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Career Danger Signals: *What To Look For*

Chapter Overview

- Your career traffic signals . . . are they green, yellow or red?
- What to do when your career light changes color.

When you drive your car and approach a traffic light it tells you how to proceed to the intersection. Wouldn't it be nice if there was a "career traffic light?" Good news, we think there is but unfortunately, as we have found, most successful managers are paying so much attention to the tasks at hand they often end up "running their career traffic lights."

- How clearly are you seeing your career danger signals?
- Did you ever get blindsided when your boss said, "we need to make a change"?

Below is a quick guide to reading your personal career traffic light and what to do when you see it change color.

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Green Light Mode

You will know your career is in the **Green Light** mode if:

- Your career is on track. This means you have written career objectives, including a time line. By the way, studies have shown that people with written career objectives make considerably more income than those who just keep their career objectives in their head.
- You have a good reading on your next one or two moves.
- You have recently been told by your boss or the board, hopefully in writing, you are exceeding their objectives.
- You enjoy your job.
- Your boss has delegated to you things he or she would normally do.
- You are being considered for a significant promotion.
- You are in good health and are satisfied with your work-life balance.

However, Green Lights don't stay green forever. We encourage you to maintain and develop your internal and external networks, volunteer for cross-functional task forces and accept speaking engagements. Do not drop your guard when in Green Light mode and remember, "the best defense is a good offense."

Yellow Light Mode

You know that driving through a **Yellow Light** can get you into trouble but how about at work or at home? Below are situations where you should be prepared to brake. We will also give you some tips on what to do when you see a Yellow Light in the distance.

In our experience two or more of the following mean you are looking at a Yellow Light for your career:

At Work

- You are not clear about your next move. Here we don't mean the exact title but directionally like operations, marketing or finance.
- No one has discussed a long-term career plan with you.
- You haven't had a career discussion with your boss or your boss's boss in the last 12 months.
- You aren't sure whether you fit the culture of the company.

- The company is highly leveraged or has cash flow issues or both!
- The company or Division is not performing in the top quartile of its industry or market.
- A merger, takeover, management buyout or sale of your company. It doesn't matter what side of the deal you are on.
- A re-organization.
- A new boss, even if you know her.
- A change in the relationship with your boss. For example, your review just dropped a rating in one category or several categories.
- Losing key people on your team or having new team members added without your approval.
- A major new account, client or project has been added to your responsibilities.
- Your mentor or a strong supporter leaves.
- A new position, especially if it requires changes in geography, function, industry, size of business, nature of your team, or amount of travel required.
- You are no longer invited to some key meetings.
- There are persistent rumors about your department.
- You have some key people in the organization who make no secret they disagree with your direction and style.

At Home

- A change in your mental or physical health.
- A change in residence, this can be very deceptive because on the surface it may appear positive but any relocation is high on the stress scale.
- A change in your commute.
- A change in your personal relationships like marriage, divorce, or a new relationship.
- A change in your family life: birth of a child, eldercare, death of a family member or friend.
- A change in your financial obligations: unexpected expenses, remodeling the house, college expenses.

OK, so you have a couple of these situations going on in your life. What should you consider doing besides slamming on the brakes?

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- First, take your foot off the gas for a second.
- Don't make any quick decisions.
- Talk with people in the company you respect. Ask them how they perceive your potential. Listen to what they think.
- Have a serious career discussion with your boss and his or her boss.
- Get to know more decision-makers and influencers inside the company especially those outside your functional or operational area.
- Step back and assess exactly what's going on. Is this event having an impact on your work, your attitude or your motivation?
- Are friends or co-workers frequently asking, "is there anything wrong?" "Are you okay?"
- Reach out to your boss, mentors, peers and friends. Ask for feedback if you aren't sure how you are coming across.
- Start listing the resources you may need to address the challenges, include both office resources and family resources.
- Begin strengthening your network.
- Stay visible, speak at conferences and industry organizations.
- Help mentor others.
- Consider professional help: an Executive Coach, a spiritual leader, a psychologist or family counselor.
- If you decide the changes and challenges will lead to a no-win situation then you may decide it is time to leave the company and you begin an aggressive search.
- Make an effort to build bridges to your key detractors. This takes guts but can pay big dividends. The important thing is to understand how much is a perception problem and how much is a strategic or operational difference of opinion.
- Stay current on global trends in your industry and be aware of your "market value." The latter can do wonders for your confidence.
- Work harder to have a more balanced life.
- Protect your health with exercise, proper diet, relaxation and fun! While this is last on our list we think it is **the most important**.

Case Study: How Josh Dealt With His Yellow Lights

Two years ago, we received a call from Josh, a successful general manager of a \$1B US subsidiary of a European financial services company. Josh had been with the com-

pany for four years and he called because he wanted to know what his “market value” was and he wanted us to provide him with some benchmark data. We first asked why? He said he thought he was underpaid and wanted to look for a similar job but in another company. We agreed to meet and sensed there was something more going on than just a comp issue.

Josh told us that he was working too hard. On paper he was successful, delivering above expectations, but Josh did not have time for anything but work. In his late forties, he was single but was anxious to start a family. He also had been very athletic but could not find the time to exercise. He said his relationship with his European boss was courteous, but distant. He was uncomfortable bringing up the topic of compensation. He had no mentors or sponsors in the company. In addition he was not getting along very well with three of his direct reports who were having performance problems and in fact he had lost his temper with them several times. He also admitted he had a fairly negative attitude.

Obviously Josh is facing a bunch of Yellow Lights! No wonder he wants to leave.

So what did we recommend? First, we discouraged him from leaving prematurely. Then we encouraged him to work on the relationship challenges with his boss and subordinates. We told him a new company would not be tolerant about his temper and in fact would fire him quickly if he has serious relationship issues with new subordinates. Josh agreed and began to prepare a proactive, positive strategy.

He immediately sat down with his direct reports and began to positively coach two of them. The third was not a fit for his area and was transferred.

We also urged him to plan more frequent trips to the European headquarters and other subsidiaries in order to strengthen his relationships with his boss and other key operating people. This turned out to be a gold mine. He re-connected with a former boss and asked him if he would consider becoming a mentor and to his pleasant surprise got agreement.

The ending: After 6 months Josh went back to his boss and put his hat in the ring for a General Manager spot in a much larger business unit. Yes, he got the job and has now been there for over a year.

The story has a wonderful ending but we must put in a quick disclaimer. The ending is a result of Josh executing his plan effectively not because we coaches had the answers. We provided some candid feedback and lots of encouragement but Josh did the heavy lifting.

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Another important lesson we can learn from Josh and that is to first look inside your own company!

Experienced marketers are always telling us that increasing the loyalty of existing customers is much more efficient and cost effective than acquiring new customers. The same goes for a job search. We strongly recommend looking first in your own backyard. Explore all the areas in the company. The grass may appear greener on the outside, but it seldom is. It is also a thousand times easier to network effectively and schedule meaningful meetings inside your company than making those dreaded cold calls to people you don't know.

Red Light Mode

Red Lights are the easiest to see. We all know we need to stop immediately. A Career Red Light also calls for immediate action.

Let's look at a few of the most common Red Lights and what to do about them.

At Work

- You are fired from your current position.
- Your boss suddenly resigns.
- Your division or company has a series of bad quarters.
- Your position is eliminated and there are no alternative positions.
- Your company has been acquired and they already have "one of you!"
- You just received an "average" performance review or worse.

At Home

- You are unable to continue your job because of an illness.
- You have to resign from your job because of a life-changing situation.

Here are a few ideas from a number of Five O'Clock Club clients who found themselves faced with one of the Red Light situations. You will notice the key pattern, in all three cases, is how proactive and immediate their actions were.

- Mary, an experienced Marketing Director, just learned her company was being acquired by another company who had a major marketing department with an experienced, highly competent Marketing Director. She immediately pulled her family together and described in detail what was going on at work.

She asked for their input and shared her “draft” strategy. There was a lot of give and take but everyone agreed she should immediately begin reaching out to her network and pursue outside opportunities. She also sat down with an old boss and mentor to get his advice.

- Immediately pulling your family together may sound like a no brainer but we often have to take our clients “kicking and screaming” into this step. Yet when you think about it, it is the quickest way to get the family behind you rather than have them wondering why you are so edgy or why you now get home at 5 PM!
- Corey was Director of an Equity Trading Desk at a major bank. The day his boss told him his position had been eliminated, he went back to his office and did three things:
 1. He called home to share the news and put the home renovation project on hold.
 2. He called his major clients to tell them his company had decided to eliminate the Trading Desk and he would be leaving. The good news was, most of his major clients asked him to be sure and tell them where he was going because they wanted him to continue to manage their accounts.
 3. He reached out to all the Directors and VPs he knew at his current competitors and told them the following: the Trading Desk has been eliminated and he would like to explore whether there were any similar opportunities with them. And of course he mentioned what his major clients had told him.
- Jane, the VP of Finance in a large manufacturing company, had just gotten great news: she was having triplets! Unfortunately there were some medical complications that required considerable bed rest early in the pregnancy so she couldn't maintain the pace of her demanding job.

Within 24 hours of learning about her pregnancy complications she sat down and outlined a proposed transition plan to review with her boss and the SVP of HR. Fortunately she had been developing one of her direct reports, Jeff, who was now considered promotable. Her boss and the SVP of HR agreed with her plan to begin transferring duties to Jeff. They also agreed with her suggestions about her career path once she returned.

Chapter Summary

If you are in a Green Light situation:

- ' Leverage your current position and strengthen it.
- ' Be visible and build your internal networks.
- ' Continue to hone your leadership skills.
- ' Get on high visibility task forces.
- ' Keep job, family and your health in balance.
- ' Constantly scan for Yellow and Red Lights.

If you are in a Yellow Light situation:

- ' Don't think that changing companies will solve your problems.
- ' History shows most of our problems "are ours."
- ' If you own your problems, history also shows the chances of you fixing them are excellent.

If the light turns Red:

- ' Be Strategic as well as Tactical.
 - ' Start immediately.
 - ' Procrastination is guaranteed to bring unhappiness.
 - ' Networking is the key.
 - ' Reach out quickly and build an advisory board, consider a coach and make your family part of your support system.
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