

If advancing in your career and having the life you have always dreamed of sounds appealing to you, there is something you should know: if you can't dream it, you can't do it. What does this mean to the modern working man and woman? It means that if you do not get specific and realistic about your goals and aspirations, you will not be able to achieve them.

Does this sound extreme? Well, maybe. But the truth is that without a road map, your career path could wind around the bend until you realize one day that you have gone nowhere. If you do not have in mind the place you want to go to, you will have a lot of trouble getting there. Think about getting in your car and deciding you want to drive somewhere. So you start your car, hit the gas, and off you go. Four hours later, in the middle of a field, you wonder why you are not at the grocery store. You have to have a plan.

So how do you start? Begin by identifying your goals and aspirations. This may sound daunting to some people who have never practiced goal setting before. But it does not have to be a difficult task. Ask yourself some questions:

- Are you in the field you want to stay in for the next ten to twenty years?
- If so, where do you want to end up in ten to twenty years?
- If not, what career would you rather have and where do you want to end up in that career after ten to twenty years?

These questions should lead you to some general answers about what you want out of your work life. If you need to make a major career change, now is the time to know about it, not five years from now when you are five years older. Five years from now, you could be working the job of your dreams. But you have to get started now.

If you love the field you are in but see yourself as an executive in a corner office, then you better get started on the path to promotion. It is highly unlikely that someone will waltz into your office one day and offer you the promotion for being so well dressed. So here is where the road map comes in.

Whether changing jobs or advancing in the one you have, you need to plot out the step it takes to get where you are going. Often, this is easiest when you start from the end. What would an executive in a corner office need to be qualified? What would someone working that new job have learned to do before he or she got hired? You may have to make some lists here, so get some paper.

Write out the qualifications and experience you need. Be specific. If you need at least a year of marketing experience, write out your ideas about where you could get that experience. Maybe you can take a lateral move in your company and run another department for a while to get the necessary skills. If you need a

degree in another area, maybe you can work your current job while attending night classes. What schools in your area offer the degree you need?

It is important to be specific and set yourself some time limits. Four years to get your degree or five years to work in human resources may sound like a long time, but remember that in four or five years you will either be well on your way to your goals or still stuck in the driveway. The difference is up to you.