Most Likely to Succeed

How to approach every step of your career, with advice from the executives who’ve been there
Life Lessons

For the past four years, dedicated readers of Bloomberg Businessweek have been rewarded for finishing the magazine with a back page titled "How Did I Get Here?". The feature profiled industry leaders by printing their résumés alongside first-person anecdotes about important moments from their childhoods and careers. Jeffrey Katzenberg, then chief executive officer of DreamWorks Animation LLC, was the first subject, in May 2013.

Really dedicated readers know that at the bottom of the page participants listed "life lessons," the shiniest pearls of wisdom from their time in the arena. In all, 168 of the most significant names in business shared their stories, resulting in about 500 lessons. The guidance was personal and practical and born as much of failure as success.

We've collected the best of this counsel and organized it according to what an aspiring CEO would need to know en route to the corner office. Week to week, there were oft-repeated golden rules for advancing up the ladder, which we've compiled into four master classes. Tear out these pages, uncap that highlighter, and never say we didn't give you good advice.

"Learn to code, even if you're not techy. It's the new literacy for a century worth of jobs."
—Alexis Ohanian, co-founder, Reddit Inc.

"Internships are the way you learn what you want and don't want out of your career, because you see the behind-the-scenes lifestyle. Lifestyle is as important as the career that you choose."
—Wendy Williams, host and executive producer, The Wendy Williams Show

"Careers are climbing walls, not ladders. A ladder is vertical and unidirectional."
—Roger Ferguson Jr., president and CEO, TIAA-CREF

"Spend the first third of your life learning, the second earning, and the third returning."
—Tristan Walker, founder and CEO, Walker & Co.

"You don't need a long-term plan."
—Claus Meyer, culinary entrepreneur

"If something seems out of reach, move closer. My uncle taught me that. He was a tailor who'd been touched by polio. He was undaunted by his paralysis—he just found himself in one meaningful and impactful situation after another."
—Freda Lewis-Hall, chief medical officer and EVP, Pfizer Inc.

"Tell people what you want. Go ask for it."
—Laura Sen, CEO, BJ's Wholesale Club

Starting out

"Don't worry about making this choice or that one. Put each new opportunity in your toolbox—you never know when it'll be useful."
—Julie Gerberding, executive vice president for strategic communications, global public policy, and population health, Merck & Co.

"Try to find an easy field. In restaurants, you have to do everything, working six days a week."
—Sirio Maccioni, restaurateur, Le Cirque restaurants, and co-CEO, Maccioni Group Restaurants

"Early on, put your head down, learn as much as you can, and look up in 10 years."
—Cheryl Boone Isaacs, president, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

"When you aspire to be a CEO, it's a slippery slope—not everyone will get on your side. Learn to wear ambition well and care about people."
—Beth Mooney, CEO and chairman, KeyCorp

Planning your ascent
“Don’t sell sugar water. The biggest problem is that the smartest people aren’t working on the biggest problems. It’s easy to go through life not realizing that you can have an impact on others.”
—Scott Heiferman, co-founder and CEO, Meetup Inc.

“Choose a workplace not for ego reasons like title and money, but because it fits your values.”
—Brad Smith, CEO and chairman, Intuit Inc.

Golden Rule No. 1: The smartest thing to do is hire smarter

“Never be the smartest guy in the room. Surround yourself with talent.”
—Lorenzo Fertitta, chairman and CEO, Ultimate Fighting Championship

“Surround yourself with people who challenge you.”
—Sheila Johnson, founder and CEO, Salamander Hotels & Resorts LLC, and vice chairman, Monumental Sports & Entertainment LLC

“Surround yourself with people smarter and better than you.”
—Spencer Rascoff

“Hire people smarter than you. It’s an honor and a pleasure when my team outshines me.”
—Danielle Brown

“Hire people who know far more than you do.”
—Anthony Romero, executive director, American Civil Liberties Union

“A human being’s most important trait is the quality of his or her energy.”
—Glenn Kelman, CEO, Redfin Corp.

“My first shift manager said, ‘I hired you because I could work for you one day.’ That was a valuable piece of advice he gave me—and if you listen to it, you’ll help your own development.”
—Tracey Massey, president, Mars Chocolate North America LLC

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—Anthony Romero, executive director, American Civil Liberties Union

“International assignments put you on the fast track to success.”
—Illene Gordon, chairman, president, and CEO, Ingredion Inc.

“Find a job at the intersection of what you’re uniquely good at and what you love. A lot of people are good at a lot of stuff, but you need to find that thing that you’re uniquely good at.”
—Suzy Welch, author and speaker

“Take the jobs that no one else wants to do. If you go work on a brand that 10 other people have worked on and everyone’s written off, and you can turn it around, then that’s how you make a name for yourself.”
—Greg Creed, CEO, Yum! Brands Inc.

“Never compromise on the team, especially in the early stages. Set an extremely high bar for talent of first-hired employees.”
—Kevin Hartz, partner, Founders Fund

“Hiring superstars

“If you don’t provide opportunities to grow, people leave.”
—Tom Colicchio, owner, Crafted Hospitality, and head judge, Top Chef

“If a job doesn’t make you think, ‘Wow, I’m not really sure I can do it,’ it’s not challenging enough.”
—Danielle Brown, chief diversity and inclusion officer, chief of staff to the CEO, and VP for human resources, Intel Corp.
Life Lessons

"Develop a reputation as a straight talker and a truth teller. Make your words mean something when you say them."
—Jo Ann Jenkins, CEO, AARP Inc.

"Never compromise your integrity. It's the only thing you have."
—Strauss Zelnick, founder and partner, ZelnickMedia Corp.

"Always conduct yourself with integrity."
—Kathryn Ruegger, partner, Latham & Watkins LLP

"Approach everything with brutal honesty. Even when it might do me bad in the immediate moment, it always serves me well in the long term."
—Jonathan Mildenhall, chief marketing officer, Airbnb Inc.

"It's business, not personal is the most damaging phrase in business, because it removes ethics and morality from decision-making. You need to lead with heart, which means that you're willing to step up and fight for what's right."
—Neil Grimmer, co-founder and CEO, Plum Organics

"If it's painful, you're learning something."
—Margaret Cho, comedian

"The answer is always putting the right person on it. Success is a function of whether we can build strong enough local leadership—and cultivating leadership is always the core of the solution."
—Wendy Kopp, CEO and co-founder, Teach for All Inc.

"If you're upset about failing, you haven't failed enough."
—Meredith Whitney, CEO, Meredith Whitney Advisory Group LLC

Rolling with the punches

"If something doesn't go wrong, it's bad luck."
—Marc Forgione, owner, Marc Forgione and American Cut restaurants

"You have to have trust that it'll work out. This is extremely huge. If you start working your way, the way appears."
—Hamdi Ulukaya, founder and CEO, Chobani LLC
Anyone believes he's a self-made man has a very selective memory. — Frits van Paasschen

"It's business. A lot of it is common sense." — Gert Boyle, chairman, Columbia Sportswear Co.

"Listen to your heart. Don't let anyone get in your way. If you want to go to the right one, you don't have to be afraid of people." — Joycelyn Millman, board member, A&R, Macy's, and Tupperware Brands Worldwide

"Blunt is beautiful." — David Falk, founder and CEO, Falk Associates Management Enterprises Inc.

"Stay fresh, stay young. Always go with your gut." — Caroline Hirst, owner, Carolines on Broadway

"If you have a hunch, follow it." — Steve Stoule, founder and CEO, Translation LLC

"Data can't give you all the answers — sometimes you have to listen to your heart." — Sanjay Mehrotra, president and CEO, SanDisk Corp.

"Like a lot of data, but the best decisions are made from my gut." — Debra Lee, chairman and CEO, BET Networks

"If you can do something, just say 'Yes.'" — Chuck Todd, political director, NBC News

"My dad taught me that." — Deborah Lloyd, chief creative officer, Kate Spade & Co.

"In the age of email and texts, a hand-written note always stands out." — Deborah Lloyd, chief creative officer, Kate Spade & Co.

"It's not quantity, it's quality. A lot of people don't realize that." — Judith Rodin, president, Rockefeller Foundation

"Don't use as much detergent as they tell you to use." — Greg Orend, CEO, Yum! Brands (and former brand manager for detergents at Unilever)

"Golden Rule No. 2: Don't ever think it" — Caroline Hirst, owner, Carolines on Broadway

"If you have to be hard on issues, but you don't have to be hard on people." — Joyce Millman, board member, A&R, Macy's, and Tupperware Brands Worldwide

"It's possible to have strong opinions and firm views without demolishing the opposition." — Diana Aivy

"Take time to get outside. It's good for you. And though the odds are very low that you'll be eaten, carry your bear spray." — Jonathan Jarvis, director, National Park Service

"Create a relationship, and business will follow. Don't look to sell. Look to engage." — Jim McCann, founder and CEO, 1-800-flowers.com
Life Lessons

How Did I Get Here?
By Arianne Cohen

Most of the wisdom on these pages comes from interviews I conducted during the past three years. In that span, I've learned a few things.

The first: Booking time with a chief executive officer is like hurling yourself into a castle moat and waiting for a guard to fish you out—you might be floating for a while. Assistants fend off interlopers, and publicists offer one 8:14 a.m. slot half a year away, along with a warning that their client will have mere minutes to chat. The interview will be canceled on short notice—"Earnings call! Sorry!"—and rescheduled for the next month.

When they eventually happen, the Q&As are almost always worth the near-drowning. Generally, executives prove affable, and they're likely to keep the conversation going past the allotted time. Here's a little secret: Schedules in the corner office are cushier than they're made out to be.

After more than 100 interviews with business leaders, I can say, with all due respect to my subjects, that CEOs aren't always geniuses. They are always dogged, however—they've navigated decades of meetings and deftly gathered power and purse strings along the way. Much of their advice reflects this: Persevere, and for God's sake, make friends.

I can also say that the people with the laugh-out-loud stories were the ones who'd gotten their hands dirty. The warts-and-all anecdotes usually came from people outside of the corporate world, such as comedian Marc Maron, who presented his career as a cascade of professional and romantic failures. Restaurateurs regaled me with tales of passed-out drunk chefs, months-late openings, and sick staffers.

All chieftains give advice—it's part of the job description—and I benefited from it. I got personal financial tips from Suze Orman and diaper recommendations from Rosalind Brewer, then-CEO of Sam's Club, who used to design the products for Kimberly-Clark. Female executives like her generally gave stronger interviews than their male counterparts. They were concise, prepared, and self-aware—"Was that OK?" was a familiar coda. A few women politely declined to participate, saying they wouldn't have time to locate the personal photos the magazine needed to illustrate the page. Most males' photos arrived in my in-box neatly labeled, often forwarded from their wives' email accounts. Behind many successful male executives is a savvy, involved partner.

And often by the CEO's side was President Obama, who seems to have spent many days of his presidency grinning next to titans of industry. I have photographic evidence.

Lastly, if you're considering becoming a CEO, I can tell you that it's doable. Just wake up extremely early—they all do—and put yourself in proximity to talented co-workers for 30 years, by which point your friends will be running corporations and boards.

One day, the phone will ring: Want to come run this mess of a company? Welcome to the C-suite.

"When you do something new, it takes at least two years for anyone to understand it."
—Tina Brown, founder and CEO, Tina Brown Live Media

Nurturing entrepreneurship

"Finish the things you start—if you try it, you'll find that it's hard to do."
—Joe Echevarria, CEO, Deloitte LLP

"The thing that makes you a good entrepreneur is a real love of making things happen. Start building something with whatever you've got from wherever you are."
—Caterina Fake, founder and CEO, Findery, and chairman of the board, Etsy Inc.

"Everyone yearns for the same thing: social intimacy and connection. To connect, to belong, love and be loved. For me, it's been all about understanding that that's the driving force."
—Jim McCann, founder, chairman, and CEO, 1-800-Flowers.com

"Find your co-conspirators, the folks who share a passion with you."
—Scott Heiferman, co-founder and CEO, Meetup
"Just because you can imagine a better mousetrap doesn't mean you can build one."
—Sanjay Mehrotra, president and CEO, SanDisk

"Even if it's a good idea in the abstract, it might not be what you're born to do."
—Glenn Kelman, CEO, Redfin

"If you have an idea and everybody thinks it's great, it's probably passé."
—Roy Price, head of Amazon Studios

"When I think, 'Huh, why didn't I think of that?' that's a good indication that a pitch is worth pursuing."
—Nancy Kanter, general manager and EVP for original programming, Disney Junior Worldwide

"Listen. It's something that leaders are often terrible at."
—Strauss Zelnick, founder and partner, ZelnickMedia

"If you listen carefully, you'll hear the answers."
—Arnold Donald, president and CEO, Carnival Corp.

"Always be in learning-and-listening mode, whether it's a tour guide or a person helping you with your computer."
—Sue Desmond-Hellmann, CEO, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

"Listen at all levels. Some of the best ideas come from those on the front lines."
—Rosalind Brewer, president and CEO, Sam's Club

"Listen to your folks. Staff and clients are often teaching things."
—Linda Hasley, president and CEO, Lane Bryant

"Listen more than you talk."
—Carter Roberts, president and CEO, World Wildlife Fund

"Shut up and listen. You can't learn if you're talking."
—Robert Gallucci, president, MacArthur Foundation

"Sometimes the best way to lead is to listen."
—Eileen Fisher, founder and chief creative officer, Eileen Fisher Inc.

"People do not change when they see the light. They change when they feel the heat. My husband said that years ago, and he was so right."
—Freda Lewis-Hall, chief medical officer and EVP, Pfizer Inc.

"There's no such thing as stress. It's that you're not having fun."
—Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO, WPP Pic

"Be open about mistakes. I often ask people what I did wrong in the last meeting, because then others feel they have permission to own their mistakes, too."
—Marne Levine, COO, Instagram LLC

"You'll be successful if you stop pretending to know it all and start learning from the brilliant people that you're working with. Stop trying to do the job and learn how to do the job."
—Jonathan Mildenhall, chief marketing officer, Airbnb

"Be on time. I hate it when people are late."
—Caroline Hirsch, owner, Carolines on Broadway

"Momentum is a mother-f---er. Keep moving."
—Shane Smith, co-founder and CEO, Vice Media LLC

*The only time a subject uttered an F-bomb in offering career advice

"Patience is an overrated virtue."
—Jeff Clarke

"Do everything fast."
—Meredith Whitney, CEO, Meredith Whitney Advisory Group

"I'd rather make a quick decision that can be fixed than be slow and miss an opportunity."
—Ron Perelman, chairman and CEO, MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings Inc.

"Patience is an overrated virtue."
—Jeff Clarke

"Longer meetings have diminishing returns."
—Jeff Clarke, CEO, Eastman Kodak Co.

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"You only have a business if your product is either better or cheaper."
—Jim Koch, founder and brewer, Boston Beer

Life Lessons

"The expectation in the Valley is that you start a company, get angel money, and raise an ungody amount of venture capital. That's rarely the case, though—in most companies, one needs to have Plan B and Plan C in the event that things take longer, as they typically do. Airbnb couldn't raise funding, so they sold actual cereal boxes—Obama Os and Captain McCain's." —Kevin Hartz, partner, Founders Fund

Building the business

"A company is built on people first, guests second, and financials third."
—Peggy Chen, co-chair and co-CEO, Panda Restaurant Group

"Stick to what you do. Starting that restaurant or music label or clothing company on the side almost never works out. I always tell the fighters that."
—Lorenzo Fertitta, chairman and CEO, Ultimate Fighting Championship

"When you run a smaller organization, you need to know everyone and everything. Larger is easier."
—Darren Huston, president and CEO, Priceline Group

"Growth isn't about pressing the accelerator; it's about moving in specific directions."
—Ron Shaich, chairman and CEO, Panera Bread Co.

"People over-estimate what you can do in a year and underestimate what you can do in 10—Bill Gates said that."
—Brian Goldner, president and CEO, Hasbro Inc.

"Leadership is a privilege. I have that taped to my computer."
—Julie Gerberding, EVP for strategic communications, global public policy, and population health, Merck

"When you're working for an institution as visible as the Met, you get criticism from all sides—some people think we're too conservative, some people think we're too progressive. But as my father once told me when he was managing editor of the New York Times, the fact that you get criticized from all different sides usually is an indication that you're doing something right."
—Peter Gelb, general manager, Metropolitan Opera

Steering the ship

"In 2009, which was the recession and one of our worst years, we thought we were going to have to ground airplanes. We got through that year and eked out a small profit, and I thought that was a major victory. I've always heard that leaders do their best work in the worst times, and it's true."
—Gary Kelly, chairman, president, and CEO, Southwest Airlines Co.

"Leadership isn't about forcing people to follow you, it's about inspiring them to want to."
—Joe Echevarria, CEO, Deloitte

"Leave the party before the lights come on. Everything has an expiration date, including organizations and people."
—Michael Houston, CEO, Grey North America

"The hat doesn't always fit, and you have to recognize it and move on. In 1996, I pushed hard for the job of head of women's design at Aquascutum London. I wanted to reinvent a great British brand. But they weren't ready for a Burberry, so I went to Burberry."
—Deborah Lloyd, chief creative officer, Kate Spade

Knowing when to say goodbye

"Lead from the front, but be in the mosh pit, not on the stage."
—Blake Irving, CEO, GoDaddy Inc.
Negotiating your salary

"Always ask big. If they say yes, you didn’t ask for enough." — Alan Rabinowitz, co-founder and CEO, Panthera

"You can’t make something bad taste good." — Marc Forgione, owner, Marc Forgione and American Cut restaurants

"Let it go. Whatever it is, let it go." — Margaret Cho, comedian

"Sleep is overrated." — Richard Haass, president, Council on Foreign Relations

"Make sure to be born of people who give you the right genes." — Carl Reiner, actor, writer, director, producer, and comedian

"You can have it all, but you can’t have it all at the same time." — Jane Rosenthal, movie producer and co-founder of Tribeca Enterprises LLC

"If you love something, you have a shot at doing it well." — Shane Smith, co-founder and CEO, Vice Media

"Your business needs to be your passion." — Kathy Ireland, chairman, CEO, and chief designer of Kathy Ireland Worldwide

"Do whatever makes your heart beat fastest." — Brad Smith, CEO and chairman, Intuit

"Love what you do or get out." — Don Epstein, founder and CEO, Greater Talent Network Inc.

"Your business needs to be your passion." — Kathy Ireland, chairman, CEO, and chief designer of Kathy Ireland Worldwide

"Love what you do. There’s no demarcation line between my work and personal life." — Debra Lee, chairman and CEO, BET Networks

"Follow your passion in all that you do. It’s more fulfilling—and also how you yield greater success." — Harvey Spevak, CEO, Equinox Holdings Inc.

"People get into trouble by just taking the next logical step. Do what you love to do." — Jim Whitehurst, president and CEO, Red Hat Inc.

"The best weather forecasters absolutely live and breathe the weather. That’s true for other industries, too." — Joel Myers, founder, chairman, and president, AccuWeather Inc.

Achieving work-life balance

"A balance between family, personal, and work time is mostly an act of will. You have to choose to do that." — Robert Hohman, co-founder and CEO, Glassdoor Inc.

"I prioritize faith, family, and work. Anything outside of that, I don’t focus on." — Tristan Walker, founder and CEO, Walker & Co.

"You don’t have control over the economy, the weather, or even what’s going to happen with the website on Tuesday. You do have control over how it affects you." — Lisa Price, founder and CEO, Carol’s Daughter

"Love what you do. There’s no demarcation line between my work and personal life." — Debra Lee, chairman and CEO, BET Networks

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"Marry someone with a sense of humor and a flexible job." — Judy Vredenburgh, CEO, Girls Inc.

"Life is more about attitude than skills." — Andrew Carmellini, chef and restaurateur

"Don’t get hung up on ‘should’ve’. Yesterday’s never going to come around again, so get on with it." — Gert Boyle, chairman, Columbia Sportswear

Channeling your inner Zen

"Don’t get hung up on ‘should’ve’. Yesterday’s never going to come around again, so get on with it." — Gert Boyle, chairman, Columbia Sportswear
We ran all of the life lessons through something called a "bigram model," which uses probability to string words together. If you're ever at a loss for what to tell someone you mentor, feel free to borrow this language:

"Believe in your life."
"Seek people smarter than talent."
"Create a bad taste good."
"Try to have to do something you do."
"As a good thermostat."
"Live your next boss."
"Longer meetings have an old video game screen."
"Develop the best work, and work harder."
"Lifestyle is a job title."
"Get the right instinct."
"Show your own money."
"Paper Mate makes the best crossword pencil."

"I'll take advantage of a bad enough, you do."

 marrow

"Make it is, let them back."
"You'll be known for it. Make yourself indispensable."
"Money teaches young designers think about yourself."
"Story, story, story."
"You're all about failing, you want to."
"Drink black coffee. My father, Arthur Gelb, was fond of a bad luck."
"Being bilingual helps people, they'll trust yourself where the right thing."
"Find a business model is what I can always control."
"Patience is a bad taste good."
"Passion is never done; continuous evolution is a bad thing. You can always neutral."
"Never give up."
"Truly believe it's probably passé."
"Whatever you're not having fun."