



Thou shalt
do thy homework
before 40

Thou shalt
develop thine
own style

Thou shalt have
put thy sexual-
emotional life in
order, if possible

Thou shalt
know thy
weaknesses

Thou shalt
know thy
strength

Thou shalt
have made a start
at putting away thy
'I quit' money

Thou shalt
have successfully
networked

Thou shalt
have learned
to delegate

Thou shalt
have learned when
to keep thy
mouth shut

Thou shalt
not worship
false gods

TO THY CAREER BE TRUE

Obeying these 10 career commandments will help you reach the top of the executive mountain before you turn 40.

By Michael Korda - Special to the Sun-Sentinel

You may think that 40 is a long way off, but beware: Everybody who is 40, 50, even beyond, once thought the same.

And take heart: It's not so bad. In fact, most of the major perquisites and rewards of success tend to accumulate after the age of 40, except in the case of the occasional boy (or girl) wonder, the entrepreneur who skips college and comes out of the starting gate running for dear life while the rest of us are still wondering how to decide on a profession.

That, as it happens, is the point of this article. If you do the right things before you're 40, then odds are they will pay off after that watershed birthday. If you don't, then fasten your seat belts for a bumpy flight to the grave. The business machine is structured to pay off big after 40 - but only for those who played the right numbers.

There is a widespread assumption that work gets harder after 40 (and of course some things are harder like remembering your secretary's name or getting up in the morning without aches and pains), but in most organizations work gets dramatically easier after 40 if you have succeeded. The responsibilities may be heavier, but after 40 you should be valued for your experience, know-how and judgment, rather than for the ability to work 18 hours every day. After 40, the successful executive runs things, rather than does things - and runs them with the help of assistants, secretaries and subordinates, all of whom do the grunt-work while he makes the decisions.

Indeed, in most corporations, the successful executive is supposed to have time to think, and is judged (to some degree) by his ability to delegate the details and the chores.

It's also at this point in a business career that the floodgates of executive privilege open up for creative thinkers: The Learjets, limousines and decorator-designed offices seldom go to people under 40 who are still doing the actual work.

You may think none of this really matters, that it's all too far off. Believe me, it does.

Sooner or later you're going to have to retire, so you may as well make the moves that will enable you to live in security, possibly even luxury. Many bad things can happen to us in old age, and not all of them can be prevented by money. But none of them is likely to be improved by poverty.

THOU SHALT DO THY HOMEWORK BEFORE 40

What I mean by this is that you have to learn everything you need to know about your business or your profession before you're 40 years old. In the first place, it's a lot harder to learn things after 40 for most people. In the second place (and more importantly), after 40 most successful people are simply finding better ways to use what they already know. After 40, it's judgment, a sense of how to manage people, and a sensible set of goals that matter in most jobs.

It is the same in business: Practically nobody learns anything new after 40. For example, I learned how to edit a manuscript as well as the rudiments of picking and publishing one, almost 20 years ago - in short, I mastered my business at the appropriate age, and have simply gone on to acquire most experience since.

Acquiring a basic knowledge of your trade and mastering whatever you need to succeed at it - all this ought to be behind you at 40. For one thing, if you're successful, you won't have time for learning later on. For another thing, you won't have the inclination. Burning the midnight oil is OK at 20, maybe even 30, but at 40 we are entitled to dance the night away or go to sleep, according to our desire. Nobody should have to sit up all night learning something new at 40-plus.

THOU SHALT DEVELOP THINE OWN STYLE

Before you're 40, you'd better adopt the style that suits you and works best for you - i.e., you'd better know what you like and what you're comfortable with, whether it's in the way you dress, the routines that work best for you, or simply the small distinctive touches that set you apart from other people.

After 40 you should be recognizable as a completed person, with your own special style. You can experiment in your 20s and 30s, but by the time you're 40 you don't want people in the office asking, "Who the hell is that?" Also, nothing looks more insecure than a man or a woman trying to redesign their look in midcareer.

THOU SHALT HAVE PUT THY SEXUAL/EMOTIONAL LIFE IN ORDER, IF POSSIBLE

If you're reaching hard for success, it's a great advantage to have put as much as possible of the personal "Sturm und Drang" of life behind you by the time you're 40.

I'm not saying that you can't have a love affair or a divorce after 40, but it's great help, when climbing toward the higher rungs of the career ladder, to be happy in life, rather than to find yourself mired in emotional crises that occupy most of your attention and energy.

It's a lot easier to think about your career when your mind isn't on a messy divorce or a hopeless entanglement. It's hard enough to succeed without taking on complicated personal problems that sap your energy and divert your attention. Besides, unhappiness is like a disease - it gradually eclipses interest in everything else.

THOU SHALT KNOW THY WEAKNESSES

By the age of 40, only a fool has failed to come to terms with his weaknesses, and only a masochist continues to punish himself because of them.

Know (and accept) the things you don't do well, can't stand, won't do. Don't make a public display of them, needless to say, but (to take a humble, gastronomical example) if you don't like oysters by the time you're 40, stop ordering them just to prove to yourself you can swallow them without gagging.

If you're not comfortable with numbers, but enjoy creative work, don't force yourself to sit in a numbers job because it's well-paid, or because it's what people expect. Get into the kind of work you enjoy before you're 40, or you're guaranteeing yourself an unhappy decade or two after that age - and probably destroying your chance for real success.

THOU SHALT KNOW THY STRENGTHS

The opposite of Commandment No. 4 (and just as important, if not more so). By the time you're 40, you had better know what you're good at, too, and know the things you enjoy doing, and do better than anyone else.

When I was younger, I often was criticized for being able to see both sides of a question. In many companies people are expected only to see one side - "ours," as opposed to "theirs," so anybody who sees both may appear to be wishy-washy, or even disloyal.

Now that I'm 51, however, I have realized this is a valuable strength. I have a gift for compromise, for resolving disputes. I'm not good in out-and-out, face-to-face confrontations, and I know it, but I'm quite good at finding a way around obstacles, keeping a negotiation calm, or coming up with the solution that allows both sides to settle with a degree of contentment and with honor.

This makes me admittedly a better adviser than an executive, but that's OK - an organization needs both types, and they're mutually supportive.

Whatever your role, by the time you're 40, you must know who you are and what you're good at. It's so important that it might almost be the first commandment.

THOU SHALT HAVE MADE A START AT PUTTING AWAY YOUR 'I QUIT!' MONEY

When I was much younger, super-agent Irving Lazar once gave me a word of fatherly advice. "The first million bucks you make," he said, "put it away, don't spend it. That's your 'I quit!' money.

Well, a million dollars is more than I have been able to put away, but the idea is a sound one. Nothing is more depressing than absolute dependency - the knowledge that you can't afford to quit your job, or take a risk in changing careers, that you're stuck, the lifetime prisoner of a paycheck.

Put enough away so that you have money to live on for a year or two by the time you're 40, otherwise you'll have to swallow whatever your corporation, your boss or your colleagues decide they want you to swallow.

THOU SHALT HAVE SUCCESSFULLY NETWORKED

If you haven't established a network of friends, or at least people who are obligated to you for one reason or another by the time you're 40, you're in trouble.

You must form a network of people who "owe you" before your 40th birthday, which means you have to do favors for them, support them in their projects, listen to their problems, so they'll do the same for you.

A network is not something you can establish overnight - it's the result of working on it for decades. In business as in politics, you need a lot of people, spread out in the right places, whom you can rely on when the moment comes because they can rely you, even if it's for no more than saying good things about them.

THOU SHALT HAVE LEARNED TO DELEGATE

Even if you have nobody to delegate to at the moment, start thinking about it. A person who cannot delegate will find himself fatally handicapped for higher office. By the time you reach 40, you'd better be an expert at it, which means you have to pick the right people and trust them.

Many people don't - can't - do this. By 40 it is too late; these people are thereby condemned to remain in subordinate positions. Delegation is half of success.

THOU SHALT HAVE LEARNED WHEN TO KEEP THY MOUTH SHUT

Don't gossip, don't talk about your plans, make sure you play your cards close to your chest.

More careers are aborted by careless talk than by anything else. Learn to keep quiet and look wise - people will naturally suppose you know more than they do, and more than you probably do in fact.

On the reality level, a reputation for keeping secrets far outweighs the easy popularity that retailing gossip may win you. The farther you go in your career, the more true this is. In higher management, secrecy is golden.

THOU SHALT NOT WORSHIP FALSE GODS

Once you're working for someone (or being mentored by someone), remain loyal to that person. If you haven't established a reputation for rock-hard, 100 percent loyalty by the time you're 40, you're going to be haunted by the lack of this for the rest of your career.

Even if the person you're loyal to is fired, your loyalty to him may earn you a place on the next person's team, but a reputation for disloyalty ultimately is bound to make you unwelcome anywhere in business.

Before, 40, loyalty is its own reward; after 40 it pays off.

STAR BREAK

The unwritten commandment, if you can master the 10 above, is to keep your sense of humor. This side of heaven, nothing lasts forever, not even success.