



P R O F E S S I O N A L S

## **The Four Principles of Career Distinction**

By William Arruda and Kirsten Dixon

To succeed and find fulfillment in the new world of work, you must change the way you think about your career. It's time to treat career management as an ongoing activity. Creating your personal brand is a great way to get you to change the way you think about your career. Your ultimate goal should be to distinguish yourself for career success. But before you start working on building your brand, you'll need to adopt a new mindset -- the Career Distinction mindset. This new way of thinking about your career is comprised of four simple principles. Adopt these principles, and get ready to grab hold of your future!

### **Principle #1: Stand Out. Stand for Something.**

Just doing your job, and even doing it well, is no longer enough. "Loyalty" and "longevity" were the watchwords of the past. In today's workplace, creativity has trumped loyalty; individuality has replaced conformity; pro-activity has superseded hierarchy. You can't wait for job assignments -- you must create them. With intense competition and pressure from shareholders to deliver ever-higher returns, companies have begun scrutinizing each and every employee to assess his or her value to the organization. If members of the executive team don't know you're there (regardless of the amount of hard work you contribute), then, unfortunately, they figure they won't miss you when you're gone.

In corporate positions, sales, independent business, and even politics and the media, people have now realized that you need to "make a name for yourself" if you hope to stay in your profession. Those who can simply do the job don't receive nearly as many opportunities as those who carve out a unique niche for themselves. And the higher you move up the corporate ladder, the more important this kind of personal branding becomes. It's all about adding value beyond what those in your same or similar positions deliver. It's about standing out, and standing for something special. So get out of your comfy office and make sure all the people around you understand the value you deliver to your organization.

### **Principle #2: Be Your Own Boss.**

To take the helm of your career and steer it toward your future, you must be your own boss -- controlling your destiny, finding and seizing opportunities, and marching up the ramp of advancement in your profession. As your own career boss, you decide which positions you will take, how much effort you'll invest in each job, and how you'll handle the challenges you'll inevitably encounter. You control how you present yourself and your intellectual and emotional assets, and even whom you position as your allies and your opponents.

At first thought, you might disagree. Perhaps you think your manager -- or the CEO or board of directors -- controls your future. Maybe you assume that your company's success -- in the form of rising stock price, customer satisfaction, and profitability -- will carry you indefinitely. Never count on outside forces to ensure your success. You can't control these forces, so you'll constantly be vulnerable to them. But you do control your own personal brand. Consider this: your skills and unique personal attributes don't disappear if your company's stock price plummets. Your future doesn't unravel if an executive who

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powerfully supported your advancement leaves the company. Your personal assets are yours, and no one can take them away from you. You must take responsibility for these assets and use them to your advantage. In short, seek strength in yourself, not your circumstances.

### **Principle #3: Forget Climbing the Ladder. It's a Ramp.**

Many people still think of their career as a ladder with their ultimate goal being that top rung. Even from the bottom, you can see the top rung off in the distance. You climb the ladder, progressing in your career one milestone at a time. At each rung, you work diligently on what you're doing at that moment. In fact, you might occasionally find yourself stuck in that moment. You forget about that next step because you're sure you'll get there when the right time comes without encountering any obstacles. And with that mindset, you've fallen into complacency.

Then something happens. Perhaps you become bored and seek a greater challenge or perhaps the project you're working on falls through for whatever reason. Only when that "something" happens do you think about that next rung in your career. You put together your resume, reconnect with lost professional contacts, and so forth. You expend enormous effort connecting with recruiters, writing cover letters, refining your career marketing materials, searching through job boards -- all the failsafe methods that people used back when the world of work was predictable.

But in today's knowledge economy, this sporadic, effortful approach to career management is no longer the best approach. Instead, you have to get rid of the rungs of the ladder (sorry, TheLadders.com! We do love your name!) and view your career climb as a continuous ramp. When you're ascending a ramp, you don't stop and relax -- you're constantly advancing, in perpetual motion toward your professional goals. In this scenario, you don't wait for a trigger to move you to the next step in your career. You manage that movement yourself, every day of your life and with everything you do -- every project you manage, every meeting you attend, every phone call you place.

Once you adopt this mindset and make these corresponding behaviors part of your regular routine, you never have to make a focused effort to work on your career again. Instead, you're always thinking about it and tweaking it as a matter of course. It's like brushing your teeth in the morning: career management becomes something you just do.

### **Principle #4: Build Your Personal Brand.**

If these elements of the Career Distinction mindset sound familiar, that's not surprising. Corporate marketers have used them for years. It's called branding. The Career Distinction mindset puts you in position to brand yourself, much like a company or product.

Remember, while corporate branding typically requires scores of ad execs and million-dollar marketing budgets, personal branding requires only you. You are your own 24/7 billboard and interactive ad campaign. Every day, in everything you do, you tell the world about yourself, your values, your goals, and your skills. In fact, you already have a brand -- even if you don't know what it is, and even if it isn't working for you the way you'd like it to. Clarify and create your personal brand in order to achieve career distinction. Then, communicate that brand unerringly to those around you. You're well on your way toward career advancement!