

Rules for Graduates¹



2001

Many commencement addresses let orators proclaim their visions of the present, using it as the starting point for how our nation and its institutions should move forward. But this morning my purpose is not that of a Winston Churchill or George Marshall responding to an Iron Curtain stretching across the middle of Europe. Instead I propose to give Widener's graduating students some rules of advice for how best to leave these cloistered walls of academia and move to the outside world.

Rule 1: Have a super dream.

Set your sights on, say, being a super surgeon like Michael DeBakey, or a builder of apartment houses taller than Donald Trump has yet erected, or a designer of novel computers like those Steve Jobs orchestrated at Apple, or follow the wonderful Widener graduate, Les Quick, to still further revolutionize the stock brokerage world. When I left college in 1947, my dream was to find the gene—a seemingly then too grandiose objective. But in only six years Francis Crick and I had the Double Helix. Better to fail attempting what no one knows how to accomplish than to be bored doing a job that offers no unforeseen challenge.

Rule 2: Seek employers changing the world.

Usually this involves working for a small firm as opposed to a long successful large corporation. You should think more than twice before starting at the bottom of the Coca Cola management ladder. Of course, you

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might 35 years later become its CEO. More likely, however, you'll find yourself at 50 in charge of sales in Scranton. Of course, small firms usually have to grow or they go bankrupt. So only work for a small firm whose product objectives you would spend your own money on. Making a left-handed toothbrush sounds clever, but have you yet seen stores called "Lefties?" In contrast, Big and Tall rings true.

Rule 3: Avoid old people.

Never willingly work for persons more than 15 years older than you. They more often than not represent the past as opposed to the future. Younger managers likely have been hired because they have skills not represented in older employees. These are the individuals who are likely to come up with the innovative approaches that will let their firms remain competitive. Also it is more fun to work for someone whom you see after work hours, say, on the basketball court or on a camping trip. Seeing a baseball game with a 50-year-old boss can just work. Doing a rave together, however, is for a Ben Stiller movie.

Rule 4: Quit rather than accept witless assignments.

If upon accepting a job you find yourself assigned to tasks that don't have to be done, look for another job. You have been hired for the wrong reason, say, for your blue eyes. Beautiful as they may be, they are unlikely to save your job at the first sign of a decreasing order book. Getting a salary incommensurate with sitting on a lawnmower spells trouble.

Rule 5: Never be the brightest person in a room.

Joining a firm made up of individuals who cannot intellectually best you is a recipe for disaster. Even if you are not resented for knowing too much, you will find no one to turn to when unforeseen troubles arise. Instead, find yourself challenged by minds that at first sight outshine you in speed and depth. Later you will likely find that your new peers have knowledge vacuums you can fill. Then everyone in the room wins.

Rule 6: Apologize quickly when you have been unfair to coworkers.

Interpersonal conflicts are almost inevitable when coworkers pursue difficult objectives. More often than we want, frustration leads to rude insults.

When so guilty, apologize quickly, no later than the next morning, before word spreads that you have acted crudely. In expressing regret, you in no way lose face—just the opposite. You also may be badly harmed by never showing anger. Failure to legitimately react can imply you have no standards. Getting angry too often, however, never works.

Rule 7: Never insult your boss.

You will fail your boss if you don't try to stop him or her from making a bad key decision. Everybody makes mistakes, and your boss will value your help when you keep him from veering off course. On trivial matters, however, it's best to act as if you are on the same side even when you think he or she is at best silly. And on no occasion should you risk seeming flippant, much less rude. Slightings are never forgotten, and fester lasting cankers that heal only when your boss no longer has to give you a paycheck.

Rule 8: If you don't respect your boss, resign before you are fired.

Sometimes you can suddenly find yourself working for someone you despise. Listening to this walking calamity will make your face express incredulity or sniggerly turn toward those who share your outrage. If not your boss, one of his or her henchmen will notice your disloyalty. All too soon, your job becomes hell with the odds overwhelmingly favoring your being forced out as opposed to your orchestrating your enemy's removal by a still higher-up official. Cut your losses by quitting before you are axed.

Rule 9: End up as the boss.

Don't, however, start out your career with this objective. This will all too easily make you an ass-kisser. Far better instead to be thought of as a pain in the ass by those content with the past who resent your running faster than the pack, say, in trying to make a still tastier hamburger. But if you sell lots more burgers, you, not one of your detractors, will move to the top.

Last rule.

Stay away from golf until, as the boss, no one dares notice you pay more attention to your score than to your balance sheet.