

CAREER GAME PLANS

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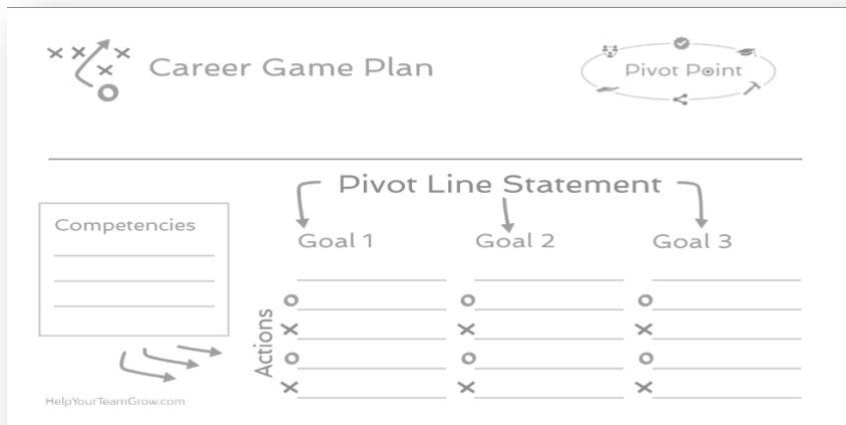
HAVING A PLAN INCREASES OUR CHANCES OF SUCCESS

Research shows that when we have a plan, our chances of achieving career success are 80% higher. Those that set goals for themselves, achieve higher rates of success in their careers. Knowing what we want, and having a plan to get there is pivotal. Whether it's taking our careers to an even higher level, pivoting industries or functional areas, or advancing to a leadership role, high potential women in transition wrestle with having a solid game plan to facilitate success.

I coach women in career transition, and believe that there is a solution to this challenge: The Career Game Plan. It is a simple four-step process. It is unique to us, and defines what success looks like. It fits on one-page and is easily shared with our managers, mentors, and coaches. It paints the picture of what good looks like, with a clear road map to get there. First, we must be able to articulate what we want, and what we are uniquely skilled to do – our purpose statement. Then, we build goals to support our purpose coming to fruition. We then brainstorm the competencies and action steps to achieve our goals.

Picture a tree – its roots, trunk, branches, and leaves. In many ways the Career Game Plan process resembles a tree. Our purpose statements are the roots. Our purposes are the basis for everything we do. They are deeply connected to who we are and what we stand for, strengthening over time. A strong tree grows outward through its branches, which are similar to the goals of our plans. A tree's branches need a strong base to rest on, the trunk. The trunk is vital to the stability of the tree, just as our competencies are for our plans. Competencies are the skills, behaviors, and/or attributes that define how we will fulfill our purposes and achieve our goals. Then, a tree expands with its leaves. These are the shorter term action steps we take to achieve our longer term goals. With a strong base of roots,

the tree grows. Just as a strong purpose does for our Career Game Plan. Here's a visual to illustrate the process.



Let's unpack the four essential elements of a winning career game plan: 1) a purpose statement, 2) goals, 3) competencies, and 4) actions. We will start with our purpose statement.

CRAFT A PURPOSE STATEMENT

To build our own winning career game plan, we start with knowing what we want. This is summarized best in a purpose statement. For this to be done well, the statement must be concise. Think of Twitter tweet length, which is 140 characters or less. People's attention spans are increasingly short, and if we get too long winded, we risk losing people's interest and interfere with their ability to comprehend our purpose fully. A good quick test is running it by those we trust and know well, and asking them to paraphrase it. If they understand what we stand for and what we want to do, and are able to play it back for us accurately, we are on the right track. A strong purpose articulates our passions, our unique strengths, and our essence in a single sentence.

Our purpose statements often become the beginnings of our networking elevator speech. We know them by heart, and proudly share them with a confident smile when asked the infamous question, “What do we do?” Often, I hear women being asked this question while noticeably experiencing an internal struggle. It appears as if something does not jive, and as a result does not roll off the tongue naturally. They often confess that they feel an internal struggle of sharing what they do versus what they really want to do. People can read our body language and see that we are not being genuine. It comes across as a lack of confidence, but it is really us holding ourselves back from what truly excites us. We can only connect in a meaningful way and make others happy, if we are happy ourselves.

When we feel this internal conflict, it is a sign we are not following our true purpose. To overcome this, we need to take a look in the mirror and do some soul searching. Purpose statements have three key elements – our passions, our strengths, and our unique capabilities. Reflect on what makes us truly happy and excited, asking these questions:

- What types of tasks, meetings, or work are we doing on our favorite days? The answer to this question likely yields some sources of our true happiness and our passions.
- How do people describe our talents? This signals our strengths.
- What subjects do people ask for our help or advice? This is a strong indicator of unique capabilities.

There is no secret recipe to discovering our purpose. While passions, strengths, and capabilities often are the nuts and bolts of these statements, each statement is unique and meaningful to the person. Think of them as concentric circles rather than a linear algebraic equation. Some words might overlap with other words; some elements might live independently.

To do this, using the questions above, generate a bank of 20 or so words. As in a true brainstorm, no word is a bad word. Let them all flow, with the personal challenge to brainstorm as many as possible.

Then, once we have a complete list of possibilities, begin looking for similarities and differences. I really like using post-it notes for this exercise, because we can organize separate words into different themes or groups based on similarities, and create separate post-it groups based on differences. The goal here is to create groups of words that are mutually exclusive from one another, yet collectively exhaust all possible words. These groups become our themes. Take the groups and weave them together. It's like knitting a quilt of different patches. They are unique words, yet when brought together, they create more value. Take a step back, and think about the big picture – Who am I? What do I want? What makes me happy? The themes bridged together become our purpose statement. And, if the purpose statement answers these questions succinctly, we've got a winner.

I have seen a number of successful applications of purpose statements. Many use them in networking settings, social media descriptions, website profiles, resume headers, bio beginnings, and more. Some of my favorites from those I coach are:

- I get to make dreams come true through facilitating the process for people to find their dream homes
- We're passionate about fostering growth by offering authentic resources and inspiration on how to navigate the entrepreneurial waters so that women can set their own standards for success
- I collaborate with diverse teams to build winning strategies that increase employee engagement and business performance

For my own business, this has evolved over time. In my own coaching business mine reads, "Help Your Team Grow exists to develop leaders and coach high potential women in transition through building winning Career Game Plans." By testing it with others, and through feedback, it has continuously improved.

I will offer some tips to cementing a good first draft before moving onto the second step: goals. First, feedback is a gift, especially with

our purpose statements. Share them with those that know us best, and pressure test them to be even better. If we say it with a smile, and it feels genuine, we are in great shape to move onto step two. Secondly, recognizing that these statements often describe our future selves, there likely may be areas not fully developed yet. The statements are intended to be aspirational. What I mean by this, is that the purpose statement may encompass our opportunities for future success. Often, I find that there is a gap between what we want, and what we are doing. This leads us to our next step, which is all about setting the appropriate goals aligned with our purpose statements. This is what takes our careers to the next level.

BUILD GOALS

Now that we have the first draft of our purpose statement, it's time to build the goals to actively fulfill it. Keeping with the analogy that our Career Game Plan process is like a tree, our purpose statements are the roots.

To take our purpose from aspirational to real, strong goals are pivotal. I recommend setting two or three goals, and definitely no more than three. I have consistently found with my coaching clients, that when we set more than three goals, it becomes very difficult to focus, thus lowering chances of success. Just as we did with our purpose statements, brainstorming up front is key. Let the goals flow out of us, involve those we trust in the brainstorm, and let our purposes guide us. With every potential goal – ask ourselves – how does this help me fulfill the purpose statement?

Our goals are the guard rails on our Career Game Plans. They help provide boundaries for what we do versus what we do not do. The goals also help us prioritize our tasks. When I am deciding what to prioritize in my weekly task list, or whether to meet with someone or attend a networking event, I remind myself of my goals, and ask how this action step helps me achieve it. If it does not have a high likelihood of helping me achieve my goals, I will not prioritize it. Goals lend focus.

To set good goals, I like the SMART goal framework – creating goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound. Once we have prioritized a handful of goals, I look at these like a checklist to make our goals even better:

- Specific: What specifically will happen to achieve this goal?
- Measureable: What numbers will I use to measure the successful achievement of this goal?
- Attainable: During the time frame specified, how attainable is this goal?
- Relevant: How relevant am I to making this goal happen?
- Time bound: When will this goal be achieved?

This is a very popular framework, and with its popularity, comes some drawbacks. While goals must be specific and measurable so that we clearly know when we achieve success, attainability is a controversial one. We want to be realistic with our goals, yet balance them with optimism. We do want to ensure we have relevancy to the goal and the ability to influence the outcomes. Then, having a time-bound component (months, years, etc.) draws the line in the sand for when we will measure it. A best practice is to have the same timing for all of our goals, that way it's crystal clear how often we measure and celebrate success.

I find my clients often limit their own success with negative self-talk. “There’s no way I could do that,” or “I will try to do this.” The words we tell ourselves matter. If we use limiting language in our goals, we limit our ability to achieve them. I like this example of a goal, “I will grow my new business to a \$1 billion in one year.” When we use our checklist, it’s specific and measurable with \$1 billion, it is relevant assuming the person is a primary business owner, and it is timely in one year. Yet, it is not likely attainable for a start-up business in year one. However, this is where sub goals come into play. We can break out larger, more daunting long-term goals into shorter term, more attainable goals. What that might look like in this example is, “I will grow my new business to \$1 million in year one, \$5 million in year three, and \$1 billion in year ten.” Obviously, financial rigor is

necessary to fine tune the numbers. It is not that \$1 billion is not achievable, it is the time frame that may need to shift to make it more realistic.

Another option is to fine tune the numbers. We might decide to downshift the numbers to reality based on our planning horizon over the next one to three years. We are far more likely to achieve success when we set challenging, yet reasonable goals up front. Our brains need to know that success is within reach, even if we cannot see the finish line just yet.

Goals often include financial measures as appropriate such as revenue, profitability, number of clients, number of products or services, client satisfaction. If financials are difficult to measure, I recommend thinking about what we can measure, and what indications we will watch to determine how successful we are. A client I coached wanted to grow her own retirement services business. Instead of using financial metrics, she chose to focus on number of clients and referrals. We have choices. I encourage us to stretch our thinking during this exercise. Remember, we have our action steps as the final step where we will identify the tactics. If we find ourselves getting too tactical too quick, I recommend identifying a basket of activities or tasks like marketing presence, professional development, or relationship building, and building a higher level goal from there. Items like website development, social media strategy, and partner organizations, are too tactical and likely will be action steps within the larger three-year goal.

Once we have a strong set of goals that align with the SMART goal framework, we're ready to prioritize how we will achieve them.

PRIORITIZE COMPETENCIES

Remembering our tree analogy, the competencies represent the trunk. The stable center that connects our purposeful roots to our far-reaching branches, or goals. They provide an extra layer of focus for connecting our vision of our future success with the goals to actively

fulfill it. Competencies are the skills, behaviors, or attributes that define who we will become. They range from leadership skills, to detail-oriented attributes, to communication behaviors. They ensure our ability to achieve our plans, and help strike a balance between our high level goals and our purpose statements.

When we reflect on our purpose statements, it is likely that there are elements of the statements that we are not currently achieving. Our goals help us close those gaps. Even if we are actively living our purpose statements today, we utilize our goals to strengthen that already strong foundation. It's one thing to have goals to get there, it's another to have a list of skills and/or behaviors that we need to internalize to make it possible. These are often unique to a profession, industry, or functional area. As a career coach, I find that having business acumen, confidence, influence, active listening, empathy, and powerful questioning competencies are vital for my success. However, just like with our goals, having too many competencies limits focus and our ability to truly make a considerable impact on that competency. Again, I recommend prioritizing three competencies of focus that have both a high impact on our purpose and goals, and also have a high ability to improve upon.

The example I use often in my coaching is being detail-oriented, which is a known weakness of mine. This is important at times when I take notes, do social media, and write thought leadership materials. However, as much as I could try to improve upon this known weakness, I doubt it could be considerably impacted. It does have relevance to my impact on my goals and purpose, but rather than focus on a known limitation, I choose to outsource these activities to my team. I would much rather choose to focus on other competencies, like influence and confidence that move the needle on impact, and I have a higher probability of improving upon.

The Nielson Group published an article, "[List of Soft Skill Competencies with Description](#)," with a menu of more than 100 possible competencies to choose from. I highly recommend perusing it with the purpose and goals in mind. Select all of the competencies

on the list that will have impact; then, with list in hand, prioritize the list based on that impact and ability to improve upon the goals and the purpose. A number of techniques work well here – simply voting, rating on each factor – impact and ability, weighing against decision criteria, making a 2x2 matrix with decision factors. I like keeping it simple, and as long as the top three competencies have a considerable impact and are within reach, we likely have a good combination to take our careers to the next level. Competencies help us align our training activities and often dictate our professional development budget allocations. We will prioritize activities in the final step that ensure we are building upon these skills, attributes, and behaviors to fulfill our purpose and achieve our goals.

DETERMINE ACTIONS

We have arrived. We're on the final step of building our winning Career Game Plan. A nice reward for taking the time to invest in a purpose statement, SMART goals, and prioritized competencies, is that this step is fairly effortless. If we have diligently articulated our purpose, crafted goals that fulfill it, and chosen to focus on the competencies that drive the most positive impact on those, our tactical plan emerges naturally. Just like the leaves emerge each spring on a tree with a set of strong roots, a stable trunk, and healthy branches, so do the actions of our plans. With a strategic plan, we will easily set in motion the steps to achieve our end goals.

Action plans have three key ingredients. Again, in the spirit of keeping things simple, there is some magic to keeping to the rule of three. In this case, solid action plans have: 1) the action step name and description, 2) the resources needed to achieve it, and 3) a timeline for completion. Take each goal and break it down into smaller steps, then create a column for resources, and another column with a deadline completion date. If an action step requires a significant time or money investment, it is essential that be a part of the plan early on, especially since other stakeholders, like our managers, significant others, and partners may be involved in helping us achieve our plan. Completion dates are key for accountability.

When we write a date down beside a goal, we increase our chances of success by 80%. Putting pen to paper makes it real. If timelines move out, that is okay, but do not let uncertainty prevent us from documenting the necessary step.

It is important to accept that the elements of our action plans are subject to change as we learn more. Start big, and fine-tune based on feedback. Time and money are finite resources, so we need to be mindful about what we commit to, while also thinking big. We've got three years to achieve these plans. The beauty of this process, is that we can break down our goals into our desired time frame. I break mine down every three months, and keep a running to-do list on my office white board. Everything that makes the three month task list supports my long-term purpose and goals. It's the filter by which I prioritize my action steps. From social media, to speaking events, to conferences I attend, all must highly impact my goals and be aligned with my purpose.

Bringing it all together, we now have a proven process to build our winning Career Game Plan. When we dedicate the time to the process, our plans take root and we branch out, growing with each successful meeting, project, or initiative. I challenge us to celebrate those success milestones. When we cross a big to-do off the list, or complete an action plan, ask ourselves this powerful question – how will we celebrate success? With any plan, we must think of rewards and recognition mechanisms to motivate us to achieve success again. Our brains will naturally find ways to achieve success again – it's self-fulfilling. With every choice we make, we take a step closer to having the career we truly want. Remember, those with a plan win.

Now, how will you build your own winning Career Game Plan?



Julie has dedicated her career to helping teams grow. She is a Certified Master Coach and Kelley MBA with experience in operations, marketing, and strategy in the manufacturing, financial services, and agriculture industries. Throughout her twelve years in corporate America, Julie has been recognized for excellence in facilitation, strategic thinking, and leadership.

Julie is the author of the book, *Pivot Point: How to Build a Winning Career Game Plan*. As a new mother, having experienced her own pivot point, Julie started her own coaching business, Pivot Point. Pivot Point exists to develop leaders and coach high potential women in transition through building winning career game plans. By nature, she is collaborative, and driven by measurable impact with her clients.

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