In CHANGING COLLARS, Daniel Muller shares lessons about how to transition from blue-collar roots to a successful white-collar career. The book contains valuable and practical insights which can be readily applied by white-collar workers at any age or career stage. Muller shares key lessons extracted from his career as well as other respected peers.

CHANGING COLLARS:
Lessons in Transitioning from Blue-Collar Roots to White-Collar Success
by Daniel Muller

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CHANGING COLLARS

LESSONS IN TRANSITIONING FROM **BLUE-COLLAR ROOTS** TO WHITE-COLLAR SUCCESS

DANIEL MULLER

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FOREWORD

The news is laden with stories about those who lack real opportunities for self-realization and self-improvement due to a lack of education, a lack of opportunity, a lack of family support, a lack of jobs, or a lack of fairness in hiring and promotion and pay.

However, there is one hidden story that impacts millions of current and future workers, one that is rarely if ever discussed and studied. It remains as one of the most important and impactful societal problems of the last forty years.

The story is about the millions of American citizens who grew up, or are growing up, in blue-collar families who venture into the white-collar world. Their journey into this very different white-collar culture is one that has been forced due to economic realities (i.e., fewer blue-collar jobs), but also chosen by some who see this migration as an opportunity to fulfill their personal goals or to improve their economic lot.

Most who have completed the migration well understood the need for education and training to have any chance for success in a white-collar profession. Those contemplating the migration today likely also understand this. But what most do not understand is the fundamental change required in basic behavioral skills and the change required in how to think and solve problems. Without such a change, ultimate success is nearly impossible.

The white-collar world, compared to the blue-collar world, is as different culturally as two nations located on opposite sides of the world. In many ways, the foundations for success in the white-collar world are polar opposites of the foundations for success in the blue-collar working world.

The key impact of this problem is the absolute waste of talent and capabilities of these blue-collar candidates. Some have overcome these fundamental differences in culture and behavior and succeeded. But given my experience over 35 years in making this migration myself, and in conducting research on this topic over the past 10 years, it is clear that a significant majority have struggled, and continue to struggle, to succeed. Most fail to understand the fundamental and not-so-obvious differences in these environments. This struggle takes a significant toll on the success of white-collar entities which are not taking full advantage of the talents and

energy of many of their employees. A larger toll is taken on the psyches of millions of those in the midst of the migration who continually become frustrated and at times highly discouraged due to their ongoing frustration with a world where extra effort, hard work, honesty, and personal time investment frequently yields minimal or near-zero results.

This book is dedicated to helping those contemplating, or already on the voyage of, migrating from a blue-collar world and culture into a white-collar land of opportunities and challenges.

PROLOGUE

"Look, Dan . . . you come from a small town and a good blue-collar family. Nobody in your family ever did anything other than work in a blue-collar job. Why invest a lot of your money, get into debt, and spend four years of your life in a college education? Even if you graduate, you won't find a good job around here anymore; this community is dying. Just follow in the footsteps of your dad, or uncle, or brother, or aunt or sister, and get a job working shifts in a local manufacturing or assembly plant. Grow up! The dreams you hear about on TV are only for the wealthy families and those who know people in power. Just get a job, make an honest day's pay for a good day's work, get married, and support your family."

Nobody ever said these words directly to me. But through dozens of discussions with others surrounding me in my blue-collar world growing up, these messages became very clear to me and were reinforced time and again by the words and actions of others. There were a few dissenters, but those dissenters were clearly framed by others as dreamers.

I was born in a small town in northeast Ohio into a blue-collar family. My wife, Sally, was born in a small town in southeast Ohio, and also grew up in a blue-collar family. My father, brother, uncles, aunts, and grandparents, for most of their careers, held blue-collar jobs. My wife's family was more or less similar.

For a variety of reasons that I will discuss later, unlike most others in our families, we both attended college, graduated, and entered the white-collar workforce in professional roles.

I learned early in my white-collar career journey that my blue-collar background was not necessarily an advantage in enabling my white-collar career to flourish. Compared to peers that grew up within families that were familiar with the white-collar professional world, I was clearly disadvantaged in many ways.

What may be a bit unique about my career journey is that despite those disadvantages, and despite my being a 'late-bloomer' career-wise, I was able to overcome a variety of challenges and progress to a very senior

management level position of a Fortune 500 company and enjoy, what I consider to be, a very successful career.

My journey from the youngest member in a family of five growing up in a small town in a blue-collar family and community, to achieving the sort of career and personal success I did was improbable at best. But, with the help and guidance of parents who were loving but tough, teachers and friends who encouraged and advised me, supervisors and managers who were great examples for me, a supporting wife and children, and a lot of hard work and luck, I was able to live out a dream that many in this country have today and many have had in the past. I am convinced, however, that this journey would have been next to impossible in any other country in the world. For me, the American dream is still possible for those who work hard and use the talents with which they are blessed.

At each of the many steps of my journey up, across and down the organization chart, I learned the hard way about new white-collar issues and challenges that kept me off-balance for a time until I learned, adjusted, and re-focused.

Upon reflection, I have wondered if, perhaps, learning about those white-collar lessons through trial-and-error made those lessons more embedded in my psyche, made them more unforgettable, or enabled me to ensure that those issues would forever help me in future endeavors. But, I have concluded that in most cases, the disadvantages outweighed the advantages. Learning these lessons by discovery and experience, or more realistically the 'School of Hard Knocks,' through a thirty-five-year career, in most cases, did nothing but take my career a bit off-track at times, and delayed my improvement in my performance and delayed my career progression.

The implications of those mistakes and misunderstandings included significant pay effects, impacts to my professional reputation, and significant personal sacrifices required to overcome my lack of white-collar world understanding.

How did I overcome all of that and still succeed? In addition to my support structure of family, friends, and advisers, one of my very early career lessons was about the value of preparation and hard work. I know now that a great deal of my success came from outworking other peers and nearly always being more thoroughly prepared.

I continually encountered others who seemed brighter than me or who had better credentials in terms of the universities attended and professional contacts or who had the significant benefit of a white-collar upbringing. However, I found that by investing the additional personal time and preparing thoroughly, I was able to succeed consistently while others' performance seemed less focused and less consistent over time. Perhaps, those work habits somehow were fostered and reinforced by a blue-collar background that always stressed hard work, determination, and a 'never give up' attitude as keys to success.

I have been very careful and deliberate in documenting all of these lessons, because there is always the danger of assuming that your own situations and challenges might apply to everyone else. As a result, I have discussed most of these lessons with other peers to make sure that what I am documenting here should apply to most readers.

I also know the value of iterating to improve quality. I want this book to have a long life based upon tried and true practices and lessons that stand the test of time. I began this book about five years prior to retiring, and after retiring, I invested another four years in developing and refining, then re-refining, the content.

Many retirees like me struggle with how to best 'give back' to others given our good fortune. I have come to realize that one of the most impactful contributions I could make would be to help others, as best I can, to understand and digest those white-collar world lessons in the most effective and efficient way. That is, from reading, instead of the much more difficult process of learning through mistakes and trial-and-error. I have also tried to mix in some humor via true stories related to my and others' careers. Many of these are truly stranger than fiction!

Someone outside the business world or white-collar world might ask, "How important is this really? How difficult could it be to work in a white-collar job in an organization or in an office where your job is fairly clear and not physically challenging?"

Clearly, the lessons I have learned about the white-collar world over a thirty-five year career cannot be equated to the importance of curing a disease, helping a sick patient get better, defending our country, apprehending and arresting a dangerous criminal, or even, educating our youth.

Yet, we know that there are tens of millions of white-collar workers just in the U.S. alone, not to mention the hundreds of millions of others around the world. Many of them were born into blue-collar families and communities.

Why should all those workers have to learn from the School of Hard Knocks? Why shouldn't all those workers be able to leverage the knowledge and skills that are outlined in this book? Why shouldn't all white-collar workers be aided via knowledge and experience so that they can do a better job for their employers, get along much better with white-collar peers, and enjoy their careers much more than would otherwise be the case?

I can honestly share that it is not enjoyable to feel left out of important white-collar conversations. It is not fun to misunderstand what drives the white-collar enterprise. It is disheartening to listen to others 'in the know' or, apparently, on the fast career track talking about concepts and issues that seem foreign. It is frustrating to go home at the end of the day feeling as though you worked very hard but fell a bit lower on the totem pole versus your white-collar peers. It is unhealthy to lie in bed wide awake worrying and wondering what you could have done to handle a difficult white-collar situation a bit better than you did. It is isolating to feel as though you are not being recognized for your hard work and contributions, while others on the team are being recognized and praised.

To me, it is absolutely crucial that those entering, and working within, a white-collar environment have the benefit of years of experience and lessons if they are able. Without that assistance, in all likelihood, they will repeatedly struggle to succeed, and may actually fail either in their current role or in their career. Is this stuff important? You're damned right it is!

This is not a book about the usual topics that are described relative to the white-collar world. All too often, we hear that success in the white-collar professions is all about who you know, not what you do. We also hear that you have to learn to 'play politics' to get ahead. You also read about the importance of appearance and dress, the importance of networking with all the bosses, or the importance of 'doing whatever you have to do to get ahead.'

Although this book may touch on a few of these issues in reference to other more important issues, the reality is that white-collar career success depends primarily upon the individual and their *successful performance*. Successful performance depends upon your ability to continually learn over time, to

invest in yourself, to apply what you learn, to add to your skill sets for life, to focus upon priorities, to achieve solid results, and to continually strive to be the best professional possible. There is no shortcut to white-collar success, as much as many would like to think that there are easy paths to bypass the hard work and dedication.

The fundamentals to this success are what I like to call 'blocking and tackling.' To some, these fundamentals may seem boring to consider and discuss, because they lack pizzazz, they are not sexy, and they certainly do not yield much television or social media coverage. But what is different, and sometimes frustrating, about these fundamentals is that there are not five or ten or twenty basic building blocks. Rather, there are hundreds of skills, habits, processes, and knowledge sets that you need to develop and refine over your career if you expect to have the success you may desire in the white-collar world.

Those hundreds of things ARE what this book is about.

So, I have dedicated years of my life during employment to document, and additional years after retirement to reflect back and capture, all of these lessons and processes for your benefit.

Having said that, even if you master the majority of these capabilities, there is no absolute guarantee of your career success, however you might define it. Knowledge alone will not transport you to the achievement of your career goals.

Anyone's career will take hundreds of twists and turns. Each of your journeys will be unique in terms of the challenges and opportunities, and you will encounter a multitude of issues, problems, and opportunities for which there is no cookie cutter set of solutions.

What I *will* guarantee is that if you read this book and seriously work to improve along many of these dimensions, your probability of success will be much higher than would otherwise be the case. I will also guarantee that you will better understand the white-collar world, be less threatened by the unknown, and be much more comfortable and confident in your journey.

INTRODUCTION

Along the path of writing this book, I have shared with my peers and associates what I was attempting to do and how I wanted to be able to share with others all the lessons I have learned, as well as lessons my peers have learned.

Surprisingly, I nearly always heard one of two reactions. The first is that they want to be one of the first to buy or read my book when it is published, and they ask me to let them know when it is finished. The other reaction I have heard is that they also have roots in the blue-collar world and that they have privately struggled with learning the difficult lessons of how to succeed in the white-collar world! They ask if they can contribute to the book, because they also want to 'give back' in some way.

So first, I want to thank my professional peers from various organizations who contributed to the content of this book by sharing many of their own 'lessons-learned' from their white-collar careers. Those peer experiences from other organizations are sprinkled throughout this book, all written from the first-person perspective as if my own, in order to protect identities and organizations. These outside contributions make the content richer and more diverse than if written based upon my experiences alone.

How did I gather some of the contributions from other professional peers? I asked them three questions, and if the answer to all three questions was 'yes,' then I gathered their stories as input for inclusion in this book.

1 - Did you grow up in a blue-collar family or have a blue-collar background?

2 – Do you think you achieved success in the white-collar world, as you define success?

3 – Are you willing to share one or two of the most valuable lessons you learned in your career that helped you succeed in the white-collar world despite your blue-collar background?

I want to explain that my white-collar experiences, and the experiences of those peers that contributed to the content of this book (including some of the 'growing up in the blue-collar world' stories), were derived from those

working within medium-to-large companies; that is, companies with revenues ranging from $50 million to over $10 billion. Typically, companies of this revenue size might employ anywhere from 200 to over 100,000 employees. If you are employed, or are considering being employed, by a much smaller company, I still believe the lessons apply, but there are a few lessons in this book that clearly would help less if you are working in a smaller company in a much smaller geography, such as a 'Mom and Pop,' family-run business.

After I cover the 'foundation of blue-collar thinking,' which describes my blue-collar upbringing, as well as the stories of some of my peers, the book is organized by 'early career,' 'middle career,' and 'late career' lessons. For my personal situation, my definition of early career spanned about the first ten years of my career and included mainly 'doing' sort of jobs, such as programming, project leadership, performing analysis, technical support jobs, etc.

My middle career basically covered my time as a manager or supervisor of small teams of people, leading various smaller business functions in doing so. Finally, my late career spanned about the last fifteen years of my career where I held more senior management positions such as director, vice-president, president, and senior vice-president roles, leading larger teams and also entire corporate global functions, such as information technology, strategy, M&A, operations, a business division, and also leading a subsidiary as president.

In my view, these 'career' stages will vary from person to person, both in terms of timeframe as well as responsibilities. Regardless of that variability, I believe that the lessons apply equally well regardless of the individual. As an example, someone's career might begin as an accountant, progress in their middle career stage to a senior accountant or accounting specialist, and then progress in their late career to hold responsibilities as a senior specialist or consultant.

What is most important is that these lessons will likely apply to most people in the white-collar world at some point in their careers, so reading and digesting all of these lessons makes sense as early in your career as is possible. In this way, whenever you encounter one of these situations, you may have a slightly different perspective than your own and, possibly, a different way to think about progressing through the issue.

Chapter 3
Common Themes of a Blue-Collar Upbringing

What all these blue-collar 'growing up' stories have in common is that for the most part, most of the non-school activities were unsupervised. I have gotten to know quite a few white-collar families and friends, and in general, it seems that most of their non-school activities were supervised or organized by adults. For example, many white-collar kids were able to take advantage of activities such as music lessons, participating on a summer swim team, being involved in clubs, visiting museums, travelling with parents to various shows or activities, attending a summer camp, snow skiing, or horseback riding. I should add 'golf' to that list, but for me, as I discussed earlier, I was able to take advantage of the whole golf culture.

What I admire now, and even envy a bit, about those white-collar opportunities is that those children were able to be around, and learn from, adults to a much greater extent than me. As a result, they did not have to 'learn the ropes' from each other, but instead, they were able to learn things from adults just due to the time they spent with them. So many times, I heard something from blue-collar friends my age, only to find later that what they shared was either partially untrue or totally untrue. (Think about all the stories you heard about sex from your peers growing up, relative to the truth! The same applies to other adult lessons; you would rather get the scoop from adults instead of kids your own age who really don't know the facts.)

Growing up in a blue-collar family, given the lack of dedicated time with other adults, you could not help but develop a sense of discomfort being around other adults, and I tended to shy away from interactions with them. It is easy to see the disadvantages that presents when blue-collar kids first attend high school or college. Not once in my high school experience did I voluntarily go to get advice from the guidance counselor or principal. Not once in my college experience did I visit a professor during their office hours to seek help or guidance when I was struggling.

I suppose you could argue that this lack of comfort with adults made me and others more independent and self-sufficient. It is true that even today, when I encounter a problem, my first reaction is to study the topic and figure it out by myself rather than ask for assistance. But in today's world, given so

much specialization of labor and skillsets, in order to be successful, you need to develop the habit or attitude to occasionally seek out help from others much more skilled and knowledgeable about certain subjects.

Furthermore, when spending so much time around other blue-collar kids in un-supervised activities, especially when teenagers, you had plenty of opportunity to get in trouble. It almost seemed normal as I was growing up as a teen that some of the other kids would smoke cigarettes, steal something from their parents, steal something minor from a store, get into fights, or do some sort of minor vandalism, especially around Halloween. I was very fortunate that I rarely copied any of this behavior, probably because I knew my parents would respond in a very tough way. But clearly, not all the blue-collar kids that I knew avoided getting into trouble.

In hindsight, clearly, I wish I had been more level-headed when it came to how fast I drove a car when I was a teenager, or how I chose to spend a great deal of time away from my family with friends, instead of helping out at home. Or choosing to go out and have a beer or two when I was only eighteen or nineteen and still driving a car. I was very, very fortunate. But I have come to understand that most blue-collar kids grow up in similar environments and, sometimes, are unlucky or make more serious mistakes and end up paying for those mistakes for quite a long time.

Blue-Collar Drinking

I am sure that all blue-collar families have differing attitudes and habits when it comes to alcoholic beverages, so there is no universal blue-collar 'core value' related to drinking or not drinking. But in my family, for whatever reason, my parents would indulge in a beer or mixed drink on occasion, especially at family functions or on holidays. This was never a big problem, except for the occasional friend or neighbor who would over-indulge playing euchre (a card game) or visiting on a weekend.

What did become a problem was my attitude and my siblings' attitudes toward drinking. We thought it was normal and perfectly acceptable, and during holidays, our parents would allow us to have a sip of a mixed drink or wine or beer. I had no idea that other families did not drink, or that those families would strongly discourage drinking for their children regardless of their age.

Once I turned sixteen and began to drive, attending parties of friends became common, and of course, beer was usually there and available and, sometimes, hard liquor. Luckily, I had good friends who watched out for one another and made sure that we did not drive if we had too many drinks, but there were times when we should probably not have been behind the wheel.

In college, it seemed that I knew more blue-collar than white-collar students, so the drinking continued, and the parties continued. But nothing good ever came from drinking. It almost seemed like a ritual that after finals were over for the quarter, we all headed to the bars to try to forget all the facts and information polluting our minds. In hindsight, this was the epitome of stupidity. There we were working our tails off, paying a lot of money to get an education, and we wanted to forget a lot of what we learned?

Anyway, once I entered the white-collar world in my first job, it became obvious that drinking was still accepted on weekends and even after work, especially with the younger employees. However, it became clear that you could not perform at your job very well if you came into work hungover or forgetting what you had been working on the prior week.

The reality of the white-collar world is that drinking, especially having ONE drink at a social hour before dinner, is perfectly acceptable but, of course, not required nor even suggested. But anything beyond one drink gets noticed, and you can put your reputation in jeopardy if you are in the company of managers and supervisors from your company. The lesson here is that for those who come from blue-collar families where alcohol is accepted and even encouraged, you should be very careful to work to recalibrate your attitudes toward drinking once you become a white-collar professional. Think of it this way—in the white-collar world, you are being paid for what is in your head, your knowledge, and your ability to communicate and solve problems. Excessive alcohol does nothing but negatively impact your ability to perform in the white-collar world. By all means, be very careful.

A Quick Commentary on the College Experience

I don't want to comment too much about the whole college experience, because my main focus is upon the lessons that I and others learned during their careers on the job.

However, I do believe that college was the beginning of my transition from blue-collar to white-collar. I learned in college that my first eighteen years of life was fairly isolated to what I knew in a small town and a rural upbringing. During my college years, I learned a bit about diversity, sophistication, accepting alternate views, studying, relationships, and unfortunately, the prevalence of drug usage on college campuses.

I frequently felt 'lost in it all' as thousands of students trudged across the large state university campus each day, attending classes or study groups, each with their own goals and challenges. It was easy to feel as though this whole effort was a waste of time. After all, if thousands of students I saw each day were going to get degrees, how special and valuable could a degree really be? I also was less than impressed that college students did not, in general, seem to be brilliant students as I expected them to be.

My freshman year was especially difficult. I failed to make the varsity golf team, I was having relationship issues with my girlfriend back home, I was living in a dorm room with a few people who I truly disliked, I missed home, and I found the class content not at all what I expected in terms of helping me get a job. Psychology, sociology, earth science, and history certainly would not be of much value when I started my first job as a programmer!

Little did I understand that in that first job, and many jobs thereafter, I would have to deal with abstract concepts, be a leader, encourage people, set a vision, and understand and respond to complex financial and business problems. Those 'foundation' classes, I am sure, helped in many ways to understand others and to think more broadly.

After coming home from my freshman year, I told my parents that I likely would not return for my sophomore year as I thought it was too difficult and a waste of time. But during the summer, working in that blue-collar job again on afternoon shift in the heat, I began to understand even more the value of a college education.

Three years later, I graduated with a 3.83 GPA with a BBA with a dual major in computer science and operations research and earned summa cum laude. I started my first job as a programmer. I thought I soon would be running the company given how smart I was after four years of college and excellent grades. Boy was I wrong!

Early Career White-Collar Lessons

Chapter 4
Goals and Extra Effort

After graduating from college with a business degree, and having a successful golf experience playing on the Kent State golf team, I accepted a job as a programmer for a large global manufacturer that was headquartered in our county. This was a convenient and easy choice for me as the only other job offer I received was in downtown Cleveland, at less pay and with much more traffic and congestion than working in our smaller, local city near home.

My first few years working there, I was focused on learning more of the programming languages used there plus other computer systems tools such as operating systems, job control language, and methods related to the testing and installation of system changes. In parallel, I began to learn more about the company and how it managed orders, planned production, invoiced customers, and marketed.

More important, however, were the early lessons about the white-collar world and how employees were supposed to behave, how to interact, what was appropriate versus inappropriate behavior, etc.

From my family, and my limited experience during college summers holding blue-collar jobs, I learned about 'shift change' times and how employees were supposed to 'punch out' very quickly at the end of the shift and how to make sure that you 'punched in' just before the start of your shift. Basically, I had developed the mentality that after the shift was over, and before the shift began, I was not getting paid, so it made no sense to spend even one more minute at work than necessary. Besides, the employer basically made it clear that you were supposed to leave the premises once your shift was complete, and you were not to arrive much more than fifteen minutes before the start of your shift.

So, when I began my white-collar career, it all seemed very similar. This was 1979, and our company appeared to have similar rules and practices about blue-collar workers and white-collar workers. In the offices, there were bells that rang right at 8:00 a.m. and at 5:00 p.m., and generally, employees would quickly walk to the time clocks when the bell rang, getting in line to 'punch out' and leave the premises at the end of the shift. We were

told that we had an hour lunch period, and if we left the premises to go to lunch, we had to punch out at noon or just after, and had to punch back in before 1:00 p.m. or risk getting 'docked' for not being in the office at the core hours assigned.

I quickly noticed that the employees, especially younger ones, would clean off their desks around 4:55 p.m., and at 5:00, would be leaning out of their chairs waiting for the bell to ring. When it did, the great majority would jump out of their chairs and walk toward the time clocks, and some even ran. So, I began to sprint to the clock to be one of the first to get out of the office right at 5:00.

In hindsight, what was very strange was that most of us in the systems department were salaried employees and paid at a monthly rate, not an hourly rate. Yet, we were treated and behaved as if we were paid by the hour.

After a few months of that, my supervisor called me in to talk to me. He asked how I was enjoying my job, how things were going, etc. He told me that thus far, he was encouraged that I was learning at about the pace expected and that the company had been happy with hiring me.

He then asked me what I wanted to do longer term. I did not know how to respond to that, so I asked him what he meant exactly. He asked if I wanted to be promoted into higher job levels within the IT profession, or if I wanted to get into management in the future, or move into some other function within the Company.

I was totally unprepared to answer that as I was thinking about my next meal, not about my next career step. And to me, I was thinking that I was hired to be a programmer and did not even consider that I would or could get promoted into another job. (This was one of those times when my blue-collar background was of zero value!)

I responded, without really thinking about it, that I was open to promotions and getting into management at some time in the future, but that I really wanted to learn the fundamentals and basics of our computer systems at the company and not get promoted too quickly into management. I was not really sure if I meant it, or if I blurted it out because it sounded good, but I had to say something in response, and this sounded acceptable, hopefully good enough to get me out of this uncomfortable discussion.

Then, he shared a very important white-collar lesson . . . "Dan, if you really want to be promoted into higher level jobs and be considered for management, what will really stand out to those watching you will be a little extra effort." What did he mean? "Well, those who really care about the company and want to learn and want to lead stick around past 5:00 and come in earlier than 7:45. Some even come in on weekends on their own time just to make faster progress on projects. Those extra efforts stand out like a sore thumb compared to most of the office workers around here. Someone like you could do a lot more, and some extra effort would really show that you care."

I walked out of his office not knowing what to think, and I tried to process and digest what he said. If 'extra effort' was expected, why wasn't that made clear to us when we were hired? And, did I really want to take away from what little personal time I had left after a forty-hour week, and work even MORE hours for no difference on my pay check (at least in the short term)?

Well, it turned out that his advice was a golden nugget that I probably didn't completely understand at the time but, now, makes all the sense in the world. What had me confused was my blue-collar background, and the thinking that I carried with me. I thought that you were hired to do a job at certain hours of the day, and when those hours were finished, you left the work premises. What was very different, and is very different, in the white-collar world, especially for salaried employees, is:

1 – White-collar workers generally do not have jobs; they have 'careers' that can consist of a series of jobs and positions throughout their lives. Even if that career is a dedicated profession, such as a dentist or doctor with their own practice, they continue to develop their knowledge, skills, and expertise over time.

2 – White-collar workers are expected to do more than what they are told to do; they need to not only perform their job, but they need to make improvements to their area of responsibility in terms of processes, methods, procedures, rules, etc. In other words, when they leave that job for whatever reason, they should strive to leave the job or area in much better shape than when they took that job originally.

3 – White-collar worker job responsibilities generally have no time limits. For example, one of my early roles was to program and support a system at

one of our manufacturing plants in North Carolina. If that plant system stopped working, that plant was not going to wait for me to arrive at 8:00 a.m. the next morning to fix it; it needed fixed quickly when it failed, whether that was 2:00 a.m. on Tuesday or Sunday morning at 7:00 a.m. True, there were 'core hours' (like 8:00 to 5:00) when all office workers were expected to be there to ensure overlap in worker schedules and to attend meetings, plan project work, etc., but white-collar responsibilities tend to not always end before or after the core hours.

4 – When management occasionally needs to choose a candidate to be promoted into a new or an open job, they want, more than anything, to promote someone into more responsibility who they trust, who they know will take the job seriously, and will do whatever is necessary to get the job done. Qualifications are important, but I have seen people promoted into jobs time and time again when they were not the most qualified. What they did have was a track record of taking ownership and taking leadership to solve problems in their prior jobs and roles. Few, if any, candidates who are stuck in the '8 to 5' mentality and behavior are ever considered for these promotions, which is not always understood by those candidates.

Clearly, the 'extra effort,' the leadership, the responsibility, the ability to solve problems, etc. is not always embraced by new employees that have just graduated from college. It is easy to understand why other issues take priority, such as dating, getting the right car, hanging out with friends, enjoying some of the money that had been earned, etc.

But, at some point early in a white-collar career, each person needs to make a critical decision about their future—either prioritize their job for the sake of their future career, or prioritize their personal priorities, hobbies, and lifestyle over their employers and their jobs. In hindsight, I would say that most choose the latter, which I can say after a thirty-five-year career turns out to be a very shortsighted decision to make for most. Others try to balance these as best they can, changing priorities as situations change in their professional responsibilities and family responsibilities. This seems a practical approach, but to me, there seems to be a more fundamental issue here that all young white-collar workers need to think about.

Let's take a very common situation. Your supervisor asks you to come in on Saturday to work on a very important project that has a tight deadline. But your family is having a birthday celebration on Saturday for your father (or your child, or your friend, etc.) who is turning fifty, and you do not want to

miss it. After all, your Dad has been there for you through thick and thin, and he deserves to have you there, right? Well, to me, there are three choices here. First, you tell Dad that you have to work, and that you cannot make his celebration. Second, you tell your supervisor about your Dad's birthday and that you cannot come in on Saturday, but that you are sorry. Third, you tell Dad you have to work but that you will come see him as soon as your responsibilities are complete on Saturday. Of these three choices, which do you think Dad will prefer? I am sure Dad would be proud that his son/daughter takes their responsibilities seriously enough to be responsible to take care of what is needed to be done, AND that they care enough to give up whatever spare time they have on Saturday to be with him.

If you choose the second option, you are risking, a bit, that your supervisor's opinion of you has changed, that you have fallen a rung on the ladder relative to your peers, and that your supervisor has lost a bit of faith that you really care about what is best for the company. Short term, I am guessing option two has few if any implications. Longer term, you will never know the impact and implications.

But the good news is that this 'choice' can really be changed at any time in a career, and others will notice very quickly when they see your time spent at work, they see your skills and seriousness in solving problems, they see your determination to improve those areas and functions within your job responsibilities.

Unfortunately for me, I did not make this choice at age twenty-two, and I really did not embrace this until I was married, and we had our first child closer to age thirty. Once I became the sole breadwinner in our family, and once there were three people depending upon me to support the entire family (and in a few years, four!), my perspective changed, and I knew I had to change my behavior and my priorities.

White-collar lesson: You need to understand this critical choice you need to make about your career, and you need to make the right decision for yourself. And this decision can be very different based upon your circumstances and where you are in life. But do not ever think that this issue does not deserve proper time and consideration! It does!

Chapter 5
Choosing a Career Direction

As I began my college journey, with all the intimidating life changes that come along with it, one over-riding question always loomed: what will I choose as a major?

My father had a strong influence on how I developed my criteria. He basically told me, as I shared earlier, that I needed to select a major which would ensure I could obtain a job versus choosing a major that was non-specific such as liberal arts.

But I also began to be influenced by my student peers, who would talk about 'following your passion,' or 'finding your true mission in life.' It was concerning to me that I had no idea what my passion was or what my mission was going to be. My main concern was finding a job and being able to support myself after college. The few passions that I seemed to have at age eighteen or nineteen or twenty were:

1 - Playing golf

2 - Eating

3 - Music, both listening to music and playing guitar

4 - Hanging out with friends playing sports, or at bars, etc.

For the life of me, I could not figure out how to earn a living doing any of these fulltime, just because I was not good enough at golf or music or eating to consider any sort of career in these areas, although I did play college golf. I even won a division I golf tournament at Kent State, so considered becoming a tour golf pro for a few years until we won the MAC tournament my sophomore year and played in the NCAA division I golf championship. At that tournament, I was able to see first-hand the skills and abilities of golfers such as Payne Stewart and Scott Simpson (both future U.S. Open champions), and I quickly decided that I could never make a living playing against that sort of talent.

So, I went back to the 'finding a job' criteria as the best one at the time. That turned out to be computer science for me, given the explosion of technical/computing careers at that time.

After reflecting on that time after thirty-five years in the business world, I look back now and realize, at least for me and what I have learned, that 'following your passion' and 'pursuing your dreams and your mission' after college is all too individualistic and self-serving. I encountered several of these 'pursue your dreams' people throughout my career, and what that philosophy did to them (not FOR them) was to make them focus all too much on their own careers, their own compensation, their next steps that they wanted to pursue, and their own view of the world. They were not able to operate as well as a team player, were not able to see the big picture, could not or would not embrace the important mission and plans of the business they worked within, and could not make sacrifices for their employer if they did not see those sacrifices directly helping their own careers and plans. They seemed to lack the flexibility in thinking about their career steps that other had.

I saw time and again where a peer executive would talk privately about an employee that reported to them, and how the employee would share how frustrated they were that their career was not moving forward fast enough, their compensation was not high enough, that their friends from college had bigger titles and pay packages, that they had a family to support and needed more compensation, etc. In the majority of those cases, the employee developed a reputation of being focused on themselves to the detriment of the team and the larger objectives of the company. Those employees would spend a lot of time developing a detailed career plan, outlining the specific job titles they wanted to obtain over the next ten or fifteen years.

In hindsight, those individuals had an outlook that served them and their company terribly, given what happens in the business world. In the white-collar world, good-paying and rewarding jobs are not the goal of the company; rather, they are a side benefit of a successful company. Success for companies comes via hard work, clear strategic goals and direction, teamwork, execution, and employees that are driven to help the company succeed financially.

Companies cannot succeed if key employees are mainly focused upon their own success. Instead, those sorts of employees gradually, or quickly, lose out and eventually depart the organization because they develop the
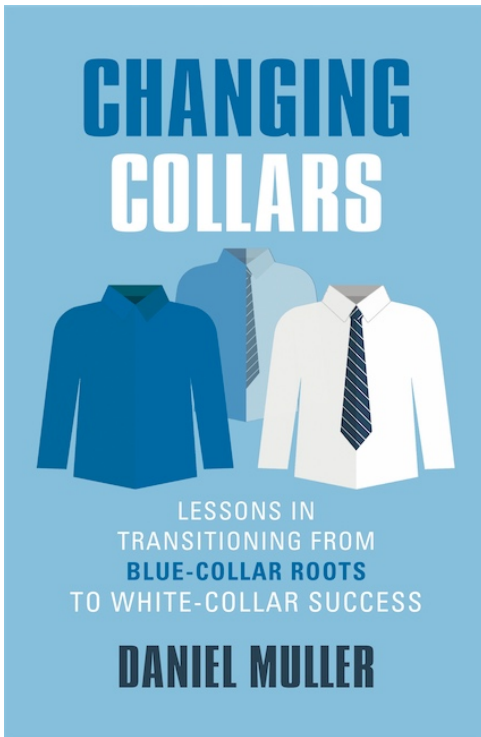
reputation as someone who is not a team player and someone who cares more about themselves than the company and its success.

Success in the white-collar world will usually require that you suppress your own needs and your own goals, and replace them with company goals and needs. I always tell high school and college students that they should not listen all that much to those who tell them to 'pursue their dreams' and to 'find themselves' through their jobs. Rather, I think it is more important to 'lose yourself' in a larger mission, a larger goal, a larger organization that you believe in. Having a fulfilling career usually means achieving team success over a longer period of time. While doing that, you develop friendships, you develop respect, you become a role model for newer employees, and you learn patience and humility.

I recall hearing about a meeting in the board room with a top group of executives at my company, and during a break, a senior leader stated that 'you are all here because you care more about the company than you do about yourselves!' They apparently looked around the room and realized that he was right. They all knew enough about each other to know that they had all sacrificed over time and that they all truly cared about the long-term success of the company.

For me, over time, I 'lost myself' in my company, recognizing that the products and services of our company truly made a difference in the quality of the lives of millions of people around the world. With a few exceptions, we conducted business 'the right way,' meaning no shortcuts, minimal politics, just working to achieve common and important goals.

Clearly, there are those fortunate souls who know at an early age what they want to do, be it a doctor or a politician or a lawyer, and that is fine and great. But for the majority of students, during teen years or in their early twenties, there is so much life ahead that it is unrealistic to assume that you know exactly what you want to do throughout your life. There will be so many twists and turns and unanticipated discoveries about life and about yourself that it is virtually impossible to know for certain what you will be doing throughout your life. I tell students to stay flexible, to make decisions that need to be made, but to realize that they will be very happy if they 'lose themselves' in a larger goal or mission rather than an individual one.

In CHANGING COLLARS, Daniel Muller shares lessons about how to transition from blue-collar roots to a successful white-collar career. The book contains valuable and practical insights which can be readily applied by white-collar workers at any age or career stage. Muller shares key lessons extracted from his career as well as other respected peers.

CHANGING COLLARS:
Lessons in Transitioning from Blue-Collar Roots to White-Collar Success
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