

The New MATH of SUCCESS

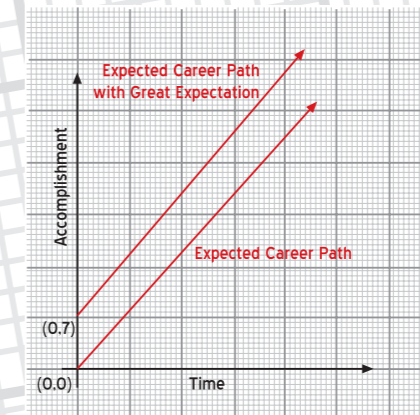
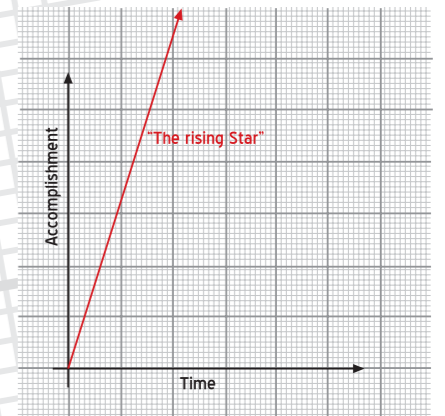
By Annette Moser-Wellman



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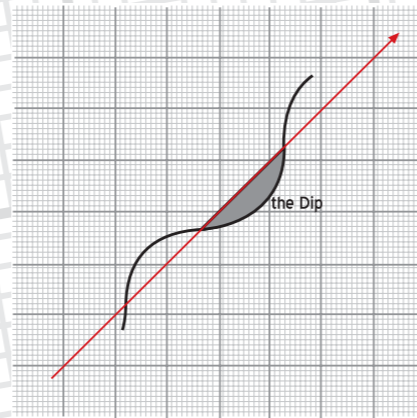
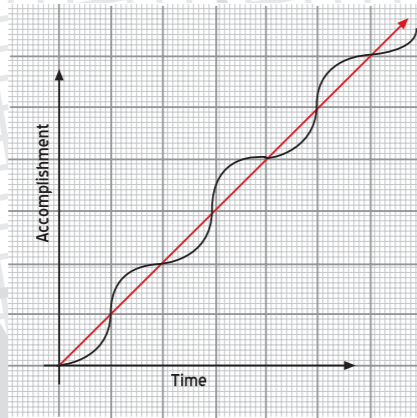
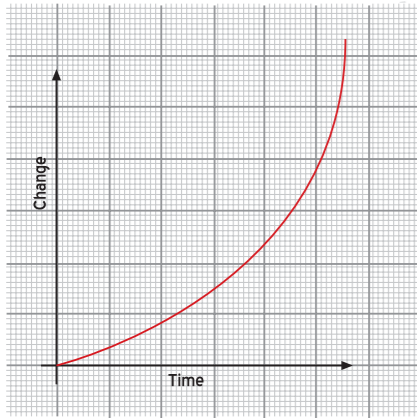


When it comes to our career, we expect it to follow a straight, upward sloping line. If we were to plot it on a graph, we'd begin at (0,0) and expect it to increase as a function described as $y=2x$. If we had a great education, we might begin at (0,2) or (0,3)



Or if we considered ourselves to be a “rising star,” we’d hope for a function of $y=3.5x$ or more. Regardless, we believe that if we continue straight and strong, we will have a guarantee of a secure and storied career in business.

But your math would be wrong. Because in times of rapid change – change that could well be characterized as $\text{Changex}+1$ for every year in business – a linear, upward career is not only an unrealistic expectation, it is a mistake. The truth is that the frequency of job change will increase, the skill set demand will increase and the probability that you, or anyone for that matter, will be successful at every point in time is less. In times of rapid change, more experimentation, more risk taking and yes, more failure, will be required.



On the Curve

The successful business leader must start thinking of his or her career as an upwardly sloping sine curve, perhaps as a function described as $y=2x+3\sin(x)$. This graph is a series of gently sloping up-and-down undulations with an overall trajectory upward. The graph of your career must be a series of gentle waves, with up representing accomplishments and down representing fallow or transition periods. This shift from the linear path to the sine curve is an important delineation and here's why I make it.

As business leaders, we must become more comfortable with risk and the attendant failure that goes with it. Because change will so fully characterize the market and our work, if we are not failing, we will not be risking, and if we are not risking, we will not be succeeding. Fewer and fewer companies will be able to claim "good to great status," as large, stable companies that can stand the test of time. This is because technology will accelerate the axis of time and we will see competition accelerating as well.

New business leaders must now manage the sine curve of his or her career, the multiple up-and-down undulations of success and failure. They must seek to point this sine curve in an upward trajectory, always learning from the past and positioning themselves for success in the next venture. The key is to optimize the amplitude of success: the good position, the new enterprise, the great idea. But when the downward transition comes – loss of revenue, layoffs, market shifts – be able to step back, wait and create the next opportunity.

Dealing with Dips

This ability to make the most of the downward wave requires comfort in what I call "The Dips," which are the spaces between the successes. They are the negative troughs in the waves of the sine curve. They represent the transitions from one change to the next.

Most business managers want to avoid the Dips as much as possible. But it is here that the best ideas and new things are born. When we have the ability to withstand the troughs and even expect and welcome them, we find the best new opportunities.

We can especially learn this skill from the creative greats of history. Artists and scientists can teach the business leader how to perform this new math of success – how to keep this sine curve undulating upward in the right direction. Artists, scientists and literary greats are experts at managing the crests and troughs of innovation. They build their careers around the ebb and flow of their creative energy. Here's what they teach us about the time in the Dip.

The Dip is a time to learn. Conventional wisdom says that most of us will have a new job every seven years. Given the pace of change ahead, we will most likely have a new job every four years. We can bemoan this lack of "job security" (which, by the way, never really existed), or we can revel in the fact that we can transfer our skills to a different area and learn something new.

What Comes Down, Must Go Up

The physicist Richard Feynman had his greatest breakthroughs early in his 20s. But he went on to make many other contributions in physics using his fascination for other areas: music, mythology, even drumming. He was able to further his field by applying learning from other interests.

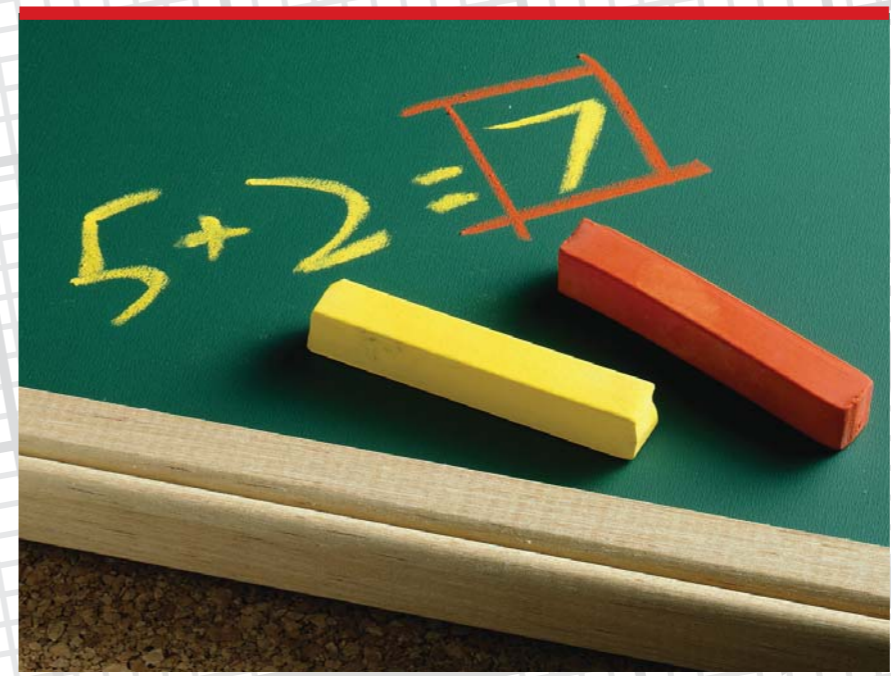
The Dip is a time to create. When we are in transition, we re-evaluate our priorities and can make decisions on what is really best for us and what we really want to do. As passion for work increasingly becomes a requirement for success, we can tailor our work more closely to what we really love and enjoy.

The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy had a period in his life in which he felt so low that he could no longer write. But during this time he began to formulate his personal philosophy of nonviolence and wrote a book that highly influenced Mahatma Ghandi's work.

The Dip is a time to reflect. We cannot innovate when our conscious mind is overly active and managing too many demands. When we quiet down and listen

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Annette Moser-Wellman is the president of FireMark, an innovation consultancy that works with some of the world's leading companies. Her expertise spans the range of strategy and vision planning to leadership and executive coaching. She is author of The Five Faces of Genius, Creative Thinking Styles to Succeed at Work. Website: www.fivefacesofgenius.com