

**Ayalla Reuven-Lelong**

**RIDING THE WHITE WATER RAPIDS**

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*Career Success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*



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*To my beloved parents and precious daughter Lior  
who taught me what unconditional love is*



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## ***Preface:***

### ***My Personal Journey***

My journey began about 15 years ago, when I first held Daniel Goleman's book about *Emotional Intelligence*. My interest in this field started from an understanding that our success does not rely on our cognitive and professional skills alone – an important part of it relies on skills of a different kind. This understanding led me to explore the essence of success of managers and employees in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Since then, I have been certified as an evaluator of emotional intelligence. I founded a center for the measurement, evaluation and development of emotional intelligence in businesses and organizations and developed expertise in building and implementing related organizational strategies. I now lead strategic change processes for large companies in Israel: analyzing the challenges, assessing the executives' soft skills, and building a plan to help them cope with these challenges. In addition, I design and conduct workshops, lecture at conventions and participate in professional panels.

As I meet with dozens of executives each month, I sense that most of them lack a real understanding as to where the organizational world is heading. As someone who sits through organizational meetings for long hours, I frequently witness the extent to which top managements strive to find talented executives of all ranks to promote, and the difficulties they experience.

Surprisingly, it turns out that over 70 percent of appointments or promotions in organizations are compromises. The 20<sup>th</sup> century classic and first choice candidate – a professional prodigy, a wizard – often fails in leading his employees, in retaining customers or adapting to changes. A second candidate, who has excellent relationships with employees, fails to offer significant value propositions to his customers, while a third candidate who displays high soft skills and excellent interactions with both employees and customers, lacks adequate professional skills.

It should be noted that this scenario is not found only in management, but in many other fields as well. The change derives from the fact that professional requirements are changing and expanding to areas where acquired studies and accumulated experience and skills are insufficient. The “organizational topography” that has developed over the past 10 years is dramatically different from the one we knew in the past, and it might change even further in the next few years. Today, in such an organizational reality, employees and executives are required to have a far more complex range of skills. Unfortunately, those who do not internalize this reality will find themselves irrelevant to the organizations they work

in. In the best case scenario, even in spite of their hard efforts, they will lag behind while others pass them by. Eventually, they might even find themselves outside the workforce.

My private journey to understand the elements of career success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sharpened and peaked during the past five years. This journey provided me with the insight that success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will belong to those who think and act differently from the way they did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While it was previously common knowledge that graduating from a good university with high grades would ensure a better future for us and for our children, we now realize that university is simply a prerequisite but is surely insufficient to guarantee success.

As a consultant, it wasn't easy for me to see talented individuals become stagnant in their careers, not knowing how and why they got there. I felt great frustration and sadness in the face of this reality. I understood that these employees and executives would need a new and updated roadmap in order to succeed, since the map they were using did not serve them anymore. I also realized that in order to successfully lead the executives whom I work with toward success, I must understand the most important factors for their ongoing success.

Throughout my journey, I delved into the leading research and professional literature on this subject. I studied the various models and applied them to the daily practice in different organizations. I met and had conversations with hundreds of senior and junior executives through lectures and personal meetings. Eventually, these led me to the understanding of what are the most important competencies and skills that

distinguish between those who are capable managers in the gushing “white water” from those who are not.

By the end of my own journey, my conclusion was that success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be achieved by those who become acquainted with four key ideas, which are represented in this book by four lands. Wise use of the principles and insights presented in each land will enable an individual to create his own fifth land – the land of success.

The objective of this book is, therefore, to equip the reader with an updated roadmap for success, by means of experiencing a journey to five lands. Each land fulfills an important role in paving the way. The roadmap is represented through a simple spiral model, where every step is based on the previous one and plays a significant role in the journey – a model which I have introduced and implemented with managements and executives of all ranks, in various organizations in Israel.

The reader will experience this model through the journey that the protagonist undergoes to those five conceptual lands.

The first part of the book is the story of a classic talented and ambitious junior executive named Michael. Although he excels professionally, he is forced to realize that the times are indeed changing. Following an annual feedback meeting, Michael is suddenly confronted with the reality that he must make a different kind of effort in order to maintain a continued successful career.

For continuous success, he has to go through an exceptional adventure. He then sets out on an unusual journey, escorted by an intelligent, pleasant and assertive consultant, Rona, who will guide him to the five lands. In each land, he will meet different

people, some of them quite strange and surreal. Through these experiences, he will gather insights that are significant to his continued success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The second part of the book contains questions for thought and reflection, in addition to numerous theories and research upon which the book chapters are based.

It is important to emphasize that even though the protagonist of the story is an executive, this book is also intended for employees who are not managers and are not interested in a management position. It is intended for all those who are interested in recognition and success in their careers, while enjoying life to the fullest, including family, friends and leisure.

You can simply read the story or delve deeply into the theoretical part. Either way, I wish you the best of luck in your personal journey.

\* \* \*

Like those white water rapids that illustrate today's reality, the concepts covered in this book evolve faster than we can write about them – the journey to success and fulfillment is a never-ending adventure. I will be happy to have your feedback on this book: suggestions, questions or comments. You are welcome to write to me at [success.i21@eq-el.co.il](mailto:success.i21@eq-el.co.il).



## *Acknowledgements*

I would like to acknowledge all those who helped me during my personal journey and made the writing of this book possible. Most of all I would like to acknowledge all the executives whom I had the privilege to accompany during the last few years. Openly and dedicatedly, they enabled me to gain those valuable insights into the quest for success in this radically dynamic reality that we are currently experiencing.

Special thanks to **Eran Shalev** (senior partner, KPMG Israel) who, through his special approach and personality, challenged me and enabled me to learn and understand the complexity of the management world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thanks to **Dr. Niva Dolev**, my friend and partner, for her infinite availability, depth, insight, encouragement, empathy and support.

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Special thanks to my spouse, **Ilan**, who is always with me,

letting me believe that the sky is the limit. Thank you for your infinite giving, special way of thinking, questions and profound insights.

I wish to thank all those whose ideas and models are described in this book. Much effort was made to avoid reproduction of copyrighted material and to present these works in a manner that constitutes fair use. Above all, I hope this book reflects my great appreciation of these works. I encourage readers to delve further and read the cited sources, as they are all essential readings for anyone interested in succeeding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ayalla Reuven-Lelong, March 2015

## *Setting Out for the Journey: Rowing in White Water*

### **Annual Feedback**

The seeds of this journey were sown during an annual feedback session with my boss, John, in his spacious office on the executive floor. I remember the conversation and all that followed in great detail. Mostly, I remember myself looking sideways – checking to see if, perhaps, there was another person in the room; he simply couldn't be talking about me...

John was an extraordinary leader. Like similar managers in our company, he was highly focused on his mission. Unlike them, he didn't focus exclusively on the bottom line of the profit and loss statement. It was important to him to understand each team member's thinking process and to encourage our creativity. It was especially important to him to conduct an in-depth personal feedback session with each of us.

Formally, all executives were supposed to conduct such a

conversation. But in fact, this wasn't always done, and even when it was, the feedback was usually superficial. It was clear that they didn't really believe in the feedback and mostly considered it a waste of precious time, taking us away from the many tasks we already had.

But John had to be different: he spoke of what he called “the process.” He said that he considered himself responsible for leading each and every one of us to realize our abilities to the fullest, acting as a kind of mentor. Sounds good, doesn't it? But you can take my word for it that back then, I would have gladly passed on such an opportunity. All I wanted was a quiet work environment that enabled me to prove myself and continue with my product development.

Just like previous feedback conversations, this one also began by focusing on professional and technical points. The beginning was indeed promising: John complimented me on my expertise and high-level of performance, affirmatively mentioning my managerial abilities and my ability to meet deadlines. But those moments of grace quickly passed as the conversation moved on to a full description of the issues that were holding me back, accompanied by suggestions and details as to my options...

He began by mentioning a specific example: “Do you remember what happened two months ago with Tami?” he said. “She had to go back home to be with her daughter, who had the flu. When she told you she had to leave, she also mentioned the measures she took to make sure that her team would be able to manage without her. Your reaction was harsh and without empathy. You made her leave in tears as you implied that she

wasn't really committed to her job if she neglected her team and compromised the project's deadline."

I wanted to tell him that he got the whole thing wrong and that he didn't hear my side of the story. But he continued. "Also, during the last project, when we had to work hand-in-hand with teams from the UK and Germany, the project manager asked to replace you. He claimed that you couldn't get along with the other participants and that you let everyone feel that your way was the only way. No one was really sorry when he announced that you weren't part of the team anymore..."

"Six months ago," he continued, "Roy led an organizational strategic change which, according to him, was essential to our value proposition and ability to keep on thriving as an organization." Yes, indeed, I remembered when Roy, our CEO, just came back from a convention with some new bright ideas.

"Well, you repeatedly expressed your firm objection to this program. You didn't even give it a chance, or really try to understand it. Instead, you provided everyone with plenty of reasons to object it. You kept on describing the existing state in bright colors and as much better than it really was, as if there was no reason for a change. All along the way, neither the opinion you expressed nor your behavior demonstrated that you were open to any change."

John kept talking in terms of open-mindedness, interpersonal skills, adaptability to new situations, creativity and emotional intelligence. I remember telling myself: here comes the gibberish part as always, and with it comes the end of our meeting... Just a few more minutes of silence and random nodding on my account – and I would be safely out.

I wasn't the only member of our team who was deterred by terms such as "soft skills," with all their "touchy-feely" connotations. Most of us thought that the introduction of emotional concepts into a "hard skills" organization like ours is a conspiracy by less talented individuals who couldn't find a more dignified way to make a living.

This time though, things didn't move as smoothly as I had expected, when John turned to me and said, "Michael, you are a real challenge for me. I truly think you have high professional skills. But, as far as adaptability, creativity and interpersonal skills are concerned, you are completely clueless. Honestly, throughout the period you have been working here, I haven't seen any progress, not even the beginning of a process, in the areas related to your emotional intelligence. Therefore, it appears that I'm unable to promote you to your next managerial position. I suggest that you schedule a meeting with Martha. Talk to her and see how we should proceed."

Once again, I doubted he was talking to me because I wasn't used to hearing my name next to the words "no progress" or "no process." After all, I was the only one in my MA class who graduated with the highest distinction. I was always highly sought-after in my field, and everyone around me considered me "successful." John himself said that he always chose me for the most complex technical assignments, because it was clear to him that if anyone could overcome the difficulty, **I would be the one.**

So where did this whole "unable to promote you" thing come from? How is the whole story of interpersonal skills related to me? After all, I didn't come to work here as an elementary school teacher or a social worker.