a personal mission statement that can help you to focus on direction over destination.

As a professional speaker, my compass directs me to share ideas I'm passionate about. My destination—to deliver around 40 speeches a year—is secondary to my direction. So, when my business took a nosedive in the wake of 9/11 (plummeting some 85 percent overnight), I engaged in writing a book, instead of speaking, to express the same ideas. In other words, I shifted my destination while I headed in the same direction.

Here are three strategies to help you follow your own compass.

Find your polarities. A compass is a fail-safe guide for tricky terrain because it responds to the push and pull of the earth's magnetic poles. It's essential that you point your career compass toward the pole of attraction—the work that's most rewarding and meaningful to you—and away from the pole of repulsion. One helpful exercise is to make a list of everything you do in your job—from your biggest roles and responsibilities to your smallest projects and tasks—to determine what most attracts and repels you. That knowledge will help you point your career compass in the best direction.

Lower your gaze. In the desert, looking ahead to the horizon is defeating because it never gets any closer. Focusing on the elusive endpoint is just as defeating for your career. Try lowering your gaze to look for meaning and direction underfoot. What aspects of your work engage and energize you right now? What parts of your job interest you so much that

you'd perform those duties free of charge? Your answers may provide clues to a direction for your career that's far more important than any singular achievement.

Get lost. Some Saharan tribes take their young men deep into the desert, only to leave them to find their way home. "Getting lost" in your career can actually help you find your direction. Put yourself in a situation in which your known skills and strengths will be of little use. For instance, if you design classroom-based training programs, why not take on an online-learning initiative? Sign up for an online course to experience firsthand what works, what doesn't, and why. In addition, explore learning the fundamentals of Web design. You may discover some new talents and passions that will clarify your career direction.

Think counterintuitively

It's dangerous, even deadly, to get stuck in the Sahara. People have literally died of thirst in as little as 12 hours. While it's essential to keep moving, these techniques too are astonishingly counterintuitive. For example, the best way to cool a car's overheating engine is to turn the heater on full-blast and keep driving. Getting stuck in your career or within your organization can be dangerous as well, particularly because your most natural reactions may work against you.

Here are three strategies to help you think counterintuitively.

Stop pushing. It's pointless to push a car that's stuck in the sand, even though that's the most instinctive response. In the deserts of your career, your natural tendency may be to push with your proven success strategies, particularly when you're stuck. That response, however, may no longer work—and might even be the reason you're stuck. Back off and see what happens.

If you've always worked late to crack a problem, but now find it's getting you nowhere, call it quits and go home. If

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perfectionism has served you well, but now it's got you trapped, humanize your standards and relax. Most likely, you'll get moving again—with a lot more ease and insight.

Deflate. There's a foolproof technique for freeing a car that's stuck in the sand. You deflate the tires, which actually lifts the vehicle up and out of the sand. Letting the air out of your ego is often the best way to get unstuck. Whether you're in a personal rut or a standoff with a boss or co-worker, try deflating. Acknowledge a mistake and apologize. Ask for help—or forgiveness. Most likely, you'll soon get moving again.

Seek support sooner. No one waits to run out of water before asking for help during a desert trek. Asking for support isn't easy, but putting off that request can make matters worse. Resist your penchant for problem-solving on your own. Instead, ask yourself what kind of assistance you need to travel faster and deeper into your desert. If you're responsible for a big new-business pitch, make a list of what you need to accomplish. Then, delegate to team members some of those tasks—everything from researching the competition to producing the slideshow. You'll ensure a smoother process and a stronger presentation, plus you'll show your team how much you trust and value them.

Stop at every oasis

“Summit fever” is a lethal state of mind that pushes a mountain climber forward when he or she should rest or turn back instead. A desert nomad takes a much different course. As often as possible, he stops at an oasis to rest, rejuvenate, and replenish his supplies. You must also rest and rejuvenate so that you can advance with more clarity and confidence.

Here are three strategies to help you find and protect your own oases.

Water what's dry. A camel can guzzle 25 gallons of water in an instant if it's gone without a drink for a couple of

weeks. You may be able to go without the essentials for a while, but sooner than later you must water what's dry. What part of your work life is parched? Need more downtime? Rather than tackle one more to-do at five o'clock, head home. Tired of developing and delivering training programs? Enroll in a class for business or, better yet for pleasure, in which you can be the learner.

Build a wall around your oasis. The wall around an oasis keeps out the sandstorms and the barbarians. For your career, firm boundaries protect your balance and energy, including the requisite opportunities to rest and rejuvenate. Turn off your cell phone after hours. Open a separate account for your personal email. Leave your laptop behind on holidays and vacations, and reserve “me time” in your schedule.

Look for unmarked oases. Secret wells exist in the Sahara that produce cold, carbonated water. You'll notice too that some of the sweetest oases in your career are unmarked. If you're a mountain climber, you probably dislike any interruption or obstacle that slows you down. Yet many of the detours and roadblocks at work can offer opportunities to relax or even rethink your direction. While it's good to plan for your oases, don't overlook the serendipitous opportunities. When your plane is delayed, head to a massage kiosk for a neck rub. When an elusive boss or co-worker suddenly wants to talk, push what's in front of you aside and listen.

And the next time an individual or a situation stops you in your tracks, ask yourself if this just might be the unmarked oasis you need to ultimately keep moving forward.

Steve Donahue is a professional speaker who specializes in individual and organizational change, purposeful living, and life balance. He is the author of *Shifting Sands: A Guidebook for Crossing the Deserts of Change* (Berrett-Koehler); www.stevedonahue.com.