



"The Pit of Success": Simple Steps to More Career Success Stories

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The “Pit of Success” meme

- The Pit of Success: “In stark contrast to a summit, a peak, or a journey across a desert to find victory through many trials and surprises, we want our customers to simply fall into winning practices by using our platform and frameworks. To the extent that we make it easy to get into trouble we fail.”
- I first said those words about software. Success has to be like falling in a pit; over the years I’ve found this notion to be a powerful one
 - Applies to many complex systems, and organizations



Context: Arriving women and their environment

- Working in the software business is hard under the best of circumstances; any additional problems add insult to injury
- Virtually everyone faces imposter syndrome
- People can be spared this with a little preparation
 - Good tasks ready to go; builds confidence and bonds teams
 - Good contacts ready to go; people you can talk to
 - Peers you can safely compare notes with
 - Early validation vital; but, frankly, people need this at all times in their careers
- Like virtually everything else I will suggest these notions are not just good for women, they're good for everyone...

Changing contours in small ways

- The “Pit of Success” works by changing the environment
- Build a gravity well that tends to lead people to good places
 - Your well will vary
- Create contours that tend to turn losing situations into winning situations
 - Don’t try to fix everything; it is impossible anyway
 - Small contours help a lot over time, you can win like this
- Everything you do that changes the space-time of your organization is durable
 - Forgive me for getting meta-physical 😊

Example: Seeding allies

- By Searching (for those already doing it)
 - “Coming out” as an ally actually tends to attract others, if you make it clear you’re going to be helping women – or any group – you’ll find that people rally to you
- By Training (for those who are interested or inspired)
 - Given a willing student, better behaviors are learnable, it doesn’t take much to go from neutral to ally and you don’t have to be perfect, you just have to change the contours
- At some critical density the presence of allies changes the overall behavior of a room
 - And, common refrain, ally behavior is actually good for everyone

EXAMPLE: Conversation changers

- Comparatively small actions by key players (manager, technical leaders) make a huge difference...
- Just a few words, “That sounded very interesting Nancy, I couldn’t quite make it out, can you repeat that for me?”
 - If I say that the entire room is now listening... to Nancy...
 - If I do this consistently when I hear something interesting, everyone wins, “Bob” too.
 - Nancy is going to go out of her mind if she has to do it every time...
 - Frankly so is Bob, he could be just shy or whatever...
- How about, “This report looks great, before we start, tell me about the rest of your team...”
 - Again, opens the door to share credit and get people in the spotlight
 - Do it all the time, it helps everyone, get peers/subordinates/managers to do it



Real Situations from just last week

- “Nancy” did a ton of data science for me and I was asked to present it
- With no intervention, assumption would be that I did it all... I suppose I could have, but I didn't...
- Fixed so easily, “I want to talk today about Nancy’s results from last week... let me start by interpreting this great chart she prepared for you...”
 - “Look how clear this is... nobody expected two linear domains... etc.”
 - Everyone wins doing this...
- People see this behavior and seek to emulate it...

Another example, same week

- “Nancy” (she’s very busy) does a mountain of back-end work that helps with a problem space I own...
- Nancy is much more junior than me and despite being invited might not have gotten recognition
- Easily fixed...
 - “I’ve prepared these materials to show you the impact of Nancy’s tools and why they’re so important to Messenger...”
 - My context enhances the value of her work
 - Maybe she didn’t even know how important the work was, if so, even more helpful to have a veteran like me around
 - Easy to make it clear that my contribution is some charts... not the tech.
 - And of course “Bob” should get the same treatment!

Fighting exhaustion

- A common theme...
 - it's always something, "I'm exhausted" is probably the most common refrain from mentees going through a difficult time
- Examples:
 - Google memo comes out, women spend days explaining how it affected them
 - Constantly interrupted, having to repeat themselves ad infinitum
 - Constantly overlooked, men in the room ask a man for "the real answer", have to fight that
 - And those are just the meeting room kinds of issues, there may be other social issues too
- Having people in the room that will reduce/remove these effects means that when there is no help, maybe you're not so tired...

It's the pattern...

- Changing the contours is so important because it's the only way I see to abate the erosion over time
- At a recent dinner party discussing “Bad behavior...”
 - “That’s a social injustice!”
 - “...That’s Thursday...”
- Like the software problems of old, with creeping paper cuts every day, punctuated by ... bigger-than-paper cuts ... it’s a losing battle to go after this things one at a time



Questions?

- I'm happy to talk about my experience at Microsoft and Facebook if that's helpful... just ask.
- Or find me after...