Blitz the Ladder

A Team-Based Approach to Getting Ahead in Business

J. Todd Rhoad

Foreword by Dr. Kevin Fleming

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T a b l e s

Introduction

The dream for many highly-motivated, accomplished performers is that of an uninterrupted upward climb on a corporate ladder. Their education, talents, and hard work will earn them a ride on the corporate train to the land of boundless opportunities. However, the ride is short, as the days of the company-promised career paths are long gone. Numerous forces beyond our control have nurtured the birth of a self-directed protean path. These forces also cause a redefinition of the psychological contracts, employment relationship, and career orientation between the employee and the company. Corporate consolidation, market globalization, mergers, acquisitions, and leveraged buyouts are some of these unstoppable forces. To many, such powers strike a nerve that floods the mind with fear and uncertainty. Worry, depression, and stress slowly ooze out of every pore, drip on the flames of change, and ignite feelings of disloyalty and distrust that tear at the heart of labor relations. The smart ones embrace these forces and look for ways to optimize their position. They bask in the spirit of cooperation, not confrontation.

In putting this book together, I spent many years talking with successful people to learn what works and what doesn't. Once I found the right technique, I put it to the test. What I learned is what you get in this book. Now, I don't just proclaim, promote and teach the Blitz Approach, I live it. I have my own team, and we meet every week to discuss new opportunities and issues. We've seen much success over the years. While I feel this approach is best, I felt it would be good

to let some other experts evaluate this strategy and team-based approach. I could have found no one better than Dr. Kevin Fleming.

Dr. Fleming is President and CEO of an international executive development and coaching firm concentrating on aligning best-practice ideas with neuroscience and brain excellence. He is considered one of the top intellectual minds and has recently collaborated with Ken Blanchard and Stephen Covey to release a book on successful business strategies called *Roadmap to Success*. His latest book, *The Half-Truth High*, prompted a request to speak to the Ministers and Prime Ministers of Jordan and United Arab Emirates. He is an expert columnist on "Transformations" for *Executive Decision* magazine. Dr. Fleming is a recognized leader in understanding the human mind and is now a believer in the strategies you will learn inside these pages of *Blitz the Ladder*.

As we progress through this book, we will discuss some of these forces individually and in detail, seeking ways we can benefit our careers by using the energy that is generated during these changes. Most importantly, we will learn an approach to overcoming the many challenges in building a successful career in today's corporations and build a strategy for success that will last for a lifetime. We will show you how to build a team, develop a strategy map, implement it and successfully navigate the rough waters of the corporate world. As Henry Kissinger put it so eloquently, "The real distinction is between those who adapt their purposes to reality and those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes." Organizations are not the same as they were a decade ago. So don't use a decade-old strategy. New times present new barriers and hurdles, which require new solutions. *The Blitz Approach* is the only solution you need to build a better future.

1 In Search of the Ladder

My father was a maintenance mechanic in a pulp wood yard for nearly half of his life, and, through this experience, he taught me one of the greatest lessons in business without speaking a single word. He was the most dedicated employee I have ever known. He was born in an era where lifetime employment was highly sought after, and so he devoted thirty four years of his life to one company. The life lessons he taught were the kind he was raised to know: "Never be late," "Do whatever they ask of you," "Never quit anything," and "Always give more than you receive." He worked hurt, sick, and tired, and never took a day off without stellar cause. It would have been a black mark on his name to have missed a day of work. It was as if somehow he would have been lesser of a man if someone was not pleased with his work. My father's job defined him.

His job role didn't change very often. The tasks he performed every day were similar. He was mechanically inclined and was often called on to resolve technical issues. So as different problems arose, he would experience a little variety from day to day. He tackled the biggest problems and solved them all. His work was ex-

ceptional. As I grew older and became an engineer, I understood just how good he was. I was always impressed with his work.

His office was outdoors, and through rain, sleet, snow, and heat, he worked. Big rail cars would usher in, drop off a load of trees, and leave to return again. The trees would be escorted by conveyor from one station to the next. The bark was stripped off, cut into pieces, and then ground down into small chips that would be used to make paper. It was dangerous work and was done regardless of what Mother Nature had in mind. Every day, trees rolled in and huge piles of chips were created. Day after day, week after week, for thirty-four years.

The job would have driven me into hysteria. But to my dad, it was what had to be done. He was a machine. At times, the job came before us; that is, my brothers and I. We understood what he was doing. Sometimes we just didn't know why he put so much into that job. Often, the guys at work would have a little cookout. Dad would take me along as if he was showing me off. On the way there, he would tell me that he didn't want me to do the same thing he does. "You can do better than this," he would say. "I want you to get an education so you don't get stuck out here," he would tell me over and over. As a kid, I didn't think much about what he was saying, but as I grew older and understood more about what he was doing and what they gave him in return, the picture became clear.

Over those thirty four years, he was promoted four times. That's about every 8.5 years. He did get increases in pay, but never enough to dig us out of our standard of living. Yet my father worked until he couldn't take it anymore. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened. As he grew into his fifties, the hard work began to take a huge physical toll on him. He tried to get a job that would put less stress on him, but the company wouldn't budge. He had to stay where he was. He was too good at his job, and the company needed him to do what he was doing, not something else. Like a star entering the earth's atmosphere, he began to burn up. Eventually, he was driven into long-term disability and retirement.

It wasn't until many years after I had left home, finished college and took my place as a cog in the corporate machine that I realized I was falling victim to the same thing my dad did. My experience was eerily similar. My first job at a manufacturing company lasted only a few

years. That company overwhelmed me with organizational changes. They restructured twice in one year. I don't know how they could figure out if anything was working at that pace. It was almost impossible to know who you were working for or what team you were on. I eventually got lost in there too, and when I found myself, I found a new job.

My next corporate adventure was a lot more exciting and lasted twice as long as the first. I started out as a fresh college graduate cliché, working as hard as I could. There were many days when I would work on a project for ten hours straight, without taking time for anything else. I tried my best to make them glad they hired me and believe letting me go would be a huge mistake. I thought I had, because when there were problems, management didn't hesitate to call on me. My responsibilities over the years grew and grew. As new projects came in or people left, I picked up the slack. I didn't complain, because I felt it made me more valuable. However, after a few years of watching opportunities for promotion pass me by, I began to wonder if any of this was about job performance at all. I apparently misunderstood the requirements for obtaining a promotion, because taking on more responsibility and working long hours weren't getting me one. The writing on the wall was becoming more evident every day. If I wanted to stay in this position forever, they wouldn't stop me. But that's not what I wanted. I wanted to do a good job for a few years, to prove myself, and then be given a higher-level position with more responsibility. They gave me part of it, but not the part I wanted. Working longer and harder left me exhausted, so I decided to try something different. A new job.

I approached the problem from a new angle. I enrolled in college again to further my expertise in the technical arena. The new degree would earmark me as a corporate player, and ensure my success, I thought. For two years, I worked the job and school simultaneously. My weekends were almost as long as my work week while I studied fourteen hours each day. As my knowledge level grew, I tried to monitor the reaction of management. Just when I thought all my efforts were in vain, a manager approached me with a proposition. He was starting a new research group and wanted me in it. This was a higher-profile role, and it took center stage in the company's activities. The programs managed by this team were designed to take the company into a new direction. It meant a lot of pressure, but ostensibly delivered a lot of rewards in return. However, to add a new wrinkle, weeks before the group was to form, the manager that sought me out was fired. My hard

work was just about to pay off. And what should happen? The executives suddenly can't work with the manager they hired, so they fire him and hire a new one. The idea for the new group immediately took a lower priority with management and was halted before it could begin. Hope disappeared as quickly as it arose. I became totally exhausted and stopped working on my Ph.D. Moving up was going to be a lot harder than I thought it would be. It seemed as if all the things I was taught to do in order to be successful were only useful when fate granted me the opportunity. Some of us are raised to wait on others to notice us for our big break. I didn't want to wait on fate. I wanted to create my own success.

As I sat in the cafeteria at work eating my lunch, I overheard several employees, who were also MBA students, discussing their vision of the opportunities that would be spread before them once they graduated. Now, I don't typically make it a habit to eavesdrop on other's conversations, but this one was rather interesting. You see, I knew these guys fairly well. They attended local universities, and one of the guys was nationally-ranked in his business program. These non-traditional students already had numerous years of work experience and felt that an advanced degree would aid in their upward mobility. *Imagine that*, I thought. This group of individuals already had a four-year degree and had reached what my dad would have called a fairly high-level position. They were professionals in their field. At this point, they felt that an advanced degree was the only means of making progress in their career. Like me, they already tried the "work harder and longer" route, and it didn't seem to lead them to the land of milk and honey. So they chose another road. This time, they would work *smarter*. It seemed to make sense to me. If they were professionals already, surely an advanced degree would move them closer to becoming an expert in their field, which would definitely warrant a promotion to indicate a higher status or level of expertise. There it was right in front of me—a more modern version of one of the teachings from my dad. That is, now that most people on the corporate ladder have a degree, getting an advanced degree will move you up the ladder when the first degree takes you as far as it can. Why hadn't I thought of this before?

That's what these guys were trying. Perhaps, they looked at a lot of their managers and noticed they only have a four-year degree. Getting a master's degree would put them in the perfect position to assume a leadership role should the organization change. We all know that's

likely to happen. If and when it does, the executives may look down at their management team and realize their skill set is antiquated, which makes them ill-prepared to handle issues related to a changing market and workforce. Embracing the technological age, executives will desire the younger, more driven, but well-educated professionals to take the company in a new direction. In any case, they would have the skill sets needed for the future, more so than anyone else.

The guys carried on, talking about the barriers to their upward mobility. They blamed a lot of it on managers. In their situation, the managers were usually older and had more experience (as you would expect). They learned that executives had a great degree of respect for experience. Naturally, if these men wanted to stave off competition, they wouldn't choose factors that would eliminate themselves. They knew they couldn't compete with the experience that comes with age, so they chose the path of acquiring more formal education. This would allow them to work efficiently and effectively; thus, outperforming the competition should be much easier. When I heard this, I immediately thought of another childhood staple, the story of the tortoise and the hare. Then I realized that I was the hare attempting to outrun my dad. While I was getting a sufficient amount of formal education, would it be enough to win the race against an established opponent? The tortoise has been in the race much longer and has had time to create a few of his own rules. These rules would be the hurdles that the hare has to overcome. The big question was, would these guys I was listening to be able to do it? More importantly, would I?

The lessons these guys were learning were extremely important to me, because I was also an MBA student at the time and a little further behind in my program than they were. After the last bout with academia in the technical realm, I had decided to try the business route. By learning more about how all the business functions, I would be able to better position myself for new opportunities as they develop. If the company decided to create the new research group again, I could design it or help solicit new programs for them to work on. However, I had to learn about all sides of business first. As I acquired this basic business knowledge, I also had the advantage of learning lessons from those eager MBA students I overheard in the cafeteria. As they applied their knowledge, some things would work and some wouldn't. My plan was to take their lessons and modify them to increase my own success.

One year after they graduated, not one of these men had moved up in their area, nor did they see any future possibilities. Everyone was still in the same position. Their managers didn't even recognize them for their achievement. Not a single word was uttered. With my own graduation approaching, I felt it was time to talk with them to gain a firsthand understanding of what was happening. Having known them for many years, I was sure they would share their experiences with me. I wanted to know if I was wasting my time. Through many discussions, they openly shared their views. They felt that their efforts were above and beyond what most of their peers—and even their managers—were doing to enhance their career development. There were no managers in the company that worked all day and then went to college all night, like they had chosen to do. This was no small commitment. It took two years to complete the degree. Two of the students were married and had several small children. The quest for the MBA while working and raising a family was an extremely daunting task, both professionally and personally. Yet, after all was said and done, none of them were even recognized for this accomplishment. They were quite confused about it. While they didn't have a great deal of work experience, they were in the middle of their careers and now possessed a graduate degree. Their new confidence prepared them to tackle the company's most difficult issues, yet no one ever asked for their input. The company never responded to their requests. It was as if nothing had changed. In fact, nothing really had, except them. So, after putting forth such a great effort to improve their skills, they found that significant expertise alone couldn't propel them upward.

I became afraid that I would fall victim to the same problems they encountered, so I resolved to get advice from the "experts." Advice from the average "climb the corporate ladder" book didn't prove to be very useful. Many of the experts are academics or consultants, who attempt to understand the difficulties employees are facing, and then offer solutions on how to handle the situations. They write from the viewpoint of someone who is already at the top and looking down, rather than at the bottom looking up. As a result, these books only offered broad generalizations that were hard to identify with and implement effectively.

The things these authors pointed out didn't make a lot of sense to me then, and some of it still doesn't. Much of what they teach is significant to executives in the positions many of us seek to occupy. Some books discussed pointers such as how to not embarrass your boss and how

to dress appropriately, walk, talk, act, rededicate yourself to your current position, avoid thinking like an entrepreneur, and so on. Much of that sounded like the life lessons my father taught. Still, others suggested that you must be able to recognize when change is needed and then make it. People know this; however, what the books fail to do is tell you what to do with this information. It is hard to know when to change, how to see the change as it really occurs, and how to make the correct adjustments to offset it. These books sounded like clichés with catchy titles.

The problem is that the advice is relative. Many of these books speak in parables. Consider one particular parable that takes place in a maze. The four characters in the maze spend their time searching for cheese, a symbol related to our livelihood, such as our careers, jobs, or industries we work in. Two of the characters just want cheese and do whatever it takes to get it. The other two characters procrastinate when it is moved, remaining unwilling to change and hopeful the cheese will return, while the other two characters run off in search of it. The main point of the story is that people must be alert to changes in the cheese and willing to search for new sources when the cheese runs out.[1]

To look at his advice in more detail, let's consider a situation that is a fairly common event in business today, organization restructuring. Your company was just purchased by a larger company to gain access to one of your customers. The parent company determines that portions of your company are no longer necessary, so they institute a new organization structure, which needs fewer people to support. Many people will keep their jobs, but many others will get the opportunity to find a new one. Unfortunately, you are one of the people that get to search for the new cheese. Most likely, you would not have been able to sense a change in the job, since management usually keeps the sale of the company confidential for fear of inducing a mass exodus. So what do you do now? You don't have a future at the company, so you must find a new one. Just as in the Johnson's book, the cheese moved. Now, you have to find new cheese. While Johnston brings up a good point, his advice is oversimplified. As in this example, some change is simple and requires little consideration to identify the need for change.

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1. Spencer Johnson, *Who Moved My Cheese* (New York: Putnam, 2002).

The real complications in decision making come from the subtleties of job change and how to actually change the situation. Let's reconsider the previous example. Now, you are one of the people that keep their job but you get a new manager. You immediately recognize that your personalities will clash. Not willing to lose your job, you try to work around the personality differences, yet it still takes an emotional toll on you. You begin to feel the happiness drain from the job. You may also realize that, over time, these things can degrade your quality of life. Sure, you need to change, but how and when do we change? In the previous case of losing your job, the solution is easy: find a new job as fast as possible. In the case of losing the joy in your job, it's much more difficult. Recognizing and accepting that change is important yet isn't sufficient in itself.

As in the case of recognizing change, it is difficult to transform generic advice into a strategy that would make the most of what you have to offer. As with getting a new manager, the situation may change, creating the need to identify the appropriate change. Many of the Fortune 500 companies change every year, so this can lead to a lot of time and effort just responding to changes in managers. In one company I interviewed, a business development manager stated he had seven managers in one year. It's not too difficult to imagine the challenge of understanding how each one felt about each important factor the experts identify as critical for success. It could be done, but it would just take too much time away from daily job responsibilities. In the cases of constant change, it may be too time-consuming to respond to each change and less beneficial to apply generic advice.

After I graduated with my MBA, I began to meet with the guys from the cafeteria to learn more about what techniques they had tried to improve their career. Each one told stories of their individual efforts and their outcomes. I tried to absorb it all. Once I had put all the pieces together, I figured out what the puzzle was telling me. In essence, climbing the corporate ladder alone is not the best approach. It is too easy to make a mistake and stalemate years of effort. While Johnson's advice about recognizing change has merit, it's not always best to just accept it. As the guys from the cafeteria and I were learning, some responses to change are best planned, especially if a particular outcome is desired. We had found moving up the corporate ladder to be difficult, but I wasn't giving up. There had to be a better way than going to college, getting a job, and working long hours in hopes of being rewarded.

These things are important, but they'll only carry your career so far. The cafeteria gang was living proof of that concept. I always knew, there had to be a better way. And, I found one.

I decided the cafeteria gang and I would all be much better served if we combined our efforts rather than spinning hopelessly alone. It became clear to me that the corporate system that we worked in was set up to encourage competition; in other words, it was built on the concept that individuals would need to outperform each other to receive any rewards offered by management. In this manner, the organization would profit from an elevated level of performance, most likely in the form of productivity and efficiency. While this is obviously advantageous for the organization, it provides no guarantees of career success for the employees, despite their performance. This is because the organization uses Forced Ranking, which requires a ranking of all employees based on pre-specified performance. Jack Welch, retired Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of General Electric (GE), made this tool popular and used this in his performance management system to remove the bottom ten percent of performers each year. Unfortunately, this means that even good performers are at risk, especially if they work in a high-performing group. This also implies that, if you fail to meet expectations, you could be ranked low and at an even greater risk of losing your employment with the company.

In such head-to-head competition, how do you guarantee success? If you find yourself on a highly efficient and effective team, such as playing golf with five Tiger Woods, how can you ensure you'll perform well enough to survive the ranking system? After teeing off on the first hole, you are sure to realize that it would be considerably more beneficial for several individuals to work together to be truly competitive against better players. In work, just like the PGA tour, you don't get a mulligan. With Forced Ranking, it's hard to recover from a bad shot. Your best bet is to not make the bad shot in the beginning. In thinking about how to compete head-to-head against a high-quality player like Tiger Woods, I realized the best option is to not try it alone. Sure, it's not head-to-head, but the odds of coming out on top are a lot better.

My ever-so-eager cafeteria colleagues and I became very close friends, so it didn't make sense that we compete with each other for opportunities. We simply decided who was the best match and began to market him for the position. And with that little change, the *Blitz*

concept was born. I then created an informal team to test how such a concept would work in a highly-political environment. The team was comprised of real go-getters. They weren't necessarily at the bottom of the organization, but they had definitely reached a plateau. Just like many of us. They had tried many things to overcome it, but failed to find a solution. Just like many of us. Luckily, this didn't seem to extinguish their drive. They still wanted to climb the ladder and a little failure wouldn't slow them down. Just like, well, you get the point. To them, it was a learning process, and they had just learned what didn't work. Now, it was time for new lesson.

After creating this team approach, we gave ourselves two years to evaluate it. We didn't dive in with any preconceived notions. We wanted to see how it would work with as little planning as possible. Over the next two years, we helped each other develop new skills, identify new opportunities, create a simple strategy and implement it. We stood up for each other and utilized our team skills to accomplish our work. Collectively we worked less than we ever did separately. The only major area of effort was that we would meet often to discuss our progress and what we wanted to do. The group had more than one set of eyes, giving us the benefit of diverse perspectives, which we fully intended to use to seek out new opportunities. Over this time period, two of the group members were promoted and one was given an opportunity to lead a new program to develop a new line of business. Our efforts didn't stop here. We still meet today and make every effort to support our team. The important concepts learned in this small demonstration are the essence of this book. Considerable reflection was performed to evaluate how we could build a strategy to improve our upward mobility. It's all in here.

As you progress through the book, keep your current approach in mind, and consider the evidence I'll put before you as to why it may not be sufficient. Corporations are changing constantly, and so must your methods if you wish to take full advantage of any and all opportunities. We have achieved considerable success with a little planning. Now combine this with the strategies defined within, and you'll begin to see how you can compel others to treat you differently. Once this initiation begins, the rest of the process will be as simple as the whole concept: Easy to visualize, easy to materialize.

About the Author

Todd Rhoad's expertise is drawn from twenty years of experience as an engineer struggling to climb the corporate ladder through government, private, public, profit and non-profit organizations. Thinking education alone would be sufficient to climb the ladder, Todd obtained a Master's Degree in both Electrical Engineering and Business Administration. He has worked in numerous industries from consumer products to high technology research and development while serving in roles from engineer to finally reaching the managerial ranks. He is currently Managing Director at Bt Consulting in Austin, TX. With over 30 publications in journals, books and conferences, he is a frequent speaker and presenter at symposiums and conferences.

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