



## CHAPTER 8

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# Climbing the Corporate Ladder: Using the Ladder as an Organizational Metaphor

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### INTRODUCTION

Climbing the corporate ladder was a phrase heard by many as they entered the workforce. The idea behind an organization as a ladder is that each rung of the ladder is one step closer to success. Or, in other words, each rung on the ladder is a picture of the hierarchy in the organization. The idea of success was imposed that the higher one achieves a position in the hierarchy, the more successful they would be. This chapter will examine the concept of an organization as a ladder and the revelation that perhaps not all people at the top are as successful as those throughout the lower rungs.

### CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER

The metaphor of climbing the corporate ladder is intriguing. Each rung of the ladder represents a different position, status, or level in the company. The idea of the ladder may involve starting on the ground floor in a

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position that many deem as less desirable. Perhaps it pays less or it involves harder work than other positions in the organization. Some may even refer to the ground floor job as grunt work, where they aspire to reach the first or second rung of the ladder. This section of the chapter will review four different scenarios as illustrations of climbing the corporate ladder.

When contemplating such ground floor or lower level rung jobs, some think about the janitor. Interestingly enough, a conversation about janitorial positions and dignity was had at a women's luncheon sponsored by the Denver Institute for Faith and Work in 2018. The owner of a janitorial service was speaking about her small business as a woman and a Christian. She was asked how her work has dignity and she graciously responded that, from the employee perspective, she tries to convey meaning in their work because being clean matters. She reiterated that most human beings would agree that being clean has value. She recognizes that not everyone will be a business owner or head of a company. According to Maddock (2011), "Not everyone is interested in climbing the corporate ladder. Many employees are completely satisfied with their current jobs" (p. 300). Many employees are fully satisfied with working what has been termed a 'menial job' and going home. For the small business owner at the luncheon, she looks for employees that are good at their job and employees she can trust. She then views her role as providing a good work environment for her employees. She is eager to start strengths training to find out what each of her employees are naturally good at and that will help her to identify areas of opportunity for them that she may have otherwise overlooked. For some, the janitor position may be all the higher they want to attain on the ladder. Or, considering the discussion about identifying strengths and opportunities, could it be that a ladder may be available to climb within the janitorial organization as well? Their ladder may just look a little different than a ladder in a big financial services firm or a manufacturing company.

Another scenario may involve an employee that starts in customer service or the mail room. Many will agree that both jobs are critical functions of an organization, yet receive little appreciation for their efforts. When starting in customer service of a big financial services firm in 1997, a mother of two started her career making \$22,000. This same person needed to ensure her family had their basic needs met. In doing so, relationships outside of the family were not that important. As one can imagine, this salary required much creativity in child care, clothing, entertainment, meal planning, and transportation to and from work. For

this family, their basic needs were of great importance. Fast forward 20 years and this same working mother may earn around six figures. She may even take for granted the basic needs for her family as most of her bills are paid via automatic bank withdrawals. Just starting out, this mother was given advice to ‘dress for the job you want, not the job you have.’ She was also driven to always strive for a better paying job, a better title, and a better office. In other words, she was groomed to climb the corporate ladder one rung at a time. Then, at some time during her career, she stopped to think about why she worked so hard. What had her climb to the top of the ladder actually given her? What did that climb take away from her?

Another story of climbing the corporate ladder may include a young man that entered the union or trade workforce to provide for his family. Each workday morning he woke up early to prepare and arrive to work timely; after all ‘the early bird gets the worm.’ He started his career at the lowest level on the ladder, otherwise known as an apprentice. According to Perrin (2017), he would learn the most basic and rudimentary skills by watching others in the workplace that were higher up the ladder. At the first stage in the young man’s career, he would be known as an assistant, beginner, learner, or novice (Perrin). Once the apprentice successfully completed a phase one of training, he would be promoted to a higher rung, known as a journeyman. During the second phase in the young man’s career, he would be known as an associate, competent craftsman, or peer (Perrin). Although he would still have supervision as a journeyman, he could begin to work on projects of his own with oversight from a master. The second phase or second rung of the ladder may take several years before promoting to the third rung known as the master. On the third rung, the man would be known as the mentor or expert (Perrin). It is at the third stage or rung that the man receives honor for his time devoted to the trade and his skill. In this stage, he will also begin to train others, since he is seen as the master. In many unions, the rungs of the ladder are clearly spelled out in terms of expectations for training and ability as well as monetary compensation. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), a first-year electrician apprentice will earn a percentage of what a journeyman electrician earns and can expect to receive approximately \$18 per hour with incremental wage increases. Pay increases continue incrementally at or near the 1000 hour marks as more experience is gained and until ultimately the master electrician earns an average of \$51,000 per year.

It is thought that the final story in this section epitomizes the corporate ladder metaphor. The young person starts in the mail room as a clerk. He

spends a year learning the business, networking, and doing a good job. He dresses for success each day and delivers the mail with a smile to each of his customers. The next year he is promoted to the second rung of the ladder and starts working outside of the mail room. Perhaps this is a customer service job or a data entry clerk. He maintains his positive attitude, hard work, and nice appearance. The third year he is promoted to another rung on the ladder where he is the team leader or manager of a group of employees. He is provided with a nice salary, bonus, and an office instead of a cubical. He continues to excel with each rung of the ladder he climbs too. After many years with the company, he is promoted into director and executive level positions. After decades with the organization, he becomes the president and is viewed as being at the top. His story of climbing the corporate ladder is repeated for years to come as a carrot dangling on a stick for others to follow in his footsteps.

### DEFINE SUCCESS

A simple Google search reveals various methodologies to seize opportunities that will provide an advantage to the employee. But, what if the climb leaves one feeling empty or used? Is there a better way to succeed in business? Buford and Collins (2015) wrote a book titled *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*. In their book, they realized that many people, often around age 40, find themselves questioning their career. Many ask, “How did I get here?” This book is a great opportunity to stop and think about what went well in the first half of life and what needs to change in the second half.

As Christians mature, they may find that their definition of success revolves around helping others, sharing the Gospel, serving the needs of widows and orphans, and having a sense of fulfillment that their daily walk on earth is leading to a lifetime of ‘success’ in heaven. Although not all people start to climb their ladder with a spiritual destination, many will question, somewhere along the journey, what their climb is for if personal gain is no longer of top priority. If they discover that the climb is towards a life of eternity in heaven, they may have a revelation that their purpose on earth is far more important than once thought.

In Genesis 28:10–17 (NIV), Jacob saw a ladder in his dream. The ladder stretched from earth to heaven. On the ladder, angels appeared. God stood at the top of the ladder and spoke. He said,

I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

In Jacob's time of need, God spoke to him. Jacob was lonely and on the run in a world of fear and terror. He was in "limbo, landless, rootless, and with no real prospects for the future" (Claassens, n.d.). Yet, God met him right where he was, in an ordinary place.

### *Generational Differences*

Wood (2005) wrote that "One day, without warning, the United States woke up and multiple generations were populating every rung of the corporate ladder" (p. 86). She expanded to describe the landscape where "old timers" extended their retirement beyond age 65 to an age when they "felt like it" or could "afford it." Meanwhile, four or five generations were in the same building trying to work together. Each of those generations has different sets of experiences that predicate their needs in the workplace and their desire to climb the corporate ladder. According to Villa (2017) "If a person does not remember a defining event and does not have a strong emotional connection to it in real time, then... they're not part of the contemporary generation of that event." Along with these differences, it is implied that each generation is in a different place on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and thus will decide what climbing the corporate ladder looks like for themselves.

For the purpose of this text, the research by Smola and Sutton (2002), as shown in Table 8.1, will be used, as it seems to be a fairly popular and accepted breakdown of the generational eras. Depending on the scholar(s), it is possible the date range may be different, yet the concept should remain the same.

#### *Baby Boomer Generation*

Williams (2017) explained that for the Baby Boomer generation, the image of success was when one started in the mailroom and worked their way up the corporate ladder to become the president of the company.

**Table 8.1** Generational differences

<i>Generation name</i>	<i>Years of birth</i>	<i>Labels</i>
Silent generation/traditional/mature/veterans/moral authority/radio babies/forgotten generation/greatest generation	1909–1945	Conservative and disciplined (Strauss & Howe, 1991)
Baby boomers/generation me	1946–1964	Time-stressed and materialistic (Strauss & Howe, 1991)
Generation X/the doer/post boomers/13th generation	1965–1978	Skeptical and individualistic (Kupperschmidt, 2000)
Generation Y/Millennials/generation me	1979–1994	Socially conscious, yet highly cynical and narcissistic (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008)
Generation Z/centennials/founders/iGen	1995–2009	Shaping up to be the “Throwback Generation” (Villa, 2017)

Source: Author’s creation

Smola and Sutton (2002) explained that Baby Boomers grew up with the civil rights riots, assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Woodstock. And, they celebrated the first man on the moon in 1969. This generation was nicknamed the ‘Me’ generation in response to their narcissism and culture of self-realization and self-fulfillment. This generation was promised the ‘American Dream’ and, as a result, became greedy, materialistic, and ambitious. According to Campione (2015), Baby Boomers paid a high personal price to climb the corporate ladder, including difficult labor conditions and long working hours. This generation also experienced Vietnam and the rejection that came along with it. For many soldiers, that experience left them lost and wandering aimlessly through life as they didn’t know where they fit in. Unfortunately, for many in this generation, they found work and stayed with it as a way to meet their basic needs, but had little hope to climb a corporate ladder any further than the basic needs rung because their psychological needs of relationships and feeling wanted or needed were never met.

### *Generation X*

Many in the Generation X era found themselves as the first generation with both parents working outside of the home. They were the first generation of Latchkey Kids. This may have resulted in a lack of family

traditions, an increase in divorced parents, and a shift from a collectivist to an individualist society (Smola & Sutton, 2002). This generation grew up with influences from computer games and Music Television (MTV). They also lived through the health scare or discovery of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), which was a major concern where people from all walks of life were contracting a deadly virus and for what seemed like a very long time, no one could figure out why it was happening. This generation was also likely working and possibly in management during the Y2K scare. The year 2000 (also known as Y2K) was a time in history when people did not know what would happen when the clock changed from 1999 to 2000 and it was presumed that anything with a computer would malfunction, including cars, banks, and phones. This generation also saw the end of the Cold War and dismantling of the Berlin Wall.

For many in this generational era, the corporate ladder was a concept taught to them at a young age. Their parents may have told them directly or inferred that they wanted their Generation X child to be more successful than they (the Baby Boomer parent(s)) were. They started working as a young adult and strived to reach the top. The top meant running the company or owning the company. Now, in their 40s or possibly mid-life, many are turning to self-help books such as Buford and Collins (2015) book titled *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*. It is in this season of life they are realizing that the corporate ladder may not be all it was cracked up to be. As a result of their hard work to reach the top, many are left feeling empty and wanting or needing more self-fulfillment and/or spirituality in their lives.

### *Generation Y*

Early on, Millennials received a stigma of being lazy, although this may or may not be the case. A 2013 *Time* Magazine cover showed this generation as “The Me Me Me Generation” and wrote they are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents. This same article explained that the Millennials are fame-obsessed and expect to be promoted every two years as a result of all the trophies they were ‘given’ in their childhood. In one case, a young lady explained that she did not need a job; her job needed her. According to Smola and Sutton (2002), Millennials crave higher salaries and are the first generation to be born and raised in a wired world. They are used to instant gratification and get bored easily. They have also grown up with social media and reality shows. Jayson (2007) wrote that research shows two important goals for Millennials include (a) getting rich

and (b) being famous. They suffer from technology addictions, high levels of anxiety and depression, and for the first time in history this demographic shows higher level of suicidal thought than previous generations (Perry, 2018).

This generation has grown up with uncertainty at every corner, including horrid events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attack, school shootings, and the Oklahoma City Bombing. They were also exposed to violence, nudity, and immoral acts on television and the Internet at a rate unparalleled to previous generations. They have also been a generation that knows of no real peacetime in their lifetime as of yet.

On a positive note, Millennials are considered an optimistic generation with “big expectations for their success” (Hulett, 2006). This generation seems to be more concerned with how they will impact the world around them and less concerned with just getting a job. They care about the community and the world; according to a 2017 article in *Forbes*, Millennials are *Leading a Revolution in Corporate Volunteering Efforts*. This generation currently has another reputation of being the first group with the most student loan debt. And, in an article by the Penny Hoarder in 2017, Cattanaach (2017) reported that 67% of Millennials do not have credit cards. As a result, they seem to be making better financial decisions as they try to manage the debt, which may account for why so many still live at home. Stein (2013) wrote “yes, we have all that data about narcissism and laziness and entitlement. But a generation’s greatness isn’t determined by data’ it’s determined by how they react to the challenges that befall them... and, just as important, by how we react to them.” The corporate ladder for the Millennials may be a moot point. They noticed the effects of the ascent from their elders and are more concerned with their lifestyle goals rather than their career goals (Campione, 2015).

### *Generation Z*

The oldest in the Generation Z era are just entering the workforce. Studies from places like the Center for Generational Kinetics indicate this group may want to learn and work hard. Villa (2017) said that Generation Z is “very different from millennials.” They are the first generation that has always had a smartphone and has no memory of the 9/11 terrorist attacks outside of the classroom. This generation thinks about their financial future as they have seen their parents struggle due to the financial recession and student loan crisis. Some are considering Generation Z to be a “Throwback Generation” in that their values are more traditional than the



previous generation; whereas, they find “loyalty, long-term commitment to a company, job security, savings, and even the traditional goals of owning a car and a house are all back in vogue” (Waddell, 2018). It will be interesting if the concept of climbing the corporate ladder comes back in style as well.

### *Gender Differences*

Babcock and Laschever (2009) wrote that “Even today, very few women sit on the boards or serve as counsel to Fortune 500 firms.” Fannie Hurst, an American novelist and short-story writer (1885–1968) once said, “A woman has to be twice as good as a man to go half as far.” Elsaid (2015) examined chief executive officer (CEO) positions and found that “In 2013, women accounted for about 4% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies” and in 2012 women accounted for only 18 CEO positions of all Fortune 500 companies, which was an increase from only eight female CEOs in 2005.

Ryan and Haslam (2005) wrote that “Women face greater challenges than men in their attempts to climb to the top of the corporate ladder” (p. 88). Whittaker (1992) wrote that “While women are able to get a foot on the ladder, few manage to climb to the top or even halfway up.” During the 2019 OPEX Week Business Transformation World Summit, Dean was asked to speak on a panel about *Women in Leadership – Climbing the Corporate Ladder*. The three speakers each shared their personal journey and a theme emerged from the session. Each of the women had mentors, coaches, and/or sponsors that helped them get to the top. They also noted that research by Babcock and Laschever (2009) showed that only 7% of women negotiate with job offers, yet 57% of men negotiate. So, the question formulated as “Are women holding themselves back because they don’t advocate for their own success?”

### MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

This text is aimed at causing each of us to question where we are on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and how that relates to our desire for climbing the corporate ladder. Many learn about Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in school; however, it is important to note that, from an organizational leadership perspective, it is thought that the hierarchy is continuing to evolve as time goes on. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs was presented in a

1934 paper on the theory of human motivation. Over the past eight decades, many scholars have expanded the hierarchy to include more needs. Dean (2017) expanded the list of needs in Fig. 6.1. As one looks at the hierarchy, they may notice that many people have their basic needs met. The basic needs of food, water, safety, and shelter for many human beings are met and they have progressed into the next layer of the hierarchy where relationships become important. In years past, many would work for the simple purpose of providing basic needs for the family.

Thinking back to when families relocated to what is now known as the United States of America, it is clear that their basic needs were of great importance. This is likely true for any family relocating from one place to another. They pack up all they can manage to fit into their shipping container(s) and travel from Point A to Point B. When they arrive, they may or may not have money saved to find a place to live (shelter) and food to eat. If this is the case, then the basic needs are critically important.

If a person has their food, water, safety, and shelter needs met, they will then start to look for other people to fellowship with. This may involve people at church, in the neighborhood, or at work. At this stage in life, a paycheck may not be the only thing people arrive to work for. They need relationships and feelings of prestige. As each human being progresses through the hierarchy, their needs will change.

When considering the corporate ladder in relationship to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it is interesting to think about how one's motivation can change over time. As an example, an eager high school or college graduate may jump into the workforce and leave the safety of their parent's home. When living at home, their basic needs were likely met and they were probably more concerned with relationships. In this situation; however, the basic needs of the new employee become obvious and very relevant to their daily thought process. They may no longer be as concerned with friendships as they are with eating. As the employee earns more money, they will likely find their basic needs met and more thought focused on relationships and feelings of belonging. Could it be that the corporate ladder was important when basic needs were not met and the motivational factor driving the employee was earning more money? Or, perhaps the employee progressed through the hierarchy and found they are concerned with their feelings of prestige and accomplishments. In this scenario, the employee may still have a desire to climb the corporate ladder. However, as the basic and psychological needs are met, many find themselves searching for meaning instead of money.

## THE CLIMBERS TOOLKIT

For those that want to climb the corporate ladder, there is much advice available. LeBlanc (2012) wrote that “If you’re hoping to move up the corporate ladder, take a hard look at your soft skills... communication and leadership abilities.”

### *Communication*

LeBlanc (2012) explained that no matter how good someone is in their job, if they cannot convey a point verbally or in writing, they will not be effective at climbing the corporate ladder. Tips for communicating better may include proofreading, listening, and paying attention to body language. Proofreading seems simple, but many people overlook the obvious. Misspellings or bad grammar can send an unfavorable impression; meanwhile, unclear instructions can cost time and money. Listening is a communication skill that is not readily taught in school, yet it is extremely important. LeBlanc writes, “Focus on what is being said rather than trying to formulate a response in your head while the other person is still speaking.” Body language is also important when communicating. According to Mehrabian (2013), there are three elements in face-to-face communication, including words (7%), the tone of voice (38%), and nonverbal behavior (55%). In other words, if sending a letter, email, or text, it is much more important to communicate clearly because the words account for only 7% of the communication effectiveness and the remaining 93% is missing. And, if communicating in person, the tone of voice and body language says more than the words themselves.

### *Flexibility*

Reitman and Schneer (2003) remind us that once upon a time, the career path was uninterrupted. An employee could go to work for an organization and expect to stay there for the duration of their career. However, the past two decades have caused employees to think twice about their loyalty to a company as many have been downsized or restructured. Hall and Moss (1998) wrote that the path that was promised to managers was “an upward climb on a corporate ladder that would provide a challenge, security, and financial benefits” and for several decades that system worked. In the late 1980s, global competition, recession, and other factors led to a

variety of reactions from business owners, including downsizing and restructuring (Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996). When climbing the corporate ladder, be flexible. It may be necessary to move to an entirely different ladder to keep the upward momentum going.

### *Managing the Noise*

The higher one climbs the corporate ladder, the more noise can occur. In other words, one may “start to receive more and more information from more and more sources” (Maddock, 2011). It will be important to figure out what is useful information as opposed to just noise. Unfortunately, there is not a science to setting a noise-filter. It will be up to the employee to decide what information is helpful and filter accordingly.

### *Negotiate*

According to a book by Babcock and Laschever (2009), everything is negotiable. Men and women can negotiate bonuses, features on your benefits package, job titles, pension benefits, promotions, salary, the scope of responsibilities, severance packages, start date, stock options, and vacation days (just to name a few). Women are especially bad about negotiations. Babcock and Laschever wrote that, in one of their studies, 12.5% of women negotiated their job offers, while 51.5% of men negotiated theirs. In another one of their studies, only 7% of women negotiated, whereas 57% of men advocated for better results. The bottom line is that all people can do a much better job negotiating than what they have done in the past. The authors provide much advice in their book about negotiating that includes (a) know what you want and (b) know what you are worth. A little research on the front end of a potential job offer could provide many benefits on the back end.

### *People Skills*

People skills are important in climbing the corporate ladder (Morell, 1996). In her article about young scientists leaving the research and development lab to climb the corporate ladder, Morell found that the employees are “learning what skills they need to add to their scientific bag of tricks” as they realize that “businesses are in the business to make money.” Morell explained that “even scientists who grasp business’s ‘golden rule’ may not go far beyond the lab if they don’t have people skills.”

### *Work Harder*

A common misconception for employees to climb the corporate ladder is that they must do more work (Maddock, 2011). At some point in a person's career, they will exceed the capacity for working harder and maintaining a healthy work/life balance. Maddock said, "...at some point you run out of working hours" and it is important to realize that the higher level positions require different work and not necessarily more work.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Notice the top layer of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Fig. 6.1 includes spiritual needs. These needs may include the recognition and admission that each and every human being will die and they want their journey on earth to be meaningful and purposeful as they aspire to enter heaven's gates. It may also involve the clear directive of The Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22:36–40. A follower asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" And, Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." And, it could also include the confusion that arises when one spends a good majority of their life climbing a corporate ladder for selfish gain when scripture says, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

### CONCLUSION

The obvious aside, it is interesting that ladders have generally been used in a male-dominated world of construction, just as the corporate ladder was historically climbed easier and faster by men instead of women. It is also interesting that a website named ladders.com offers career advice, news, and resources. While the metaphor of the corporate ladder may be out of style for a short period of time, it is most certainly coming back with a new set of rules or a new summit to strive for. And, as more and more people are reaching the top of Maslow's Hierarchy, it is interesting to see the desire of efforts such as Faith at Work and workplace spirituality ignite across the globe in order for humans to learn how to include spiritual aspects of life in their everyday work.

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