

THE RED PILL

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“[Y]ou are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.” — Lana Wachowski.¹

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ABSTRACT

In our professional journeys, we may often find ourselves confronted with pivotal choices similar to the ones made by Neo in “The Matrix.” This Article explores these choices in the contexts of career developments, the corporate environment, and self-perception, as they relate to the Hollywood sphere. This Article will analyze the concept of choosing the “red pill,” revealing the truths about the realities of professional life and how one can successfully operate within it. This Article will guide readers through the dark side of adulting, which may include the harsh, but necessary, choice of leaving people behind that alters one’s confidence and self-perception to make the most of a newfound professional career. This Article will outline how to address feelings of impostor syndrome and self-doubt when making a career transition into the corporate landscape. Additionally, it analyzes the

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1. THE MATRIX (Warner Bros. Pictures 1999).

dangers of idolizing successful public figures or highly ranked CEOs without examining the often-questionable means in which they achieved their status. Here, this Article will address the idea of Cultivation Theory to demonstrate how the media misleads us into thinking that what we view and read about successful individuals is accurately depicted. This Article will also touch on the interests of corporations' own welfare and why employees should maintain a safe emotional distance while still actively fueling their own corporate development. It will encourage readers to embrace their talents and specialties that make them unique in comparison to others in the corporate world, so they can greatly excel in a career in their desired field. By addressing these themes, this Article will ultimately provide the mindset to navigate the choices and realities of one's professional endeavors, helping readers to acknowledge their potential in the evolving realm of Hollywood.

INTRODUCTION

The Matrix is a movie about Neo, a young computer hacker who discovers that reality is not what it seems. Neo (played by Keanu Reeves), like everyone around him, is living in a computer projection called the Matrix, which resembles the natural world.² The purpose of this virtual reality is to divert humanity's attention away from who is actually in control of the world and to what end.³ Yet, after awakening Neo to this paradox, his mentor Morpheus (played by Laurence Fishburne) presents Neo with an ultimatum. It's in the form of two pills: one blue and one red.⁴ Neo can either resume living, comfortably sedated in the illusion enveloping his consciousness by swallowing the "blue pill," or he can ingest the "red pill" to be fully disconnected from the dream and sinister machines.⁵

When offered the opportunity to venture into a new chapter of our professional journey, we often find ourselves in the same predicament as Neo. We can remain on the familiar path that offers a more-or-less predictable outcome, or we can overcome the crippling fear of the unknown to embrace what's ahead. The reason we are tempted by the latter is because we instinctively know there's more to explore and experience than what we've been told or taught. Still, the width of that gap between what we already know and what we'll learn is beyond our perception. For some, that gap will be a scary chasm of exponential proportions; for others, it will be a thrill-seeking adventure. In either case, that journey will certainly require establishing the right mental, emotional, and intellectual foundation to equip you for the task. That foundational preparation is not about obtaining particular pieces of information, but about reframing your perspective around the information you already have. This Article is designed to teach you how to leverage that perspective over the circumstances and situations you will encounter in Hollywood.

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

I. THE RED PILL

Like in *The Matrix*, we're often subjected to virtual projections that gloss over the harsh realities of our world. That is why this Article will likely be the most unpleasant to read, yet the "red pill" you need. Those unpleasant realities that exist in our actual world are usually seen as inconvenient truths that offer very little utility in our day-to-day lives. However, that's not true at all. The "red pill" also reveals your two greatest enemies. These are the most intimidating obstacles you'll ever encounter: your mind and emotions (aka your heart and soul). Your mind and emotions have been programmed to lie to you about the truth, cheat you out of a fulfilling career, and steal your clarity of thought. You lacked that awareness until now. For instance, Neo began the journey to claim his power once he was fully disconnected from the machines to witness the dark, industrial-like power plant that operated everything, including the beauty of his virtual reality: "You already know enough. It's not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know."⁶

Until the moment you leave for college, most of you exist as the center of your universe. Though you can't sense it any more than you can feel the Earth rotate around the Sun, it's an imperceptible reality since your birth. The Earth is in rotation around the Sun at this very moment, just like your parents, professors, coaches, and friends are rotating around you. When you leave that familiar universe and start law school (or college), you immediately feel your world begin to change as though you've landed on a new planet that has a different gravity, atmosphere, and climate. For a short while, everything becomes a little off balance until you find your footing with your classes, new social circle, and virtual independence. This transition can be difficult at times. Still, you feel somewhat protected by tethering to the institution that enrolled you and your connection to family or friends back home.

The reason we require those adjustments and transitions is because when we enter a new world (whether that's a new school, new job, new team, or new social circle), we usually step into it as though the laws of gravity and the natural elements surrounding us will operate the same as the world we came from. However, just like the Sun in our solar system gave Clark Kent superhuman strength, the atmosphere in your new world may supercharge your natural gifts or make you feel winded and weakened after walking 100 feet. Although these are figurative examples, the principals remain

6. *Exterminate All the Brutes: The Bright Colors of Fascism* (HBO television broadcast Apr. 8, 2021) (quoting SVEN LINDQVIST, *EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES 2* (Joan Tate trans., The New Press 1996) (1992)).

consistent. Some of you will immediately excel in your new worlds with little effort and others will quickly fail with no knowledge of why. Understanding the reason for your success or failure is rooted in first understanding the truths and falsehoods you've been taught about that new world, as well as the ones from which you originate. Essentially, you need to understand the dualities of the world at large. Regardless of how demoralizing, disheartening, or disinteresting that might be, I will give you a litmus test for grounding yourself in actual reality and a strong self-identity to cope with the transition. That litmus test requires a firm understanding of human nature and the expectations of the business world, and placing conventional success, fortune, and legacy in its proper historical context. Without that foundation, you will easily be lost in the chaos that comes with discerning who you are while acclimating to the new atmosphere of that business enterprise that hired you.

II. THE DARKSIDE OF ADULTING

Reflecting on my personal experiences, I vividly remember how much I thought I understood about a corporate career when I first started. I quickly learned that I had no idea about the litany of silent, subtle, and serious expectations that came with the job. Even though I had just been knighted by the nobility into a corporate kingdom that granted the title and authority I had always hoped to achieve, deep down inside I didn't feel ready. I projected confidence in the presence of my monarchs, but my subconscious was still entangled in layers of lingering voices left by childhood naysayers and negative experiences. These were things that I often wasn't even aware existed, until I mentally pressed replay on my response to a tense work situation or examined how I handled various professional pressures. Managing deadlines, dealmaking for high dollars, and dealing with demanding bosses will quickly test your grit, which is undergirded by gut. Being under that kind of intense scrutiny exposed the hairline fractures in my outward armor. A poker face and an impressive intellect will get you into the race, but not across the finish line if your mind begins to trigger emotions that sabotage your strength. It took me a few years to figure out where those skeletons were buried in my brain, and who dug the graves. When I did, I had profound revelations. I concluded that the people closest to me (family, friends, etc.) did the most damage to my confidence and self-perception. Ironically, these same people did not know who I would become as a professional, the professional expectations of my ambitions, or the professional competitiveness of the world I would inhabit. So, their negative affirmations, contagious anxiety, or inability to see my vision weren't meant

to be destructive by design. Nevertheless, these all needed to be uprooted, along with the access entrusted in them to nurture me into that professional future. It was time for me to find believers and liked-minded visionaries who spoke my language and were on the same journey as me. That's another dark side of adulting: Some people will need to be left in the childhood chapter of your life or relegated to a safe emotional distance, if you're going to make room for the new people that can be entrusted with that intimacy.

III. YOU'RE AN IMPOSTER

Many of you will have an experience similar to my own. For instance, however productive, successful, or fortunate you've been up until this point, most of you still feel that you're not good enough to achieve your dream career. You feel a sense of anxiety when confronted with your lack of clarity about your professional ambitions. When in the presence of highly successful people in your field, it's intimidating and stressful because you think you don't measure up. You have an ongoing fear that people will discover you're not that smart, funny, creative, or interesting. You think they'll see through the superficiality of your charming personality, astute social etiquette, witty sense of humor, good looks, enthusiastic nature, impressive intellect, or effective communication skills and realize you have none of those things. They will see that you're not special at all. They'll smile at you, but secretly think that you don't deserve a seat at the table. They'll say to each other that you don't belong amongst the brilliant or best that naturally possess the gifts you're pretending to have. You're just an imposter! “[A]n estimated 70% of the population” have experienced imposter syndrome at some point in their professional and personal lives.⁷ The number jumps for women in professional settings, with “75% of executive women” citing “imposter syndrome” as an obstacle in their careers.⁸

A. Approaching Imposter Syndrome

So, let's surface that imposter syndrome in your life. When you hear the negative voices in your head or feel them in your heart, ask yourself these two questions: (1) Where did these insecurities come from?; (2) How can

7. Jeanne Crouteau, *Imposter Syndrome—Why It's Harder Today Than Ever*, FORBES (Apr. 4, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannecrouteau/2019/04/04/imposter-syndrome-why-its-harder-today-than-ever>.

8. Kathy Caprino, *Imposter Syndrome Prevalence in Professional Women and How to Overcome It*, FORBES (Oct. 22, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2020/10/22/impostor-syndrome-prevalence-in-professional-women-face-and-how-to-overcome-it>.

someone like you who's achieved distinction in academics, athletics, or social circles feel so unprepared for the world? The answer: The adult life you learned about outside your protective bubble likely scared you into believing that you can't cope with the expectations, which is a reasonable basis for fear. However, that's only a small part of the issue. The larger issue is related to the other stuff you've been feeding the inside of that bubble—those sights and sounds messaging that you're not good enough. That proverbial food has left you malnourished. It has put you, mentally and emotionally, in a state of starvation. In essence, it has disarmed your ability to confront the falsehoods about your identity, even if you're posting or projecting otherwise in your public profiles.

We curate our social media feeds to present a specific, polished, and accomplished life. Dr. Elizabeth Lombardo, author of *Goodbye Imposter Syndrome* explains:

Many people post pictures or quotes that represent their ideal self They want others to see them in this positive light because they want to see themselves in this positive light. However, once you put those posts out there, then there is the sense that people think that is your normal [life], especially when people make comments like, "You are so beautiful" or, "How lucky you are!" And that is when the *imposter syndrome* starts creeping in. Your inner critic starts screaming, "You are such a phony; if only they knew!"⁹

This is where you take stock of what you've been trained to think about yourself, and who or what you've been listening to—actively or passively—about your self-identity. Make a hit list to root out the mental skeletons, self-actualizing imagery, or disconcerting voices. Keep the filtration process simple: If you're not being supported with words of affirmation, aspirational examples, or resources to help you fly, why are you continuing to share the same air with the negative examples, distractors, or nonbelievers? These are the tough questions that you'll need to ask yourself if you want to trigger answers that will change the proverbial atmosphere feeding or suffocating you. It is also going to be hard to actively change your atmosphere due to the sentimental connections you've created (e.g., familiarity of certain friendships or the comfort that comes with certain coping mechanisms

9. Bella Gerard, *How Instagram Can Trigger Imposter Syndrome—And How to Overcome It*, THE CHILL TIMES, <https://www.thechilltimes.com/how-instagram-can-trigger-imposter-syndrome-and-how-to-overcome-it> (last visited Apr. 21, 2024) (emphasis added).

you've chosen). However, these steps are a necessary blueprint for building the foundation you'll need for healthy growth.

IV. WORSHIPING FALSE IDOLS

We've all been hardwired to accept the seemingly natural hierarchy established within our society by illustrious titles, distinct jawlines, well-curated confidence, and aspirational lifestyles.¹⁰ That's been the case well before Instagram filters or millionaire media influencers.¹¹ No, that hardwiring isn't by happenstance or the result of some random outcome. It serves a specific purpose. It's designed to create a society of submissive, well-socialized, sycophants (aka suck-ups) that won't upset the status quo, but instead, wait patiently to be invited into those exclusive cohorts.¹² Through this practice of social engineering, a society of "yes-men" is created, and no one is left to challenge those in power.¹³ Some might be asking, what's the harm in that? The answer to that question: relatively none, if you understand you're being manipulated, and that exclusive cohort achieved its status through its own merit. However, that's rarely the case. Career expert Terina Allen shares:

[M]ost people get [socially engineered] this way because they are responding to a culture or people in management who elicit and reward this type of behavior. . . . [S]o-called yes men are doing what they think they need to do to survive on a dysfunctional leadership landscape where all the signals and messages confirm for them that dissent is bad and agreement is good.¹⁴

Winning the genetic lottery that awarded you your chiseled chin and statuesque physique shouldn't equate to an advantage over others in your

10. Jessica E. Koski et al., *Understanding Social Hierarchies: The Neural and Psychological Foundations of Status Perception*, 10 *SOC. NEUROSCIENCE* 527, 527–28 (2015).

11. Anthony Tshering, *Why Social Media Will Make You Feel Empty: Identity and Social Hierarchies in the Internet Age*, ANTHONY TSHERING, LCSW (Mar. 2, 2021), <https://www.brooklyntherapist.net/blog/2021/3/2/why-social-media-will-make-you-feel-empty-identity-and-social-hierarchies-in-the-internet-age>.

12. See Koski et al., *supra* note 10, at 529.

13. *Yes-Man*, MERRIAM WEBSTER DICTIONARY, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/yes-man> (last visited Apr. 21, 2024) (defining "yes-man" as "a person who agrees with everything that is said").

14. Terina Allen, *Are You Creating 'Yes Men' and Hindering Your Own Leadership Success?*, FORBES (Nov. 10, 2018), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/terinaallen/2018/11/10/are-you-creating-yes-men-and-hindering-your-own-leadership-success>.

career, but you know it will. Getting promoted from vice president to senior vice president because the CEO golfs with your dad doesn't mean you're any more capable than the other VPs in your group, but you know it does. Building a multimillion-dollar tech startup based on the \$250,000 starter kit in your family's trust fund shouldn't be marketed as a self-made success story, but you know it will. The point is, most of you are measuring yourselves against people and their success purely based on what they are projecting to be, but not who they actually are. You're being programmed to do the same thing when it's your turn in the photo booth. That tactic might be effective in the short term to manage your starvation, but in the long term, you'll need a respirator to survive (i.e., you'll never feel safe or satisfied). However, you won't be alone. Author Malcolm Gladwell contextualizes this idea of unconscious bias in *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*: “[M]ediocre people find their way into positions of authority . . . because when it comes to even the most important positions, our selection decisions are a good deal less rational than we think.”¹⁵ Hollywood leans into unconscious bias and as a result, people are hired for reasons aside from work ethic and experience, such as who they know or even how visibly appealing they are.¹⁶

After spending time with executives of every rank and multiple business leaders (e.g., founders, presidents, and CEOs), I learned that most of them feel exactly like you do. I recall how infectious their fear would be and hating to get a phone call from one particular executive I worked with. She was always so nervous about a deal blowing up or not landing the actor we were pursuing. Her lack of calmness and heightened anxiety would throw me in a tailspin of emotions. She was a bad example of leadership, but the perfect example of a socially engineered sycophant because she was willing to bleed for a company that didn't value her loyalty. The bosses loved that. The improved versions of those fear-filled people also aren't confident about what they can accomplish; yet, they've learned how to project confidence. They don't fully understand every major aspect of their role or even know how to solve many of the big problems under their purview. However, they developed a gift for sourcing the needed expertise. They lack self-confidence in their appearance and have tons of anxiety about how they are perceived. They eventually realize you can't smell their fear or the antidepressant medication, only their designer cologne.

15. MALCOLM GLADWELL, *BLINK: THE POWER OF THINKING WITHOUT THINKING* 88 (2005).

16. See Steph Clarke, *Three Big Ideas Learnt from the Book Blink by Malcolm Gladwell*, MEDIUM: STEPH'S BUS. BOOKSHELF (Nov. 21, 2019), <https://medium.com/stephs-business-bookshelf/three-big-ideas-learnt-from-the-book-blink-by-malcolm-gladwell-e4ffc5288d87>.

Do you get the point? These people are no different than you. They find coping mechanisms (some unhealthy) like you, to hide their insecurities or productive ways to refocus that energy so that it doesn't hamstring their effectiveness. Even after ascending the ranks of an organization, you don't stop getting nervous about speaking up in an office meeting. You'll still be fearful of sounding dumb or not being liked because of what you say. Seasoned and experienced people think of themselves as adults, but we're more akin to an adolescent Adam and Eve covering up our insecurities with fig leaves in the Garden of Eden.

In a *Harvard Business Review* survey looking at the top fears and anxieties of powerful CEOs, the number one fear of respondents was imposter syndrome.¹⁷ Other common fears included “underachieving” and “appearing too vulnerable.”¹⁸ Nearly 60% said these “fears affected behaviors on their executive team[s]”; however, 95% stated they had a “limited view of their own fears.”¹⁹ By refusing to look at their anxieties, these executives failed to overcome them and as a result, listed over 500 consequences due to their dysfunctional behavior that originated with fear.²⁰

As you can see, these anxieties are likely to remain with you like your mentors and professional contacts that possess them, unless you take a proactive approach to rooting out these anxieties. One of the most effective ways to reclaim the power of self-image and build self-confidence is to not just develop self-awareness but to be aware of the falsehoods that surround you. The people projecting power know, like you do, that perception is greater than reality. Deifying powerful people that inspire you can also infuse within you an inferiority complex, especially when in their presence (which they will sense). Idolizing those higher up in the workplace is a particularly bad idea for a multitude of reasons. It clouds your judgment, making it impossible to see yourself, others, and situations clearly.²¹ This leads to more mistakes and passivity, as you're more likely to cover up for your idol.²² On the other hand, those with power are at risk of becoming delusional and believing the hype about themselves, which stifles professional growth.²³

17. Roger Jones, *What CEOs Are Afraid of*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Feb. 24, 2015), <https://hbr.org/2015/02/what-ceos-are-afraid-of>.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. Annie McKee, *Why It's Dangerous to Love Your Boss*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Dec. 4, 2014), <https://hbr.org/2014/12/why-its-dangerous-to-love-your-boss>.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

Remember that time you were so impressed by a photo or video of a beautiful social media influencer (or television personality) until you discovered the unfiltered, non-airbrushed, no-makeup version of them? Do you recall feeling much less impressed because their apparent perfection wasn't real? The same principle applies to the uber-successful or brilliant businesspeople you admire. Yes, they may have reinvented the wheel or landed a spaceship on Mars, but what about those unflattering things you find when surveying the headlines of their life. Steve Jobs would drive around in his car without a license and regularly parked in handicapped spots.²⁴ Amazon employees recollected Jeff Bezos's regular "put-downs" and outbursts that include gems such as "'Are you lazy or just incompetent?' 'Why are you wasting my life?' and 'I'm sorry, did I take my stupid pills today?'"²⁵ When Elon Musk's longtime executive assistant advocated for a significant raise, he sent her on vacation for two weeks and when she returned, he fired her.²⁶ Despite their significant contributions to society, these powerful men, if weighed on the scale of morality, would be found wanting just like the rest of us.²⁷ Yes, their tech empires are impressive achievements, but accessing the totality of the person will give you a more accurate measure of their accomplishments.

A. The "Cultivation Theory"

Here's a crude example: Would you stand in awe of the pharaohs that built the pyramids if you witnessed child-laborers being crushed to death by those heavy stones? No, of course not. That's because you instinctively understand that the appraisal of brilliant achievements should be counterbalanced by the undergirding bad acts. However, as a society, we are not socially engineered to think that rationally.²⁸ We're offered the illusion of choice in terms of what we consume that frames our perspective, but in reality, almost everything we watch or read stems from one of five

24. Tony Schwartz, *The Bad Behavior of Visionary Leaders*, N.Y. TIMES (June 26, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/business/dealbook/the-bad-behavior-of-visionary-leaders.html>.

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. See Amanda Onion et al., *Great Wall of China*, HISTORY (May 31, 2023), <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-china/great-wall-of-china>. Of the Seven Wonders, it's likely the majority of them were built on the backs of enslaved and exploited people. See *id.* For example, over 400,000 people died during the building of the Great Wall of China, all of them slaves, soldiers, convicts, and other unpaid laborers. *Id.* Yet its construction is typically accredited to various emperors, specifically the project's initiator, Emperor Qin Shi Huang. *Id.*

conglomerates owned by the same 15 billionaires.²⁹ Their reach extends to nearly 100% of American homes.³⁰ That kind of penetration allows a very small community of people to cultivate the mass population's perspective and attitude that what they are consuming is "an accurate depiction of the real world."³¹ In the study of mass communications this is called "Cultivation Theory"³²:

The theory suggests that this cultivation of attitudes is based on attitudes already present in our society and that the media take those attitudes which are already present and re-present them bundled in a different packaging to their audiences. One of the main tenets of the theory is that television and media cultivate the status quo, they do not challenge it. Many times the viewer is unaware the extent to which they absorb media, many times viewing themselves as moderate viewers when, in fact, they are heavy viewers.³³

Successful people are deified because we only see their highlight reel. Allow their flaws to humanize your perception of them. If you do that effectively, you won't feel as intimidated by their presence because you'll remember they are no more perfect than you are. This principle remains true for anyone whose towering intellect intimidates you. Like Anand Giridharadas, author of *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, pointed out about Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook: "[T]he guy in the t-shirt with a nice smile and a nerdy vibe and an inability

29. Kate Vinton, *These 15 Billionaires Own America's News Media Companies*, FORBES (June 1, 2016), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katevinton/2016/06/01/these-15-billionaires-own-americas-news-media-companies>.

30. See Second Thought, *Capitalism and Monopolies: How Five Companies Control All US Media*, YOUTUBE, at 2:25 (Aug. 28, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1_ICe3vyyc. Since the early 1980s, vertical integration has caused the number of media companies controlling the majority of U.S. media to shrink from around 50 to only 5 near monopolies: Disney, Comcast, National Amusements, News Corp and AT&T. *Id.* at 0:37. Altogether, these companies are worth over \$400 billion and control about 90% of all media, ranging in everything from film studios to news. *Id.* at 2:17; see also James George Jatras, *How American Media Serves as a Transmission Belt for Wars of Choice* (Sept. 2016) (unpublished manuscript at 7), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2838494 ("80 percent of the top 20 online news sites are owned by the 100 largest media companies. Time Warner owns two of the most visited sites: *CNN.com* and *AOL News*, while Gannett, which is the twelfth largest media company, owns *USAToday.com* along with many local online newspapers." (citation omitted)).

31. Gavin Davie, *Cultivation Theory*, MASS COMMC'N THEORY, <https://masscommtheory.com/theory-overviews/cultivation-theory> (last visited Apr. 21, 2024).

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

to process emotions.”³⁴ He practically “compromised a U.S. federal election”³⁵ by allowing “3,000 political ads” to be purchased on Facebook by “Russian-backed accounts” in favor of Donald Trump while simultaneously defending the dangerous spread of misinformation on the platform.³⁶ Titans of tech, like Zuckerberg, may have decades more experience than you, skills you can’t compete with, and a salary 20 times higher than yours, but they are flesh-and-blood and full of flaws that you actually may not have. That means you have no reason to be intimidated. You don’t have to know their dirty laundry or bad habits to know these flaws exist. Respect their work, but know they are not immortal. Look them in their eyes as an equal, and they will be attracted to your confidence. Personal branding expert and author, William Arruda says: “When someone exudes confidence, we want to work with them.”³⁷ Lynn Taylor, author and national workplace expert, adds:

Confidence is also a key leadership quality . . . [It allows you] to attract and retain a quality team, because they will trust you and feel you have matters under control. If you know your subject and stance, believe in yourself, and speak with poise and conviction, you will naturally exude confidence.³⁸

Anxiety is a contagion the same way exuding confidence and strength can be infectious. We all want to be infected with that kind of positive power. It feels good to be around people who feel good about themselves and aren’t easily intimidated. However, when the roots of that confidence are rotten, the power tends to get corrupted. So, if you find yourself in the midst of powerful people, examine what anchors their confidence and lack of regard for what others may think. Repeatedly peek beneath the surface of that outward show of strength. I’ve encountered three kinds of successful people: (1) Those that think everyone is beneath them, so their arrogance masquerades as

34. Anand Giridharadas, *New Economic Thinking: The New Feudalism*, YOUTUBE, at 11:19 (Jan. 9, 2019), <https://youtu.be/n-2TEwdRnX0?si=dQWTC4-nQPrNzxMV> (interviewing Anand Giridharadas “about how the titans of Silicon Valley use ‘philanthropy’ to control more of our lives”); see also ANAND GIRIDHARADAS, *WINNERS TAKE ALL: THE ELITE CHARADE OF CHANGING THE WORLD* (2018).

35. *Id.* at 11:29.

36. Kathleen Chaykowski, *Zuckerberg Defends Facebook’s Role in Election but ‘Regrets’ Dismissing Impact of Fake News*, FORBES (Sept. 27, 2017), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathleenchaykowski/2017/09/27/zuckerberg-defends-facebooks-role-in-election-but-regrets-dismissing-impact-of-fake-news>.

37. Jacquelyn Smith, *How to Be More Confident at Work*, FORBES (Mar. 6, 2012), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2012/03/06/how-to-be-more-confident-at-work>.

38. *Id.*

confidence; (2) Those that identify themselves by their achievements, so their confidence crumbles with the shelf life of those laurels; and (3) Those that are grounded in who they are (unfiltered flaws and all) and not easily impressed by accolades unless it's accompanied by inner strength of character. Become the latter version. Invest in opportunities that offer character building and emotional intelligence. Resist the urge to conform or be conventional out of fear.

V. THE IRON PRICE

Don't romanticize the power elite or the trappings of their success; always know the stories of their origins. For example, every empire, whether business, political, or governmental, paid the "Iron Price" to achieve its status. In *Game of Thrones*, the Iron Price "means seizing something [by the force of an iron sword] from those one has defeated [or from one's corpse after killing them] rather than paying or trading for it."³⁹ Republican governments, sovereign monarchs, and business monopolies of the 20th century all share the same Iron Price legacy (e.g., colonialism, the African slave trades, imperial genocides).⁴⁰ Industrialization, modern technology, or human rights regulations forced the monarchs and rich merchants of yesterday to reinvent themselves as the capitalists and plutocrats of today. You don't need to be a forensic accountant or historian to follow those financial footprints. Anyone can easily connect the coffers of today's hallowed institutions and corporatocracies to the exploitative tactics of yesterday's power elite. As the low-born sellsword by the name of Bronn in *Game of Thrones* put it in response to the rich and handsome Jamie Lannister:

Who were your ancestors? The ones who made your family rich? Fancy lads in silk? They were fucking cutthroats. That's how all the great houses started, isn't it? With a hard bastard who was good at killing people. Kill a few hundred people, they make you a lord. Kill a few thousand, they make you king.⁴¹

39. *Iron Price*, WIKI OF WESTEROS, https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/wiki/Iron_price (last visited Apr. 21, 2024).

40. See Richard Schneirov, *Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873-1898*, 5 J. GILDED AGE & PROGRESSIVE ERA 189, 200-01 (2006); Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu & Kelechi Johnmary Ani, *Slavery & Colonialism: The Roots of Postcolonial Conflicts in Africa*, 24 WORLD AFFS.: J. INT'L ISSUES 132, 134, 137, 140-41 (2020).

41. *Game of Thrones: The Last of the Starks* (HBO television broadcast May 5, 2019).

However, what does any of that have to do with you or your career? That's simple. You may not be working for the East India Company trafficking human cargo for cash or for a bank cartel lending money to emerging nations at usurious interest rates. However, you'll be employed by a company that approaches business with the same level of cognitive dissonance in pursuit of capital. I'm not suggesting that people within your organization won't care about your well-being and success or the fate of mankind. I'm saying that those things won't trump the importance of the organization's health, vitality, and bottom line. So, you're being cautioned to not get too entangled in a corporate identity and misplace your loyalty. Companies are not afraid to cut employees with no regard for their welfare. During the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic in April to September of 2020, "45 of the 50 most valuable publicly traded U.S. companies turned a profit"⁴² "Despite their success, [27 of these companies] held layoffs [that] year, collectively cutting more than 100,000 workers," leaving them unemployed and uninsured during a pandemic.⁴³ Therefore, work smart while maintaining a sober mind and safe emotional distance from the company pep rallies and watercooler conversation. If you do, then you will be able to see the machinations moving you around the chess board into a prestigious opportunity or off the company's payroll.

Social Darwinism is the order of the day.⁴⁴ It is the idea that survival of the fittest applies in the workplace too and encourages innovation and change, as opposed to hindering it.⁴⁵ According to Bill Frederick at Fast Company:

The competitive "winners" are those most adaptable to their organizational environment—not necessarily the smartest, the cleverest, the most far-sighted, the wisest, the most experienced, or the most cooperative—but only the ones who learn to play the organizational game in adaptive ways. Survival is the nature of the workplace game.⁴⁶

42. Douglas MacMillan et. al., *America's Biggest Companies Are Flourishing During the Pandemic and Putting Thousands of People Out of Work*, WASH. POST (Dec. 16, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/50-biggest-companies-coronavirus-layoffs>.

43. *Id.*

44. See Claire Goldstene, *Our Social Darwinists Then and Now*, INEQUALITY ORG (Feb. 22, 2015), <https://inequality.org/research/american-social-darwinism>.

45. David Hassell, *Workplace Darwinism: Are You Up for the Evolution?*, HUFFPOST (Jan. 25, 2014), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/workplace-darwinism_b_4309002.

46. Bill Frederick, *The Darwinian Dynamics at Play in Your Business*, FAST CO. (Jan. 7, 2013), <https://www.fastcompany.com/3004114/darwinian-dynamics-play-your-business>.

I've witnessed countless senior executives collapse in tears after giving the best part of their life to an organization that liquidated them to improve the company's stock price. That's the game and position you play as a fungible functionary. In essence, you are only as valuable as the unique expertise you can provide and pace at which it can be harvested. If you remain anchored in that truth, you'll be empowered to make wise decisions about your career and maneuvering within your company. Think of multinational conglomerates as the neo-fiefdoms of today.⁴⁷ The size of your salary and title determines your designation as feudal serf or lord of the manor. If you want to claim that castle, you must understand and master their methods even if you're just a pawn. For instance, in today's workplace, speed is valued over perfection because quick decisionmaking increases efficiency and productivity⁴⁸: "When companies or people don't spend time on overthinking, they devote time to executing."⁴⁹ Study the business fiscally, remain loyal to your own ambitions, and function with expediency and effectiveness. Then you'll spot opportunities emerging that you can capitalize on as brilliant chess moves.

VI. SUPERCHARGED WITH SUPERPOWERS

This may be a lot for some to process, especially if this is your first time "peeling back the curtain" of corporate life. Do not be dismayed. You may not feel it now, but you are the rockstar in the room. You are the future of your industry, not the 55-year-old executive vice president who's your boss. Even if the powerful people around you are extremely intelligent, hardworking, or gifted with creativity, it does not change the fact that you inherited an instinct, resource, or talent that exceeds their capacity (that's why they want to hire you). Everyone is born with a special gift that makes them unique. It's often simply about discovering what that gift is, then harnessing it to be your weapon for warfare. "Everybody has [a] talent, it's just a matter of moving around until you've discovered what it is," according

47. See Elizabeth A.R. Brown, *Feudalism*, BRITANNICA (Mar. 4, 2024), <https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/feudalism>. The feudal system, or feudalism, was the dominant "social, economic and political" system in place during the Middle Ages. *Id.*; *Serfdom*, BRITANNICA (Sept. 1, 2023), <https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/serfdom>. Serfdoms were characterized by a lack of public authority, with local lords in control of land, their "fiefs," and the tenant farmers that were bought and sold alongside the land, the "serfs." *Id.* Despite the fact the serfs were the ones working the land, they were required to give their lords a substantial portion of the grain they grew. *Id.*

48. S. Stefan Karabacak, *Why Speed Is the Most Important Thing for Your Business?*, MEDIUM: A FEW WORDS (July 11, 2018), <https://medium.com/afwp/why-speed-is-the-most-important-thing-for-your-business-99afe248a3e3>.

49. *Id.*

to producer, director, and screenwriter George Lucas.⁵⁰ That means you're just as special as them. More importantly, you have what they need to grow (e.g., youth, enthusiasm, passion, and focus). So don't undervalue your gift or be shortsighted about what you offer.

Talents demonstrate themselves in a variety of ways. "[A]re there magazine topics that you just can't get enough of? Are there shows you love?," author Mike Michalowicz asks.⁵¹ "Think about what it is that you love to do most when you have free time. If you are drawn toward it, it is a natural talent."⁵² In case your superpowers are dormant and in hiding, here are signs and secrets to help sniff them out: Your gifting lies in the things others may see as a weakness. They are the things you do that get you in trouble or trigger complaints from family or friends around you; they are the reasons why people contact you for help or always want you in the conversation; and they are the activities you're engaged in for endless hours without being aware of the time. Your natural gifts will create a seat for you at the table if you embrace them fearlessly and find ways to express them directly in your work. Walk in there forcefully, but with humility, and your career will soar.

50. *Everybody Has Talent, It's Just a Matter of Moving Around Until You've Discovered What It Is*, PHILOSIBLOG (May 7, 2011), <https://philosiblog.com/2011/05/07/everybody-has-talent>.

51. *Easy Steps to Find Your Hidden Talents*, MIKEMICHALOWICZ (Feb. 18, 2013), <https://mikemichalowicz.com/5-easy-steps-to-find-your-hidden-talents>.

52. *On a Journey of Self Discovery*, NEWS24 (Nov. 3, 2016), <https://www.news24.com/news24/MyNews24/on-a-journey-of-self-discovery-20161103>; see also Mike Michalowicz, *How to Figure Out Your Hidden Talents*, AM. EXPRESS (May 18, 2022), <https://www.americanexpress.com/en-us/business/trends-and-insights/articles/5-ways-to-find-your-hidden-talents>.