
BLIND SPOTS

The 10 Business Myths
You Can't Afford to Believe on
Your New Path to Success

ALEXANDRA LEVIT



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

“Anyone can say everything you’ve been told is a myth. The hard part is offering something better in its place. Levit has succeeded. This book is a hard-hitting, honest, and course-correcting exposé on what it really takes to be successful in business. Highly recommended.”

—Michael Port, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Book Yourself Solid*

“*Blind Spots* is essential reading for a postrecessionary climate where all the rules have changed and the old ways won’t work.”

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“*Blind Spots* busts success myths as it replaces them with time-tested techniques to transform yourself into a twenty-first-century winner. If you want to lift your self-image, get real in an unreal world, or bolster your resilience, this book is a resource for you!”

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“*Blind Spots* shines a very bright light on the exact traits that will make you a sought-after addition to any workplace.”

—John Jantsch, author of *Duct Tape Marketing* and *The Referral Engine*

“Alexandra Levit tells it like it is—not how we’d like it to be—busting myth after myth along the way to get us exactly where we want to go.”

—Tory Johnson, founder and CEO, Women For Hire

“Don’t believe the hype! When it comes to career advancement without killing yourself, no one tells the story better than Alexandra Levit.”

—Chris Guillebeau, author of *The Art of Non-Conformity*

“Alexandra Levit’s myth-busting book is a straightforward, honest, and much-needed guide to succeeding in the real world of business today. Readers are sure to feel empowered by Levit’s many tell-it-like-it-is anecdotes, tips, and tactics. Highly recommended.”

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“The thought-provoking stories, staggering statistics, and candid, digestible advice Alexandra offers throughout the book reveal the secrets to career success. This is a straight-talk book that will point out what you have been buying into that is stopping you.”

—Christine Hassler, author of *20 Something Manifesto*

“Alexandra Levit proves yet again that she is a thought leader of our times. Her myth-busting advice, which weaves in real-world examples, compelling research, and great storytelling, is a must read for anyone working to make it to the top in corporate America—and be happy along the way.”

—Jodi Glickman, author of *Great on the Job*

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INTRODUCTION

This is not your parents' business world. It's not even your older sister's business world. The recent recession has toppled and transformed our ideas about just about everything. Massive change is afoot and many of us are still reeling from the workforce blood-letting that began three years ago and the downfall of companies we thought we all respected.

If we take the time to examine the world that's rising out of the ashes, we see that a major paradigm shift is occurring. We have realized that money and manipulation will only go so far, and we've come 180 degrees from the backbiting and dirty politics that characterized the dog-eat-dog 1980s. Inside the business world, organizations and individuals are looking inward and seeking a return to traditional human values like honesty, trust, moderation, open communication, and one-on-one relationship building.

Open the newspaper or go online and you'll see what I'm talking about. Trader Joe's has become one of the most popular gro-

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cery chains in the world, but its management refuses to expand if it means giving up its homey, mom-and-pop feel. Southwest Airlines considers customer loyalty to be more important than profitability and it qualifies a customer service candidate for employment based on attitude, not experience. Stephen M. R. Covey, son of legendary business author Stephen R. Covey, just had a runaway bestseller about resurrecting trust in the business world.

Those who wish to be gainfully employed for the foreseeable future must take this transformation seriously and adapt to new ways of doing things. In this book, we're going to explore the 10 biggest myths of business success—principles that people believe to be true even though they don't work for 98 percent of all truly successful people. The time to debunk these myths is now because they are more dangerous and less viable than ever, given this postrecessionary climate of ethical scrutiny and intense competition. If adhering to these myths didn't get you places before, it really won't today, when employers want to hire people with a puritan work ethic, people who want to do their jobs well without rocking the boat too much and who are strong representatives of the organization's culture. If you want to get ahead in this values-driven environment, you can't afford to have these blind spots. You must throw away these myths, determine what will work in their place, and immediately put it to use.

With the help of this book, it won't be as hard as it sounds. I will help you hone positive traits like authenticity, perseverance, and self-awareness and I think you'll see that the suggestions I and other experts provide ring true in your own experience and

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make more intuitive sense than most of these myths. As legendary business author Tom Peters once told me: “Really, it’s about remembering the simple things your grandmother taught you, getting through the day, and helping others get through the day.” Tom was right, and so were his equally famous colleagues Dale Carnegie and Stephen R. Covey, both of whom amassed their life fortunes writing and speaking about these concepts.

You may find this book to be a bit different from others in its class. I wrote it because I was tired of reading silly theories and platitudes dispensed by business and career authors who sell their work by giving these myths credibility and by telling readers what they want to hear. Here is one thing you can count on: I will tell it like it is. I will be honest with you about what will render you successful in today’s business world, not yesterday’s. I refuse to give you overly provocative advice that hasn’t worked for anyone I know, like quitting your job tomorrow and starting your own business the next day, or marching into your boss’s office and announcing that he should appreciate your individuality.

Now that I’ve set the stage, let’s get to it. These myths and their realities are:

Myth #1: Overnight success is possible.

Reality: Most people persevere for a long time and experience several setbacks before achieving an objective definition of success. This chapter will explore how to move your dream forward a little bit at a time and how to cope when things temporarily go south.

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Myth #2: Controversy will propel your career.

Reality: Being controversial usually generates attention for a little while, but people will probably not trust you in the long term. In this chapter we'll talk about how to incorporate the tried-and-true values of honesty and authenticity into your daily work life.

Myth #3: Employers want you to be yourself.

Reality: While employers value the unique set of skills and experiences you bring to the table, they expect you to toe the line with respect to company rules and conduct. Here we'll discuss what it means to be a professional and how to be diplomatic even if someone has wronged you.

Myth #4: Being good at your job trumps everything.

Reality: You can be the most talented employee your company has ever hired, but if your contributions aren't visible and people don't value what you do, it simply won't matter. This chapter will address how to spend a little more time promoting your job and a little less time slaving over it.

Myth #5: It's best to climb the ladder as fast as possible.

Reality: Getting promoted year after year requires near-constant vigilance as well as a laser-sharp focus on work—often to the detriment of everything else in your life. Here we'll talk about why it's prudent to enjoy your time as a middle manager or individual contributor and how to make the most of this period in your life.

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Myth #6: You'll get more money because you earned it.

Reality: Not everyone rakes in a six-figure salary because they played their cards right. This chapter will demonstrate how compensation is about business realities, HR mandates, and office politics—not performance—and illustrate techniques to increase yours.

Myth #7: The problem isn't you, it's the organization.

Reality: People job jump constantly because of this one, but the truth is, the same situations crop up in the business world over and over. In this chapter we'll discuss why it makes the most sense to learn self-awareness and change your own thinking and behavior instead of waiting for the company to adapt to your needs.

Myth #8: You won't get laid off; you're too essential.

Reality: Everyone is replaceable, and employees who consistently add value are let go every day. Here we'll talk about what's really behind the decision to lay people off, and you'll learn how to identify the signs and take steps to protect your job now.

Myth #9: If only you could leave corporate America, everything would be perfect.

Reality: Running a business is harder than it looks, and entrepreneurship is not for everyone. This chapter will address why many people are better off working for large companies, including the hidden perks that you don't want to live without.

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Myth #10: Do what you love, and the money will follow.

Reality: Just because you have a passion for a particular area doesn't mean you will automatically make money doing it. Here we'll talk about ways to do what you love without going broke, and how and when to take smart risks and make measured progress in pursuing meaningful work.

Each chapter includes academic research, expert commentary, anecdotes from contemporary culture, and inspirational stories from people like you who either fell prey to a blind spot and had to rethink their approach, or who recognized the myth for what it was and consequently came out on top. Along the way, I'll provide specific advice for course correction that you can use immediately in your work life. I hope that by the time you finish reading, you realize that a lot of what it takes to be successful is already a part of who you are, and that you absolutely have the power to cultivate the skills and attitude that will take you wherever you want to go, now and in the future. I am looking forward to taking the journey with you.



MYTH

#1

Overnight Success Is Possible

We are in awe of them. We are jealous of them. We love—and hate—the people who come out of nowhere to set up camp in the corner office or amass large amounts of cash and public admiration. They are the ones who catapult from obscurity to massive success in an extremely short and frantic period of time. But don't be fooled.

Overnight success is the first myth I debunk in this book because it's one of the most widely held beliefs. It's also hugely misleading, and adopting this idea that you can easily become an overnight success could actually be quite damaging for your career and life. The truth is simple. There are very few—if any—genuine cases of overnight success. The majority of successful people have dedicated themselves to a goal and persevered for a long time, experiencing several setbacks before reaching a high

level of achievement that is finally noticed and talked about by others.

The best modern example of the overnight success phenomenon is Susan Boyle. A Scottish singer, Susan launched her career on the world stage when she competed on *Britain's Got Talent*. Susan appeared for the first time to stares and whispers from judges and audience members who were skeptical that any woman who looked like a dowdy old maid could sing a note. However, the moment the first few bars of *Les Misérables*' "I Dreamed a Dream" were out of her mouth, perceptions started to change. By the time she finished, the audience was on its feet and the judges were singing her praises. Susan finished second place in the competition and signed with powerhouse producer Simon Cowell's Syco Music label. Her debut album, *I Dreamed a Dream*, was the fastest-selling UK debut album of all time.

Millions—possibly even billions—watched Susan Boyle's first-round performance on television and YouTube, and the international media latched on to her story of overnight success. They said that she'd never sung in public before. They said that the idea of having a singing career wasn't even on her radar and she'd entered *Britain's Got Talent* on a whim. Just a single, one-minute performance later, Susan was rubbing elbows with Meredith Vieira and her idol Donny Osmond.

Sounds fascinating, doesn't it? But this wasn't *exactly* the way it happened. As a child, Susan attended the Edinburgh Acting School and sang at churches and karaoke bars. She trained with a professional voice coach and auditioned for musicals. As recently as 1999, Susan sang "Cry Me a River" for a charity CD and spent all her savings recording a demo that she pitched to

record labels. She hit the talent show circuit in a big way, taking home titles from many local competitions. *Britain's Got Talent* was the culmination of achievement in a lifetime's worth of effort to get her singing career off the ground. It didn't happen overnight. It happened over forty-eight years!

The myth of overnight success is so prevalent that we're encouraging our kids to adopt it. Following in the footsteps of fellow elementary school student Alec Greven, who wrote the bestselling book *How to Talk to Girls*, nine-year-old Alya Nuri of Fishers, Indiana, recently wrote a series of books called *Things Every Kid Should Know* about smoking, alcohol, and drugs (www.alyanuri.com). She was sure that once she became a published author and started spreading her worthwhile message, she would get rich instantly. She quickly realized, though, that "money doesn't fall from the sky" and "even if you just want to help people, you have to work hard."

While she hasn't quite reached her goal of selling thousands of books, Alya moves her dream forward a little at a time by partnering with in-kind organizations, doing media interviews, and speaking in public. Through experience and coaching from her mom, Alya is gradually learning what it takes to become the spokesperson for a cause. And Alec Greven, by the way, wasn't an overnight success either. He peddled his handwritten, three-dollar pamphlet to thousands of locals before attracting the attention of HarperCollins.

Here's the bottom line. If you haven't conquered all your life's ambitions yet, please don't get down on yourself, because chances are, the timeline you set initially was unrealistic in the context of the challenges we're all facing in business today. This chapter is

about moving your dream forward a little bit at a time, through goal setting and persistence, and how to cope when things temporarily go south.

Make Gradual Progress Through Goal Setting

A pretty brunette who has lately spent her weekends trying on bridal gowns, thirty-year-old Jennifer Woofter isn't necessarily the first person you'd imagine as a powerhouse businesswoman. You might not believe that her environmental consulting firm, Strategic Sustainability Consulting (www.sustainabilityconsulting.com), makes substantial profits with high-profile clients like American Greetings and Georgetown University. If you'd talked to Jennifer four years ago, she wouldn't have believed it either. All she knew then was that she was bored.

In the tranquil calm of the Pacific Northwest, Jennifer attended college courses surrounded by Douglas fir and red oak trees. While she appreciated the scenery at the University of Oregon, Jennifer grew restless and finished a bachelor's degree in political science in just two years. Itching for a change, Jennifer headed for the hills of southern Virginia to get a master's degree from Virginia Tech. There, she found that the two-year program she'd selected was a bit too slow for her taste, and she finished that degree early too. "It seemed a waste to spend my prime years drinking beer in a pub with my fellow grad students when I could just as easily turn around a thesis over the summer," she told me.

While in Virginia, Jennifer joined the Calvert Group, an asset management company full of people who believe that going green

can be good for a company's bottom line. The firm has a unique focus on social responsibility and prides itself on being recognized by a wide range of organizations, from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to *Working Mother* magazine. Jennifer was happy there for a while. She was invigorated by the research and analysis aspect of her new job and loved judging companies based on their social and environmental performance.

But before long, the girl who could not sit still wanted more. "I had a little money saved, no family dependent on my income, and complete freedom," she explains. "I thought, 'Why don't I start my own business?'" The idea didn't stay theoretical as it does for so many would-be entrepreneurs. Her mind began spinning ideas about how basic social and environmental systems could be built into a business so that the owner could eventually run the initiatives on her own.

Jennifer methodically set goals for the business, one after the other, until Strategic Sustainability Consulting was a fully functioning enterprise. In her office today, Jennifer will meet with her top consultants to finish off a two-year plan that plots reasonable growth in an economic downturn, and this evening she'll sit in front of her television and sketch new marketing materials while taking in *Grey's Anatomy*. And for her wedding, Jennifer can boast of an achievement none of her friends can top: she, not her parents, is paying for the festivities.

In the process of talking about this book, Jennifer sent me her preliminary list of goals for her business, written in deceptively simple language on a wrinkled piece of notebook paper. The list included things like "write a business plan," "think of a name," and "develop a set of services." When I first saw the list, I almost

laughed at how simple it was, but Jennifer was deadly serious. Within one week, she'd gone to her local Barnes & Noble, picked up a book on business plan writing, and written a first draft. She'd registered her website domain, hired a graphic designer to do her logo, and created descriptions of cool-sounding offerings like green office audits and sustainability reporting. Most people would then wait for the paperwork to be filed, but not Jennifer. She wanted to pay herself a salary within a year, so she got busy locating pro bono clients so that she could quickly build a portfolio.

Jennifer's entrepreneurial success didn't happen overnight, and it wouldn't have happened at all without her secret weapon—her goal orientation. "I'm a compulsive list-maker, and being able to check off items throughout the day helps me create a sense of momentum," she told me. "In terms of bigger projects, I know that I get discouraged when I work on something for days, so I devise little milestones along the way. When I'm able to say that I accomplished my goal of calling x number of new prospects, I really have a sense of progress." Jennifer's goals also kept her safe from the "start up and crash" phenomenon that kills so many small businesses. "Goals force me to think my ideas through," she agreed. "Once I create a work plan for a project and can accurately predict the number of steps involved, I almost never underestimate the work involved."

Have you ever noticed that successful people spend a lot of time thinking about what they want and ways they can get it? Because they understand their ideal situation and are motivated to turn their vision into reality, they are able to focus their efforts, determine how to organize their time and resources, and elimi-

nate distractions. On the other hand, unsuccessful people tend to complain a lot about what they don't like about their lives without proactively trying to change these unpleasant aspects. The hard truth is that few of us are just handed the ingredients for a fulfilling life. In most cases, if you want them for yourself you have to go out and grab them—and your surest path is by setting goals and following through on them.

When I was doing research for this book, I heard a great story about a guy who was tasked with outshooting an archery pro. Since he was a beginner, he never came close to the pro, who could hit the bull's-eye with one arrow. The novice eventually figured out that the way to outshoot the master was simply to blindfold him and spin him around a few times so that the pro would lose sight of the target. After all, how can anyone hit a target he is unable to see? This tale explains why people who don't set goals never realize their full potential and simply drift along in life without making any real progress.

Theories abound on the best way to set goals, but research has most often supported the SMART approach of defining goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. The most famous study followed a group of 1950s Yale University undergraduates who were about to graduate. The researchers discovered that only 3 percent of the senior class had written goals for their future in this format. These students had also delineated the knowledge, skills, and resources essential for achieving their goals and had outlined action plans for each objective. The researchers followed the class for the next twenty years and, incredibly, found that more than 95 percent of the group's net worth was controlled by the 3 percent who had written out their goals.

I'm obviously a believer in goal setting, but this sounded crazy to me, so I dug a bit deeper and found more biological and psychological reasons that goals are so important to getting what's ultimately important to us. For one thing, goal setting appears to be hardwired in our brains. According to Dustin Wax, a productivity writer who has investigated the science of setting goals, the brain cannot distinguish between things we want and things we have. The brain treats the failure to achieve a goal the same way that it treats the loss of a valued possession, and up until the moment the goal is achieved, we have failed to achieve it. This sets up a constant tension that the brain seeks to resolve by driving us toward accomplishment.

Another reason why goals are so critical to achievement is the so-called endowment effect, which means that when we take ownership of something, we invest ourselves in it until it becomes a part of our identity. The endowment effect was illustrated in a Cornell University experiment in which researchers gave students school logo coffee mugs and then offered to trade chocolate bars for the mugs. Very few students were willing to make the trade, no matter how much they professed to like chocolate. However, when the researchers reversed the experiment, handing out chocolate and then offering to trade mugs for the candy, they found that now, few students were interested in the mugs. The key finding? *What* the students had in their possession didn't matter, it was merely the fact that they had it in the first place. In subsequent experiments, researchers found that the endowment effect doesn't require current ownership. If we have a reasonable expectation of future possession, we will start thinking of that item as a part of us. Well, this would explain why I decided what

to name my new Toyota Prius before the financing had even come through. In any case, the bottom line is that establishing a goal causes us to internalize it to the degree that activities we undertake to fulfill it feel natural and necessary.

Define the Goal and Options for Achieving It

The whole world waited for what he was about to say. On a warm, breezy day in May 1961, U.S. President John F. Kennedy announced before a special joint session of Congress the very ambitious goal of landing on the moon before the end of the decade. The goal was motivated by a variety of factors, the most significant of which was to have the United States overtake the Soviet Union in the space race.

Said Kennedy to Congress as well as the planet: “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.”

He wasn't kidding. In 1961, only one American had even flown in space, and even the most talented NASA employees were doubtful that the United States would be setting up shop on the moon anytime soon. But Kennedy put his money where his mouth was, committing \$25 billion, employing 400,000 people, and involving 20,000 industrial firms and universities.

As soon as the goal was defined and the resources were

marshaled, mission planners considered various options for accomplishing a moon landing while thinking through the risk to human life, cost, technological limitations, and astronaut skill. They talked over four possible mission modes, including direct ascent, in which a spacecraft fueled by a Nova rocket would travel directly to the moon, land, and return as a single unit. Other options were earth orbit rendezvous, in which multiple rockets would be launched independently and dock in earth orbit, and lunar orbit rendezvous (LOR), in which a spacecraft composed of modular parts would be launched. A command module would remain in orbit around the moon, while a lunar module would descend to the moon and then return to dock with the command module while still in lunar orbit. Unlike the other plans, LOR required only a small part of the spacecraft to land on the moon, thus minimizing the mass to be launched from the moon's surface for the return trip.

The decision in favor of LOR dictated the design of what became the famous Apollo spacecraft. Kennedy wasn't alive to see it, but his goal was achieved on July 20, 1969, when Apollo 11 commander Neil Armstrong stepped off the lunar module's ladder and onto the moon's surface. It was an image that will be cemented in American history forever.

In 1961, Kennedy's goal seemed downright foolish, but like all big aspirations, it wasn't quite so unfathomable once the project was properly assessed and the most reasonable option chosen. As for Kennedy, he's still remembered for his vision and courage and his role as the father of the modern space age.

Develop Your Perseverance

As I prepared to write my 2010 book, *New Job, New You: A Guide to Reinventing Yourself in a Bright New Career*, I profiled dozens of individuals who'd made major career changes. While in many ways my interviewees were very different, they did share some common traits that made their high level of achievement possible, including perseverance.

Perseverance is defined as remaining constant to a purpose, idea, or task in spite of obstacles. Some people are born with the tendency to persevere. In fact, I can already see it in my toddler son. He likes to push his wagon around our backyard, but he doesn't always have enough strength and control to move it where he wants it to go. However, instead of giving up and crying, he faithfully pushes at the wagon from different angles until it's free of the tree or fence.

Pick up any one of Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories and you'll be virtually hit over the head with the lesson that earlier generations didn't expect instant gratification the way we do today. If they had, we wouldn't have had the opportunity to evolve as fully as a society, with the most critical cultural and technological advances marinating over decades. We've become a society of *now, now, now*, but the truth is that most things worth having take a little bit of process and a lot of time. You shouldn't assume that if something doesn't manifest overnight it won't happen at all, and in fact, you will do wonders for your personal development if you can learn to be patient, maintain faith in your own potential, and increase your perseverance in driving important aspects of your career forward.

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