



As soon as I signed my military contract in 2001, I started receiving career advice. Leaders, from my professor of military science to future commanders, began sharing their wisdom with me on the right branch, the perfect career-enhancing positions, and the lock-step series of assignments I should compete for to be successful. I've also given career advice to the officers I had the privilege of mentoring. But along the way, I've learned something about career advice — it is all autobiographical.

Everyone has a different idea of success and what steps should be taken to achieve it. Everyone has benefited from (or been victim of) luck, timing, and tribes. What worked for one person's career might not work for someone else, and what one person may view as a career-ending assignment could be the springboard for a leader with a different skill set.

Yes, there are gates that everyone must walk through to be considered for promotion, and certain assignments do lead to better chances of gaining specific positions, but this post is not about that progression. This is about the approach to that progression. If young leaders don't take into consideration a couple of different factors when making career decisions, they could blindly follow in someone else's footsteps, leading them not to success, but to disappointment and regret.

So what should we consider when making career decisions?

**Define YOUR Success.** What is your definition of success? When you define success for yourself, you can better determine the steps to get there. In developing your definition, it helps to know why you do what you do. This year I sat down with my senior rater and we spent over an hour honestly discussing my values, 3-5 year goals, and 5-10 year goals. The exercise ended with my own “Why?” statement (my reason for living), which I carry around on a piece of paper. This helped me define success, something I’ve struggled with for the last 15 years. Through this process, I found that my definition of success did not include a rank or a position. My definition of success had three elements:

- I invested in others around me by passing on knowledge gained from experience and self-development.
- I continually improved myself through self-development and by seeking experiences that lead to personal and professional growth so that I could pass that knowledge on.
- I provided my family with experiences that we wouldn’t have gotten living in the same house in the same town our entire lives.

I’m not downplaying those who have high career aspirations, but the best thing about my definition of success is that it can’t be derailed by a bad OER, non-selection for a nominative assignment, or getting passed over for promotion. And more importantly, my success isn’t defined by a career. I can achieve success inside or outside the military. When you know your definition of success, you can apply it as a filter to the advice you receive — and know if that advice is worth taking. You can also be prepared to answer questions about goals when a senior rater asks you about them. It helps them tailor their advice and avoid any misperceptions about what you want.

Another important point to also consider is that your definition may change over time. Marriage, children, sickness, divorce, and career setbacks may cause you to reevaluate what you once thought was important. I recommend leaders continually reflect on and update your definition of success as you grow older.

**Consider Your Strengths and Weaknesses.** Each one of us is unique, with our own gifts and shortfalls. We should consider these when making career decisions. If we blindly follow a career path recommended by someone else, we may find ourselves in environments that require skills beyond our own abilities. For instance, I do well in assignments where I have the freedom to be creative and the leeway to use my own approach. I do well in operations-oriented jobs; teaching; and jobs that require me to read, think, and write. On the other hand, I struggle in assignments where I have to follow constraining processes, enforce adherence to these processes, or have to pay close attention to numbers. Therefore, I seek out assignments that play to my strengths. When I find myself in positions that require skills

that are outside my comfort zone, I have to work very hard to keep up.

One of the best aspects of the military is that there are opportunities for everyone to play to their strengths. Even if you don't excel at what are considered the more traditional military roles, there are career paths within the services that will allow you to succeed in your own way.

**Be Open to Luck, Timing, and Tribes.** We like to believe that all of our career achievements are due to our own greatness. But in reality, timing, luck, and tribes also play important roles. We should acknowledge their existence and be open to their influence when thinking about the future. This not only helps us safeguard against the universe when it conspires against us — it gives us an advantage, too.

You could select all the right assignments that someone advises you to take but end up with a boss who maximizes your weaknesses and minimizes your strengths. Timing can also affect cohorts of leaders. Consider the group of majors in the early fall of 2001, who only began to crack the books at Leavenworth when their peers deployed in the wake of 9/11. They came out of the Intermediate Level Education course to a totally different Army.

Similarly, there are countless examples where leaders either benefited from, or missed, opportunities associated with training, deployments, assignments, or other events simply because they were in the right place at the right time.

People matter, too. Timing and luck introduce you to leaders outside of your network who become mentors and open your eyes to new pathways, taking your career in a very different direction than you originally planned.

Below is a closer examination of each of these factors.

*Luck favors the prepared.* There are multiple facets to luck, and I've discussed them before in a [previous post](#). It can be a good thing (you meet the right people or get a really good team). Luck can also present you with setbacks. You might work for someone who doesn't like your personality or join a team with a toxic culture. But you can shape your luck by remaining informed of assignment options and considerations and discussing your career timeline with your chain of command as well as mentors external to the chain of command. Not every opportunity will be exactly what you were looking for in a job, but preparing for it will reap as-yet-unknown rewards. In the end, the root of all success remains individual proficiency in your job.

*Timing is everything.* We've all seen this one play out time and again. For instance, a

captain shows up to the unit one month later than planned and spends a year on staff before taking command. If he signed in three weeks earlier, his path would have been very different. An example of timing also includes having all the right people in the right organization at the same time. As I was coming out of my last assignment, a great opportunity opened up that wouldn't have been available if I started my S3 (operations officer) job six months earlier, as originally planned.

I saw the power of timing and luck come together when I was a second lieutenant. My Army career began in a 12-month pilot program as a basic training executive officer, not a platoon leader. Every active duty officer I knew, from my Reserve Officer Training Corps program to my Office Basic Course Commander, tried to have that assignment deleted because they were concerned I would miss the opportunity to be a platoon leader. Thank God their efforts didn't work.

The timing of this assignment was serendipitous. I got lucky and met several leaders who became (and still are) instrumental in my professional development. I learned about [third generation leadership](#) first-hand from a young company commander who wanted to make sure I was ready for my first platoon. The drill sergeants and first sergeants, fresh from combat experience in Iraq, invested a great deal in me. Over the course of the year-long assignment, my brigade and squadron commander ensured that I was afforded opportunities to stress my leadership abilities when possible. And that brigade commander still invests in me 15 years later. That assignment gave me exactly what I needed to step into the role of Stryker platoon leader for the next two and half years (due to the Surge and stop-loss, I got more platoon leader time than anyone foresaw).

*Tribes.* Whether we want to admit it or not, there are tribes in the military. Every one of us is in one of these tribes, too — they are called networks. Research shows that our networks are critical to professional success. In his book [Friend of a Friend: Understanding the Hidden Networks That Can Transform Your Life and Your Career](#), David Burkus argues, “Being connected to a strong network provides major advantages — access to diverse skills and perspectives, the ability to learn private information, and the type of expertise and influence that makes it easier to attain power.”

We need to understand what tribes we belong to, and where we fit within that tribe.

New assignments bring us into contact with members of our existing tribes and expose us to new ones. If we allow others to make career decisions for us, through luck and timing we may miss out on meeting members of other tribes who could potentially open doors that we

did not even know existed.

Luck, timing, and tribes are no substitute for competence, and they can either help or hurt us as we strive to achieve our definition of success. Acknowledging their roles allows us to play an active part in shaping our future, and not get too down on ourselves when things don't go as planned.

### **The Next Time You Get Career Advice**

Remember that the person giving you advice most likely has a different definition of success than you, a different set of strengths and weaknesses, and their path provided them with unforeseen interactions that got them to where they are now.

If you can look in the mirror and define success for yourself; reflect on the things you are good at; and stay open to the power of luck, timing, and tribes, you will more likely have a fulfilling career. Life is too short to not know why you're doing what you're doing and enjoy doing it. Don't waste your career on someone else's autobiography.

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